



Kidnapping Cordelia (Wicked Sons #7)

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Category: Historical

Description: Out of the frying pan...

When Muir Anderson leaves London to escape the rumours surrounding his involvement in the death of Lord Richmond, he thinks the worst is over. Returning to Scotland to face his father, the Earl of Morven is not an enticing prospect, but there's no escape. Little does Muir know he's about to be plunged into an epic drama that will change his life forever.

Into the fire...

Lady Cordelia Steyning is in a bit of a pickle, and rather dismayed to discover being kidnapped is not at all the thrilling adventure it had appeared to be in the romantic novels she so adores. Though she had often daydreamed about daring adventures and being the heroine of her own story, the truth is she's just a little bit terrified. Still, she's not about to let a man she despises take control of her future. Desperate measures are called for.

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Page 1

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Da,

I find I'm in a bit of trouble. You'll have heard by now, I'm sure, but I wished to assure you I did not kill Lord Richmond, no matter how richly the bastard may have deserved it. He tried to kill Ash and stabbed his sister instead when she got between them. I pray she is recovering well. The wound did not appear deep, but I had not the time to look closely.

Richmond ran off when he saw I meant to teach him a lesson and he led me a merry dance. I finally tracked him down, hiding in the marshes close to Millbank Prison. A sorry sight he was too, weeping and begging for forgiveness for having murdered his own sister. Before I could speak a word to him, however, some villain clouted me good. I ought to have known better, for it was a vile place and perfect for an ambush, but the next I knew I woke up in the marshes at daybreak, filthy and sodden and relieved of my valuables. Richmond was nowhere in sight.

I felt a right numpty I can tell you, and I can hear your rebukes ringing in my ears now. Believe me, you cannot berate me any more than I have done myself. Now, however, there is a hue and cry for me, and I would be more than grateful if you could use your influence to put things to rights. The last I saw of Lord Richmond, he was very much alive. I'm afraid he must have seen what happened to me and who did it, which meant he got tougher treatment than I did when they stripped him of his goods. I can't pretend I'm sorry, but he did not die at my hands. I swear it.

?Excerpt of a letter to the Right Hon'ble Gordon Anderson, The Earl of Morven, from his son, The Hon'ble Muir Anderson.

24th March 1850, somewhere near Alconbury, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, England.

Upon reflection, Delia had to admit that being kidnapped was not half so thrilling as it had appeared to be in the scandalous novels she so adored. Indeed, so far had been disorientating and uncomfortable, but most of all, a great bore. Of course, that was entirely the fault of her kidnapper. In the romantic stories she favoured, the villain was always a charismatic devil for all his vile ways and nefarious intentions. Delia's reality was something of a disappointment.

Sourly, she glared at the man on the opposite side of the carriage. Mr Enoch Goodfellow, the son of her father's steward, had been a playmate of hers since they were children. They had been brought together by proximity, though her father would have had a fit if he'd known the extent to which Enoch had sought her out. The temptation to tell him had been strong at times, but the duke was a cruel man and Delia could never bring herself to do it.

When they had been small children they had rubbed along quite nicely, with Enoch ready enough to join in her imaginary games, of which she had a wealth to choose from. Pretending to be explorers or cats, highwaymen or pirates, had not seemed to trouble him at all, and they'd had a good deal of fun. Little by little, however, he had changed, much to her dismay. As he had grown older, however, he had appeared to model his behaviour upon that of her father. A worse example of what a man was ought to be was hard to fathom, but Enoch seemed to think that by parroting her father's words and ways, he might gain the man's respect. She could have told him it would never work – she had told him, but Enoch seemed not to believe that the duke despised him, not only for his toadying ways, but simply for being from another class. It was a class he longed to belong to, and it seemed he would stop at nothing to gain admission.

Any affection she had felt for Enoch had long ago worn off. Delia did not appreciate

his attempts to reprimand her or speak to her as someone who had the right to comment on her behaviour. It had not taken her long to discover that he seemed to take pleasure in being cruel enough to make her cry, for the pleasure of comforting her afterwards and pretending he was sorry. He always told her he had done it only because he cared for her so very much. Enduring her father's sermons had been bad enough, from Enoch it was intolerable. Thankfully, since her brother Wrexham had taken over her guardianship, she had no longer to endure either of their lectures, and it had been over a year since she had seen Enoch at all. This, she supposed, accounted for her stupidity in not being on her guard when he had presented himself to her so unexpectedly. She had even managed to pretend some pleasure in seeing him again after so long, enough to be polite, at least. More fool her.

That her childhood playmate could behave so despicably, was still something she was struggling to come to terms with. When she had first come around from the deep sleep induced by the vile drug she had been given to knock her out, she had been certain she could talk him around, but that belief had died over the last couple of hours. Indeed, though she tried hard to remind herself that she had known the man all her life, and that he could not possibly be a real danger to her, her composure was beginning to slip, and the first insidious tendrils of fear slithered beneath her skin.

Enoch was a tall man, though painfully thin. With his greasy black hair, long nose and spindly limbs, he had always put her in mind of a mournful stick insect. She watched him carefully paring the skin from a small apple with his penknife. With equal care, he cut it into four neat pieces, removed the core which he threw out the window, and then put the knife back in the leather bag he carried everywhere. Delia eyed it as it slipped out of sight, wishing she might get her hands upon the knife and sink it into his cold, black heart, or at the very least somewhere exceedingly painful, if not fatal. She could still not fathom how he could treat her so abominably.

He offered her a piece of apple and whilst she was desperately hungry, the idea of eating it made her want to retch. Instead, she glared at him, gathering the tattered

remains of her courage.

“I see I badly miscast you in all those games we played when I pretended to be the villain,” she told him, a little surprised herself by the hurt behind the words. “You ought to have played Blackbeard, and the wicked baron, and the cannibal, and the feral cat, and—”

“That’s enough,” he said sharply, colour rising to his cheeks. “I prefer to forget all the nonsense you talked me into when we were children. It does neither of us any credit.”

“It was fun,” Delia told him, finally giving into the desire to tell him what she thought of him. “It was fun, and you enjoyed it, until you decided you wanted to be a duke. If that isn’t the biggest piece of make believe you’ve ever played at, I don’t know what is. You can’t become a duke by marrying me, Enoch. I do hope you know that.”

His colour heightened further, followed by a flash of anger in his eyes that made her subside into silence for a little while. Silence was not going to free her from this unbelievable situation, however, and as it appeared she was not dreaming as she had at first hoped, she had better persevere.

“I shan’t marry you, Enoch, so you might as well turn this carriage around this minute,” she said, and not for the first time.

Enoch made a show of gathering his dignity, toying with the gold signet on his finger, a habit he had adopted upon seeing the duke do likewise. It was similar in style to one her father wore, except her father’s was solid gold which Enoch’s plainly was not. He sighed, pushing his spectacles up his nose before sending her a reproachful look and attempting to mimic the clipped tones the duke used. “Delia, do not, I beg you, start this all over again. I’ve told you there’s no choice now. You’ve been travelling in a closed carriage with me since yesterday. You’re quite ruined, my dear.”

“Don’t you ‘my dear’ me, you horrid little sneak. I was unconscious for most of that and casting up my accounts for a good deal of the rest!”

“I have already apologised for the discomfort you endured,” Enoch said stiffly, as if that ought to be an end to the matter.

“Oh, well, that’s all right then,” Delia said with a snort.

“Don’t snort, it’s most unladylike,” he reproved, his dark eyebrows drawing together before he took a bite from a piece of the apple.

“I’ll do something far more unladylike than that the moment I can,” Delia said hotly, fighting the urge to cry. There was no way on God’s green earth she would give him the pleasure of seeing her weep. “I shall brain you with the nearest heavy object, Enoch Goodfellow, and just wait until my brother finds out what you’ve done,” she added, having the satisfaction of seeing Enoch’s narrow face blanch at her words.

“It will be too late by then. We shall be married,” he said, striving to sound cool, though she could tell she had rattled him. Wrexham had long ago taken Enoch’s measure and despised him. He had no compunction about putting the wretched man in his place with a few sharp words. Whilst Enoch made much of pitying Wrexham for being blind, the truth was he was no match for her clever, quick-witted brother. Oh, how she wished he was here now. Instead, she was alone, with only her own wits and fortitude to protect her. The thought made her throat tightened and the fear that Enoch might be right made her heart thud erratically.

He ate another piece of apple and Delia fervently wished for him to choke on it.

“Enoch, you do realise there are such things as trains now?” she said, fighting to keep her voice hard and angry so she might disguise the way it trembled. “You may be forced to take me by carriage to keep me hidden, but no one else will have such

restrictions. They'll be at Gretna Green long before we are. I don't doubt Wrexham has half the country out looking for me by now."

"Nonsense, he won't want a scandal," Enoch said, sounding so damned sure of himself that Delia wished she were strong enough, and brave enough, to launch herself across the carriage and beat him about the head with her fists. Sadly, she had already discovered Enoch was rather more powerful than she had imagined; she had the bruises to prove it. That had been the biggest shock to her system, to discover the man who had always treated her like she was made of spun sugar, had no compunction about treating her so roughly now. "Besides which, we are not going to Gretna Green."

"Not going to Gretna Green?" Delia repeated in surprise.

"No," he said, a smug look upon his face that made her hand itch with the desire to slap it off. "There's no need. It's obviously the first place they will look, but you can marry anywhere in Scotland. Gretna just happens to be the closest. We'll cross the border elsewhere, somewhere remote, where they won't think to look for us."

"Oh, you think you have it all planned out, don't you?" she exclaimed, her fists clenched as tears sprang to her eyes despite her best efforts.

"I do have it all planned out," he replied with perfect equanimity. "And, I might add, I need not have put us both through such an ordeal if you had just agreed to marry me when I asked you."

"But I do not wish to marry you, Enoch," Delia said, striving to stay calm when hysteria threatened to overtake her. "How many times must I tell you this? What is more, I shall not marry you. Not under any circumstances."

"I think you will."

“I will not!”

“And what will you do in Scotland, with no one to help you? A woman alone, ruined and with not so much as a shilling to her name.” He put the last piece of apple into his mouth, his expression one of haughty satisfaction as he chewed.

“I have my name, whatever you think,” Delia said, praying he could not hear the tremble in her voice as she comprehended just how desperate her situation really was. “My brother is the Marquess of Wrexham, my father a duke, and if you think I am so poor-spirited as to give up and marry you just because I am alone and without funds, you really do not know me at all.” As a speech it sounded well enough, brave and honourable, but the truth was Delia feared what might become of her. A woman alone in the world was a vulnerable creature. Might she really become this odious man’s wife rather than face that? The idea terrified her so much she could hardly breathe.

“Don’t be foolish, Delia. These flights of fancy of yours are entertaining enough and I’ve borne with your little eccentricities with a good deal of patience, but this is not one of your silly romance novels.”

Hysteria won out, and having been pushed way beyond what she could bear, Delia launched herself across the carriage with a cry of rage and grasped Enoch by his hair. Holding on tight, she bashed his head repeatedly against the door, only to be thrown off a moment later. She hit the floor of the carriage with a heavy thud, leaving her sprawled in an ungainly heap. Hurriedly she covered her exposed legs with her skirts and scrambled up, pressing herself into the far corner of the carriage as Enoch’s glare had become less than friendly. He raised his hand to his head, wincing as he found a tender spot, which Delia discovered gave her little satisfaction. She watched warily he reached into the bag he had kept close beside him and withdrew a small bottle and a wad of cloth. He poured some of the liquid onto the cloth, re-stoppered the bottle and turned towards her.

“I’m sorry, my dear, but you’ve only yourself to blame,” he said, moving towards her.

Delia gave a muffled shriek and fought him off with teeth and nails, biting and kicking and raking her fingers down his cheek so hard she knew she must have scratched him badly, but the cloth closed over her mouth and nose all the same. Within seconds, the ghastly fumes invaded her lungs, stinging her eyes and she tumbled into unconsciousness once more.

Muir sighed and stared into the glass of whisky he’d been nursing for the past half hour. He was thoroughly blue devilled. The mess he’d got himself into was not half so bad as it might have been, his father had seen to that, but it had left him feeling out of sorts and in a dark mood that was quite unlike him.

He could not shake the idea that if he’d not chased Lord Richmond down, the stupid bastard would still be alive. Though Muir knew well that Richmond was a despicable creature who had deserved his sticky end, it was still an uncomfortable feeling to have played a part in the devil’s demise. Moreover, he felt a proper twit for having been clouted over the head and robbed. He was not the kind of man people took advantage of. Built in the same mould as his father, he was taller and broader than most and well able to look after himself. Admittedly, he had landed himself in tight spots often enough, but he’d always got himself out again. Not since he was a snot-nosed lad had he been forced to go running to his da, begging for help. Though he’d not yet seen his father, thank the lord. That dubious pleasure was still to come, and he was not looking forward to it. Still, never one to shy away from unpleasantness, he’d figured he’d best get himself back to Scotland forthwith and get it over with. Keeping his head down until the story that he’d murdered Lord Richmond went away was not a bad idea, either.

“Chin up, pet, it might never ’appen,” said a cheerful voice.

Muir looked up and managed a smile for the perky barmaid who'd been giving him come hither glances all evening.

"Perhaps it already did. Ye didnae think o' that, lassie, eh?"

"Coo, don't you talk funny," she said, pausing with her hands on her hips as her eyes lingered on his bare knees where his kilt had ridden up. "Scotch, are you?"

"Scottish," Muir corrected. "Aye. What gave me away?"

She snorted and took a grubby cloth from her apron, leaning over to wipe down the tabletop. "I finish in half an hour," she said, looking at him thoughtfully.

"Oh, aye?" Muir replied, taking in a generous figure with lush curves. She was a pretty lass too, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. "That so?"

"It is. Would you like to walk me home?"

Muir considered this, then thought of the lumpy bed he'd taken for the night. "Happen I would, lass," he told her with a grin before lifting his glass. "Fetch me another while I wait, aye?"

Delia woke by slow, painful degrees. Her head was spinning, and her stomach rebelled, though there was nothing in it to bring up. She tried to breathe slow and steady, but vile fumes seemed to linger in her nostrils and her eyes did not wish to open. The continuous rocking of the carriage told her she had not been rescued while she was unconscious, more was the pity.

Strange dreams had plagued her, making her wonder at first if she was still sleeping. In the dream, there had been a hero who had come to defeat the dragon who was guarding her and his hoard of gold signet rings. The dragon had been bedecked with

them, one on every clawed toe, even one through his nose, which the hero had held on to when he lopped the creature's head off. Sadly, her foggy brain had to accept there was no headless dragon, only Enoch. It would have been so lovely to open her eyes to see a handsome rescuer gazing down at her with concern and admiration in his eyes, though at this point, Delia had to admit she'd have been thrilled with any kind of rescuer, handsome or otherwise. Even though her mind was still dull with ether fumes, she had clarity enough to know one thing. No one was going to save her. She knew without question that her brother would have men scouring the countryside for her, but if Enoch was not taking her to Gretna Green, Wrexham's people would have a job finding them. No, any rescuing there was to be done, she would have to do herself.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

The familiar first line of *David Copperfield* rang through her cloudy brain, and, despite her circumstances, she felt a little burst of certainty. She would not marry Enoch Goodfellow, no matter what happened. Somehow, she would get herself free and find her way to safety. Enoch had always treated her like a dim child rather than a woman with a mind of her own; surely he would let his guard down at some point.

As there was nothing to do at present and she had no desire to converse with her despicable kidnapper, Delia feigned sleep, praying the cobwebs would clear from her mind and she would be alert enough to act when the opportunity arose.

She did not know how much time had passed when the carriage finally halted, for she had eventually dozed off. Now she stared blearily out of the window. It was dawn, the sun appearing behind the horizon and painting the sky with fierce slashes of scarlet and gold. The fields about them were wreathed in a frail mist that clung to the long grass and gave the scene an eerie quality Delia could have done without.

“Are you hungry?” Enoch asked curtly.

Delia turned her head with some difficulty, her neck aching after so long spent in one position. She nodded, though she strongly doubted her ability to keep anything down, but if she could get inside the inn, she might have the chance to call for help.

“I’ll have something brought out to you,” Enoch replied, dashing her plans.

“I need to use the necessary,” she said urgently, and though she hoped that too might give her an opportunity, she was suddenly aware it was no more than the truth.

Enoch's grimace and frustrated look of impatience suggested that he thought she should be above such ordinary bodily needs. “Fine,” he said tersely. “But I warn you, Delia, you had better not cause trouble.”

“That’s Lady Cordelia to you,” she said coldly. “I rescind any right for you to call me Delia, that is a privilege given to my close friends and family.”

“And your husband,” he added with an equally frigid smile.

“Which you shall never be,” she retorted.

His lips compressed into a hard line. “Do you wish to relieve yourself or not, Delia?”

Delia’s clenched her fists with frustration, but she really did so she just gave a taut nod.

Enoch returned a thin smile before stepping down from the carriage and offering her his hand. Delia took it and said nothing as he escorted her to the privy. “I’ll be just outside,” he told her.

“Well, really,” Delia protested. “Can I not have a moment of privacy?”

“Yes, you can close the door,” he snapped irritably. “Now hurry. We’ve still a long way to go.”

Delia shot him a look of utter loathing before entering the privy and taking care of her most pressing requirements. Once done, she took a moment to gather her wits, and to wonder if perhaps she had been foolish. A change of tack might be in order. Enoch had never credited her with much of a brain, not that he was alone in that. As someone who preferred to daydream rather than take part in a formal dinner party, her distracted air often gave people the impression she was dim. Her preference for talking to animals – any animals whether alive, stuffed or painted – did not help much either.

As promised, she found Enoch waiting outside.

Doing her best to look dejected and repentant, Delia cast him a despondent look from under her lashes. “Please, Enoch, might we go inside? I’m m-most dreadfully cold. I promise to be good, and... and I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you. Only... Only you did frighten me so. It’s all been so very trying, and that horrid ether has made my head ache wretchedly.”

Enoch returned a suspicious glance, considering her words, which Delia was dismayed to discover had more truth behind them than she liked. “I am sorry for having frightened you,” he said, frowning. There really was something resembling remorse in his expression too, reminding her for a fleeting moment of the boy she had once called her friend. “You left me no choice, of course. A man must take drastic action sometimes, you see, my dear. It was for your own good, you must understand that. I’ve always known you’d marry me eventually, but—”

“You did?” Delia interrupted, so astonished by this piece of impudence she almost

forgot she was being meek and subservient.

“Of course I did. You need a firm hand, Delia. Someone to curb these foolish flights of fancy you have and keep your feet on the ground before you do or say something foolish enough to damage yourself. Your brother has indulged you and let you get away with murder, not that he could do otherwise,” he said with an air of condescension, giving Delia a kindly smile. “He is blind, and a good Christian must remember to show compassion and understanding for that fact. I cannot blame the man for failing you when he is not a whole man at all.”

Delia bit her lip to contain the explosion of words crowding on her tongue. Wrexham was ten times the man Enoch Goodfellow was and would still be if he were deaf, dumb, and blind.

“You are too kind, Mr Goodfellow,” she managed, though the words almost choked her. “And I hope you can show a mite more kindness and understanding and allow me to go inside for a little while. Just for a bite to eat by the fire. I won’t keep you for above ten minutes, I promise, and then I shall be quiet and cause no more trouble.”

He laughed softly. “No more playacting and make believe,” he told her, shaking his head and smiling like she was silly little girl. “I’m not so foolish as that and you are not a kidnapped princess waiting for a heroic highwayman to rescue her. However, I shall let you go inside, if you give me your word of honour you will behave yourself.”

Delia glared at him, her cheeks blazing with mortification.

“Your word upon it, Delia,” he said sternly, sounding so much like her father it was extremely disturbing.

Delia swallowed hard and returned his gaze. “I give you my word,” she said, hiding

her crossed fingers in the folds of her cloak.

“Very well. I confess I should like to eat a meal whilst sitting still myself. Come along, my dear.” He offered her his arm, smiling at her indulgently.

As there was little alternative, Delia took his arm and allowed him to guide her inside the coaching inn.

It did not surprise her to discover that it took Enoch some time to gain the innkeeper’s attention. For all his aping of her father’s mannerisms, he did not have the aura of a powerful man, one that commanded attention with ease. He was not a prepossessing specimen and, though he could bully Delia if he drugged her and used physical force, she knew the other boys had bullied him at school. She had pitied him greatly for that and had been extra kind to him when he had returned home for the holidays. Even then, however, she had understood why he was bullied, but though she had tried to make him see that he would make more friends if he stopped trying to be something he wasn’t, he never would listen. Instead, he had become the kind of man people overlooked, or avoided, in order to escape his prosy ways and dull conversation.

The innkeeper, by contrast, was a large, ruddy man, currently overrun by the amount of traffic and demands for breakfast, many of which came from more insistent voices than Enoch’s.

One such voice boomed over their heads, making Delia jump as a man pushed past Enoch.

“You, there. A pint and a sirloin and don’t tarry. I’ve no desire to hang about in this damned backwater.”

“Yes, my lord, at once,” the innkeeper said, recognising the voice of command when he heard it.

Enoch and Delia turned, and her heart skipped as they came face-to-face with Lord Malmsey. Oh, lud . If only it had been a friendly face, or at least someone prepared to help her, but she knew very well that Malmsey was a vile creature and far more dangerous than Enoch.

Malmsey almost strode past them without blinking but his gaze snagged on Delia and an arrested expression lit his eyes. “My Lady Cordelia,” he said in surprise, looking from her to Enoch. “And... who the devil are you?”

“Enoch Goodfellow,” Enoch said stiffly.

“What is this?” Malmsey said, a suspicious note to the question as he stared between them. He eyed the scratches on Enoch’s face with obvious interest.

“Our honeymoon,” Enoch told him, with more sangfroid than Delia had credited him. “We were married two days ago. We are on our way to visit my mother in York.”

“That so?” Malmsey replied, a calculating glint in his eyes. “Funny, I don’t remember reading an announcement in the papers or hearing a thing about it.”

“I expect her brother forgot. He’s blind, you know, and in any event, it was a quiet affair. Close family only.”

Delia gritted her teeth and told herself to hold her tongue and not contradict her husband. Malmsey was far more dangerous than Enoch. He would not lift a finger to help her, quite the reverse. More like he would spread the news far and wide to ensure the biggest scandal possible.

“Close family only, but not your mother?” Lord Malmsey enquired politely.

“She’s an invalid,” Enoch said, quick as a wink.

Delia admitted herself impressed by the ready lie, for Mrs Goodfellow was as round as Enoch was thin and, the last she had seen, as fit as a flea.

“Ah,” Malmsey said, amusement lurking in his dark eyes. “Yes, of course. Well, I shall not detain you any longer. And congratulations on your nuptials.”

With that, he executed a stiff bow and carried on into the taproom.

Enoch let out a huff of indignation. “Disgusting excuse for a man,” he muttered irritably, and, for once, Delia could not fault his opinion. “Did you hear about that business with Lady Fidelia Ponsonby?”

Delia nodded. “Lady Fidelia De Beauvoir now,” she said with a smile. “Apparently, Mr De Beauvoir flattened him and Lord Richmond. Did you notice the shadow of a bruise on his eye even now? And it must be a fortnight since,” she added, hoping to keep his attention on the gossip and to forget he was supposed to keep a close eye on her. Enoch always had loved to stick his nose into other people’s business, especially if it was scandalous.

“They say Lord Richmond attacked him with a sword,” he said, diverted as she’d hoped he would be.

When they were finally shown to a small and rather dingy private parlour, Enoch was in a much better humour and told her everything he had heard about Lady Fidelia’s elopement and subsequent marriage, and the fact that the duke had suffered an apoplexy.

Delia listened to him drone on with half an ear while she did her best to do justice to the bacon and eggs she’d been given. She knew needed to keep her strength up, but the eggs were overcooked and rubbery and the bacon had a suspicious green tint she did not appreciate. Her empty stomach churned, and she concentrated on the cup of

chocolate, which was everything it ought to be.

As Enoch held forth between mouthfuls of his own meal, Delia surveyed the room. There was little that would serve as a weapon, though the tankard of ale at his elbow might do in a pinch. Shifting a little on the hard bench, Delia looked past Enoch to the fireplace. There was not much to see. A few meagre coals glowed, and the open hearth occasionally let out a desultory puff of smoke, but there, lying on the floor beside the hearth, was a poker.

Delia stiffened, her heart leaping. Well, if she could not lay the fellow out with a poker, she did not deserve to escape. She finished her chocolate and gave a sigh.

“I’m afraid my stomach is a little unsettled, Enoch. Would you care to finish my breakfast, I’m sure you must be famished after the past days.”

“Oh, well, if you are sure,” he said, helping himself to her plate.

“Might I stand by the fire for a moment? I’m still rather chilled,” she said meekly.

Enoch hesitated, and then reached across the table and took her hand. For a moment Delia almost resisted, her flesh creeping at the feel of his hands upon her bare skin, but she forced herself to relax and summoned a shy smile.

“You are frozen,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’m sorry, my dear. If only you hadn’t forced my hand, I should never have treated you so roughly. I wish you had not made me do it.”

So, this was her fault? Ha! Delia fumed but tried to keep her thoughts from her face, not that he was looking at her face. His expression had become somewhat dreamy, his fingers stroking the back of her hand in a manner she did not like one bit. Her stomach roiled and the terror that had receded a fraction during their shared meal

returned in force. She needed to get away from this man and she must do it at once.

“What soft skin you have,” he said, his voice a little hoarse.

“Yes, and it’s cold too,” Delia said briskly. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just warm myself a little. It’s a chilly day and I shall catch my death if I don’t keep warm. I’m a martyr to coughs and colds, you know. The slightest chill and my nose runs like a tap and turns bright red, and the phlegm! Oh, you cannot imagine how I suffer.”

Much to her satisfaction, the dreamy expression vanished, replaced with one approaching disgust.

“Er... yes, well, do go and warm yourself then, my dear.”

Hiding a satisfied smile, Delia got to her feet and stood by the fire, warming her hands. When the clink of cutlery recommenced, she turned her head to assure herself Enoch was intent on his meal before bending at the knee and lowering herself down. Not taking her eyes from him, she searched the hearth with her fingertips until she found the cold iron of the poker. She curled her fingers around it and stood, her heart beating too fast. Though she knew she must escape him, it was one thing to attack a man in the heat of anger, quite another to strike him over the head from behind. Yet she was not strong enough to resist him if she fought him openly, and he was deaf to her pleas. He had brought it on himself, she told herself firmly, before taking two quick steps forward, raising the poker as she moved.

The sound it made when the poker connected to his head quite turned her stomach, and she stumbled away with a squeak of mingled alarm and disgust as he fell like a stone. The chair clattered to the floor and Delia just stood, unmoving, not even breathing, as she listened for a hue and cry and people storming in to accuse her of murder. Whilst she was quite ready to demand help and admit what she’d done to free herself, that would be easier to do without a body at her feet.

Had she murdered him? Anxiously, she got to her knees, turning him onto his back and more than relieved to see the steady rise and fall of his chest. Not dead, then. Thank the Lord.

With no time to lose, Delia scrambled to her feet. She did not know how long she had before Enoch revived, so she ran for the door and tugged it open. For a moment she toyed with the idea of going straight to the innkeeper, but there were so many people about and she had no desire to ruin herself. With luck, her brother had kept the whole affair under wraps, and if she got home with no one the wiser, there would be no damage done. Wrexham would have no trouble silencing Enoch once she was safe. No, the best thing was to get her hands on a horse or gain passage onto a carriage heading back to London, though she quailed a little at the idea. As a sheltered young lady, she had never so much as set foot outside of her house without a chaperone. On the day Enoch had kidnapped her, he had blackmailed her maid into aiding him with his dreadful plan. If only the poor girl had confided in Delia that she was with child, she would have helped her, but the foolish creature had fallen prey to Enoch's nosy beak, and this was the result.

Moving stealthily down the corridor, Delia kept a sharp lookout, certain that at any moment Enoch would leap out at her, having not been out as cold as she'd hoped. A side door beckoned, and Delia's heart quickened. It looked as if it might lead out to the stables. Her hand had just grasped the latch when another, larger hand pressed against the door, over her head, holding it shut.

With a gasp, she turned, and to her horror, found herself staring up into the cold, dark eyes of Lord Malmsey.

"M-My lord," she stammered, putting up her chin. "If you would excuse me, I need to use the necessary."

"And without an escort? Tut, tut. But your poor husband is unconscious, is he not?"

Tricky for him to escort you anywhere in such a state, I fear. Your handiwork, was it, my pretty one?"

Delia stiffened, horribly aware that she might just have exchanged a dreadful situation for a dire one. She knew very well that Malmsey was a violent brute with no morals and not a shred of honour to his name. Enoch was a selfish, unpleasant little sneak, but Malmsey was another creature altogether.

"Unconscious?" she said, trying to feign surprise. "Oh, the poor dear. I must go to him at once." She tried to push past him, only to find herself caged in by his arms. She shrank back against the wall, truly afraid now in a way she had not been until this point.

"Nice try, pet," he said, his thin lips curling with amusement. "But I'm afraid I don't buy it. I thought perhaps it was an elopement, but I see now Mr Goodfellow had the right idea. I've recently lost out on a nice, fat dowry and a pretty little wife. But one duke's daughter is much like another, I fancy."

"I'll not marry you," she said, her voice breathless with terror. "Not now, not ever."

He chuckled at that, an unpleasant sound that made all the fine hairs on her body stand on end. "Oh, I think you will, sweetheart, given the right inducement."

There was a look in his eyes that Delia did not mistake. This was a man who had no compunction about using violence to get his own way. A ridiculous desire to find herself back in the far more manageable hands of Enoch Goodfellow hit her hard and fast and Lord Malmsey grinned, apparently reading her mind.

"Better the devil you know, eh, love? I don't doubt you're right, but you've got me to deal with now, and no fireside poker will save you this time. Try it and I'll show you just how much harder I can strike back."

Delia went cold at his words, which only confirmed everything she had ever heard about him.

“Come along, my lady. My carriage is waiting, and I think I prefer to make haste before your beloved awakens. We don’t want any shocking scenes, do we now?”

Laughing softly to himself, he grasped her by the arm, so hard his fingers bit into her flesh and would certainly leave bruises. He opened the door and guided her through, holding on tight the entire time.

To Delia’s dismay, the door did not lead to the stables, but out into a small courtyard behind them. Though she could hear the bustle of people and the sound of horses’ hooves on cobbles, they were out of sight on the other side of a high wall. Malmsey strode quickly, tugging her behind him. At the end of the yard, he paused, for here was a door sized opening that led out onto the busy stables. Before she could think of screaming, he clapped a hand over her mouth and bent to whisper in her ear.

“We’re going to move quickly and quietly, and no one will notice us. If you make so much as a squeak of protest, I shall make you sorry for it. Do you hear me, pet?”

Delia nodded, recognising the ring of truth in his words. Yet she feared what would become of her if she did not take this slender chance. What if there was no other opportunity to escape, what if this was her only hope?

Closing her eyes, she sent up a silent prayer that she would come through this ordeal unharmed and, as Malmsey took a step forward, she bit the hand covering her mouth with all her might.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Kitty,

I hope you will not be terribly vexed with me, but I have decided to come to town after all. If all goes well, I shall leave first thing tomorrow morning, but I thought I had best warn you of my arrival.

?Excerpt of a letter to the Right Hon'ble Kitty Baxter, The Countess of Trevick, from the Hon'ble Miss Violetta Spencer (cousin and adopted daughter to The Right Hon'ble Kitty and Luke Baxter, Countess and Earl of Trevick).

25 th March 1850, Spinney Cottage, Alconbury, Cambridgeshire, England.

Muir looked around at the sound of a contented sigh and smiled at Sally.

"Must you go?" she asked, giving him an admiring glance as he sat and tugged on his socks.

"Aye," he said. "That I must, lassie. I told ye I'd be off in the morning, did I nae?"

"Yes, only 'tis a shame. I don't start work until this afternoon."

Muir chuckled and got to his feet, moving to the bed. He bent and kissed her before chucking her under the chin. "Sorry, hen, but I must away. I've to be in Scotland before the end of the week or my da will tan my arse."

"Aren't you a bit big for that?" she asked sceptically.

“Aye, but ye dinnae ken my da,” he said, grinning at her. “Thanks for everything,” he added, blowing her a kiss before he made his way out of the cottage, careful to take the back door and keep out of sight in case anyone was watching.

Striding out, Muir hurried back to the Rising Sun to grab his bag and his horse. Once he’d paid his shot, he headed out into the stable yard where one of the grooms recognised him and hurried off to fetch his mount. Kicking his heels for a moment, Muir set down his bag and leaned back on a heavy oak post, reading a newspaper that he’d picked up inside.

To his eternal relief, the news reported that Narcissa Anson was out of danger and making a swift recovery. The paper also related the truth of the events surrounding Lord Richmond’s murder. Thank God for his da, Muir thought, though he had no illusions that the story wouldn’t stick to him for the rest of his days. Where there was smoke, there was fire, was what most people believed, and he doubted the ton would ever completely exonerate him of the crime. He sighed and folded the paper, stuffing it in his bag before he straightened to watch the activity of the yard. A large carriage rumbled in at that moment and suddenly everything was chaos as the ostlers leapt into action, changing the horses while the passengers alighted for a quick meal and stretch of their legs.

Muir’s attention was so focused on the bustle before him that he almost didn’t hear the muffled scream, but he turned his head to the side, where there was an open doorway set into a high brick wall. For just a moment, he glimpsed a woman struggling in the arms of a man. The scream must have come from her, but the fellow clapped his hand over her mouth before she could draw attention to herself, and dragged her on, out of sight.

Muir straightened, hardly able to believe his eyes, but he did not doubt what he’d seen. Moving quickly, he ran to the opening and peered round. His breath caught as he saw the man half dragging, half carrying the struggling woman towards his

carriage. The brave little lass kicked and fought with all her might. Turning in his arms, she caught him a good one with her knee, right in the privates. The fellow let her go, sucking in a sharp breath before backhanding her so hard she hit the ground with a thud.

Fury exploded in Muir's soul as he watched the girl reel back and fall with a cry of pain, and he did not stop to think. With a bellow of rage, he took to his heels, bearing down upon the bastard like an unstoppable tide.

Delia's head spun, her cheek burning and throbbing. Half in a daze, she forced herself to look up, certain Malmsey must be about to grab her again and knowing she must try to escape, for she might not get another chance. A scream rose in her throat as he towered over her with murder in his eyes.

"You little bitch," he muttered, and grabbed hold of her hair.

At that moment came a sound like no other she had heard in her life before. It was a bellow of rage, the kind of noise she had imagined coming from a pirate king as he boarded a well-laden vessel ripe for plunder. Even Malmsey seemed struck by it, for he spun around, the colour leaving his face as his eyes widened in horror.

Delia followed his gaze and felt her heart stop, for there, barrelling towards them in full flight, was a Highland warrior. Kilt flying, and with an expression of such fury on his features, she could well understand Malmsey's obvious terror at the sight. Lord, but he was magnificent, though he was moving so fast she could only gain an impression of a roaring warrior, big and broad and ready to do battle. Her heart thudded hard with relief as Malmsey let go of her hair, moving to defend himself. Delia scrambled back, just as the Scotsman tackled Malmsey, crashing down on top of him with such force she felt the impact herself and heard the breath expelled from Malmsey's lungs.

A fight ensued, of the kind Delia thought she had read about, though the reality was brutal and far more frightening than any description in a book. The urge to flee and leave the two men to their fates tugged at her, yet how could she leave her heroic rescuer? Instead, she ran back to the stables and, though she knew she was about to ruin herself quite comprehensively, she would not have an innocent man's blood on her hands. The Scotsman might look entirely in charge of the encounter, but she did not trust Malmsey as far as she could throw him and would not be surprised if he had some dirty trick up his sleeve.

This time her cries were heeded at once, and a crowd ran after her, hurrying to the scene of the fight. Instead of trying to stop the two men from murdering each other, however, the wretched mob started taking bets.

"Oh, do stop them," Delia begged, running to the man she recognised as the innkeeper. "Please, sir. That wicked man kidnapped me, and the other has only come to my aid. You must help him."

"The Scot? No, miss, don't you fret none. I think the lad has his lordship's measure and I'm glad of it. I've been waiting this age to see someone take the shine off that self-satisfied bastard—excuse my French—but there's no denying he's a blackguard, is Malmsey."

Delia let out an exclamation of frustration and turned back to the fight. The men were on their feet again, though Malmsey looked the worse for wear. As she watched, however, he bent and reached into his boot, then he threw himself forward. Delia saw the flash of a blade and screamed with all her might.

"He's got a knife!"

There were gasps throughout the crowd as Malmsey sent the Scotsman to the ground and thrust the knife towards his chest. The Scot grasped hold of Malmsey's wrist,

holding it off, though Malmsey shifted, grasping the knife with both hands and putting his entire weight behind it as he drove it down.

“Don’t just stand there!” Delia screamed with incoherent fury.

Belatedly, the innkeeper moved forward, just as the Scot forced the angle of the knife back, turning the Malmsey’s hands away from him. The angle must have put the man off balance, for his weight shifted, his boots scrabbling for purchase on the dusty ground as he slipped, falling heavily.

Delia watched in horror as the crowd surged forward, pulling Lord Malmsey off the Scotsman, and revealing his lordship with his own knife plunged deep into his belly. Malmsey gasped, his mouth opening and closing as he clutched at the knife, his eyes wide with terror.

“He’s killed me, he’s killed me!” he rasped, his accusing gaze on the Scot.

“Fetch a surgeon,” the innkeeper bellowed. “Take him inside, quick now.”

Delia watched in a daze, swaying on her feet at the appalling sight. Suddenly it was too much. The effects of the ether had still not worn off, she had barely eaten a morsel in the past days, and now the terror of the past few moments and its violent denouement were more than her senses could take.

“Oh, dear,” she murmured, which seemed a very inadequate thing to say but appeared to be all she could manage.

“Lady Cordelia? Christ, lassie, I had nae idea it was ye,” came a startled voice and Delia’s eyes drifted to the man addressing her. “Are ye hurt?”

“Mr Anderson?” she murmured in surprise and then fainted dead away.

Muir stared at the woman he had rescued from Malmsey's clutches and could hardly believe his eyes. He had not got a good look at her until now, but now he recognised her well enough.

He addressed her, but she only looked at him blearily before she crumpled. Muir thought perhaps she had said his name but could not be sure as he reached for her, too late realising he had just covered her gown in Malmsey's blood. Well, there was no help for it now. Hefting her into his arms, he discovered she was not as feather light as he might have expected of such a petite little creature and carried her inside the inn.

"A private parlour for the lady," Muir shouted at the innkeeper, who immediately dropped what he was doing and showed him up the stairs.

"I reckon her husband is below, sir. Shall I fetch him? Good Lord, such goings on in my inn. I don't like it, I tell you. A respectable place, this is."

"Well, Malmsey isn't respectable," Muir said shortly, staring at the man with interest, for to his certain knowledge Lady Cordelia had been unmarried when he'd left London and had made no announcement of a betrothal, let alone a speedy nuptial. "And I should be pleased to meet her husband. Send him up at once."

"Yes, sir," the innkeeper said as Muir carried Lady Cordelia to the bed and lay her carefully down.

She stirred, giving a little moan. Muir extracted a small silver flask from his person and sat down beside her, easing one arm behind her shoulders to lift her a little.

"Here, lassie, a wee drop of whisky will put all to rights," he told her, pressing the open flask to her lips and tilting it up.

Lady Cordelia spluttered and gasped, then stared up at him with an expression of mute dismay.

“W-What was that?” she demanded, clutching at her throat and grimacing comically.

“That’s the finest whisky you’ll get anywhere in Scotland and will do ye a deal of good. Take another sip.”

She shook her head, holding her hand out to stop him from giving her another dose.

“Dinnae make a fuss, ’tis only a sip. It will give ye strength enough to deal with what’s next.”

“What is next?” she asked in alarm.

“Well, yer husband is on his way up, so I’m told,” he said, watching her expression closely.

“My—” she began, only to gasp and sit bolt upright, clasping his arm. “Oh, Mr Anderson, you must help me,” she pleaded, just as a man walked through the door.

Muir turned, frowning as he regarded the fellow. He looked vaguely familiar, though he could not say from where. A spindly fellow with an air of gravity about him... for a moment, Muir wondered if he was a curate.

“Darling!” he exclaimed, hurrying into the room towards Lady Cordelia. “Did that vile man hurt you?”

Muir felt as much as saw Cordelia stiffen as the man rushed towards her. “Don’t you come another step, Enoch,” she told him with some force. “I shall never forgive you for getting me into this horrid mess and I am not and never will be your darling!”

Well, this was interesting. Muir looked from one to the other of them, observing the livid scratches down the man's cheek.

“Is he nae yer husband then, my lady?”

“No!”

“Yes!”

Both answered at once, but the thin fellow spoke louder, holding Muir's attention for the moment. “We eloped,” he said with a chagrined smile. “Dreadful, I know, but she feared her brother would disapprove of the match, for I have no title nor fortune. Sadly, she's got cold feet since, but now she's quite thoroughly ruined, so—”

“You wicked liar!”

Muir turned to see the lady had got herself onto her knees on the bed and was gazing at Enoch with such blazing anger her cheeks were flushed scarlet, her lovely blue eyes glittering with the force of her fury. She was really quite splendid, considering everything she'd been through, and he could only admire her spirit as she pointed at her would-be husband with an accusing finger. “He kidnapped me, and I would rather be ruined ten times over than spend another second in his company, the vile, despicable, dishonourable rat!”

“My dear,” spindleshanks said again, trying to reach for her hand. “You're overwrought and—”

Muir grasped hold of the fellow's wrist, keeping him back. “Is this true?” he asked, his voice quiet.

Though recent events might give people pause to believe it, Muir was by nature a

peaceable and pleasure-loving fellow who had taken nothing much too seriously over the past years. However, anyone who knew him would know that tone of voice was not one to trifle with. It seemed this fellow recognised the dangerous note in it too and stilled. He tried to tug his hand free but failed to do so.

“Answer the question, sir.”

“This is none of your affair,” the man said stiffly. “Nothing more than a lovers’ tiff. It is regrettable that Lord Malmsey had to interfere in the matter but, as we all know, there is nothing he would not do for his own pleasure.”

“Well, if that’s not the pot calling the kettle black,” Lady Cordelia piped up. “You just wanted my dowry and title, Enoch, the same as all the others.”

“That is not true!” he replied. “I have loved you since—”

“You have loved my father’s rank and power,” she shot back, her voice trembling with emotion. “You have never heeded my wishes, never listened to me, only droned on and on about all the things I ought not to do and attached yourself to me at every opportunity. We were friends once, Enoch, which is the only reason I let you do so, and now I see my folly in not having given you the set down you so richly deserved. Go away, Mr Goodfellow, I shall not marry you.”

“Then whom shall you marry?” he demanded.

Muir noted the coldness in the man’s eyes and did not doubt the lady’s estimation of his character.

“For you are quite ruined. No one will have you now. Gossip will spread and tell tales of the fact you spent all that time with me alone, and then with Lord Malmsey. You’re fit for no one, Delia. Goodness, there won’t be a respectable man in England

who would—”

Muir grabbed Goodfellow about the throat with his free hand and backed him up against the bedroom wall.

“Shut yer fat gob,” Muir growled, having heard quite enough to have a decided opinion on what kind of man he was dealing with. “There will be nae gossip, do ye hear me? Nae a word of this will pass yer lips, or else I’ll have the closing of them and ye will eat nowt but soup for the rest of yer days.”

Mr Goodfellow turned a sickly shade somewhere between green and white, but he held Muir’s gaze defiantly. “I don’t need to breathe a word. You think news of Lord Malmsey’s murder won’t travel like wildfire, and that the cause of the fight was Lady Cordelia here? She’s ruined no matter what I say, and her only choice is to marry me.”

“I’m afraid I must beg to differ,” Muir said, enraged, both by the man’s arrogance and at being put in a position where he must sacrifice his own future for the sake of honour. “Lady Cordelia?” he said, not taking his eyes from Mr Goodfellow.

“Yes?”

“It’s nae much of a proposal, but I’m afraid yer out of options. Skinny malinky longlegs here is right, damn him. Yer certainly ruined, but if ye’ll have me, I’ll wed ye myself.”

There was a stunned silence as she digested this.

“You w-would do that?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper, though he thought he heard the relief behind the words and was hardly surprised by it.

Muir sighed inwardly, for he wished more than anything to tell the lass that he would not, but he was no villain, he knew what his honour demanded. He could not in all conscience leave the girl in the hands of such a piece of work as Mr Goodfellow.

“Aye, I just said so, did I nae?” he said, unable to keep the terse note from his voice.

“Don’t be a fool, Delia,” Mr Goodfellow said, his voice rasping somewhat from the hold Muir still had on his throat. “You don’t know this man from Adam. He’s a heathen and will probably beat you and ach—”

Muir tightened his grip. “I have never raised my hand to a woman in my life and I never shall, ye miserable bastard.”

“Yes, Mr Anderson,” came the sudden reply from the bed. “Yes, I shall marry you.”

“Right, then,” Muir said, reaching around and opening the door before shoving Mr Goodfellow out of it with some force. Goodfellow staggered back, hitting the opposite wall before he fell on his arse. “Yer nae welcome here, so I suggest ye leave afore I stop feeling so peaceable.”

“Or what? You’ll murder me, like you did Lord Malmsey?” the fellow sneered.

Muir took a step towards him, and the fellow ran like the rat he was, scurrying down the stairs, and if he knew what was good for him, far away from Muir.

Standing at the top of the stairs, Muir watched for a moment before he looked down at his hands and saw the dried blood there. Malmsey’s blood. His stomach dropped. The words slung at him were true enough, he supposed, though it had not been his intention. He’d had no choice, he knew that, and he was not about to beat himself up over the demise of such a villain. Malmsey would have murdered him without a second thought. All the same, his belly roiled. Swallowing down his nausea, Muir

was about to turn away when the innkeeper appeared again.

“Sir,” he said, somewhat apologetically. “Lord Malmsey is dead.”

“Aye,” Muir replied, his tone even. “Quicker than I expected, but I reckoned as much.”

“Everyone here will speak for you,” the fellow said hastily. “There’re over forty witnesses who will tell anyone who wants to listen that you did nothing wrong. Malmsey was well known here and reviled, too. He’s left a fair few bastards and ruined girls in the surrounding villages. There’s none who will mourn him and that’s a fact. I promise you, there’s no need to fear reprisals.”

“I thank ye,” Muir replied, grateful but knowing just what this would do to his reputation, coming so swiftly on the heels of Lord Richmond’s murder. “Would ye be so good as to send up a bite to eat and a pot of tea for the lady? She’s had a trying day by anyone’s measure.”

“Her husband?” the man said in confusion.

Muir strode down the stairs and took out his purse, pressing a gold sovereign into the man’s hand. “Ye dinnae know me, but I’m Muir Anderson, my father is the Earl of Morven and so ye may take my word for what has passed. The lady was kidnapped, first by that little shite, and then Malmsey figured out what had happened and sought to take advantage of the situation. The lady is to be my wife, and I’ll have no shame or scandal attached to her name, d’ye ken my meaning, sir?”

“Yes, indeed, Mr Anderson,” the fellow said, pocketing the sovereign. “Like I said, I run a respectable house. I cannot speak for everyone who witnessed what happened outside, but you may be sure no gossip about the lady will come from anyone I have any influence over.”

“Good man,” Muir said, slapping his shoulder, before making his way back up the stairs. He felt suddenly weary, and more than a little apprehensive about re-entering the room to speak to his fiancée .

Lady Cordelia was sitting on the edge of the bed, but she leapt to her feet as Muir came in and closed the door.

“Ye have no need to be feart of me, lassie,” he said with a sigh.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said quietly. “I wanted to thank you for everything you have done and... and to release you from your offer. I know you only sought to protect me, and I only accepted to get free of Enoch.”

“Aye, I did seek to protect ye, and I still do. Ye cannae change yer mind. Ye have nae choice now,” he said, his voice flat, knowing she was not the only one.

She put up her chin, once more showing a strength of character he might not have expected from what he knew of her, nor by looking at her, considering the frills and flounces of an extraordinarily pretty, if tattered and grubby, gown. He could only admire her for the courage she showed. “My brother is the Marquess of Wrexham, my father the Duke of Sefton and—”

“And that will nae do ye a whit of good now, lassie,” Muir said firmly, sorry to have to crush her spirits, but it was best she had no illusions about just how bad things were. “I’m afraid ye have caught yerself in a scandal of the sort ye dinnae yet comprehend. I left London to escape it and now I have made it a million times worse with the death of that miserable devil Malmsey, curse him.”

Lady Cordelia stared at him in dismay, and Muir regarded her in return. She was a fetching creature, her curling hair the colour of old gold, though it was in a dreadful state of disarray after her ordeal. He had first met her a few years ago and thought her

a charming but rather odd girl. She said the most extraordinary things and seemed to spend a good deal of her time in her head, daydreaming. Though he had liked her well enough, she was not at all the kind of woman he'd imagined as his wife. He needed a strong and capable woman, someone robust, who could handle being the wife of a man who was a farmer at heart and lived much of his life out of doors. A burst of resentment at having been caught once more in other people's troubles made irritation surge through him but he pushed it back down. It was not the girl's fault any more than it was his own.

"What do you mean?" she asked, recalling him to the conversation. "What scandal did you seek to escape?"

"The murder of Lord Richmond," he said, running a hand through his hair.

She gaped at him in such horror, he almost laughed.

"Nae, I didnae murder him, though he well deserved it. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Everyone saw me go after him and—" Muir sighed and shook his head. "Sit down, lassie. I've ordered something to eat and some tea. Let me tell ye the whole and then ye shall see just how big a scandal we have on our hands. If we stick together, we shall ride it out well enough, but I reckon we shall need to keep our heads down for a good long spell."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Rex and Emmeline,

This is just a brief letter to tell you I am safe and well. It has been the most appalling few days and I hardly know where to begin, but I must tell you Enoch Goodfellow kidnapped me. He intended to force me into marriage, though I tell you now, he would not have succeeded.

I was feeling quite pleased with myself for having escaped him by bashing him with a fireside poker until I fell into Lord Malmsey's hands.

I have never met a man so lost to honour and decency and I was truly in fear for my life. He tried to take me to his carriage, but I fought him as best I could. I should not have prevailed, however, if not for the intervention of Mr Muir Anderson. He came upon us and bravely fought Lord Malmsey. His lordship tried to kill Mr Anderson with a knife during the altercation, but in defending himself, Mr Anderson stabbed Lord Malmsey in the stomach. I am told he bled to death not long after.

It's all been quite remarkably awful, and I know that the scandal is of quite terrifying proportions. Mr Anderson is the most honourable of men, however, and has offered me the protection of his name. We are to be married in Scotland. He is taking me to stay with his brother, Viscount Buchanan and his wife whilst he prepares his home for my arrival.

He believes it is best we stay away from town for the foreseeable future until the dust settles. So, I may be back in a decade or so.

Oh, what a mess I am in!

?Excerpt of a letter from The Lady Cordelia Steyning to her brother, and sister-in-law, The Most Hon'ble Marquess and Marchioness of Wrexham.

25th March 1850, The Rising Sun, Alconbury, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, England.

“You’re quite sure she’s in no danger?” Delia said for the tenth time, blowing her nose on the huge handkerchief with which Mr Anderson had provided her. The terrible story he’d related concerning her dear friend Narcissa and the attack her brother, Lord Richmond, had made upon Narcissa’s new husband—and accidentally upon Narcissa herself—had brought Delia to tears.

“So said this morning’s papers. And ye ken her new mother-in-law has a hand for healing.”

“Oh, I wish I could go to her,” Delia said thickly. “And I thought I’d had a horrid few days.”

“And so ye have,” Muir told her firmly. “Dinnae fash yerself over Mrs Anson. She’s in excellent hands and by the looks of him, Ash would move heaven and earth for the girl. He’s head over ears for her if ye ask me.”

“It’s truly a love match, then,” she said with a contented sigh, her concerns eased by his words. “I suspected there was something between them, certainly on Narcissa’s side, for she was forever asking me if I had seen him or what event he was attending. Oh, how romantic it must have been, eloping to escape her vile father. I do hope they will be happy, they certainly deserve it.”

Mr Anderson said nothing more on the subject, intent on dishing up the meal a curious serving girl had brought up to them a few minutes earlier. The vexing little creature had been agog, staring between Muir and Delia as if she were viewing

creatures in a menagerie. Her gaze had certainly lingered on Muir most of all, though, for which Delia could not blame her. She was finding it a little difficult to stop staring at him herself. The heroic way in which he had burst into her life was enough to make any girl feel a little weak at the knees, but being alone with him and in such close quarters, knowing he would soon be her husband... Well, it was all rather unsettling, to say the least. Muir had finally hurried the girl out of the room and Delia tried to turn her attention to the meal. It smelled divine, though after the vile eggs and bacon that morning, she was more than a little suspicious of it.

Rather to her surprise, Delia discovered the stew to be rich and meaty and well-flavoured, and finished a first helping with no trouble, even accepting the second serving that Muir offered her.

“My stomach is rather stronger than I believed it to be,” she said ruefully. “I suspect I ought not to have such a healthy appetite after everything that’s happened.”

“There is nae point in starving yerself, lassie,” Muir said, his tone matter of fact. “It serves nae purpose and none of what happened is yer fault, ye ken.”

“I know,” she replied, looking at him covertly whilst he applied himself to his meal.

His hair was on the long side for fashion, and in severe disarray after his fight with Malmsey. Unsurprisingly, his clothes had fared little better, his kilt dusty and his coat torn and just as filthy. He looked utterly disreputable, large and dangerous, her every notion of a Highland warrior come to life. Her idiotic heart gave a lurch as she remembered how magnificent he had looked rampaging towards Lord Malmsey, bellowing with fury as he went. The image ingrained in her mind was one she would not soon forget, and this great, untamed-looking creature was to be her husband! A shiver of something not quite fear prickled down her spine.

“My name is Cordelia. My friends and family call me Delia,” she added.

He glanced up at that. “Ye dinnae like being called lassie, aye?”

“Oh, I don’t mind it,” she replied with a smile. “It’s rather endearing actually, but I thought you might like to use my name now and then, too.”

“Ye dinnae prefer I call ye ‘my lady?’” he asked her curiously.

“Good heavens, no,” she said, shaking her head. “I am not nearly so formal as that and... and if we are...” She swallowed, still having some difficulty with the truth of it.

“To be married?” he finished for her. “There’s nae point in being squeamish. I reckon I am nae the husband ye wished for, but I cannae change it any more than ye can.”

Delia held her tongue, too uncertain of herself to reply, especially as it would be to contradict him. He was exactly the kind of husband she had wished for. She had dreamed of a bold, dashing man who would stop at nothing to keep her safe. A hero who would throw her over his shoulder and carry her out of danger and off into the sunset. The trouble was, she was only now realising that such an exciting husband might not be very comfortable to live the rest of her life with. She did not know Mr Anderson well, but though he was a fine, handsome man, and he had made her laugh a good deal during their brief conversations in the past, he was a little... well, rough about the edges. Not that she minded that, nor his frank speech. It was only that she wondered what kind of life she might lead as his wife, and what he might expect of her.

“I cannot imagine I am the kind of wife you wished for either,” she replied quietly.

There was a brief silence, which was answer enough for Delia.

“I consider myself a very fortunate fellow,” he said, and whilst she appreciated the

gallant try, she wished he had lied a bit harder.

“You are kind, sir, but I pray you are better at hiding your true feelings when you play cards,” she replied dryly.

He sighed and set down his cutlery, pushing the empty plate aside. “I spoke true enough,” he said, his tone gruff. “Yer a very lovely girl, beautiful, in fact, and no doubt ye will bring me a healthy dowry. I’d be a fool to turn my nose up. It’s only I think ye will nae like the life ahead of ye. I expected to marry a lass who was more... robust,” he finished after a pause.

“Robust?” she replied with a frown.

“Aye. Ye husband-to-be is nae more than a glorified sheep farmer in the wilds of Scotland. My brother Lyall inherited the title, ye ken. Wildsyde is his now, but I inherited the home farm.”

“Sheep farming is a successful enterprise in the Highlands now, I understand. Since the clearances—”

“There wisnae clearance at Wildsyde,” he said, his voice sharp. “There wisnae need, for the land was never forested, but even if it had been, neither my da nor my brother holds with putting people off the land they’ve farmed all their lives. We’ve land enough for our needs, and we deal in quality, nae quantity. I’ve the best sheep ye will find anywhere in the Scotland, or in England too.”

“I beg your pardon,” Delia said meekly, flushing with mortification. “I did not intend to insult you.”

“Ach, nae,” he said, his expression becoming less forbidding in the face of her apology. “Ye must forgive me. There’s nae reason ye should know such things.

Dinnae heed me, lassie—I mean, Delia.”

“We’ve a good deal to learn about each other,” she said hesitantly, wondering what life as a sheep farmer’s wife might entail. She could not begin to imagine it.

“Aye,” he replied, sounding even more dejected than she did. “I reckon we do.”

The next day, Muir went to a deal of trouble to send her brother one of the newfangled telegrams that the railway now offered, to assure him of her safety. Then they both sent letters to everyone who needed to be informed in more detail of their situation. By the time Muir had resolved things with the magistrate summoned upon the death of Lord Malmsey, it was late in the morning.

Setting off to the train station at Huntingdon, Delia could only stare out of the window in bemusement. Her life had never been her own, for her brute of a father had been a far too domineering figure in her life, keeping her isolated from the world until her brother had married and insisted on taking responsibility for her. As the duke had by that time bankrupted himself through a lifetime of selfishness and mismanagement, he’d had little recourse.

Wrexham kept their father on a tight leash these days through the allowance he paid the duke. Anything resembling inappropriate behaviour and Wrexham simply refused to pay. It had changed Delia’s life beyond recognition, bringing her society and a few dear friends of the kind she had never had before. But a lifetime of solitude, where novels and daydreams about exciting adventures and romantic escapades had been her only friends, made her ill-equipped for the ton. They thought her peculiar at best, and her habit of speaking to herself out loud, or worse, having make-believe conversations with animals or inanimate objects, did not help matters. She had a lively imagination and often found humour in things other people did not seem to appreciate. Besides which, animals were far easier to talk to than most people. Though she had tried to cure herself of the habit, it was too ingrained, and she seemed

unable to stop it entirely.

And now here she was, once again swept away by the tide of life, picked up like a leaf and towed along by the current, with no means of fighting her fate.

She told herself she was not ungrateful. Even now she might be married to Enoch Goodfellow, or worse still, at the mercy of Lord Malmsey. Shuddering, she reminded herself she had escaped Enoch through her own efforts and running into Malmsey had been sheer bad luck. She was not entirely helpless, and she had a will of her own. Having extracted an agreement from Mr Anderson that they should have a few weeks to get to know each other before they wed, if things between them did not appear to be working, she would simply refuse to marry him, no matter how bad the ensuing scandal would be.

If she was destined to be Wrexham's peculiar sister and eccentric maiden aunt to his and Emmeline's children, it would be no more than she had ever expected.

Across the carriage from her, Mr Anderson had closed his eyes and appeared to be dozing. She suspected he had slept no better than she had, for despite her exhaustion she could not rest easy after everything that had happened. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Lord Malmsey clutching the knife in his belly and accusing Mr Anderson of having killed him. She did not doubt the horrific scene was etched on the poor man's mind too, and most likely accounted for his rather haggard look this morning.

Not that he wasn't a handsome fellow. He had strong features and an uncompromising square jaw that suggested he had a stubborn streak a mile wide. He had broken his nose at some point in his life, but it added to the rather uncivilised air he carried and in no way diminished his looks. Quite the contrary, in fact. Involuntarily, her eyes dropped to his knees, and to the long legs that stretched out diagonally across the carriage. Colour rose to her cheeks, and she looked hurriedly

away, only to find herself studying him again just moments later. With his tawny hair brushed more neatly this morning, and his dress clean and properly arranged, he still looked not quite tame, like a man out of time and place. She could easily imagine him wielding a broadsword and defying the English at that awful ultimate battle that had taken place at Culloden over a hundred years ago. He was an honourable and brave man, the kind that would die before he yielded to what he believed to be an evil influence.

Delia realised she found him rather intimidating. Though she had met him in society and his manners had been impeccable, she had never felt he was entirely at ease there. At first, she had assumed it was her company he disliked and that he'd been eager to get away, but then she had wondered if he experienced the same sense of being out of place as she did. He certainly never made the same kinds of faux pas that Delia did with humiliating frequency, and he was always witty and engaging. There was no real reason for her to suppose he was anything but at home there, other than some sixth sense that told her he was not where he would choose to be.

The carriage lumbered over a rut in the road and Delia dragged her gaze from his legs to his face just in time as he blinked awake.

“Where are we?” he asked thickly.

“I’ve not the least idea,” she replied with an apologetic smile. “But I think we must be nearing the station.”

“Aye,” he said, staring out of the window. “Reckon so. Lord, but I shall be glad to be out of England.”

“Is Scotland very different?” she asked, feeling foolish as he looked at her incredulously.

“Have ye never been?”

Delia shook her head. “I’m afraid not. Though I have long wished to. Is it really as wild and remote as people say?”

“Not all of it. We have cities that could rival London,” he said with no small amount of pride. “But aye, Wildsyde is about as far from the world as ye can get, I suppose. Ye winnae be feart to be so far from everything?”

Delia shook her head. “I grew up in the countryside and, whilst we were not so far from the world, I saw nothing of it, so I may as well have been on the moon.”

He considered this, studying her with interest. “Your da, Sefton. He’s nae a kindly fellow, I think?”

Delia suppressed a shiver at the mention of her father. “No, Mr Anderson, not a kindly fellow at all.”

“Ach, dinnae call me that. If we are to be wed, I reckon ye may call me Muir.”

“Thank you,” she said, but his expression had grown serious.

“He didnae beat ye, I hope?”

“No, he never raised a hand to me, though I had a strict governess who did the job for him often enough,” she added with a wry smile. “I suppose I gave her cause to, for I was not a very adept student.”

“Student? Yer father educated ye like a lad?” he asked with interest.

Delia let out a laugh at the idea. “Good heavens, no. My father would think that a

ludicrous idea. No, but I was supposed to learn to paint and sew and play the pianoforte and the harp. All the ladylike accomplishments.”

“And ye couldnae?”

Delia shook her head. “Only very poorly. I have a fair hand with a pencil, I suppose, and I play the piano a little, but as for the rest. No, indeed. I have very few talents I fear.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Muir replied, which she suspected was nothing more than another try at gallantry on his part, but he sounded more sincere this time and she appreciated the sentiment.

The train journey to York, then Berwick and into Edinburgh, was long and wearying and Delia was not displeased about stopping for the night before going any farther. The inn where Muir secured lodgings was a bustling place and as Delia waited in the carriage, watching the comings and goings, she doubted Muir would be able to find them rooms for the night. However, he returned to her, hurrying through the dark and drizzle to tug open the carriage door.

“Well, ye have a bed for the night, but ye may not like it overmuch,” he admitted.

“I think I could sleep pegged to a line,” Delia said, smothering a yawn.

He chuckled at that and offered her his hand. “Come then, lassie, and ye may scold me after if it ’tis nae to yer liking.”

“I’m sure I shall do no such thing,” she said, tugging her cloak up over her head, for they were not yet married, and she did not wish to add more fuel to the fire... if that were even possible. Obediently, she hurried up the stairs in Muir’s wake, and into a cosy, low beamed bedroom with a large fourposter and a blazing fire in the hearth.

“Oh, but it’s perfectly charming,” she said, turning to Muir in confusion. “Whyever did you think I would not like it?”

“It wisnae the room I suspected ye would dislike, but the fact there is only one. We must share it, lassie. Dinnae fret yer head about it, though. I signed ye in as my wife, and I shall sleep on the floor.”

“Oh,” Delia said, trying her best not to look dismayed by this information. She had been so longing to go to bed and have some peace to collect her thoughts. The idea of resting with a burly Highlander sleeping in the same room was one she did not find the least bit soothing. “Well, I am grateful that I have a bed to sleep in,” she said resolutely, determined not to be missish and give him further cause to regret having helped her.

“Good girl,” he said with approval. “I’ve ordered supper up here too. I dinnae think it wise to show ourselves too openly. I’m known in these parts and the news I have a wife will spread soon enough now, we don’t need the other business muddying the waters.”

“No, indeed. I doubt the news could have spread this far yet, but I should feel conspicuous all the same,” Delia admitted.

“Aye. I shall be glad to get home. Ye will have nae gossip to fret yerself over there, save for the servants gabbing a little. But they’ll do ye nae harm with it, for they’re decent folk and ken better.”

“How far from Wildsyde Castle is your farm, Muir?”

“Oh, a hop, skip and a jump,” he said with a shrug before catching her eye. He laughed then. “I suppose two or three miles. Nae far. Ye can see the high tower from the bedroom windows.”

A knock at the door announced the arrival of their dinner and Muir oversaw the servants as they set everything on a small table by the window and then left them alone.

“Well, it smells good,” Delia said as Muir pulled out her chair for her.

“It does,” he agreed, taking up the spoon and placing a generous portion of cottage pie onto her plate. It was served with cabbage and Delia watched with amusement as Muir practically inhaled his plateful before helping himself to more.

“Would ye like wine?” he asked, pausing for a moment to fill his glass.

“Yes, please,” Delia replied, for she was alone in a room with a man after having been quite thoroughly ruined. She did not see the least reason why she ought not to indulge herself with a glass of wine too.

Muir poured her a glass, and she took it, sipping thoughtfully.

“Good, aye?” he asked, watching her.

“Better than the whisky,” she said solemnly.

“Ach, nae. Ye must no say such things, Delia. ’Tis sacrilege.”

She smiled at him, seeing he meant it, and shook her head. “I shall try to like it if it’s important to you.”

Muir returned her smile, regarding her with interest. “Thank ye. If yer to make yer home in Scotland, I think ye best had.” He paused, looking a little ill at ease. “I suppose we ought to get to know each other a bit better, aye?”

Delia felt suddenly uncomfortable, having not been in the least so until this moment. “I suppose so,” she said, lowering her eyes to her dinner.

“Well, ye dinnae sound very happy at the idea,” he said, and she felt his gaze as if it were boring into her head. “Do ye prefer to marry a stranger?”

“Oh, no!” Delia said at once, shaking her head and appalled he might think her disinterested. “I would love to know more about you, if you would be so good as to tell me more. It’s only—”

“Aye?” he pressed her, when she failed to carry on.

Delia sighed. “When people get to know me, they usually run away soon after.”

He laughed and shook his head at her words. “Dinnae be daft.”

“Oh, I’m not,” she replied earnestly, staring at her dinner and suddenly not so hungry as she had been. She toyed with the mashed potato on top of the pie, using the side of her fork to shape it. “I’m only being honest, for I’m afraid if you learn more, you shall dislike the idea of marrying me even more than you do now.”

“I dinnae dislike the idea,” he said stoutly, and then sighed as she shot him an incredulous look. “Alright, I admit I am nae over the moon. A fellow likes to have the choosing of his bride, aye? It’s nae a secret, and to have this situation thrust upon me... well, I dinnae like it overmuch. But yer a fine bonnie lassie, and I reckon we can make things work if we give it a go.”

Delia swallowed, feeling worse than ever. “You are very kind, Muir, but I beg you will tell me truthfully if the idea of marrying me becomes intolerable. I should far rather be ruined and free to live among my family than married to a man who comes to resent or even despise me.”

“Ach, I could never despise ye!” he exclaimed.

Delia shrugged. “Perhaps not, but you might not like me. Even my family get exasperated you know, and they love me.”

“Why do ye think I would not like ye?” he asked, his voice softer now.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But people don’t, as a rule.”

It was nothing but the truth. She was uncomfortable among the ton and nerves usually made her tongue run away with her, or worse, she could not think of a thing to say. Those occasions were the worst, for she would sometimes blurt out the first thing to come to mind, usually things she ought not say at all. Sighing, Delia glanced down at her plate, appalled to realise that while she’d been talking, she’d sculpted the potato into something that looked distinctly like a sheep. Hurriedly, she used her fork to shove the potato around and glanced up, praying he hadn’t noticed.

“Who disnae like ye?” he asked curiously, and she felt a rush of relief that he must not have seen her inappropriate artwork.

“Well,” she said, wondering if she ought to say it, but if they were to be married, there was no point in being anything but honest. “Well, I didn’t think you liked me much, for one thing.”

“Me?” he replied in surprise. “Ach, ye have rocks in yer heid. I liked ye well enough.”

“The first time we met, you couldn’t get away fast enough,” she reminded him, taking another sip of her wine.

Muir frowned, looking uncomfortable. “I dinnae think—” he began, only to fall

silent. “Oh, I remember.”

Delia blushed and looked away from him.

“There, you see,” she said quietly.

To her surprise, he chuckled. “It wisnae that I didnae like ye,” he replied, scraping the last of the cottage pie from the dish. He lifted the spoon in her direction, but Delia shook her head. “It’s just I was a little disconcerted. For I was talking to you while we strolled by the lake at Holbrooke House, and you began a conversation with a duck.”

Delia groaned and covered her face with her hand.

“I mean, I dinnae mind ye talking to the duck, it was only when ye seemed to hear the duck’s replies I got a little worried about ye,” he admitted ruefully. “But when I spoke to Emmeline, she told me ye were very fond of animals, and liked to imagine the things they would say if they could talk, and that I could understand, once she explained it.”

Her cheeks blazing, Delia struggled to meet his gaze. “Some animals are so expressive, you see,” she said, feeling utterly stupid. “I feel like I know what they are thinking sometimes and... and... Well, the truth is, they are more fun to talk to than most people.”

“Well, I cannae fault ye there,” he said easily. “And my brother talks to his dogs, I suppose. I cannae say I have conversations with my sheep, for they have nae much resembling a brain, but I do talk to them, so I suppose it’s nae so very different. But was the duck more interesting than I was?” he asked, humour glinting in his eyes.

“No, of course not,” she said, a little crossly. “But I do particularly stupid things

when I'm nervous and... and you made me very nervous."

"Did I, then?" he asked, interest lighting his expression. "Why?"

Delia rolled her eyes at him. "Because everyone I don't know makes me nervous," she said tightly, and though that was perfectly true, she was not about to admit it had been Muir himself with his lovely accent, so handsome and kind, who had turned her into a blithering idiot.

He made a sound low in his throat that she could not identify, and they lapsed into silence until the maid returned to clear the dishes and serve an apple pie with cream. They ate in silence, which was not entirely comfortable, while Delia racked her brain for some safe topic of conversation and failed.

"Ye ken we must work at this, aye," he said, once he'd cleared his bowl and Delia had barely taken two spoonfuls of hers. "It's a damned strange thing for both of us to be fankled together so dramatically. I think we would do well to be honest with each other, even if it's nae always the thing the other wishes to hear. Delia, I must tell ye, I am having a hard time imagining ye in my home, in my life. Ye have been bred to run a grand house and be the wife of some fine English gentleman, and I am nae that."

Delia nodded gloomily. "I know. Though can you really see me doing that? I don't think I'd have been a very good wife to an English gentleman either, do you? Can you honestly imagine me hosting a dinner party to impress those in society?"

He considered this, frowning a little. "Perhaps ye have a point," he agreed, which was not very flattering, but it was honest, at least.

"Why do you find it so difficult to see me at your home?" she asked, hoping he'd be truthful about that too. If she decided to marry him, she needed to know what he did not want from her.

Muir shrugged. “It’s a fine house, and I’m proud of it. I think ye will nae be displeased, but it is a working farm, and though I would never expect my wife to get her hands dirty in that way, there’s a deal I would hope she could do. I know ye must have been trained to run a great household, but I have nae need to give splendid dinner parties. Ye will have very little society, and I have nae requirement to fill every room with exotic flowers and fruits. The kitchen garden has nae flowers, it is a large affair and ye would need to oversee using or preserving the produce. Winters are harsh in the Highlands, ye ken. Then there are the tenants. Could ye see yerself walking for miles, visiting the sick, taking care of our neighbours and keeping the peace when they fell out with each other?”

“I don’t know,” Delia replied. “It might be difficult at first, perhaps, but I think I could certainly learn a good deal. I know I said I was useless at ladylike pursuits, but that’s because I always found them so dull and pointless. If the things I did had purpose, if they were valued, it would be different, I think.”

Muir reached for her hand and Delia’s breath caught as his warm fingers closed around hers, turning it palm up.

“Such a small, white hand,” he said, shaking his head. “Soft as a bairn’s.”

“Would you prefer if it were hard and calloused?” she demanded, a little indignantly.

He shook his head at once. “I widnae, and that’s the trouble. Look at ye, lassie, with all yer lace and ribbons. Yer pretty as a picture despite the ordeal ye have endured, but such a rig will nae be fitting at my home most days. Won’t that trouble ye?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I do like pretty clothes, that’s true, but if you dislike such things—”

“I didnae say that,” he said, a touch of impatience in his voice. “It pleases me to look

upon ye in yer finery. But during the day, ye will have nae cause for such a rig. Only the sheep, my housekeeper, and a few farm hands will see ye.”

“Oh. I see,” she said, frowning. “But is there no society at all?”

“Aye, of course there are neighbours, though they’re not exactly on the doorstep, and there’s Lyall and Luella and their bairns at the castle, of course. But it is nothing like being in London, with constant dinner parties and dances.”

“Oh,” Delia said, suddenly thinking that she might like her new life very well indeed. “Oh, I see.”

“I’m sorry, lass. It’s a blow, I reckon, but it’s best ye know in advance.”

“Yes, of course,” she said, not paying him much mind as she considered the idea that she may never be required to hold a dinner party for anyone but family and friends.

“Are ye going to eat that?” he asked, drawing her attention back to him once more.

Delia looked down at her barely touched apple pie and then up at him. Though he’d eaten heartily, she suspected a man of his size must need a good deal to keep him going.

“No,” she said with a smile, handing the bowl over to him. “You finish it for me, please.”

“If yer sure?”

“I am,” she said with a smile, feeling a good deal happier about the prospect of being a farmer’s wife than she ever might have expected.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Delia,

Oh, my friend, I have this very morning discovered what befell you and I am so terribly sorry for the ordeal you have endured. My darling Ashton returned in the early hours, after having discovered the truth from Wrexham. I am so relieved to hear you are safe but cannot imagine how frightened you must have been.

Is it true you will marry Muir Anderson? I must tell you I have always admired Mr Anderson and Ashton says he is a fine man and will make you an excellent husband. I do hope you will be as happy as I, my dearest Delia. I beg you will write as soon as you are able and tell me everything. How I wish I could fly to you at once and hear the story from your own lips, but I too have had a little excitement recently, and Ash will not hear of me travelling such a distance until he is certain I am strong again. He is such a dear man, but frets over me like a mother hen.

Write soon please!

?Excerpt of a letter from The Lady Narcissa Anson to The Lady Cordelia Steyning.

27 th March 1850, The Red Lion, Inverness, Scotland.

The following day they'd travelled from Edinburgh to Inverness by carriage, and Muir had done his best to put Delia at ease. It worked at times, and when the conversation flowed easily between them, he thought perhaps they would make a go of it. But the journey was long and tedious and there was too much time for fretting over the future, for cursing the past and a turn of fate that seemed to think his life was a grand joke. By the time they'd reached their destination, they were both tired and

out of sorts, and now they had to do it all over again.

He'd woken early, as was his habit, stretching his aching limbs after another night spent on the floor. Though he'd certainly slept in worse places, and he did not begrudge Delia the bed, he was looking forward to the comforts of his own home. Muir hoped they'd be back in time for dinner, for he was looking forward to some home cooking. He toyed with the idea of taking Delia directly to the farm. Mrs Paterson would certainly treat them to a good spread. She usually did, being a fine cook and housekeeper, though undoubtedly the most terrifying woman in the Highlands. Even his da gave Mrs Paterson a wide berth when he was visiting, rather than cross swords with her. He wondered how Delia would rub along with her, and suspected Mrs Paterson would eat her for breakfast. He'd have to keep an eye on that situation if they made a go of things. However, he could not take her straight to his home. She'd have to stay with Lyall at Wildsyde until they were wed, which meant he'd have to explain everything that had happened the moment they arrived. The idea of having to tell his older brother the details of the mess he was in made his pride burn with resentment, but there was no avoiding it.

Muir crouched to stir the fire back to life and add some more coals, then straightened and turned to look at the bed. Despite the situation he found himself in, he smiled as he regarded Delia. She was curled on her side, her hands tucked under her cheek. With nothing resembling baggage to her name, he had given her money to buy the overnight things she needed and a new carriage gown, so she looked respectable again. The nightgown she had chosen was a feminine extravaganza of frills and ribbons and somehow, she looked like a sweet little girl rather than a woman whom he was honour-bound to marry.

She stirred, sighing and turning onto her back. Muir looked away, uneasy with watching her while she slept. Footsteps outside announced the arrival of the maid and Muir opened the door before she could knock and wake Delia. He accepted the jug of hot water she carried, thanked her and went back inside, taking his shaving kit from

his bag. He propped his small shaving mirror on the mantelpiece and began his ablutions. He'd done half his face when his eye caught Delia's reflection in the mirror and noticed she was watching him.

"Morning, lassie. Did ye sleep well?"

She blushed a rosy colour as she realised he had remarked her perusal of his person and he hid a smile, amused by her innocence.

"Y-Yes, I did, thank you," she said, dropping her gaze at once. "I hope you were not too uncomfortable on the floor again. I feel so very guilty that you are uncomfortable when I have the bed."

"Nae harm done," he said cheerfully, pleased by her concern for him. Glancing over his shoulder at her, he gave her a smile. "Ready for breakfast? I'd like to get going as soon as we can if ye have nae objection?"

"No, not in the least, though I may need someone to help me dress. The gown I bought is lovely, but impossible to put on by myself. It was all they had ready, though. Perhaps the girl who helped me last night?"

Muir pulled a face as he wiped the last of the shaving soap from his face. "I can ask, but the place is fit to bursting by the sound of things. I don't think they'll have anyone to spare at this hour."

"Oh," Delia said awkwardly. He considered her with interest, wondering if she would ask the inevitable question or delay their journey by insisting on waiting for a maid. She swallowed, her gaze riveted on the embroidered eiderdown that covered the bed. He watched as she traced a simple pattern of entwined daisies and got his answer a moment later. "Perhaps, if you don't mind helping me... I... I might manage without," she offered.

Muir turned and smiled at her. “Aye, lass. Reckon I could do that and don’t fret yourself. I’ll go out while ye wash and do what ye can. I’ll be back in ten minutes and wait outside the door. Ye can call me when yer ready. How’s that?”

Her relief was obvious, and she nodded her agreement at once. “That will do very well, thank you.”

Nodding, Muir pulled on his coat and went out of the door to order breakfast and arrange their onward journey.

Delia let out a breath of relief once the door closed. Hurriedly, she leapt from the bed and made use of the chamber pot before washing with what remained of the hot water. Horribly aware of the time ticking past, she dressed faster than she ever had in her life before. She did not wish Muir to think her terribly vain if she spent too long over her toilette. That he had intended to marry a practical woman who would have been of use to him was unquestionable until she remembered his name had once been linked to that of Evie Knight.

Since then, Evie had married the beautiful Comte de Villen, much to the envy of most other women of the ton, but Evie did not strike Delia as being any more suitable as a farmer’s wife than she was. She was a rather more robust, though she supposed, wondering if Muir preferred a more voluptuous figure than her own. Frowning, she tugged her corset up and tied it as tight as she was able but found herself unable to manage the strings.

“How are ye doing, lass? Shall I come in and help ye?”

Delia started, torn from her thoughts by his muffled voice. “One moment!” she called, ensuring everything was covered as decently as she could manage. “C-Come in.”

Though she was determined to be matter of fact about the situation, Delia could not help the rush of colour that ran from her cheeks to her toes as Muir came in. Never in her life had a man seen her in nothing but her petticoats and corsets and she was beyond mortified that it should happen in such circumstances.

“Chin up,” Muir told her with a wink. “At least I’m not Enoch Goodfellow.”

That startled a laugh from her, easing the tension in the room. “No, indeed,” she said fervently, before remembering how much worse than Enoch things might have been.

“Shall I tighten yer corset strings?”

Delia nodded absently, turning her back to him as visions of that awful night flooded her mind. She closed her eyes, shaking her head as if she could rid herself of the horrid images by shaking them loose.

“Is aught amiss?”

Delia forced herself to turn and look up at the man she might well be married to in a few short weeks. “I’m not sure I ever thanked you properly for what you did for me,” she said gravely. “You did not know who I was, or what the situation was. You might have been killed, and yet you did not hesitate to come to my rescue. I think you are the most honourable and brave man I have ever known, and I shall never cease to be grateful to you for what you did.”

Rather to her surprise, colour crested his cheeks, and he looked away with a laugh. His deft hands tugged at the corset strings, pulling them firmly and tying them together. “Ach, stop that. Ye will swell ma head and then ye will have the devil of a time with me, for I’m an arrogant gowk already.”

She smiled at his words, though she could not help asking, “Gowk?”

He flashed her a quick grin, which made an odd, tickling sensation flutter in her belly. “A gowk is a fool, hen.”

Delia frowned at that. “I’m not sure I appreciate being referred to as poultry,” she said doubtfully.

He gave a bark of laughter, which pleased her more than she wished to admit. “Noted,” he remarked easily. “Now, let’s get ye dressed, for my innards are tying themselves in a knot with hunger and I want my breakfast.”

Hurrying to do as he asked, Delia threw her dress over her head and did her best to arrange her hair as Muir did up the row of tiny buttons down her back.

“There,” he said with satisfaction when the last button was done.

Delia turned towards him, smoothing her hands over the gown. Though she had no doubt he thought the dress was fussy and frivolous, it had been the only one available, and she had to admit she loved it. The dressmaker had said the colour was Ashes of Roses, and it was indeed a dusty pink, with a darker pink velvet trim, with little velvet roses and bows embellishing the skirts and bodice.

Muir stepped closer, frowning, raising his hand to the bruise where Malmsey had struck her. It was not as bad as she had feared, for it seemed to be fading quickly, but it wasn’t exactly pretty either. Delia’s breath caught as he touched her cheek beside the bruise, so lightly she barely felt it.

“Does it pain ye?” he asked gruffly, a fierce look burning in his eyes.

“Not much, no. Only it’s not very attractive, is it?” She flushed, aware she was fishing for compliments. “Will I do?”

His eyes warmed a degree as he looked her over, darkening in a way that made her stomach react with that odd ticklish sensation once again.

“Aye, lassie. Ye look good enough to eat,” he said, and then turned, striding to the door before she had time to fully appreciate the lovely bit of flattery.

She went downstairs on his arm, and despite her nerves at being in public, for fear of the scandal having reached so far, so quickly, she discovered a burst of pride at being escorted by Muir. The place was every bit as busy as he had predicted, and Delia could not help but notice the covetous glances many of the women they passed sent his way and wondered if he remarked them. She could not blame them either, for he looked splendid, all broad shoulders and that wild, untamed aura that surrounded him, and it was hard for Delia not to gaze at him in wonder too as he guided her to the private parlour he had secured for them. That this man might soon be her husband seemed at once impossible and wonderful and downright terrifying. She had spent all yesterday in a stew of mixed emotions, and it appeared today would be little different.

Breakfast passed in a companionable manner and Delia watched Muir with covert fascination as he devoured more food than she thought she herself would manage in three days, never mind one meal. It was not until they were seated in the carriage that would carry them on to Wildsyde that she remembered Evie Knight and wondered what it had been about her that Muir had so fancied. Had he been in love with her? For Evie could not have returned his feelings, having run off with the comte a very short time later, if gossip was to be believed. The notion that this was the kind of woman he favoured, a voluptuous, dark-haired beauty nagged at her though.

Troubled, Delia did her best to console herself with the passing scenery and waited with anticipation for the first glimpse of Wildsyde Castle.

“Papa, Papa, will we stay with Pops and Grandmama?”

Pip looked up from the letter he was writing as Tilly hurried into the room. For once she had not barged through like the wildebeest Mrs Harris often accused her of emulating, but she forgot to knock or to ask if he was busy. Not that he cared; a visit from his daughter was the only reason he needed to stop what he was doing and give her his attention.

“You know that we are, little bird,” he said, amused, for she had been in alt since he had announced they were going to town, and she was to go with him. She seemed to find it hard to believe and kept asking the same questions over and over, just in case his answer changed from one day to the next. The truth was, he could not bear to be parted from her, and the world would have to know of her existence, eventually. He hoped between himself and his formidable father, no one would dare to treat her unkindly, but he had no illusions. People could be cruel, other children especially, and he had every intention of guarding his daughter closely.

“That’s good,” she said with a sigh as Pip sat down and allowed her to scramble onto his lap. She was seven now, and no doubt some people would think her too old to treat so affectionately, but Pip did not care about that. She was the apple of his eye, and the little devil knew it too. “Papa, why are we going to town?”

She had not asked that question of him before and Pip hesitated. His father had always been honest with his children, preferring to give them the truth, even if that truth was difficult to hear, rather than placate them with an easy lie.

“I have things to do in town, sweetheart,” he replied carefully, which was true, but he knew he was prevaricating, hoping she might change the subject. He ought to have known better, for Tilly frowned up at him, sensing at once there was something he was not telling her.

“What things?” she demanded, a suspicious note to her voice that made him quail inwardly.

Damn it . He had not wished for her to know just yet of his real reasons for returning to society, but he could not keep it from her when it would impact her life as much as his own.

“Well, I have some business dealings that I need to attend to, people to see and... and...” Pip cleared his throat, wishing he could find a way of breaking the news gently but in the end, he’d best just get it over with. “It’s time I found a wife, Tilly.”

The silence that followed this pronouncement seemed to ring through the room and Pip held his breath.

“But you don’t need a wife, Papa,” she said earnestly, covering his hand with her own. “You have me.”

Pip’s throat constricted, and he swallowed hard. “I know that, little bird, and if I could leave things just as they are, I would, but it is my duty to provide an heir to inherit my title.”

“And I can’t inherit it because you didn’t marry my mother,” she replied, her tone thoughtful rather than accusatory.

“Darling, even if we had been married, you could not have inherited. Only a male heir can inherit the title.”

“That’s stupid,” she said indignantly, crossing her arms.

Pip choked back a laugh. “Well, yes, perhaps it is, but it’s the law, no matter how stupid it is, and your pops would be very upset if there was no heir to become Montagu in the future.”

“Pop wants you to get married?” she asked in a small voice, for she knew if her

grandfather wanted something to happen, it would happen.

“Yes, sweetheart. He’s wanted me to marry for a very long time and has been rather cross with me for not doing so before now.”

“I see,” she said, and he could hear the anxiety in her voice.

Pip hugged her close and turned her head, so she looked directly at him. “You’re not losing something, you see, but gaining a mama. Won’t you like that?”

“No,” she said obstinately.

Pip sighed. He had been right to be worried about her reaction. “No matter what happens, and when or who I marry, nothing will change for you and I, darling. You know that, don’t you? You will always be my little bird, no matter what.”

Her gaze dropped to the floor, her bottom lip trembling ominously.

“Even if you have another daughter?”

“Of course,” Pip said, his heart aching for her. “I love you, Tilly. No little girl could be loved by her papa more than I love you. I would give you the moon and stars, you know this.”

Tilly swallowed hard, making a visible effort to control herself, before nodding. “Yes, Papa,” she said quietly.

Pip sighed with relief, glad to have had this chat with her after all. Though she was obviously troubled, he felt certain she would grow accustomed to the idea. In truth, it had gone better than he could have hoped, and it was a relief to him to know there would be no difficulty from Tilly if and when he finally chose his bride-to-be.

“Run along now and find Mrs Harris,” he told her, kissing her cheek and lifting her from his lap. “I must finish this letter and see it sent.”

“Yes, Papa,” she said obediently and dropped a very creditable curtsy before walking calmly from the room.

Regina Harris looked up as her small charge burst into her bedroom and threw herself down on the bed with a wail of fury.

“Whatever is the matter?” Regina asked, setting the mending she had been doing to one side and surging to her feet. The little girl smothered her face in her pillow, thankfully muffling what would have been a most horrific sound and pummelling the mattress with small fists. “Otilie, you will stop this dreadful behaviour at once. You are a young lady, and this behaviour does you little credit.”

The girl stopped abruptly but when she looked up at Regina, her face was one of such utter misery that she could not scold her further. “Oh, love, what’s happened?” she asked, sitting down beside the little girl. “Has the earl decided we must not go after all?”

Much to Regina’s regret, Tilly shook her head, and that little ray of hope died a swift death.

“N-No,” Tilly stammered, tears streaming down her face. Regina reached for her handkerchief, blowing the girl’s runny nose before she could forget her manners and wipe it on her sleeve. “It’s m-much worse than that.”

“Oh?”

“He’s getting m-married,” she said wretchedly, and then burst into noisy sobs once more.

Regina stilled, staring at the girl in shock. An odd sensation lanced through her, emotions that she had no name for but identified as fear. If the earl married, things would change, and she could well understand why Tilly was so afraid. Ashburton might be a doting father, but it would take an extraordinary woman to accept his bastard daughter into her own household before she even had a child of her own. Even if she did, the woman would have the power to make Tilly's life a misery if she chose to. It also made Regina's position uncertain. She'd known it could not last forever, but she'd banked on remaining with Tilly for a good while yet, for the earl had never spoken about sending his daughter to school. Perhaps now that would change, and Regina would lose the position that had given her safety and security and no small amount of satisfaction over the past years.

Though Tilly was a spoilt little madam at times, thanks to her father, she was also a bright and affectionate little girl and Regina loved her dearly... more than she ought, if the truth were known. In the absence of her own family, Regina had lavished all the love and care she had to give upon Tilly, whilst trying her best to remain the stern and serious governess she was employed to be.

Yet she could not imagine who the earl was to marry. Though she heard the gossip the servants had murmured about his mistresses over the years, to her knowledge he had visited no respectable ladies in the area.

"Who is the lady he intends to marry?" she asked Tilly, stroking the girl's hair and trying to think how best to soothe her, for she did not wish to give the girl false hope.

If her life was about to change, Regina must prepare her for those changes as best she could. She felt a sudden surge of anger towards the earl for not having told her first before he blurted such news to the child. At least then she would have been equipped to deal with the results.

"I don't know," Tilly sniffled, batting Regina's hand away again when she tried to

apply the handkerchief. “He’s going to find someone in London. That’s why we’re going, not to visit the museums and see all the places he promised to take me, but to find him a w-wife,” she said wretchedly, dissolving into another bout of sobs.

Regina let out of breath, but to her consternation did not feel relieved by the news that the new Lady Ashburton was not as close at hand as she might have feared. The earl was the biggest prize on the marriage mart, and he would have his pick of the available females, all of whom would no doubt throw themselves at his feet. There would be a Lady Ashburton, sooner or later, and the knowledge made her want to behave just as badly as Tilly for reasons she did not understand in the least. She had never liked the earl, who was everything she most detested about the men of the ton . Whilst he had certainly redeemed himself in her eyes to a large degree after having settled down for the sake of his little daughter, she did not believe a leopard ever changed his spots.

She did not trust him an inch, and she told herself she pitied any woman who was fool enough to marry him, for he would never be faithful to her. There would be compensations, of course, for the earl was a beautiful man. Too beautiful.

“Handsome is as handsome does,” Regina muttered under her breath.

“What, Harry?” Tilly asked, looking at her in confusion.

““I beg your pardon, Mrs Harris,”” Regina corrected sternly, and then relented, reaching out and stroking the girl’s hair. “We really ought to finish our packing, you know.”

Tilly groaned and buried her face in the pillow again.

Smiling, Regina let out a sigh. “Well, perhaps it can wait for an hour or so. How would you like to take a carrot to your pony? We could ride into the village and buy

some lemon drops for the journey. How's that?"

"Oh, thank you, Harry," Tilly said, throwing her arms about her waist and hugging her tightly. "Whatever would I do without you?"

"Go to the devil, I should think," Regina said crisply.

Tilly snorted with laughter but then grew serious, gazing up at her. "You won't ever leave me, will you, Harry?"

Regina's throat grew tight, and she blinked back a sudden blur of tears.

"Not if I can help it," she said firmly, and found she could say no more.

Page 5

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What on earth am I to do with such a boy, Matilda, I ask you? I swear he's given me more grey hairs than even his elder brother managed, and that's no small thing, let me tell you. He was always such a funny boy, full of mischief, but mischief has turned to trouble this past month and I worry for him.

The news that reached me this morning tells me he rescued Lady Cordelia Steyning from an attack by Lord Malmsey. That much I can well believe having met Malmsey. A loathsome man whom I cannot pretend to be sorry met such a fate, but that he did so at Muir's hands? Oh, my poor boy. I cannot imagine how he feels. First Richmond and now this. It's all anyone can talk of, and I hardly dare set a foot outside the house.

Though it seems he has come through this event as a hero, his reputation is that of a dangerous man with a violent temper, which is so far from the truth.

And now he is to marry this Cordelia creature? I know nothing of her, saving that her father, the duke, was a horrid man who refused to acknowledge me once because my father was in trade. Gordy was incensed, I can tell you and it was a near thing he didn't do murder. Oh, dear, perhaps it does run in the family. The men do have rather fierce tempers. I cannot deny it.

But who is Lady Cordelia, Matilda? Shall I like her? Is she suitable? Oh, please write back and put my mind at rest at once. I must return to Scotland as soon as I can arrange it, so please do not delay.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven to The Most Hon'ble Matilda Barrington, The Marchioness of Montagu.

27 th March 1850, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.

“Wake up, lassie, we’ve arrived.”

Delia stirred as Muir gave her a little shake, and she tried to rouse herself, blinking in the glare of the carriage lamp he held up to her face. Her entire body felt bruised, and her bones ached after so long travelling on indifferent roads. The weather had been kind at least, though cold, and the hot brick beneath her feet had lost any remnant of heat several hours ago. Shivering, she sat up, smothered a yawn, and put a hand to her hair only to discover it was escaping its pins on all sides.

“Drat it,” she muttered, trying to rearrange it.

“Never mind that,” Muir said with a touch of impatience. “My brother and his wife dinnae stand on ceremony. They know we’ve had a wearying journey.”

“That’s very well, sir, but I have never met them before. I do not wish their first impression of me to be a bad one,” she retorted, too weary to watch her tongue as perhaps she might have otherwise.

“Lassie, I am tired and famished. I want to sit down in something that disnae move, preferably with a glass of whisky in my hand. Now stop yer blethering and tie the ribbons,” he said, putting her bonnet firmly on her head before he climbed out.

Drat the man! Delia thought crossly but did as he asked upon hearing voices outside the carriage. Though it was a lost cause, she took a moment to smooth her rumpled skirts and pinch her cheeks to urge some colour back to them. She did not doubt she must look a fright, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

“Are ye coming?” Muir’s impatient voice called her from outside and Delia hurried to stand, taking his hand and climbing down. It was full dark and though there were

servants bearing lamps, she gained only a vague impression of a huge, looming presence as the walls of the castle disappeared into the night. It was not entirely welcoming or reassuring, but then a young woman hurried out of the castle, smiling warmly at Muir. Her expression faltered for a moment upon seeing Delia, but she fixed in place again.

“But Muir, how lovely to see you. We did not expect you to bring us guests, however, certainly not such pretty ones,” she added, with an anxious glance at the man beside her.

That had to be Viscount Buchanan, Delia decided, for his resemblance to Muir was striking. He was looking at his brother with concern and no little disapproval.

“What this, Muir? What have ye gone and done now?”

“Can we nae get in the door first?” Muir said testily, eyeing his brother with annoyance. “I have nae desire to tell the tale before an audience, aye?”

“That depends,” Buchanan said, taking Muir’s arm and dragging him to one side, obviously hoping he was out of earshot. “Ye cannae arrive here with an unescorted woman! Are ye out of yer mind? Who the devil is she?”

“Oh, dear,” Lady Buchanan said with a sigh. “He never did learn the art of whispering. I beg your pardon, my dear. I’m afraid you must have had a trying journey, and this is no warm welcome, is it?”

Delia, reassured by the kindness of the woman’s smile, tried her best to return the expression. “I cannot blame Lord Buchanan for his words, nor anyone else for thinking my sudden entrance upon the scene a strange one. I’m afraid it is a ramshackle way of arriving, but you see I was kidnapped, and Mr Anderson kindly came to my rescue and—”

“Kidnapped!” the lady exclaimed, wide-eyed. “Mercy me! Oh, you poor, poor girl. Lyall, leave Muir alone. He’s quite right, we need to discuss this inside. Come in, both of you, at once.”

Catching sight of Muir giving his brother a smug look as he strode away, Delia followed Lady Buchanan into the house.

“But Luella,” the viscount protested.

“But me no buts,” she replied firmly. “This poor young woman has suffered a terrible ordeal, and I shan’t have her explain herself on the doorstep. Where is this fabled Highland hospitality you are always telling me of? Don’t put us to the blush, my lord, by forgetting it, please.”

Glowering, his lordship followed them all inside.

Delia followed Lady Buchanan, who took them into a remarkably cosy parlour where a fire blazed in a huge stone hearth. They were divested of coats, hats and gloves, and Delia seated directly beside the fire. She soon found herself plied with tea, shortbread, and whisky.

“You are just in time for dinner, but I don’t doubt you will want to wash and change, so I hope this will keep you going for the moment,” Lady Buchanan told her with a smile.

“You are most kind, my lady, but—but I’m afraid I have nothing to change into,” Delia said, feeling wretchedly out of place and embarrassed.

“Nothing to— The devil, Muir, what is going on here?” Lord Buchanan demanded of his brother.

Delia took her courage in both hands, for his lordship was a rather daunting figure and looked increasingly angry at his brother's unheralded arrival with a strange female in tow. It was not fair that Muir should bear the brunt of his displeasure.

"If you please, my lord. I beg you will not be angry with your brother, for without him I should be in fear for my life at this moment. If you will forgive me for my impertinence, I shall tell you I am Lady Cordelia Steyning. My brother is the Marquess of Wrexham. An old family friend who is the son of my father's steward kidnapped me. He drugged me and took me away, hoping to take me to Gretna Green and force me into marriage."

His lordship gaped at her, and then his expression softened, and he took his place by his wife's side. "I beg yer pardon, my lady. I pray ye will forgive me for being less than hospitable. I ought to have troubled myself to hear Muir's explanation."

"Aye, ye ought," Muir replied with a snort, helping himself to his brother's whisky decanter.

Buchanan ignored him. "And Muir got ye away?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Delia replied, taking another sip of the sweet tea she held to steady her nerves. "I hit Mr Goodfellow over the head with a fireside poker when we stopped for breakfast and got away from him."

"Oh, well done," Lady Buchanan said, her eyes gleaming with approval.

"Yes, well, I thought so too, at the time," Delia admitted. "Except we'd had a run-in with Lord Malmsey, and he had guessed things were not what they ought to be. Mr Goodfellow told him we were eloping, but... well, anyway, I escaped and had the misfortune to run directly into him. So, Lord Malmsey decided he would take me for himself."

“Goodness me. What an ordeal you have suffered.” The lady moved to sit beside Delia and took her free hand, squeezing it tightly. “You were not hurt?” she asked in an undertone, and from the look in her eyes, Delia understood what she meant to ask.

“I was not in the least hurt, only a few bruises,” she said, touching the tender skin where Malmsey had backhanded her. “But that is because Muir so bravely came to my rescue.”

“Did ye now?” Buchanan was regarding his younger brother with approval and no little interest. “Malmsey fights dirty, so I’m told. He’s no gentleman, aye?”

“He wasnae,” Muir agreed, his back to the company, his foot on the fender as he gazed down at the fire. “He’s deid,” he added baldly.

Lady Buchanan gasped, and her husband surged to his feet, moving to stand beside his brother.

“Deid?”

“Aye,” Muir replied, taking another drink from the glass he held.

“At yer hands?”

“Aye.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Delia said at once, not wanting Muir to carry the guilt of a man’s death, even if the blackguard had well deserved his untimely end. “Muir fought fair and square, but Lord Malmsey drew a knife and tried to kill him. It was his own fault that Muir turned the knife away and Malmsey fell upon it. So you see, he killed himself,” she added, unable to repress the shudder that ran through her at the memory.

“Good heavens,” Lady Buchanan said, gripping Delia’s hand. “You poor girl.”

Delia swallowed. Exhaustion swept over her, and the lady’s kindness threatened to unravel what remained of her self-control. “It is Mr Anderson who has suffered the worst of it, I’m afraid. It has been quite dreadful for him, though he has never said as much but I know it must have been. Not only has coming to my rescue involved him in a most distasteful scandal, but now he feels honour-bound to marry me, for I’m q- quite ruined you see,” she added, her voice trembling.

Silence filled the room, making Delia wish she had left it to Muir to make the explanations, but after all he had done for her, she owed him this much.

“Ye offered for her?” Buchanan asked, not quite able to keep the shock from his question.

“Aye,” Muir replied evenly, glaring at his brother. “What else could I do? There was the little worm who had kidnapped her in the first place, offering his hand, and the lass looking like she’d rather die than accept him. I did what I could to stem the gossip, but a story like this is going to make the rounds in no time. I could nae throw her to the wolves and let the lass endure that, nor let her fall into the hands of such a vile little sh—”

Lady Buchanan cleared her throat and Muir shrugged, returning his attention to his glass and frowning as he discovered it empty. His brother took it from him and went to refill it himself.

“So, now what?” he asked Muir, returning and handing him the glass.

Muir stared at it for a long moment before he answered. “I hoped ye would let Delia here stay with ye for a few weeks while we get to know each other a little. It may be that she prefers ruin to marrying a highland sheep farmer, aye?” he said with a grim

smile. “She’s daughter to a duke, after all.”

“I should never be so ungrateful as to—” Delia began, but Lady Buchanan patted her hand reassuringly.

“I think you are both exhausted. If you will excuse me for being presumptuous, I shall see you to your room, my lady, and have your dinner brought up to you.”

Delia sighed in relief. “Oh, yes, I would like that above all things,” she admitted. “Only, please call me Delia. I should much prefer it.”

“As would I, so long as you call me Luella. And my husband is Lyall,” she added, gesturing to the man who nodded. He still looked rather fierce, however, and Delia thought she might stick to ‘my lord’ for the foreseeable future.

“Thank you,” Delia murmured, forcing her aching limbs to obey her as she stood stiffly. “Goodnight, Muir,” she added quietly.

Muir turned, his expression unreadable. “Aye, goodnight, Delia.”

Delia nodded and followed Luella out of the room.

“Well, ye have gone and done it this time,” Lyall said, though without rancour.

Muir could hardly disagree, though he glared at his brother irritably. “Is that the best ye can do? I’d hoped ye may have a solution of some sort, that ye would show me the bright side. Some sage advice, perhaps?”

“A solution? To this mess?” Lyall said, shaking his head in wonder. “Even by yer standards, this is a pretty kettle and nae mistake. D’ye even like the lass? I could nae tell.”

“I’m not sure myself either,” Muir admitted, running a hand through his hair in frustration. “I swear, Lyall, I didnae do the thing lightly, but there seemed no other choice. Even looking at Goodfellow made my guts sour. I could nae hand the lassie over.”

“She’s a fetching little thing,” Lyall remarked, watching Muir closely. “Lovely, in fact.”

“Aye, she is that,” he agreed, for it was hardly a secret.

Lady Delia was beautiful, that much was obvious. Even when he’d first seen her that fateful day, in the dirty, rumpled gown, with her hair a tangled mess, she had shone with an inner light, something good and true that could not be manufactured or got from a bottle. His feelings about her seemed to fluctuate wildly, though. Every time he looked at that bruise, it made his guts tighten with fury and he wanted to kill Malmsey all over again, and yet other times he resented her fiercely for forcing his hand into offering marriage.

“What’s she like?”

“I hardly know,” Muir admitted. “I spoke to her a handful of times over the past years and... well, she made me smile, laugh too, but she’s a wee bit...”

“What?” Lyall demanded.

Muir hesitated, torn between loyalty to a woman who might well be his wife in a short space of time, and confiding in his brother. His brother won out, for Muir knew he’d never breathe a word of what was spoken to anyone. “Away with the faeries,” he said, smiling at his brother’s expression. “She’s sweet and kind and gentle, I reckon, but I there’s nae denying she’s a wee bit eccentric.”

“Well, that’s perhaps nae a bad thing. Yer a bit of an odd one yerself, aye?”

Muir sent his brother an unloving look, but Lyall only laughed.

“Nae, don’t eat me. I dinnae mean to insult ye, but ye have a sense of the ridiculous, do ye nae? Perhaps this lass is the same?”

Muir shrugged. “Perhaps. Perhaps it will work out fine and we’ll live happily ever after,” he said glumly.

“What about Rona Telfer?” Lyall asked him.

“Ach, I never gave her the slightest reason to suppose I would wed her,” he said crossly, annoyed by the implication. “I widnae do that, Lyall.”

“I ken that, and ye ken that, but does Rona?” Lyall asked, pressing the point. “She’s been sweet on ye these past three years and more. I reckon the news yer to wed a pretty little Sassenach will nae be easy to swallow.”

“I dinnae ken what that lass thinks, but she has nae hold on me, thank the lord. Faith, I’d rather marry one of my flock than find myself tied to her. Believe me, Delia wins over that choice any day of the week.”

“Well, then,” Lyall said, slapping him on the back. “There’s yer bright side, aye?”

“Aye,” Muir said glumly, not in the least bit comforted by the thought.

Page 6

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Hamilton,

You may already have heard, for the world is flapping its gums like fury already, but our fool brother is in an almighty mess. I reckon he might appreciate your company at the farm for a while. You know I only ever rub him up the wrong way, but perhaps you can help him figure things out.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble, Lyall Anderson, The Viscount Buchanan to his younger brother, The Hon'ble Hamilton Anderson.

28 th March 1850, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.

Delia woke from a peculiar dream about dancing sausages to discover the scent of bacon wafting under her nose and the sound of someone bustling about in the room.

“Good morning, my lady. I began to think ye would sleep all day, though the mistress tells me ye’ve had a trying time of it, so I’m sure nae one begrudges ye the rest. But I have brought ye an excellent breakfast, so dinnae spoil it by falling asleep again. Aye, up ye come and I’ll arrange yer pillows. There, like so. How’s that now?”

“Perfect,” Delia said, rather dazedly, as the lady wrestled her into a sitting position and plumped her pillows.

“There, now,” the woman said, placing a tray on her lap that could not have held another morsel of food. A steaming cup of tea was rammed beside a plate overflowing with sausages, bacon, and eggs, with another plate of golden triangles she could not identify to the side and small dishes containing butter and jam.

“Tattie scones,” the lady said cheerfully, seeing her eyeing the triangles with interest. “They’re lovely with butter and jam. Eat yer eggs and bacon first and then have a go.”

“I’ll burst if I eat all that,” Delia protested.

“Nae, lassie. Yer but a wee little thing, I grant ye, but difficult times give ye an appetite. Ye will eat it right enough. I’m Mrs Baillie by the by, housekeeper here at Wildsyde. I’ll send one of my girls to ye in half an hour to bring ye hot water and help ye dress, and I expect a clean plate returned to me, aye. Set to it now,” she ordered, before drawing the curtains and bustling out once more.

Rather stunned, Delia gazed at the plate before her as her stomach gave an audible growl of protest. Deciding Mrs Baillie might have a point, she tucked in, and rather to her astonishment, very nearly cleared the whole tray. Replete and sleepy, she sat back against the pillows and allowed her gaze to drift to the window. A blue sky beckoned, daubed with large billowing white clouds that scudded past with speed enough to suggest it was exceedingly windy outside.

Curious, Delia set the tray aside and slid from the bed. She exclaimed as her bare feet touched the freezing floor. Dancing about a little, she tiptoed over to the window and peered out, her cold toes quite forgotten as she regarded the spectacular view before her.

Though Delia had grown up in the countryside, it had looked nothing like this. This was a far harsher landscape than the one she had known in Norfolk, and yet it was still beautiful. Stunning, in fact. Looking out of the window, she could almost believe she was the only person in the entire world, for it showed her a vast expanse of stark, open plains that seemed to her eye to go on into infinity.

“Good morning, my lady.”

Delia turned to see a pretty young woman had entered the room, holding a billowing mass of fabric. She bobbed a quick curtsy and smiled, her eyes bright with interest.

“I’m Eilidh, my lady. Mrs Baillie sent me to help ye, and Lady Buchanan has provided a few gowns for ye to try. I’m to make any alterations, should they be needed, and I’m a fair hand with a needle, I promise.”

“I’m sure you are, Eilidh, thank you,” Delia said, smiling at her and shivering as the cold by the window seeped into her bones.

“Ach, ye will catch yer death, standing there in nowt but yer shift. Hop back into a bed a moment while I run down and fetch the hot water, aye, and then we’ll set to.” Eilidh, who looked to be perhaps a year or two younger than Delia’s four and twenty years, bit her lip anxiously. “If that pleases ye, my lady.”

Delia smiled and nodded. “It does, indeed, thank you.”

“I beg your pardon, my lady. I’ve never attended a duke’s daughter before. Ye may dislike my manners, I’m thinking?” she said sheepishly, laying the gowns she had brought on the bed.

“Not a bit of it,” Delia replied, meaning it. “I am not the least bit high in the instep and prefer plain speaking. You do as you would for any other lady visiting the castle and we shall rub along nicely.”

“Thank ye, I shall do so, but ye must tell me if I go awry,” she said firmly, hurrying to the door. “I won’t be above a moment,” she added, dashing out again.

Delia laughed softly, climbing back into bed to await the hot water and deciding that she liked Eilidh a good deal.

“Well, I’m glad to see ye back, laddie. I feart ye would leave all the hard work to me, and I’m nae spring chicken, ye ken.”

“I’m gladder to be back, ye may be sure, Dugald,” Muir replied, shaking his farm manager’s hand. Dugald MacDonald was a large man in his fifties with massive shoulders and the weatherworn complexion that spoke of a lifetime spent out of doors. “Have ye had any problems?”

“Nae, but I’m hearing tell that ye have had a wee bit of excitement yerself, aye?”

Muir glowered, irritated. “Have folks no better things to do than blether about matters that dinnae concern them?”

“Nae, laddie, of course they dinnae.”

“Ach, and I’m nae yer laddie, Dugald,” he added, scowling.

Dugald swiped the hat from his head and gave Muir a considering look. “Reckon ye have been away too long. Yer crabbit and ’tis nae like ye, but I’ll call ye sir if ye prefer it. ’Tis hard when I have known ye since ye were a bairn, though, aye?”

Muir sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “Nae, Dugald. Ignore me. I shall be in a better humour when I’ve seen everything is as it ought to be.”

Dugald nodded, accepting this, and they strode out.

A fresh cold wind blew in, bringing with it the salt tang of the sea from barely a mile away, and Muir breathed deep. The familiar smell settled his nerves, cleansing his spirit as the brisk walk shook off some of the impatience with which he’d risen. Despite his fatigue and the generous amount of whisky his brother had provided, he’d slept ill and woken with a sense of simmering anger towards Delia, which he knew

was ill-placed. The girl was innocent in all of this, bloody Goodfellow and that bastard Malmsey were to blame, and he knew it. Yet he felt trapped, imprisoned in a snare that had forced him into offering for a wife he did not want.

“They look bonnie, aye?”

Dugald’s voice broke into his dark thoughts, and he looked up to focus on the flock of fine, healthy ewes.

“Aye,” Muir agreed. “Are the men ready?”

“Aye, I’ve engaged extra hands, for I reckon the lambing will be full upon us in a few days at most. Ye have come back just in time.”

“I always intended to be home for the first of April,” Muir assured him. “Ye dinnae think I would shirk my duty, I hope?”

Dugald grinned at him and gave him a hearty slap on the back. “Nae, laddie.”

Muir snorted and muttered something rude, and the two men continued their inspection of the flock in quiet accord.

Delia made her way down the stairs, her skirts and petticoats swishing as she went. When she got to the bottom, she gave a little squeak of alarm as the front door opened, bringing a gust of cold, fresh air and three enormous dogs.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Luella called cheerfully, appearing behind them. She looked a little windswept, her cheeks pink and glowing. “They’re very friendly, I promise.”

Reassured, Delia descended the last step and held out her hand to the biggest dog, who sniffed her fingers and gave them a swift lick, wagging his tail at her.

“That’s Murdoch,” Luella said, closing the door behind her. “He’s a sweetheart, and those are his wives, Maggie and Moire.”

“They’re huge,” Delia said, petting each dog in turn. They looked rather like greyhounds, but bigger and covered in wiry grey hair.

“They are,” Luella said, smiling at them. “Go and find Lyall, then,” she told Murdoch, who seemed to understand perfectly as he walked off, pushing at a door with his nose and walking inside, his wives following on his heels.

“I’m sorry I slept so late. I’m not usually such a slugabed,” Delia said apologetically.

“Nonsense, you were worn to a thread, anyone could see that last night,” Luella said, giving Delia’s outfit a critical once over. “That looks rather good, I think. I thought that dark green would be good for you. It sets off your gold hair to perfection. You’re really very beautiful.”

Delia blushed but admitted herself pleased by the compliment. “I can’t thank you enough for lending it to me. I confess it puts one quite out of countenance not to have a change of clothes to hand when one is required.”

“Quite understandable. Now, what would you like to do today? I am at your disposal,” Luella replied, staring at her expectantly.

“Oh,” Delia said, at a loss. “I don’t wish to impose. What would you normally do? Perhaps if you just carried on as usual. If I am to make my life here, I shall have to learn a good deal, I fear.”

“Well, I usually spend the mornings with my children, but they are with their nurse at the moment, for I was thinking of visiting the one of his lordship’s tenants. Mrs Grant had a bad fall and broke her arm a few weeks ago. She’s on the mend now, but it’s

hard to cook and clean with only her left hand. I'm taking her a pie Mrs Baillie made and few preserves and the like to help her a little. Should you like to come? We'll pass close to Muir's place on our way home, and I imagine you'd like to see that too."

"Oh, I would, very much," Delia agreed, for whilst she still did not know whether she really would rather marry Muir than accept her ruination and live quietly among her family, she was beyond curious to know more about him. Not to mention more of the place that she might one day call home.

"Run and fetch your cloak, then, and I'll collect the basket from the kitchens."

Delia agreed, and a few moments later, they were heading out of the front door.

"Take Murdoch," called Lord Buchanan after them, before they had gone more than a few steps.

"Very well, love," Luella called back, waving at her husband. "Come on then Murdoch," she called, as the big dog trotted after them.

Delia put a hand to her bonnet as a sharp wind blew, tugging at it.

"It's often windy here," Luella said, smiling at her as she strode out. "You get used to it."

"You said you have children? How old are they?"

Luella smiled. "Yes, we have two, a boy and a girl. Gordy is three now, and Fiona is a little over a year old. I'll introduce you to them later."

"Thank you, I should like that very much. I love children, especially little ones.

They're so interested in everyone and everything."

Luella laughed at that. "Gordy certainly is, the little devil. He's full of mischief, that one."

Delia laughed, feeling a little breathless as Luella set a fast pace. "How far is the house we are visiting?"

"Oh, just a wee stretch of the legs," Luella replied with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "That's what Lyall would say, in any case. It's probably a good five miles, though. Are you still game?"

"Of course!" Delia said at once, not wishing to be thought faint-hearted.

"Good girl," Luella said with approval. "But I must warn you, if you are to live here, you'll need to be hardy. Lots of walking and being outside. That is, if you ever want to spend time with Muir, for he's not one for sitting about indoors, I'm afraid. Not that a farmer gets much opportunity for that. Are you very fond of parties and society?"

"I detest parties and society," Delia said shortly. "Unless it's the kind with just family and close friends."

"Well, that's a good start, for that's the only kind we have," she said with a laugh, and then ran to pick up a stick and threw it for Murdoch, who ran off after it, barking happily.

The visit to Mrs Grant's was brief, for which Delia was grateful, as was Mrs Grant, who was in no state to welcome visitors. She greeted Delia cordially but with obvious discomfort at being indisposed. It was interesting, however, to see how warmly Luella was treated, and the friendly way the two talked.

“Mrs Grant told me her youngest daughter just had her first baby,” Luella said as they left the property. “A fine, healthy boy. I shall have to tell Lyall. We must think of a good christening present for him.”

They walked for another mile or more, chatting as they went, and taking a different path from the one they’d arrived by, when Luella pointed ahead of them. “There is Muir’s place, up ahead.”

“Oh,” Delia said, looking at the grand building with a little surprise. The only dwellings she had seen on their journey before night had fallen had been small crofter’s cottages and modest stone houses and she’d wondered what to expect of Muir’s home. This was something else.

“Himself built it when Muir was born,” Luella said with a smile.

“Himself?”

She smiled at Delia’s confusion and nodded. “The Earl of Morven. He knew Lyall would inherit the title and Wildsyde and it’s difficult to make a life in the Highlands. He wanted to ensure his sons could stay close and prosper. So, the sheep farm is Muir’s and Hamilton was put in charge of the herring boats, though from what I hear of him these days he has a finger in every pie in Wick.”

Delia looked at her expectantly and Luella laughed. “I can’t keep up with him. The last I heard of Hamilton, he’d bought a whisky distillery. He started his own shipyard three years ago. With the enormous increase in the herring trade, not to mention exporting the fine wool that’s produced in these parts, well, that young man is doing very well for himself.”

“In trade?” Delia said hesitantly, for she had never heard anyone from a noble family speak so openly about doing such a thing. It was tantamount to social suicide, making

whoever dared to dabble in such a grubby enterprise a pariah among his equals.

“I’m afraid so,” Luella said, looking at Delia with a speculative gleam in her eyes. “Are you horribly shocked?”

“Y-Yes, and no,” she replied carefully, not wanting to offend the woman who had welcomed her so warmly. “I have always been taught that to be in trade is a dreadful thing, you see. My father would certainly condemn him without a moment's hesitation, but my father is not a nice man nor one who would ever lift a finger to earn his own keep.”

She thought then of how the duke had spent his fortune so selfishly that there was nothing left for Wrexham to inherit. If not for her brother's foresight and good fortune in investing in Mr Gabriel Knight's railway scheme, the family would have been brought to ruin.

“My brother, however, is a good man, and one who would do anything to ensure the safety and prosperity of his family. I think he would wholeheartedly approve of Mr Hamilton's efforts, and so do I. A man with intelligence and ambition ought to take the opportunities given to him to make a good life for himself. It is only a pity that we do not have those same opportunities. My value was in my virtue, and now that has gone, I'm worthless despite my dowry,” Delia said with a catch in her voice.

“My dear,” Luella said, taking hold of her hands and squeezing them tightly. “No one in this family thinks that way, I assure you, and neither will any man of good sense.”

“That does not mean they will wish to marry me,” Delia replied, grateful for her kind words but too aware of the truth to allow herself to be lulled into thinking it was not so very bad. “If Muir and I find we suit, perhaps I will have a lucky escape, but otherwise the only offers I shall receive are from men desperate enough for my money to overlook my reputation. I do not think that will be a happy basis for a

marriage.”

“Then we must hope you and Muir do suit,” Luella said, her voice gentle. “And I have to say, I do not see why not. If you think you could endure life in such a remote part of the world.”

“I think I could do so very easily, if only I could find a way to be useful. I know Muir thinks I’m ill-suited to such a life.”

“And what do you think?” Luella asked, holding her gaze.

Delia put her chin up. “I think, like most men, he underestimates what women are capable of.”

“That’s my girl,” Luella said approvingly. “You show him what you’re made of. I faced many of the same challenges when I arrived, you know, and you’ll be amazed by what you can achieve when you put your mind to it. What do you think of the house, by the way?”

“I think it’s very fine,” Delia replied, gazing across fields dotted with hundreds of sheep towards the stone manor house.

It was handsome, rather than pretty, built to withstand the harsh environment in which it stood. The house was modest compared to Wrexham’s vast estates and holding, but the place had a friendly aspect that appealed to her. It looked to be a comfortable home rather than an impressive showpiece, a place where one could be contented to raise a family and live a life free of the expectations of others. To her surprise, Delia found she could imagine herself in such a place without difficulty, though imagining herself living there with Muir was a harder image to conjure.

“Come on, then, let’s see if Muir is around. At least we can get his housekeeper to

make us a cup of tea. I warn you, though, Mrs Paterson is a formidable woman. She frightened the wits out of me when I first met her.”

Delia looked at the Lady Buchanan sceptically, for she did not look like the kind of woman who found anything daunting. She was elegant and self-possessed and exuded a quiet strength and confidence that Delia wished very much to emulate.

“She did, I swear it,” Luella said, laughing in the face of Delia’s expression. “But the trick is to stand up to her. If you let her bully you, she will continue to do so, but if you show no fear, then you’ll earn her respect. Eventually.”

“Eventually?” Delia said, not liking the sound of the housekeeper one bit.

“Probably,” Luella said, which was not in the least bit reassuring. “Don’t be disappointed if Muir isn’t here. They’ve a busy time ahead. Lambing generally starts around the first week of April and it’s heavy going until they’re all born.”

“Muir really is a farmer, then?” Delia asked, realising she had assumed he was more of a gentleman farmer who let others do the hard work.

“He doesn’t have to be, for he has good men working for him, but he’s not the sort to sit idle. Muir takes a pride in the farm and the quality of his sheep. You understand that the wool they produce is very sought after and fetches a high price, even for these parts, where the demand is increasing at an incredible rate.”

“I didn’t really, but I do now. I have a great deal to learn, don’t I?”

“Yes, but that’s the fun of it, you see. I couldn’t cook when I got here, but Mrs Baillie took me on and now I’m a fair hand with a pudding or a pie, if I do say so myself.”

“You cook?” Delia said, and then hurriedly rearranged her face to one that was less

shocked.

Luella only laughed. "I'm a dreadful viscountess, I know, but that's the thing, Delia. Out here, we can make our lives what we want them to be. Oh, if we went to town I should hold my tongue and not admit to enjoying spending time in the kitchens, but in truth I do not care for the opinions of people who would disparage me, and our close friends accept me for what I am. My life is here, with Lyall and our children, and the rest of our family and friends. The rest is just a bit of frilly nonsense that we indulge ourselves with when we want to shop and catch up with friends."

"It sounds idyllic," Delia said with a sigh.

"It is rather, or at least I find it so," Luella told her with a smile. "Come on then. Let us see if Mrs Paterson is in a good enough mood to make us tea."

Muir left Dugald to his work with reluctance. He'd far rather spend the rest of the day outside with him, preparing for the lambs that would arrive in the coming days. But Dugald had everything well in hand, and there were bills to pay that would not wait and a pile of correspondence that had grown to a dismaying volume in his absence. The idea that his life would be a good deal easier with a wife to help him manage things was not a new one. It was the reason he still spent time in London for the season, hoping he might find someone suitable. He'd concluded he was kidding himself over the past weeks, however, for the ladies of the ton were too finely bred to welcome the life he could offer them, though it was looking to be an increasingly prosperous one. He had spent a fair bit of time in Edinburgh too, thinking perhaps a hardy Scottish lass would be a better prospect, but though he had met lots of lovely young women, none of them had stirred his interest.

Now, though, a wife had fallen into his lap, like it or not, and he could not decide if he did like it at all. It would save him a deal of trouble, but could Delia really adapt to such a life? She'd been raised to be a fine lady, a duke's daughter, of all things. She

was hardly ideal. Though he could not deny she was a pretty wee thing, which was a definite point in her favour.

He got back to the house to discover Mrs Paterson hefting a large tea tray.

“Have we guests?” he asked in surprise.

“Aye,” the lady said curtly. “And I would have been grateful if ye had told me ye were expecting such fine company. Here’s me, run off my feet on wash day, and that fool girl ye have employed is nae help at all, blethering on about lord knows what when all I need is a capable pair of hands and—”

“Who are my guests?” Muir asked, interrupting the flow of discontent and paying it little heed. Mrs Paterson seemed to take a perverse joy in complaining about everyone and everything and he rarely had the patience for it.

“Lady Buchanan and the Lady Cordelia Steyning, and that’s another thing, sir. Rumour has it the lassie is to be yer wife. Did ye nae think that might be a thing I needed to know, and her here without a by-your-leave to see the house, with me all at sixes and sevens?”

“Faith, calm yerself,” Muir said in exasperation. “The lady may well be my wife, if she decides she can be happy here, and she’s nae like to do that with you blethering on and complaining about every little thing that troubles ye. So, I’ll thank ye to mind yer tongue whilst she’s here, aye?”

“Aye, sir, whatever ye say, sir,” she replied curtly.

Muir sighed and pushed open the door to the parlour, gesturing for his housekeeper to precede him.

“Good morning, Luella, good morning, Delia,” he said, as he followed her into the room and closed the door. “I didnae expect to see ye today,” he added, giving his sister-in-law a reproving look, which she met with equanimity.

“I beg your pardon, Muir. It was my fault, but Delia accompanied me to see how Mrs Grant fares, and so inevitably, we came back this way.”

“Thank ye, Mrs Paterson, ye may leave us now,” Muir said, waiting until the housekeeper had left the room. “’Tis nae bother, Luella, ’tis only that ye have put Mrs Paterson in a pelter by arriving without me giving her fair warning.”

“Oh dear, is she terribly vexed with us?” Delia asked anxiously.

“Nae, lassie, nae more than she is vexed with any other thing that troubles her during the day. Ye must pay her nae heed.”

“That’s what I said,” Luella replied cheerfully. “Shall I be mother?” she added, reaching for the teapot and preparing everyone a cup.

“These shortbread biscuits are divine,” Delia said, once everyone had a cup of tea to their liking.

Muir nodded, pleased to note she helped herself to a second. “Aye, that’s Paterson’s saving grace. She is a fine cook, else I should nae tolerate her crabbit ways. But tell me, how do you find Brabster Farm?”

“I like it very well,” Delia said, smiling at him, and rather to his surprise, Muir found that he’d been eager to hear her opinion and to know she liked it. “The house is a fine one, strong and handsome, and inside is most comfortable,” she added diplomatically.

“Aye, it is that, though ye need nae be so polite. It needs a woman’s touch. I have nae

the time to pretty it up.”

“Nor the inclination,” Luella added with a laugh.

Muir shrugged, not about to deny it. “Nae, ’tis true enough. I would nae have the first idea of where to begin. Do ye think ye could make something of it?” he asked Delia, curious to know what she would do, just how she would change it.

“Oh, but it would be easily done. Especially in this lovely room,” she said at once, her eyes lighting up. “I should take down those dark curtains first, for though the material is beautiful, they give the room a rather gloomy aspect. I think the chairs and the settees are very elegant, but I should have them reupholstered too, and you ought to have a lovely rug in here, something in blue and grey tones, I think.” She broke off suddenly, her cheeks turning a charming shade of pink that made Muir smile. “I beg your pardon. I ought never—”

Muir laughed and waved her apology aside. “I asked ye, did I nae? I think it sounds a fine plan too.”

She relaxed visibly, smiling at him. His eyes fell to her lips, which were soft and plush and a delectable rose colour. A stir of interest flickered in his guts, and he had to fight to look away from her.

“Ah, if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I really must try to persuade Mrs Paterson to give up her shortbread recipe.” Luella hurried from the room before either of them could object.

“I think that is her idea of a discreet exit,” Muir said ruefully. “For she’s certainly nae hope of getting her hands on that recipe.”

“She’s been terribly kind to me,” Delia replied, though she was suddenly all on edge

again, her posture ramrod straight, her cheeks blazing a deeper colour than before.

“Aye, though Mrs Baillie will murder her with her bare hands if she discovers she asked Mrs Paterson for her shortbread recipe, and then she’ll murder Mrs Paterson. There’s a wee bit of rivalry between the two, ye may as well ken.”

Delia didn’t reply, and Muir got to his feet. “Would ye like to have a look about the place, then?”

She nodded and put her teacup down before accepting the hand he offered her. Muir placed it on his arm and escorted her out of the room. “We’ll nae visit the lion’s den for now as Luella is keeping her busy,” he said confidentially, showing Delia instead the dining room and family parlour, his study and the music room.

“You have a piano!” she exclaimed in delight, hurrying over to it.

“Aye, but I thought ye said ye had nae talent for such ladylike accomplishments?”

“Oh, I don’t,” she admitted, with such candour he could not help but smile. “But I love to play all the same, and I adore listening to those who are more accomplished, too. Do you play, then?”

“Aye, a wee bit,” he admitted. “It was my punishment, actually.”

“I beg your pardon?”

She looked at him in confusion and Muir laughed, settling himself on the stool and lifting the lid over the keys. “I was a wicked boy, I am ashamed to tell ye, Delia. I had a grand sense of adventure and fancied myself an explorer or some such nonsense. I’d get myself lost or stuck up a tree and everyone would waste hours searching for me. Ach, I was always in trouble for one thing or another, and my da

did nae care to birch me. Our grandfather was a violent man, ye see, and so it gave him a disgust of laying hands on a child. But though he's formidable, is my da, his ranting and bellowing had nae effect and I kept on making mischief until Ma came up with an idea. My mother is an evil genius, ye may as well know, and she brought a music tutor here, all the way from Edinburgh. I was forced to do half an hour every day and, for every misdemeanour, another half an hour was added to my time. So, in a very short time I became very accomplished," he said, grinning at her unrepentantly as he began a complicated piece she recognised at once.

"Un Sospiro," she exclaimed in delight, and Muir preened a little at the admiration in her eyes.

He rarely played in front of anyone. He always felt rather awkward about doing so, for usually it was the ladies who played, as it gave them an opportunity to shine. Sometimes at family events, his parents or brothers would harangue him into playing for them, but mostly he did it for his own pleasure, usually when he was blue devilled and nothing else would soothe him. Playing for Delia made him feel rather pleased with himself, though. He brought the piece to a premature end, not wishing her to think he was showing off, but her disappointment seemed genuine when he closed the lid.

"You play wonderfully well," she said, gazing at him in such a way his pride swelled a little. "I shall never dare to play for you, though, I'm afraid. You will put my meagre talents to shame."

"I doubt that, and I should like to see ye sat at the piano, for ye would make a pretty picture, of that I have nae doubt."

"Perhaps, so long as I don't actually play anything," she replied, laughing. "I used to pretend to be an explorer too," she blurted out suddenly, blushing at the admission.

“Did ye now?” he said in surprise. “I’d think ye would prefer to be a princess stuck in a tower.”

She gave him such a look of disgust he could not help but laugh. “Ach, I didnae mean it. Yer are nae the sort to sit about awaiting rescue, that much I ken well enough. I can see ye as an explorer too. A wee girl with yer skirts tucked up and dirty knees, aye?”

She blushed harder but her mouth twitched. “An accurate description, I fear,” she said dryly. “And a stolen bun from the kitchens stuffed in my pocket,” she added with a smile.

Once more his gaze drifted to her mouth, a stir of interest flickering in his loins as he wondered what it might be like to take her in his arms and kiss her. That he ought to find out sooner rather than later was an idea he was all too ready to accommodate. After all, if they did not suit, if she did not enjoy his attentions, that would certainly bode ill for their future.

For now, he got to his feet and took her hand in his. She had removed her gloves to take tea, and her hand was slender and soft, the skin so fair he suspected it had never seen the sun. She swallowed as his larger, weather-browed hand wrapped about hers, and he found himself surprised by the thrum of connection he felt, by the increasingly insistent tug of desire that urged him to kiss her, but he did not wish to frighten the girl out of her wits.

“Is this all right?” he asked, squeezing her fingers gently.

“Y-Yes, quite all right,” she replied, though she sounded breathless with nerves.

Muir watched her closely, aware suddenly of the scent she wore, or perhaps it was the soap she had washed with. Chamomile, he thought, something fresh and innocent. It

suited her. He looked into her eyes; they were a remarkable shade of blue, darker than any he ever remembered seeing before.

“Are... Are you going to kiss me?” she asked, surprising him.

“Would you like me to?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, considering the idea. “Are you very good at it?”

Despite himself, Muir burst out laughing. “Well, I have had nae complaints,” he remarked, noticing too late how mortified she looked.

“I beg your pardon!” she exclaimed, covering her hand with her mouth. “Oh, please forgive me. I am not usually so bold, only the thought came into my head—”

“And so ye said it out loud,” he said, still chuckling. “I dinnae mind that, lassie, though I can see how being out in society might be a trial to ye.”

“Oh, it was. I was forever putting my foot in my mouth,” she said, looking so wretched Muir could not help but feel sorry for her.

“Nae, then. I much prefer to know what yer thinking, no matter what it might be. Especially if yer thinking of kissing me,” he added with a flirtatious lilt to his voice, just to see how she would react.

“But I wasn’t thinking of it. Well, at least, I wasn’t until I thought you might kiss me, then I thought about it,” she said with her usual candour.

“Aye, and then ye wondered if it would be worth yer while to let me,” he added, smiling at her. “Shall we find out?”

She swallowed nervously and gave a taut nod.

“Have ye ever been kissed?” he asked her, moving closer, and a little startled by the way his body tensed with anticipation.

Delia shook her head, her eyes wide and impossibly blue in the bright light of the music room. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and colour bloomed in her cheeks. As he watched, her tongue swept out, licking her lips, and a jolt of desire arrowed through him. Well, that was a good sign, he thought, reaching out to cup her cheek with his hand.

“Your hands are very warm,” she said, never tearing her gaze from his. “So large, too. I mean, larger than mine, not too large for you. I don’t mean that they are out of proportion to the rest of you, for that would look ridiculous, only that—”

“Hush, lassie,” he whispered, and bent to press his mouth to hers.

Her lips were every bit as plush and inviting as he’d supposed they would be, but though the temptation to plunder was hard to resist, he lingered only for a moment, not wanting to offend her maidenly sensibilities.

As he drew back, he saw her eyes flick open, and she stared at him, looking a little incredulous.

“Is that all?” she asked bluntly.

Muir bit back a smile but could not keep the amusement from his voice. “I didnae want to make ye feart of me, but if ye can stand a bit more—”

“Yes, certainly,” she said at once, looking so earnest it was all he could do not to laugh.

“Aye, well, here we go, then,” he said, moving his mouth back to hers.

Tenderly, he brushed his mouth over her lips, back and forth, dozens of light, teasing kisses that sought to entice her as he placed his hands on her waist. Such a tiny waist it was too, easy for him to span with his hands. It reminded him of how delicate she was, how fragile. Surely a fairylike creature of this kind could not survive in such a wild place? The idea that she would be unhappy here struck at his heart and was hard to shake off.

Then she sighed, leaning into him, her palms pressed against his chest. That soft sound set off sparks of delight that glittered through his blood and made him want to take more, so he pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her. She went willingly, pliant in his embrace, and he broke the kiss to look down at her.

Delia’s eyes were closed, her lips still pursed to receive his next kiss, and the sight made him smile. One eye cracked open, and she regarded him with a slight frown creasing her brow.

“Have you finished?” she asked.

“Nae, not just yet,” he told her, and kissed her again, harder this time. Muir traced her lower lip with his tongue, feeling her surprise as she gasped. “Open for me,” he urged, not entirely surprised when she pulled back to give him a questioning look.

“I don’t understand.”

“Open yer mouth a wee bit when I kiss ye,” he explained patiently, amused by her sceptical expression. “Ye wanted to be kissed, did ye nae? Well, this is the way of it. If ye dinnae like it, I shall stop.”

He prayed she would not tell him to leave off, for by this point the idea of kissing her

had taken hold of his brain, not to mention other parts of his anatomy farther south.

“Very well,” she said, looking brave rather than enthusiastic, which put him on his mettle.

When his mouth touched hers again, she opened her mouth a little and Muir slid his tongue inside, his senses igniting at the shy touch of her tongue against his. To his delight, she did not remain passive, but sought to copy his movements, giving back everything he gave to her with enthusiasm, and within a very short time, Muir knew the kiss was evolving into something he had not been prepared for.

She was just so responsive to his touch. As he kissed her with increasing passion, so her fervour grew in response and encouraged him to continue, to deepen the kiss further still, allowing his hands to wander places he knew better to let them go with an innocent girl. His palm closed over her remarkably full breast, and he squeezed, yet she only sighed and pressed herself closer. Muir’s mind became a blank, his only thought focused on this first, delicious kiss, and what might come next if she became his wife.

“Oh!”

Delia jolted and pushed out of his arms, her cheeks blazing as Luella exclaimed in dismay.

“Oh, I’m so sorry I thought you were in the parlour! Pretend I was never here. Do carry on,” she said wildly and fled the room.

The door closed with a thud and Muir turned back to Delia, half expecting a flurry of accusations for his bad behaviour, or icy silence, or simply wailings of mortification. Instead, he saw her cover her hand with her mouth for a moment before she burst out laughing. Muir grinned, relieved she could see the funny side of it.

“Oh, p-poor Luella,” she stammered. “I shan’t be able to look her in the eye ever again.”

“Ach, Luella is a great gun. She won’t be the least bit shocked, I promise ye. Are ye nae angry with me, then?”

She looked genuinely bewildered. “Whatever for?”

“I took things a bit farther than I intended,” he said ruefully, watching her to see flush and drop her gaze to the floor.

“Do you think me very bold for not stopping you?” she asked.

Muir shook his head before realising she was still not looking at him. “Nae. I dinnae think that.”

She glanced up with a smile and shrugged. “I do not see how I can decide whether to marry you if we do not discover if we suit first,” she said simply.

Muir nodded. “Sensible lassie, and if ye wish to discover a bit more, I am at your disposal.”

He winked at her and discovered himself pleased when she grinned back at him, and he discovered she had dimples in her cheeks that he had not noticed before. They were charming, giving her an impish air which appealed to him. “I shall bear that in mind,” she said gravely. “But now I think I had best find Luella and return home. Shall I see you again today?”

“Nae, I’m afraid ye shan’t. I have to tell ye, the next weeks are going tae be mad busy and I may see little of ye at all.”

“Oh,” she said in dismay. “Of course, I understand, but I cannot stay here indefinitely without...”

“Aye,” he said, aware of the problem. The longer she remained here, unmarried, the worse the gossip would get. “I ken the difficulty. I’ll do my best, aye?”

“Perhaps if I came to help you?” she asked, and Muir’s mind boggled at the idea of this pretty society miss, daughter to a duke, on her knees in a lambing shed, covered in blood and muck.

“I dinnae think so,” he said at once, seeing the disappointment in her eyes, but not heeding it. “’Tis nae a proper place for ye, Delia, and ye would only be in the way.”

“Oh. Oh, yes, I see,” she said, though he heard the flat tone of her voice.

It was better that they did not pretend she was fit for such work, though. He was not about to encourage her rosy daydreams of what she thought being a farmer’s wife might be like, no doubt cuddling newborn lambs with snowy white fleeces, with no real concept of how they came into the world.

“Well, in that case, I had better let you get back to work. There’s no need to see me out. I’ll find Luella. Good day to you, Muir.”

“Good day, Delia.”

With that, he watched her go, aware of a sense of having lost something, but not entirely sure what it had been.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Delia,

My poor child, I am so sorry for the dreadful ordeal you have undertaken and so relieved to hear you are none the worse for your experience. Of course, I know you well enough to understand you are putting a brave face on, but please know you do not need to do so with me. I am your brother, and I am here to support you, no matter what.

Muir Anderson is an honourable and brave man, and I shall forever be in his debt for what he did for you. That he offered for you only elevates him further in my estimation, but my dearest sister, please know that you do not have to marry him. The scandal is quite appalling, but we will survive it, no matter what you choose to do. If you wish, we could go back to the continent for an indefinite time until the worst of it has died away. Think on it, sweetheart. I will abide by whatever you decide to do.

We are making plans to come to Wildsyde and hope to leave by the end of the week. I have only hesitated because Emmeline is once again in an interesting condition, and I wish for the doctor to assure me she is fit to travel before we leave. In the meantime, do write back and assure me of your wellbeing and that you are being treated kindly.

Yrs etc.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Most Hon'ble Leander Steyning, The Marquess of Wrexham to his sister, The Lady Cordelia Steyning.

28 th March 1850, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.

“I hope... I mean... I’m very sorry...” Luella began diffidently on their walk back to Wildsyde.

“Oh, don’t, please!” Delia said, mortified to have been caught in such a position. “I cannot imagine what you must think of me.”

Luella only shrugged. “I think you were trying to discover if Muir is a man you can imagine yourself married too. Very sensible too, in my opinion.” She smiled at Delia’s obvious surprise. “I’m really not a stickler for propriety, so don’t worry your head over my good opinion. I should be more shocked if you did not wish to see if you suited before you make such a big decision. Dare I ask if you came to any conclusions?” she added with a glint in her eyes.

Delia let out a huff of laughter. “If you’d have asked while he was kissing me, I’d have said I was certain he would be a wonderful husband.”

“Ah, yes, but the Anderson men all have a deleterious effect on a female’s ability to make sensible decisions. They’re so big and rugged and... and I think it’s the kilt, or at least, it’s definitely the knees.”

“Yes!” Delia exclaimed, throwing up her hands. “How is one to concentrate on a proper conversation when they’re all so—”

“I know,” Luella said sadly.

“And s-so—”

“Yes,” she agreed, nodding with amused sympathy in her eyes. “You don’t need to tell me, love. I quite understand. So, what was it he did when he stopped kissing you that made you uncertain again?”

Delia sighed. “He said he wouldn’t be able to see much of me because of the lambing, and so I asked if I could come and help.”

“And he said no, this is manly man work and not for mere females to dirty their hands with?” Luella guessed, making a face that showed she too disapproved of such behaviour.

“Yes, and I was so vexed,” Delia admitted. “And it was worse because before that I was so—” She sighed, giving an expressive wave of her hand that Luella seemed to understand.

“The rat,” Luella said in disgust. “Honestly, men think they are so big and strong and we’re the ones in need of protecting, when half the time it’s the other way about. Do you know Lyall fainted when I was giving birth?”

“No!” Delia said, finding it impossible to imagine the hulking great Highlander passing out.

She nodded enthusiastically. “Don’t say anything to anyone,” she begged. “He’ll murder me if he knows I’ve told anyone.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t,” Delia said at once.

“Well, to be fair, the poor man was not supposed to be in the room, for the midwife had shooed him away, but I was screaming my head off, calling for him, and so he came rushing in, and then fainted dead away. If I’d not been so furious with him when I was the one who needed the support, I’d have laughed. I have done a fair bit since,” she added conspiratorially.

Delia snorted and the two of them burst out laughing.

“Thank you,” Delia said, wiping her eyes once her mirth had subsided. “I feel a lot better now.”

“And so you should. Don’t you heed Muir. If you want to attend a lambing, I’ll do my best to arrange it for you when he’s not about, and then when you’re prepared, you can show him what you’re made of.”

“You’d do that?” Delia asked, delighted by the idea.

“Of course,” Luella said at once. “Many of Lyall’s tenants keep a few sheep. I can’t promise I can do it, for Muir is not the only man with such ridiculous opinions, but if I can, I shall. Just leave it with me.”

Delia gave a squeal of delight and hugged Luella, who grinned at her and hugged her back.

“I like you, Delia,” she said firmly. “And I hope to goodness Muir doesn’t mess things up, for I’d love to have you for a sister.”

Too overwhelmed to know what to say to this, for once Delia was sensible, and kept her mouth shut.

“Afternoon, sis. Good lord, don’t tell me you’re breeding again?”

“Leo!” Arabella, the Marchioness of Bainbridge, set the book she was reading aside and sat up. Though how she could concentrate on reading in the din carrying on around her was anybody’s guess. There appeared to be children everywhere. “Were we expecting you? I thought Mama said you were in Warwickshire?”

“I was, and now I’m back,” he said, catching a small child by the wrists before she could smear her sticky fingers over his boots. “How are you, sweetheart?” he asked

the child, not entirely certain which one this was.

“That’s Leona,” Arabella said with a sigh, guessing as much. “The one we named for you, remember? Do keep up, Leo.”

“How can I when you keep producing more every time I turn my back?” he protested.

“If you visited us more often, it would not be so difficult to keep track,” she retorted. “Now go and ring the bell and I’ll send for tea. Then you can tell me what you want of me,” she added sagely.

“What makes you think I want anything?” Leo demanded, going and giving the bell pull a tug.

“You’re here,” Arabella replied.

“Fair point,” Leo allowed and looked around for a place to sit that wasn’t covered in children or their accoutrements. “Don’t they have a nurse?” he asked, watching the younger twins, Rayne and Gabriel, squabbling because Rayne had pushed over the castle Gabriel had been building out of wooden bricks onto the floor.

“Gabriel, if you didn’t want your sister to interfere with your construction, you ought not to have provoked her,” Arabella said sternly, before turning back to her brother. “Yes, but the poor dear looked to be at her wits’ end, so I sent her for a lie down. There’s usually two of them, but the children all had vile colds last week and so now Sarah has gone down with it too. I only hope Rachel doesn’t succumb or we shall be in the basket. Ava! Don’t do that,” she said, wagging a finger at the child.

“Where’s Bainbridge?” Leo demanded. “He causes all this trouble, the least he can do is help you with it.”

Arabella gave a gurgle of laughter and stroked her burgeoning stomach fondly. “Oh, he does, my dear, he does.”

Leo shook his head, wondering if he was truly considering settling down and having children, though he could never imagine Violette among such a chaotic scene. A footman appeared and Bella ordered their tea, momentarily halting their conversation.

“Bainbridge had some business to attend to this morning,” his sister said, finally answering his question. “He’ll be back shortly. Is it him you wanted, then?”

“No, or at least, no, I don’t think so. I want your advice, Bella.”

His sister’s eyes grew round with astonishment. “You don’t say! Truly?”

“Yes, and don’t make a fuss or I won’t ask. Especially don’t make a fuss when I do ask,” he added hastily. “I mean it, Bella, no crying or carrying on, and you’re not to say a word to anyone. Anyone,” he repeated, glaring at her.

“But darling, I’m the soul of discretion,” she said, returning his glare with an expression of indignation.

“You tell Bainbridge everything,” Leo said flatly.

Bella waved this away as immaterial. “Oh, well, yes, of course, I’ll tell Bainbridge, but that’s not the same thing at all,” she protested. “Do stop being mysterious and tell me, Leo!”

Leo rolled his eyes. “I knew this was a mistake,” he said with a sigh.

“Stop being dramatic. What’s the trouble?” Bella demanded, before her expression shifted to one of delight. “Oh! A woman! It’s a woman! You want to know how to

propose to her. Is that it, Leo?" she asked, practically bouncing on the spot.

"Steady on, Bella," Leo protested. "I'm sure all that jiggling about isn't good for the baby."

Bella's eyes twinkled and Leo guessed she was about to say something outrageous, so he hurried on, "Don't say it, and if you must know, I've not got that far yet."

Bella squealed with delight. "At last!" she crowed. "I had almost given up hope. Who is it, darling? Shall I like her?"

"Well, I should think so," Leo said wryly. "It's Violetta."

Bella went very quiet and then burst into tears.

"Bella!" Leo said, horrified, and having no clue about what to do about it. The children, seeing their mama sobbing piteously, all decided they ought to follow suit, and suddenly the noise level rose dramatically.

Leo stared around at six children, the older ones having run over to clutch at their mother while the others huddled about her legs, tugging at her skirts and wailing with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

"What the devil is going on here?" boomed a masculine voice from the doorway.

"Oh, thank God," Leo muttered, never more relieved to see the Marquess of Bainbridge than he was at that moment.

"Leo! What have you done?" he demanded, advancing on Leo with fury in his eyes.

"Bainbridge," Bella sobbed. "Don't murder him, he's... he's... he's in love," she

said, hiccoughing and hefting her bulky form upright as she threw herself into his arms.

“Oh, is that all?” Bainbridge said with a sigh. “Lord, Bella, I’ve grown used to you weeping over kittens and puppies when you’re breeding, but Leo? It’s a bit much, love.”

“I should say it is,” Leo said in disgust.

“You stay out of this,” Bainbridge retorted, handing his wife a handkerchief so she could blow her nose. “There, all better. Now sit down and tell me what’s been going on.”

Leo watched with resignation as Bainbridge settled his wife back in her seat, withdrew another handkerchief and went around the room, blowing his children’s noses one after another. Any hopes of having a quiet word with his sister — which had admittedly not been high — died an inevitable death.

“He’s in love with Violetta,” Bella said with a sniff.

“Well, of course he is. Didn’t I tell you so the year before last?” Bainbridge said impatiently.

“Good heavens, so you did. I remember now. How clever you are, darling, to have noticed such a thing,” Bella said, gazing at him with such admiration Bainbridge swelled visibly.

“Nothing to it. Takes an understanding of human nature, that’s all,” he said with a modest smile.

“Excuse me,” Leo said, the familiar sensation of vexation Bainbridge usually

engendered creeping over him. “But I do not see how you could have known it because I wasn’t in love with her the year before last.”

“Yes, you were,” Bainbridge said firmly, turning back to his wife. “I suppose he wants to know how to court her. He’ll make a mull of it, you mark my words.”

“I am here!” Leo protested.

“I know that, but we’re talking about you, not to you,” Bainbridge explained with excessive patience before adding. “Ava, don’t do that.”

He scowled at his daughter sternly before subsiding as the tea tray appeared. The conversation was adjourned for long enough for Bella to provide them both with tea and give each of the children a biscuit. Bainbridge swiped three for himself before they all disappeared before turning his attention back to his wife, who smiled at him and nodded her agreement.

“Yes, that’s just what he needs to know, darling, how to court Violetta, and we must be very clear, for I agree, he’s bound to mess it up if we don’t give precise instructions.”

“Oh, now come on, that’s too much,” Leo said crossly. “I’m not a blasted halfwit!”

“Mind your language in front of the children,” Bainbridge told him, which made Leo stare, for Bainbridge was the worst culprit for swearing. “And whilst you might not be entirely stupid—”

“Thanks so much,” Leo grumbled.

Bainbridge returned a long-suffering look. “Not entirely stupid,” he repeated. “But Violetta thinks you’re a loose screw. She believes you’ve taken nothing seriously

your whole life, and she's not about to give you the time of day when she thinks you're only playing games with her for your own amusement."

Leo stared at Bainbridge for a long moment, a little stunned. "That's... actually, that's precisely what it is," he admitted, wondering if he was really about to take advice from a man he'd always considered a benevolent lunatic.

"Don't look so shocked. I know what I'm talking about because I've been where you are," Bainbridge said, looking entirely sincere. He moved from the seat he'd taken and crossed to the settee, lifted a small child from the seat beside his wife and sat down again, allowing the child to snuggle against him, crooked in his arm, while he reached for his wife's hand. "It took me a long time to figure out how to have a wife, how to change myself to be worthy of the trust Bella put in me. But I did it, and I'm bloody good at it."

"Yes, you are, my darling," Bella said, her eyes shining. "But don't swear in front of the children."

"Bloody?" Ava piped up from her place in front of the fire. The child was sprawled on the floor with a doll in a state of indecent undress, and Bella sent him a reproving look.

"Don't say that word, Ava," Bainbridge said, wagging a finger at her. Naturally the little girl scrambled to her feet and set off marching about the room muttering under her breath.

"Bloody, bloody, bloody, bloody—"

"That's a bad word, sir. You ought not to have said it to Ava," piped up Bainbridge's son and heir, Aurelius, looking rather sternly at his father.

“I know, I know!” Bainbridge said impatiently, before trying to return to the point of the conversation. “Leo, the only way you’re going to win that young woman is by convincing her of your sincerity, and the only way to do that is to go about it in the proper fashion. Woo her. Flowers, walks in the park, escort to whatever interminable play or exhibition she wants to go to. Prove to her you’ve got what it takes to be a dependable man. In short, grow up,” he added firmly.

“Ugh,” Leo said, slumping back into his chair. “I rather feared you’d say that.”

“He’s right, dearest,” Bella said, helping herself to a biscuit and munching contentedly. “If you want to win her and have the most blissful kind of marriage, as Bainbridge and I do, then you are going to have to work hard at it.”

Leo looked around him, at a room which looked like a small but powerful explosion had taken place, at the children alternately playing and squabbling, at Bella and Bainbridge holding hands and looking on with a look of slightly bewildered pride and happiness.

Yes, he thought, much to his own surprise. Yes, this was what he wanted too.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Rex,

I hope this letter reaches you before you leave for Scotland. Please don't come!

Understand that it's not because I do not wish to see you. It's only that there is nothing you can do here, and I do not wish for poor Emmeline to endure that horrid journey in her condition. I also know what a trial such a journey would be to you, and there is no need for you to undertake it.

If I decide I shall marry Muir, I will, of course, let you know, but for the moment, we are just taking some of time to get to know each other. I confess I have fallen in love with this place, if not yet with my husband to be.

Wildsyde Castle is beautiful, rugged and remote, set in an untamed landscape that is like nothing I have ever known before. Lady Buchanan has been so wonderfully kind too and has welcomed me like a sister. I have also visited Muir's property, which is quite different and wonderfully modern, but just as lovely in its own way. I believe I could be happy in this place, Rex. It gives me a deep sense of peace and freedom that I have never experienced elsewhere.

Please rest assured that I will keep you apprised regarding my plans and do not worry about me. For the moment, I am happy and well looked after and there is nothing for you to fret about.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Lady Cordelia Steyning to her brother, The Most Hon'ble Leander Steyning, The Marquess of Wrexham.

30 th March 1850, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.

It was two days before Muir returned to Wildsyde to visit Delia. He was not quite certain why he had stayed away. Though it was a busy time and he'd hardly had a moment to spare, he knew well enough that he would have found a way if he'd really wanted to. Something held him back, and try as he might, he could not put his finger on what it was.

The kiss lingered in his mind, memories of holding Delia in his arms returning to him at inopportune moments. When he'd finally fallen into bed, she'd been there the moment he had closed his eyes, and he relived those private moments all over again. Remembering the feel of her in his arms, her innocent ardour, the honeyed taste of her lips and the fresh, meadowsweet scent of chamomile, his body stirred restlessly, and he'd had the devil's own job finding sleep, despite his fatigue.

Now, as he handed his horse over to a groom and walked up to the front door, he was aware of a sense of anticipation, of excitement, and wondered why he'd been so foolish not to come before now. He'd offered this woman marriage, and he thought now that it was not such an outrageous notion as he'd first believed, yet how could he be certain if he avoided her?

"Numpty," he muttered as he let himself in the castle and hollered to the inhabitants that he'd arrived.

"Oh, ye have decided to show yer face, have ye?" Lyall said, regarding Muir with annoyance as he appeared from the door of his study.

Murdoch walked past his master, tail wagging, and Muir bent to make a fuss of the dog before returning his attention to his brother.

"Aye, I've been invited to dine with ye," Muir said, following Lyall back into his

study.

His brother lifted the whisky decanter in Muir's direction with a questioning lift of one eyebrow.

"Aye, please. A wee dram will warm me up. It's bitter out today. How's Delia?" he asked nonchalantly, watching Murdoch return to his wives who were sleeping in front of the fire.

"Why don't ye ask her?" Lyall enquired, passing Muir a glass containing a healthy dose of the amber liquid. "Ye could have asked her yesterday too, or the day before that."

"Ach, I've been busy," Muir said defensively. "She's well, though?"

"Aye."

Lyall sat down, regarding his brother speculatively. Muir tsked, annoyed by the sensation of being judged and found wanting. Mostly because he knew it was justified.

"Well, what d'ye make of her, now ye have had her company for a few days?"

Muir watched, genuinely wanting to know Lyall's opinion. His brother's first marriage had been a disaster and for a time had made Lyall both cynical and deeply distrustful, yet marriage to Luella had changed that, and Muir knew his opinion now would be both measured and worth listening to.

"She's too good for you."

Muir glowered at him. "If yer just going to insult me—"

“Haud yer wheesht,” Lyall said, amusement glinting in his eyes. “I like the lassie. She’s an original, aye? I mean, if patter was water, she’d drown, but she’s entertaining. For all her odd ways and notions, Lady Cordelia is nae a little pea goose that chatters about nothing.”

Muir was about to ask precisely what she’d been talking about when his sister-in-law appeared.

“Oh, you’re here,” she said, with rather less enthusiasm than she usually showed him.

“Aye, well ye invited me, did ye nae?”

“Yes, because I feared you would ignore your fiancée for another two days if I did not do something. Good heavens, Muir, what are you playing at? She’s a lovely girl who’s endured a horrific ordeal. You’ve brought her here after proposing marriage, and then dumped her among strangers. What are you thinking?”

Something that felt horribly like shame curdled in Muir’s belly, making the whisky turn sour as heat crept up the back of his neck. Luella had said nothing he didn’t know already.

“Aye, I’m—” he hesitated, clearing his throat. “I’m sorry.”

“You’d be better off telling her, not me,” Luella said tartly. “I mean, I know you’re busy, but I’d think in the circumstances—”

“Aye! I ken I have nae acted very well, there’s nae need to batter me about the heid with it,” he said impatiently.

“Well, why did you stay away, then?” Luella demanded. “If you knew that?”

Muir shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. “I dinnae ken why. I like her well enough, it’s just... I suppose I still feel a wee bit resentful towards her, and aye, I ken it is nae her fault, but it’s how I feel, trapped in a cage someone else made.”

“I suppose that’s understandable,” Luella said with a sigh. “But it’s cruel to lead her on if you think you can’t give her a future here. Not to mention her reputation will be further damaged, the longer she stays.”

“I’m nae leading her on,” Muir said crossly. “I’m just... ach, I dinnae ken what. I’ll be better, aye. I promise.”

“Very well,” Luella said, giving him a hard look. “I shall hold you to that. Now come along, dinner is ready.”

The two men followed Luella out of the room and Muir glanced up at the staircase, just in time to see Delia come down it. Tonight, the gown she wore was blue, and a mad confection of ruffles and lace and bows.

Muir blinked, thinking she looked like a Christmas fairy and not disliking what he saw in the least. She looked adorable, like a beautifully wrapped gift just for him. Muir wondered then just how long it might take him to unwrap her and found his mind returning to the kiss they’d shared. Ye great numpty, ye could have kissed her again if ye were nae such a blithering idiot!

“Good evening, my lady,” he said, smiling at her as she descended the last steps. He held out his hand, uncertain of the look she gave him but relieved when she placed her hand in his. He lifted it to his mouth, kissing her fingers before glancing up at her. “Forgive me for nae having been to visit ye. I promise ye, I am regretting it sorely in this moment, for yer the prettiest thing I ever did see.”

“Are you trying to fleech me?” she asked, a sceptical glint in her eyes.

He laughed, pleased as he always was by her frankness. “Nae, lassie, and who taught ye that?”

“Mrs Baillie,” she said, and he was relieved that she was now smiling at him. “I’m learning a good deal, you see.”

“Aye, so it seems, but nae, I didnae seek to coax or flatter ye, it was only the truth. Ye look bonnie.”

Colour pinked her cheeks, and she seemed to glow at the compliment, making him wonder if she was unused to such praise. Surely not, for she was a beautiful woman and that much must be evident to at least the meanest intelligence.

“My brother was thoughtful enough to forward some of my things so I’m not beholden to Luella,” she said, stroking a hand over the skirts of her gown.

“Ye looked very well in everything I’ve seen ye wear, but that is rather splendid. Ye look like a fancy French dessert.”

“Oh,” she said, apparently quite taken by this description. “I think that’s the nicest thing anyone ever said to me. Most people think I wear too many bows and frills, but I like pretty things and it makes me happy to wear them, so—”

“So ye should wear them and to the devil with what anyone else thinks,” he said firmly. “But if ye want my opinion, I think ye look very fetching indeed.”

Much to his surprise, she lifted onto her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you, Muir.”

Her voice was soft and seemed to wrap around him, a caressing sound that soothed away sharp edges. Muir gazed down at her, transfixed and finding he could not look

away. “Ye have the bluest eyes,” he said, almost to himself, for he felt momentarily adrift, like he’d been swept away by a warm Mediterranean tide.

“If ye dinnae come now, it will all be ruined,” said a tart voice from farther along the corridor.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mrs Baillie, we are coming,” Delia said hastily, hurrying past Muir and breaking the spell she seemed to have cast upon him.

Shaking himself and wondering what had come over him, Muir followed her into the dining room.

The meal was an excellent one, which was hardly surprising for Mrs Baillie took a deal of pride in her work and, knowing her rival’s master would eat at her table, had excelled herself. Having known Muir and his brothers since the day they were born, she knew their favourites off by heart, so he was pleased but not astonished when his favourite pudding appeared before him.

“Ach, Mrs Baillie is hoping ye will tell Mrs Paterson how good the fare was tonight,” Lyall said with a laugh, watching the footman spoon a generous serving of Cloutie dumpling onto his plate.

“Well, she’ll be sorely disappointed,” Muir said, pulling a face. “It may be the best thing I ever ate, but I’ll still nae tell Mrs Paterson. That woman is terrifying enough as it is. I’m feart of what she’ll do tae me if I say such a daft thing.”

Delia laughed, accepting her own serving of pudding with interest. “What’s it called?” she asked him.

“’Tis a cloutie dumpling,” Muir said, grinning at her. “It’s a kind of spiced fruit cake but boiled instead of baked in the oven. Ye have made it a time or two, have ye nae,

Luella?”

“Yes, and I’m waiting to see if Lyall thinks it’s better than mine,” she said, smiling sweetly at her husband, who froze with a spoonful suspended before his mouth.

“Aye, now ye see the difficulty,” Muir said to him, snorting with laughter.

“Of course, ’tis nae better,” Lyall said, holding her gaze.

“You haven’t tried it yet,” Luella pointed out dryly.

“I dinnae need to. Yer pudding was made with love, so it stands to reason, it is the better of the two.”

“Ach, I had nae idea ye were such a smooth talker, Lyall,” Muir taunted, but Lyall ignored him in favour of concentrating on his dessert.

“Good evening, and where did you come from?”

Muir turned back to Delia to discover Murdoch had appeared in the dining room and was sitting beside her, his nose twitching. The great dog was favouring her with a beseeching expression.

“It is very good, yes,” Delia said conversationally, just as if Murdoch had asked the question. “Yes, I know you would, but I think Lord Buchanan would tell me off,” she carried on, enjoying her dessert and keeping up the conversation.

Murdoch made a pitiful sound and put one great paw up on her knee. Delia tutted at him.

“Sir, unhand me. You are a deal too bold. I ask you, is that any way for a gentleman

to behave? Shame on you.”

With a resigned grumble, Murdoch laid down at her feet and sighed heavily.

“Well, if you behave very nicely, I might save you a bit. How’s that?” she offered, and Muir gave a startled laugh as the dog’s tail thumped on the ground.

“I think he understood ye!” he exclaimed.

Delia looked up at him in surprise. “Of course he did, he’s not stupid,” she said indignantly.

“The dog is nae stupid,” Lyall said with a smirk. “I cannae speak for my brother,” he added, regarding Muir, who rolled his eyes at him before turning back to watch Delia with interest.

What a strange and rather fascinating girl she was.

Delia enjoyed the rest of the evening more than she could remember doing for a long while. She felt very much at ease at Wildsyde, in a way she had never accomplished outside of her brother’s home. Lyall and Luella were amiable company, neither judging her nor expecting anything of her. Even the formidable Mrs Baillie had been kind, welcoming her into the kitchen when Luella decided she had a yearning to make scones and taking Delia with her. They’d chatted as Luella had guided her through the simple recipe, and then all three women had sat together and eaten the scones with butter and jam and a cup of tea.

The thought that Delia might sit at the table drinking tea and gossiping with the snooty French chef her brother employed was ridiculous, and if she had contracted a fashionable marriage, it would have been equally unlikely such a thing would be possible. Undoubtedly, Mrs Paterson was not a warm or friendly presence and the

idea that she might welcome Delia's intrusion into her domain was hard to believe. However, the notion remained that Delia could create an atmosphere like this at Muir's farm, that she need not be the grand lady her father had always expected her to be. Delia had known she would fail miserably if she tried. Imagining herself running a vast household and directing an army of servants and giving endless dinner parties to fashionable people had brought her out in a cold sweat. Nights like this one, however, with family or very close friends, that she could do.

After dinner, instead of leaving the men to their port as she might have expected, they all retired to the family drawing room and relaxed with a glass of whisky until Luella cleared her throat.

"Lyll, would you come with me a moment? I meant to ask you before, but there's something I need to discuss with you," she said, setting down her empty glass and getting to her feet.

"What?" Lyll asked blankly, gazing at her in surprise.

"A... A letter," Luella said, avoiding looking at anyone else. "It came earlier."

"Who's it from?" Lyll demanded, frowning. "Is there a problem? Why did ye nae tell me before?"

"No, there's no problem," Luella said impatiently, glaring at her husband. "I just need to speak to you about it... now ," she added, a warning note to the word that Lyll could not escape.

"Well, I dinnae see why I ye must bring it up now when we are all relaxing and—"

"Lyll!" Luella said, throwing up her hands and stalking from the room.

Lyall shot them a look of bewilderment before going after her and closing the door.

Hardly daring to meet his eye, Delia glanced at Muir, whose shoulders were shaking silently. She gave a bark of laughter which set him off and it took them a few moments to regain their composure.

“Lord, and he thinks I’m daft,” Muir said, wiping his eyes. “She is nae subtle, is our Luella.”

“I don’t think subtlety works on Lord Buchanan,” Delia replied with amusement.

“Aye, true enough. Us Anderson men generally need clouting over the heid with something before we take notice, ye ken.”

“I had remarked as much,” Delia replied, holding his gaze.

“Why, ye wee devil. I do believe yer insulting me,” he said, though he looked pleased rather than annoyed by her sally. “Though if yer trying to say I have nae noticed ye, I’m afraid yer far and wide of the mark.”

“You surprise me, sir, for I would think it is difficult to notice someone who is not in your company.”

Delia felt her heart pounding, wondering if she ought to have said that, but she refused to act the shrinking violet. He’d said himself he needed clouting over the head, so she would spell it out to him in no uncertain terms. She was not so foolish she did not know when someone was avoiding her. But Delia had spent the past days in a state of agitated anticipation, wondering when she would see him again, and if he would kiss her. When he had so obviously stayed away, it had made her feel foolish and vulnerable and more than a little cross.

To her surprise, he did not immediately try to defend himself, nor make excuses. Instead, his voice lowered to something dark and intimate that made everything feminine in her quiver with anticipation.

“Ah, well, that’s where yer wrong, lassie. For even when ye were nae by me, I noticed ye. I have nae been able to keep that kiss from my mind.”

“Then why didn’t you come?” she demanded, wishing the question had not sounded so needy and plaintive. “I... I felt foolish, for your brother and Luella plainly expected you to come, despite you being busy. I wish you would be honest, for if you do not want me here—”

Before she could finish the sentence, he had moved, getting to his feet and closing the distance between them. Delia gasped as he knelt beside her chair and reached for her hand.

“Forgive me, Delia. I have behaved badly, and yer right to scold me. I promise ye I meant nae insult. I just...” He sighed and ran his free hand through his hair, making it into an untidy tangle. Delia longed to smooth it back down again but did not quite dare. “Ye remember I told ye I was a naughty wee laddie when I was a bairn?”

“Yes,” Delia said, smiling at his words. “I remember.”

“Aye, well. If anyone told me I must do something, I did the complete opposite. I dinnae ken why. Often as not, I quite wanted to do what they had asked me, but there is a wee devil in me that sometimes makes me act the fool. I thought I had it in order these days, but—”

“But the idea that you must marry me is making you fight the idea,” she guessed.

“Aye. That’s it in a nutshell,” he said, watching her face. “Do ye understand? ’Tis nae

because I dinnae like ye, I just... I can't abide it when my hand is forced."

"I did not force you to offer for me," Delia reminded him gently.

"I ken that very well," he said quietly. "'Twas my own idea, and I'm thinking it wisnae a bad one. All the same—"

Delia nodded, contemplating him as an idea occurred to her. "In that case, I release you from your offer, Mr Anderson."

"What?" he said, sounding shocked. "Lassie, I dinnae mean to say I would nae marry ye. I just—"

"I understand that very well," she replied, hoping this was the right tack to take. "And I am grateful to you. But it seems to me we are going about this all wrong. You are an honourable man, but I do not wish to marry someone who does not want me. So, I will release you from your offer. We shall not marry. But I shall stay on here at Wildsyde for a little longer, for I do love it here. If, in that time, I find someone I wish to marry, and who wishes to marry me, then all to the good. If I do not, I shall return home, and there will be no hard feelings on either side."

Muir stared at her, his expression troubled.

"Don't look so vexed," she said soothingly. "We shall go on as before, and see what happens, but now we can just be friends and get to know each other, with no pressure or expectations on either side."

"I am nae vexed," he said, though he sounded it to her ear. "I'm just a—"

"What?" she asked when he failed to finish the sentence.

“Ach, I’m disappointed,” he said irritably. “I have been thinking of kissing ye all night and I cannae do so if we are just friends.”

Despite herself, Delia laughed at his predicament. “You are a spoilt boy who wants what he can’t have,” she told him sternly.

“Aye, I ken that well enough,” he grumbled, releasing her hand and slumping against the chair she sat on.

With her heart beating in her throat, Delia reached out and smoothed the tangle he’d made of his hair, running her fingers through what felt like warm silk. He sighed, tilting his head to allow her to continue.

“That’s nice,” he said, and Delia smiled, feeling as though she was petting a friendly lion.

He was so big, not only in size but his presence seemed to eat up the space in the room, dominating it and her every thought whenever he was near. How frustrating that the more she saw of him, the more she wished to make a life with him, and the farther away he seemed to get. Unless, perhaps, she did something about that. Unless there was a way to draw him closer again.

“You could still kiss me, if I allowed it,” she said, certain that her heart had leapt from her chest to her throat, for it seemed to be beating there now.

He was still for a moment, and then he moved, shifting back to his knees, his gaze intent. Delia swallowed. He still seemed like a lion in the amber glow of the firelight that highlighted the gold and russet glints in his hair, gilding his skin, but now he seemed less friendly and more likely to eat her in one bite.

“I could?” he said, and she appreciated the question she heard there, even though the

glint in his eyes made her pulse speed faster still.

She nodded, as an audible reply seemed to be beyond her, breathing was enough of a challenge just now. Heat swept over her skin, that odd tickling feeling in her belly morphing into something stronger, like wings beating as her blood raced through her veins.

Muir considered her for a long moment, before shifting to kneel in front of her. He braced his hands on the arms of the chair and leaned in. “I kissed ye the last time,” he murmured, never taking his eyes from her. “Reckon ye owe me one.”

Delia’s eyebrows shot up. “Owe you?” she repeated, startled.

“Aye. ’Tis yer turn to kiss me,” he said, a challenging note to his words.

The temptation to tell the arrogant lout to go to the devil warred with her own desire to do just as he asked. Deciding she’d not cut off her nose to spite her face, she gathered her nerves, not a straightforward task as they seemed to be leaping about like mad rabbits. Leaning in, she pressed her mouth firmly against his, and then remembered how he had kissed her over and over... tiny, soft kisses that had melted her from the inside out. So, she softened her lips against his, and repeated his actions, finding heat washing over her as he met each kiss with one of his own.

He did not move, nor try to touch her, just held still as she kissed him. Emboldened, she remembered next the shocking touch of his tongue, and the beguiling slide and caress as it moved against her own. Wondering how she dared, she ran her tongue over his lower lip, her confidence soaring as she heard his breath catch. His mouth opened and though she had instigated the kiss, she felt the moment when he took control of it, demanding more of her and deepening the kiss to something she felt to her very bones.

Delia was hardly aware of him pressing closer. At first, she did not realise he had insinuated his body between her legs, that she had opened her thighs to let him move closer. She realised it now as his body pressed against hers, the heat of him blazing through his clothes. A large, warm hand wrapped around her ankle and slid higher up her calf, where his fingers toyed with the sensitive skin at the back of her knee. Giddy with sensations she did not know what to do with, Delia was uncertain how to respond. She did not want him to stop, yet she was aware she had swum into deep water. This was turning into far more than a kiss, and yet she wanted him to want her, wanted him to want the future they might find together if only he would not keep underestimating her.

His left hand followed the same path the right had taken, and her mind tried to sort out the jumble of feelings, the pleasure of his kisses that turned her mind to warm honey, the distracting heat of his hands sliding up her thighs that seemed to make tiny fireworks explode deep inside her. The whole experience was so diverting, she did not hear the turn of the doorknob, and apparently neither did Muir, for the two of them leapt apart at the sound of a voice in the doorway.

“Oh! Beggin’ yer pardon. Excuse me, sir! I thought ye had gone to bed and came to clear up. So sorry...”

Delia watched in dismay as a maid darted from the room and firmly closed the door behind her.

“Christ,” Muir said furiously, raking a hand through his hair. “Forgive me, Delia. I ought not to have taken the chance. Damn Mrs Baillie, she’s a sight too efficient in keeping the maids on their toes.”

“It’s fine, really,” Delia said shakily, though her cheeks were blazing with mortification, her lips pink and swollen from his kisses. The sight only made him feel more wicked, for desire still ran in his veins, making him unsettled and frustrated

with himself, her and the blasted maid.

“It’s nae in the least fine! Scandal in England might nae touch ye here, but gossip runs wild in a place like this, and the girl saw me with my hands under yer skirts. ’Tis nae good at all, Delia. Damn me, but I ought to ken better than that when the staff are still about. I do!” he added furiously.

“It’s not your fault. It was my idea, after all. I ought to have stopped you,” she replied, frowning. “Only I couldn’t,” she added sadly, making him feel worse than ever.

“I ken that well enough, and I beg your forgiveness, lass.” He sighed, shaking his head, knowing there was no choice now, he’d made his bed. “I’m afraid ye will have to marry me now.”

There was a taut silence which set his instincts prickling.

“No,” she said, the word stark and hard, and she sounded quite in control again, which was more than he could say. “There is no need for that. I’m ruined already, so it hardly matters.”

“It hardly matters?” he repeated, aghast, wondering how she could be so calm when she had ruined herself in the one corner of their world where her reputation had not been entirely shredded. He shifted closer to her again, still on his knees, trying to reach for her hand but she removed it from his grasp. “Dinnae talk such rot. Ye ken well enough what people will think of ye after everything that happened to get ye here. Dinnae be so damned foolish, Delia. I may no’ be yer choice, but I’m considered a fine catch, ye ken. Ye could do worse.”

“I know very well what the situation is,” she told him, and he noticed the glint of anger in her eyes but was too overwrought to heed it.

“Says the girl who, by morning, everyone will ken let me put my hands under her skirts,” he retorted, and immediately wished the words unsaid as she flushed scarlet. “Delia,” he began, but she got to her feet, pushing past him in such a rush he fell back on his arse.

“Goodnight, Mr Anderson,” she said coldly, stalking toward the door.

Muir hurried after her, catching hold of her hand. “Forgive me, Delia. I ought never to have said that. I... I’m sorry, lassie. The truth is, I want ye something fierce, which is the reason my brain has gone begging.”

She glared at him, her eyes so bright they put him in mind of driftwood fires he’d made on the beach as a lad, watching the blue flames dance against the sky. “It seems to me that you only want the things you cannot have. Goodnight, sir,” she said, and left the room with the dignity of a queen.

Muir stared at the door before cursing himself soundly for making such a hash of what had been a wonderful evening.

“Ach, ye great gowk, now ye have ruined everything!”

For one thing was certainly true, she was right. He had avoided her the past days because he’d felt trapped and annoyed. Now he wanted her badly, and knowing she’d have none of him now was enough to make him mad as fire at his own stupidity. Well, she would simmer down, and he would make it up to her, he told himself. She wanted him right enough, that much was clear. So, all he had to do was grovel a bit, and he’d be back in her good graces.

Thank the lord she was a kindly and forgiving sort, a woman who would not hold a grudge nor be unfair. She’d be a wonderful mother, he realised, suddenly picturing a domestic scene with little ones playing at his feet. The idea pleased him more than

he'd bargained for, giving him a warm sense of wellbeing that he'd not expected.

"Aye, well, tomorrow is another day," he said, determining to come back in the afternoon, bearing flowers and a dejected expression that was bound to touch her tender heart.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Cissy,

I received your letter just this morning and cannot tell you how much it cheered me. It was indeed a trying ordeal, but I am perfectly well and unharmed. For the moment, I shall spend some time with Lord and Lady Buchanan at Wildsyde Castle, and I must tell you it is every bit as romantic and beautiful as you might imagine. I love it here, Cissy, and I want to stay with all my heart, for I feel it is a place where I could be myself and have a happy life if I had a husband I could be content with. As for marrying Muir Anderson, however, that I cannot tell you.

I know so little of men and their ways, Cissy, and I do not know what to make of him. He is so very handsome, and he makes me feel things I have never experienced before, yet I do not know him well. I know he is a good man, and an honourable one, but I do not know if he would make me a good husband, or for that matter, if I should be a wife he could be content with. I do not even know if he likes me; I know he feels aggrieved at being trapped into marriage. Yet sometimes it's so easy to be with him, and the way he looks at me makes me think perhaps he does like me a little, and then he says something that makes me furious, and it all goes wrong.

It is all happening so fast, and I feel I have little control over my fate. For the time being, I have told him I will not marry him, for I believe as much as his intentions are honourable, his resentment at being caught in this ridiculous situation is colouring his feelings. Sometimes I think we are well suited, but at others I see he is a stubborn creature and I know I would have to battle hard for the things I want. I've never considered myself a very strong person, Cissy, and I'm afraid to make the wrong choice. How I wish you were here to give me your advice and make me brave, for I was always so much braver when I was with you. I promise you I will try to be

strong, for my own sake.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Lady Cordelia Steyning to The Lady Narcissa Anderson.

31 st March 1850, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.

The next day, Delia came down the stairs to a deal of excitement, as a coach had been seen in the distance coming towards the castle. Delia prayed her letter had got through to Wrexham, for she did not feel equal to seeing him. She had eaten breakfast in her room this morning, for she had slept ill, plagued with thoughts of the row she'd had with Muir... and of the way she had felt when he had touched her.

That there was something between them was obvious enough, but that he only seemed to feel it only when he wasn't honour bound to marry her, seemed equally clear. She should never have let him kiss and touch her so after having refused his offer of marriage. It had confused everything, and he likely thought the worse of her for having done so. Judging from the giggles she'd heard from two young maids this morning when they passed her in the corridor, he'd certainly been right enough about the gossip. Her refusal to marry him in the face of it had certainly shocked him.

Perhaps he believed now that she had led Enoch on and had deserved to be abducted. Uneasily she banished that notion, telling herself that Muir was too decent a man to think any such thing. That he must think her bold and most unladylike, however, was a notion she could not shake. Yet the arrogance of the man, changing his mind again and saying they must get married, after confessing the arrangement was what had kept him away...! And so, her emotions lurched from anxiety to dismay to fury and back again, until she felt quite exhausted.

"Who is it?" she asked Luella as that lady appeared in the hall, hurrying towards the door.

“It’s Hamilton, Lyall and Muir’s younger brother,” Luella replied with a smile. “Brace yourself, my dear.”

Not knowing quite what to make of this statement, Delia watched with interest as the coach drew to a halt and the door swung open. A man stepped down from the carriage, took one look at Luella and grinned broadly.

“Now that’s what I like to see, a bonnie lassie come to greet the prodigal, aye?” he said, reaching for Luella and grasping her by the waist, swinging her up in the air and around before setting her down again.

“Hamilton!” Luella exclaimed breathlessly, putting a hand to her hair and flushing pink as she glanced at Delia. “We have company, you dreadful creature. Behave yourself.”

“Oh, aye?” Hamilton said, turning his attention to Delia, who felt colour rise to her own cheeks at the intensity of his gaze. “So we do, and pretty company it is too, are ye no going to introduce me, Luella?”

“Only if you behave yourself. Delia, do be careful, this fellow is the most dreadful rogue, but I had better do the thing properly. Delia, please meet Hamilton Anderson. Hamilton, the Lady Cordelia Steyning.”

“My lady,” Hamilton said gravely, giving her a formal and very elegant bow, though there was a wicked twinkle in his eyes as he did so. “I am very pleased to make yer acquaintance.”

“Delia is betrothed to Muir,” Luella told him sternly as he raised her fingers to his lips.

“No, I’m not,” Delia said, before she could think better of it. She had not yet had the

chance to explain things to Luella and had intended to do so in private that morning. Blurting the thing out on the front doorstep in front of his brother was hardly polite, but it was too late now.

“What?” Luella said, aghast, as Hamilton gave a burst of laughter.

“I dinnae blame ye, lassie. One look at me and ye decided the younger brother was the one to have, aye?”

“Hamilton!”

“Sir!”

Both Luella and Delia turned on him as one and Hamilton returned an unrepentant smile.

“Ach, I’m only pulling yer leg, my lady. Luella. Don’t murder me before I get in the door. I beg your pardon, only I could nae resist. Forgive me?”

He gave them a smile that was somehow both sheepish and wolfish, which was quite something to behold, and Delia decided Muir’s younger brother was incorrigible and ought to be treated with a good deal of caution.

“I think we had best go inside,” Luella said, sending Delia a worried glance. “Delia, we’ll talk about this in private once I’ve shown Hamilton to his room. How long are you staying with us?” she added to her brother-in-law as she led him up the stairs.

“Trying to get rid of me already, pet?” he asked as he hefted a large bag one of the footmen had taken from the luggage rack on the coach.

Luella sent him an impatient look, and he relented.

“I dinnae ken. I came to see Muir, for I’ve heard many outlandish tales about what he’s been about of late, and then I got a letter from Lyall telling me I’d best come at once for our brother is in rare form and has got himself into a deal of mischief. So here I am, come to put the world to rights, aye?”

“Well, it was very kind of you to come and support your brother,” Delia said, realising that despite his banter, his intention had been to be beside his sibling during a difficult time.

“Aye, it was,” he said, for apparently modesty was not one of his traits. “And much thanks the devil will give me for it, I dinnae doubt,” he added with a sigh.

“I’m sure he will be most appreciative,” Delia replied, to which comment Hamilton only snorted.

“He’ll send me off with a flea in my ear and tell me to stop sticking my nose in other people’s business, but that’s what I do, and no one ever got rid of me using such tactics as those, I can assure you.”

Delia did not doubt he was correct. Watching as the footmen unloaded the rest of the luggage, Delia went back outside, looking up at a sky that was a vivid shade of blue. The sun shone on her face, warming her cheeks, and for once the wind had dropped, making it feel like spring had arrived at last. She did not much want to discuss her refusal to marry Muir with Luella. Not at the moment, and thoughts of escaping before the young woman returned were too urgent to be denied.

Delia jumped as a cold, wet nose pressed against her fingers, followed by the swift swipe of a warm tongue. She looked down to see Murdoch watching her expectantly.

“Good morning, Murdoch,” she said, stroking the great dog’s head.

Murdoch wagged his tail, still staring at her.

“Was there something you wanted?”

“ Ooof! ” His low, deep bark made her smile, and she nodded.

“It is a good day for a walk, I agree. Should you like me to come with you?”

“ Ooof! ”

“Very well, just let me fetch my cloak,” she told him, not needing any further excuse to escape, and hurried off, unsurprised to see Murdoch waiting patiently on the doorstep for her when she returned. “Come on then, show me the way,” she said, smiling as Murdoch bounded joyfully ahead, before turning to watch if she was following.

He led her out of the castle and along a well-trodden path while seagulls shrieked overhead. The path eventually took them beside the edge of a sheer cliff that looked out upon the North Sea. Today the water was calm and rivalled the blue of any she had seen when she had journeyed through the Mediterranean with her brother.

She sighed, remembering that little excursion had been arranged to remove her from society last year. It had been a terrible season for Delia. Somehow, she always managed to say not only the wrong thing, but the thing that made people stare at her as though she had grown a second head. If only she could learn to hold her tongue, she might have survived, but instigating a one-sided conversation with roast suckling pig at Lady Banbury’s lavish dinner party had been the last straw. She had only been funning, as the man sitting on her left had been the dullest creature on God’s green earth, but she had become a figure of ridicule and Wrexham had decided the best thing was to take her away until everyone forgot about it. She sighed, pausing to tie the ribbons of her bonnet tighter. The wind had picked up this close to the cliff’s

edge, billowing her cloak out behind her like a sail.

“My lady!”

Delia turned at the sound, a little disconcerted to discover Hamilton waving at her. She waved back, standing still, as that seemed to be what he expected.

“Thank ye for waiting,” he said, sounding a trifle breathless. “I saw ye from the bedroom window and thought I would come and have a word. I just wanted to be certain I had no offended ye. I am a deal too free with my words and my opinions, I’m afraid but I was only baddering ye.”

When Delia stared at him blankly, he translated.

“I was larking about, teasing ye.”

“Oh, yes, I gathered that much, sir,” she said, looking at him with interest. All three brothers were very similar in looks, the same broad shoulders, the same tawny colouring, and yet Hamilton seemed far more gregarious than Lyall who was more taciturn, and even than Muir who seemed to pitch from gregarious to reserved in a short space of time. Of course, she did not know any of the brothers well enough to judge, but the distinction seemed quite apparent on the surface, at least.

“Ah, call me Hamilton. There’s nae need to be so formal out here. Wildsyde is a place apart, ye ken. Not quite the real world.”

“Yes!” Delia exclaimed, pleased to have her own thoughts spelled out so clearly.

“Yes, that’s exactly how it feels. Like time moves slower here somehow.”

Hamilton nodded sagely, apparently taking her words seriously. “That’s it. There’s a magic here. The others dinnae ken it, for they live here all year round give or take a

week here and there, and even Muir is nae absent for long, but I live in Wick now, and 'tis a bustling place, bursting with life of all sorts. It's a place for a man to make himself, but there's nae magic. I miss this place a good deal, but I have things to do, a name to make for myself, and so I must make my fortune before I can return."

Delia regarded him with interest. "You mean to return, then?"

"Oh, aye, one day. When I have a wife and intend to settle down and have some bairns. God willing, I shall build my wife a fine house and we'll be peaceful here. But for now, I am a busy man," he added, winking at her.

"Luella told me you run the herring boats, and that you have recently bought a distillery?"

He laughed softly and nodded. "Aye, something like that," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Am I to take from that you are rather more successful than that description implies?" Delia asked, knowing she ought not to ask such a thing, but she was too curious not to.

"Yer a shrewd lassie," he said, stooping to pick up a stone and throw it out to sea. "And aye, I'm doing well enough. Shipping is making my fortune for the moment, but I have high expectations for the distillery, too. The world is moving fast, Delia, and if a man wishes to keep up, he must move fast too. Why are ye nae marrying my brother?"

The non-sequitur took her by surprise, and it took her a moment to gather her wits.

"You are very bold, sir," she said, more as a statement of fact than a criticism. He seemed to take it as such too, and only nodded.

“I ken it well enough, but I’d like to understand the reason all the same, if yer willing to tell me.”

Delia considered this. She was not entirely comfortable discussing the situation with Muir’s brother and yet he seemed very easy to talk to. The urge to unburden herself was too tempting, despite the fact she’d run away to avoid doing the same thing with Luella.

“Muir is a good man, and an honourable one. If you know anything about what happened, you must know he saved me from an appalling situation and put his own life at risk to do so. I owe him very much, and so I will not force him into a marriage he does not want.”

“He disnae wish to wed ye?” Hamilton asked, his surprise evident, which made Delia feel a good deal better. “Is he mad?”

Delia laughed, shaking her head at him. “You, sir, are a wicked rogue, just as Luella warned me. Of course, he does not wish to marry a woman he barely knows. Who would?”

“I would,” Hamilton said frankly. “I’m an excellent judge of character and I trust my gut. It’s got me this far, and that’s a deal more than most men, let me tell ye. So, if ye are looking for a husband still, I’ll wed ye and be pleased to do so.”

Delia gaped at him in astonishment, hardly able to believe her ears. It took her a long moment to gather her wits sufficiently to respond. “You cannot be serious.”

His expression said otherwise, his eyes calm and grave as he stared back at her. “Aye, I am. But let me be plain, lassie. If there is something between ye and Muir, I’ll not get into that. My brother is my blood, and I’ll do nothing to drive a wedge between us. However, if it’s just that ye must wed to get out of the situation ye find yerself in,

well, I'm here and I'm willing."

"Why on earth would you do such a... a foolhardy thing?" Delia demanded, so shocked she hardly knew what to think. "You don't know the first thing about me."

He flashed her a quick grin, and she saw a shrewd glint in his eyes. This man was intelligent, right enough, and she doubted anyone could make him do anything he did not wish to do. "Ah, well, that's where yer out, lass. I ken a good deal. I know ye are kin to a duke and a marquess, and that's never a foolhardy match for a man with ambition. More than that though, Lyall and Luella think a good deal of ye. Lyall especially widnae give ye such praise without reason, for he has been burned himself by an unfortunate marriage. But none of that matters more than what I feel in my gut... if ye will excuse me for being so indelicate. Yet, when I ken something is right, is a good thing, solid, dependable, true in every way, well I feel it in here," he said, striking his midriff with his fist. "And I ken yer a good, kind female, and ye have a twinkle in yer eye which pleases me. Also, yer a fine-looking woman and I would be proud to have ye on my arm."

Rather stunned by this, Delia could only stare at him in bewilderment.

"I'm sorry if I have shocked ye," he said, studying her with a regretful smile. "I'm told I'm a bull in a china shop and I cannae deny it."

"Luella did tell me to brace myself," Delia admitted faintly.

Hamilton laughed. "Aye, and ye ken now that she had good reason. Ye will think on it, though?"

Delia nodded, for though she could not imagine herself married to such a whirlwind of a man, she could not deny his interest was a balm to her pride. She had never judged Muir for not wishing to marry her, or for his confession of feeling trapped by

the situation. Indeed, it seemed an eminently sensible reaction. It was only the way he blew hot and cold that made her furious with him. All the same, to know his brother would marry her, when he had no reason to do so, was a much-needed boost to her morale.

“Have ye visited the beach yet?” Hamilton asked, after walking beside her in silence for a few minutes. He was not a restful presence, and she thought perhaps the quiet was difficult for him to endure for long, so she turned to him with a smile and shook her head.

“Is there one?”

“Aye, ’tis a splendid place for sea bathing when the weather allows it. If yer brave enough, at any rate, for the sea is cold enough to wither yer—er—it’s a tad chilly,” he corrected hastily, before giving her a swift grin that made his eyes sparkle. Delia suspected he was a popular fellow with the ladies and used to getting his own way. “Would ye like to see?”

“I would,” Delia replied, taking his proffered arm.

Up ahead, Murdoch barked impatiently.

“Aye, he kens where we are going right enough,” Hamilton nodded, and they set out after the dog.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Ruth,

Firstly, to put your mind at rest. The Lady Cordelia is a delightful girl, something of an original I am bound to say. She has not taken well to society life, and I must say I could see a marriage between her and a man like Muir might be the very thing for her. From what I know of the girl, she would like nothing better than a quiet life with a family to care for. In my opinion, she is the kind to hide her light under a bushel, but she has quite a lively, if eccentric, way about her, which I found charming.

In short, my dear, I think you will adore her.

I am currently awaiting my darling Tilly, who we expect at any moment. Pip is coming to town, and you will not believe this, Ruth, but he intends to find a bride. What is more, he has even asked us for a list of suitable candidates. Can you imagine? I pray he finds someone with whom he can finally fall in love, for it pains me to see him still so alone. I do not believe he ever loved Tilly's mother, but her death and the discovery of his daughter seems to have had a profound effect upon him. He adores Tilly, of course, but I am afraid the child will rule the roost if he does not find a capable woman to keep her in line. But can you think of a woman who would love the child as she deserves to be loved? I fear for the girl, for there are too many women who would profess they would be a mother to her, only for the chance to be his wife. Still, Pip is no fool, and I do not believe anyone could pull the wool over his eyes.

I am so glad he has agreed to stay with us instead of opening up his own property. Lucian is in alt, though I fear Tilly will be even more spoiled than she is now if I do not keep her doting pops from giving her the moon if she asks for it.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Most Hon'ble Matilda Barrington, The Marchioness of Montagu to The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven.

31 st March 1850, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.

“What do ye mean, she is nae here?”

Luella gave Muir a look of mild exasperation as she lifted her baby daughter Fiona up, settling her on her hip. Little Gordy was sat on the floor at her feet, drawing what looked to Muir's eye to be a dragon with three heads. “Exactly what I said. I think she went for a walk.”

“Alone?” Muir asked in concern. “And ye let her? Luella, she hisnae the sense she was born with, and she disnae ken the place at all.”

“You do her a disservice, if that's what you think,” Luella said shortly. “She's an intelligent young woman and perfectly capable of looking after herself. If you've given her the impression you think her a fool, I can well understand why she's refused to marry you.”

“She told ye?” Muir asked, discomfited by the realisation.

“She did,” Luella replied coolly. “And she's not alone in any case. She took Murdoch on her walk, and when Hamilton saw she was by herself, he went after her. So, she is quite safe.”

“Quite safe!” Muir repeated in alarm, his heart thudding with anxiety at the realisation his charismatic brother was with Delia. “Alone with Hamilton? Good God, Luella, have yer wits gone begging? Faith, I had best go after them.” He set down the large bunch of daffodils he'd been clutching as a peace offering and turned to leave.

“There’s no need,” Luella said, before he could turn and stalk off again. “They’re back.”

She nodded towards the window of the parlour and Muir looked to see his brother and Delia, walking arm-in-arm, chatting animatedly, and looking like they’d known each other for years.

“Damn him,” Muir growled, irritated, and stalked off towards the front door.

“Muir!”

Impatiently, he swung around to look at Luella, who glared at him. “If you actually have sense enough to wish to marry Delia, I should think very hard before you go charging out there and throwing your weight around. Hamilton was walking with her, that’s all, and if you’d not done whatever it was you plainly did last night to make her refuse you, there would be no cause for concern, now would there.”

Unbidden, the memory of last night returned and Muir felt heat surge through him, guilt and desire creating a messy tangle of emotions that knotted in his chest, making him feel entirely out of sorts. He drew in a deep breath, forcing himself to consider the truth of Luella’s words.

“Aye,” he said grudgingly. “Very well, I winnae murder him this time, but he had best keep his nose out of my affairs,” he added caustically, before striding out to greet them.

Delia stiffened when she saw him, her expression settling into one that was less than friendly, which was not an encouraging sign, but hardly surprising.

“Good morning, Delia,” he said, smiling at her. “And may I say how bonnie ye look this morning? The fresh air has put roses in yer cheeks.”

“Thank you,” she replied, though her manner was reserved, her gaze speculative.

“Hamilton,” he added with a nod, giving his brother a look that told him he was not entirely pleased to see him.

“Muir, ye are looking well. It seems ye misadventures of late hinnae harmed ye. I heard ye had a time of it with Malmsey.”

Delia flinched at the man’s name, and Muir glared at him. Trust Hamilton to step in with both feet. “Aye, but my lady disnae wish to discuss that. Come in out of the cold, sweetheart, and have some tea.”

Something flashed in her eyes at the endearment, and he carried on hurriedly.

“Something smells good too, so I reckon Mrs Baillie has been making shortbread.”

“Ach, nae. She knows I’m here, so it’ll be Abernethy biscuits,” Hamilton said smugly, making Muir want to tell him to go the devil. He minded Luella’s warning, however, and held his tongue.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s bound to be good, aye,” Muir said, offering Delia his arm.

“Come along then, lassie, let’s warm ourselves by the fire,” Hamilton said, guiding her into the house before Delia could even decide if she wished to switch brothers or not.

Irritated, but determined not to show it, Muir followed.

“Good morning, Fiona!” Delia exclaimed, on entering the room to find Luella with her two children. Fiona made an excited sound and reached up her arms towards Delia, who promptly scooped her up and planted a kiss on her chubby cheek. “Oh,

you smell better than the biscuits. I think I shall eat you up instead,” she declared, pressing her nose into Fiona’s neck and pretending to eat her. The little girl giggled and squealed, squirming madly.

Muir felt a peculiar surge of warmth in his chest as he watched her, so at ease with his little niece and so ready to have fun with her. Delia laughed and then looked up, blushing crimson as she discovered Muir and Hamilton both watching with amusement.

“Gain, Dede!” Fiona demanded. “Do it ‘gain!”

But Delia had turned shy now and only kissed the child, distracting her by showing her how to pet Murdoch gently.

“She’s a treasure,” Hamilton said, and Muir turned to see his brother watching as he had been, admiration shining in his eyes. “Pretty as a picture and sweet as honey.”

“Aye, and she’s my betrothed, so I’ll thank ye to keep yer hands and yer sweet talking to yerself,” Muir growled, hearing the heat of his own anger in the terse words.

“That’s nae what I heard,” Hamilton replied, regarding Muir with a wicked gleam in his eyes that Muir did not like one bit. “I heard she gave ye the go by. Smart lassie,” he added, winking at his brother.

Muir opened his mouth to tell Hamilton precisely what he thought of that comment, but the door opened, and Mrs Baillie bustled in, hefting a heavy tea tray.

“Sheenagh, for heaven’s sake, you’re supposed to get the footmen to bring such things,” Luella protested, but Hamilton rushed to take the tray from the woman. He set it down and then wrapped his arms about Mrs Baillie and gave her a smacking

kiss on the cheek.

“She didnae want to give it to the footman for then she’d nae see me for another hour or more and she couldnae wait,” he said, grinning at Mrs Baillie, who pushed at his chest, looking torn between scolding him and melting at his feet.

“Oh, ye great lummo, yer squashing me all to bits. Yer a deal too bold, my laddie,” she said, trying to sound cross and failing miserably.

“Aye, Mrs Baillie, but ye love me all the same, aye?”

“Aye, ye wretch, I do at that,” she admitted, and reached up, patting his cheek. “’Tis good to see ye. It’s been too long. Now I’ve made Abernethy biscuits and I’ve all yer favourites ready for dinner, so ye make sure ye eat everything. I know ye dinnae eat right when ye are working all the time in that heathenish town.”

“’Tis only Wick,” Hamilton protested with a laugh. “’Tis nae Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“All the same,” Mrs Baillie said with a sniff. “Now pour the tea before it gets cold,” she commanded, and bustled out again.

“I always was her favourite,” Hamilton told Delia with a wink.

“Ye were nae,” Muir objected, scowling. “Ye are just the one she disnae see so often, that’s all.”

“If ye say so,” Hamilton replied, shrugging and taking a biscuit from the tray, popping it in his mouth in one go. “Abernethy biscuits,” he said around the mouthful, smirking at his brother.

Muir rolled his eyes and turned his attention to Delia. “I wondered if ye would like to

visit the farm this afternoon. The first lambs have arrived and they're sweet little creatures."

"Oh," Delia said, her eyes shining, yet she hesitated.

Muir held his breath, knowing she was reluctant to spend time with him again, and yet she wanted to see the lambs. She turned to look at Luella, who nodded.

"I can drive you over there in the dog cart when the children take their nap, if you'd like?"

"I would, thank you, Luella," she said, happy now she had a chaperone.

Less pleased at Luella's involvement, Muir only nodded.

"Well, I'll look forward to it, lassie," he said, holding her gaze and giving her a warm smile.

Colour rose to her cheeks, and he knew she was remembering those intimate moments they'd shared last night—as was he. Truth be told, he'd not been able to think of anything but the kiss they'd shared, the feel of her shapely legs beneath his hands, and he'd come over to see her the first second he'd been able to. As was their wont, the first lambs had arrived in the early hours of the morning, and though Dugald and his men were more than capable of managing without him, Muir did not like to leave it all to them. The next weeks would need every man to do his part and if any of them got more than a couple hours sleep at night, he'd be amazed.

"I'll see ye later, Delia, Luella. Hamilton," he added, glaring at his brother.

"Hold up," Hamilton said, surprising him. "I'll see ye out. Pour the tea, Lulu. I'll be back in a moment."

Muir walked out of the room as Hamilton followed, closing the door.

“Aye?” Muir asked, folding his arms.

“Are ye all right, a chuilein?” he asked, such sincere concern in his eyes that Muir sighed, unable to remain annoyed with him. No one ever could, which was half of Hamilton’s trouble. “Malmsey was a nasty piece of work, and nae mistake, but it could nae have been pleasant for ye.”

Muir shrugged, touched by the concern but not really wishing to discuss it. “Aye, ’twas nae a fun afternoon, I’ll grant ye that,” he said, with more sangfroid than he felt. The memory of that day had come back to him forcefully the previous night, when his hands had been covered with blood after bringing a new lamb into the world. That was what he’d always loved, helping new life emerge, not taking it away, and the moment had been spoiled by a vile blackguard who’d had no business in Muir’s life. He knew it was a foolish to make the comparison, but Malmsey’s blood had stained his hands and he felt it had stained his life too in some intangible way. His whole life he’d been known as a charming devil, a fun-loving young man with a ready laugh and an easy manner. What did people think of him now? The knowledge that parlours from Wildsyde to London were likely buzzing with gossip about him made him angry at Malmsey all over again.

“They’re calling ye a hero,” Hamilton said, his lips quirking. “I thought ye might like to ken that much.”

Muir snorted, not feeling much better for hearing it. “Aye, for now. And then they’ll remember that business with Richmond and people will step aside to get out of my way.”

“Disnae sound so bad,” Hamilton said with a grin. “I may play up to being little brother to murderous Muir Anderson, aye?”

“Christ! Is that what they’re calling me?” Muir demanded, appalled.

“Nae, laddie, keep yer hair on. I’m only playing with ye. I’m glad ye’re well, aye?”

“Aye,” Muir said grudgingly, accepting the hand Hamilton held out to him. “’Tis good to see ye. I’m glad ye came, aye, but stay away from my girl or I shall make ye sorry.”

“Like that, is it?” Hamilton said with interest. “I heard ye were nae pleased at being caught in such a way.”

Muir shrugged, avoiding his brother’s eye. “A man likes to choose his bride, aye? It’s nae a secret, but... but I’m thinking I might have chosen her anyway, if given the choice. It’s complicated, so dinnae stick yer oar in and muddy the waters.”

Hamilton watched him curiously. “Maybe I will, maybe I won’t.”

“Hamilton,” Muir said, a warning note to his voice.

“See ye later, brother,” Hamilton said, flashing him a swift grin as he went back into the parlour.

“You’re very quiet,” Luella observed as the pony trotted ahead of them, bearing the little dog cart and its two occupants to Muir’s farm.

“I’m sorry,” Delia said at once. “Forgive me. I’m being a terrible guest.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Luella said at once. “I know you must have a good deal on your mind. I only wanted to offer to be a shoulder to cry on, or lean on, or someone to complain to if that’s what you need.”

Delia smiled. "You're very kind, Luella, kinder than I had any right to expect."

"Nonsense. I told you from the start, I like you, Delia, and I should be glad for you to be my sister, but I wish for you to know that I would be your friend too. If you decide Muir isn't for you, I would not hold it against you. Choosing your own path is important, and marrying a man you'll spend the rest of your days with a decision that cannot be taken lightly or overnight."

"Thank you," Delia said gratefully. "I just keep thinking that the longer I delay the more I presume upon your kindness, and the worst the scandal will become, and yet I am so confused I... I do not know what to think or what do to."

"Hardly surprising after everything you've been through," Luella said, guiding the cart neatly around a rocky part of the path before encouraging the pony back to a trot. "But really, if you are thinking you might say yes, there is no hurry. You may not have noticed but scandal does not really touch us here at Wildsyde," she added with a wry smile. "I mean, that's not to say there isn't a scandal, but all the time you remain here, there may as well not be, for no one will speak of it and you need not think of it."

Delia nodded, relieved to discover that their little indiscretion last night had not yet reached Luella's ear. "Hamilton said it's a magic place."

Luella laughed softly. "Yes, I suppose it is, and that's just the sort of thing he would say."

"He proposed to me."

"What!" Luella was so startled she fumbled the reins and had to take a moment to pick them back up. "He did what? When?"

Rather sheepishly, Delia explained about Hamilton's outrageous offer within moments of his arrival at the castle that morning.

Luella shook her head, obviously as stunned as Delia had been. "Good heavens. Even by Hamilton's standards, that's quite an extraordinary thing to do."

"I don't disagree," Delia replied, still reeling herself.

"What will you do?" Luella asked her, concern in her eyes.

"Well, I won't accept him," Delia said at once. "I should never do such a shocking thing. Good heavens, to have tangled Muir in such a dreadful scandal is bad enough, to then jilt him and marry his brother? What a dreadful thing to do."

Luella let out a breath of relief. "Well, that's good. I would not want Muir to be hurt."

Despite her best intentions, Delia could not help the contemptuous little huff of laughter at her words. Luella shot her a quick glance, her expression curious.

"I beg your pardon," Delia said at once. "But I really do not think Muir will care one way or the other. The only reason he wishes to marry me now is because I've told him I won't."

"I'd like to say what a typical man," Luella said ruefully. "But really, it's just human nature, love. And, to be honest, I believe there's more to it than that. He's confused too, I think, at having been plunged into this business so violently. The one thing I do know is that Muir is a good man, and he feels things a lot more than he lets on. Lyall thinks the business with Malmsey disturbed him more than he's allowing us to see. So, perhaps you should give him another chance. But, Delia?"

"Yes?"

“Don’t be afraid to stand up to him. Like all the Anderson men, they can trample you if you’re not careful. Talk back, shout at him if you need to. Make yourself heard.”

Delia made a sound of derision. “Oh dear, and after having spent so much time ensuring people didn’t hear the daft things I say.”

“You’re not the least bit daft, and Muir knows it or he’d not have been so furious to see you with Hamilton this morning.”

Startled by this information, Delia perked up. She had noted the daffodils he’d left for her, not that he’d actually handed them over, but perhaps if he was cross with Hamilton, he’d forgotten. It was not a good excuse, but it was a reason she could understand. “He was furious?”

“Green as grass, more like,” Luella said, winking at her. “I think Hamilton could not have arrived at a more propitious moment. If Muir thinks he’s in danger of losing you, he might actually exert himself to say the right thing instead of putting his foot in it.”

“I don’t want him to say things just to win me like I’m a silver cup in a competition, though,” Delia objected.

“Then make sure he knows you are flesh and blood,” Luella said with a laugh. “And not made of cold silver.”

Blushing, Delia looked away, and wondered what the afternoon might bring.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Miss Spencer,

If you think running away from me is going to change anything, I am afraid you are very much mistaken. You will need to run a good deal farther than London to escape me.

However, I am not about to plague you. This letter is only to inform you that I am very much in earnest despite the hasty way I went about things at our last meeting. I hope you will forgive me for how I behaved, but you know as well as anyone that I can be impulsive. That does not mean to say I am not sincere. I mean to court you, Miss Spencer, and I warn you, I shall present myself to the earl to ask his permission to pay my addresses.

I am not a fool, nor am I still a reckless boy. I only ask that you give me the chance to prove this to you.

?Excerpt of a letter from Mr Leo Hunt (Son of Alice and Nathaniel Hunt) to The Hon'ble Miss Violetta Spencer.

31 st March 1850, Brabster Farm, The Highlands of Scotland.

“The men are all out in the lambing shed,” Mrs Paterson said, eyeing Delia with suspicion though it was Luella who had asked. “And I’ve no time to go fetch them, for as ye can see, I have bread to make.”

“Not at all, please don’t trouble yourself,” Luella said with excessive politeness. “We can find our own way.”

Turning, Luella rolled her eyes at Delia and led her out of the kitchen.

“Miserable old bat,” she muttered under her breath, making Delia snigger with laughter. “If you do marry Muir, I trust you will have a word with her and put her in her place. Anyone would think she was the lady of the manor.”

“I’m not sure I’d dare,” Delia admitted, quailing at the thought of facing such a creature.

“Nonsense. Why do you always put yourself down? You’re more than capable of dealing with the likes of Mrs Paterson. Indeed, I think you would do it with ease.”

Delia smiled, gratified that Luella thought her capable, for so far Luella was everything she aspired to be.

Picking their way carefully across the muddy yard, Luella led them into the lambing shed, though Delia thought she could probably have found it herself, for the bleats and cries from within were most expressive.

Wooden hurdles separated the mothers-to-be, so each had their own space, and whilst some slept peacefully, others were obviously in varying stages of the birthing process.

“There’s Dugald,” Luella said, raising a hand as the fellow waved at them and gestured for them to come over.

“Just in time,” he said quietly, grinning as he gestured to the scene he’d been watching.

As Delia looked over, the ewe pushed her new lamb into the world and Muir took it up at once, checking its airways were clear and rubbing the tiny newborn over with

straw, his movements brisk and sure. The lamb gave a heartfelt bleat and Muir looked up, glancing at Delia as he put it before its mother, who promptly began washing it. His gaze was cautious, and she realised he was waiting to see if she would turn away in disgust from the scene, which was bloody and rather gruesome as well as being touching and extraordinarily beautiful. She supposed she could understand his expectation that she might squeal and turn away, or even swoon, for she knew plenty of girls who would do just that, but she was not one of them.

So, Delia watched the scene with quiet delight until Muir left the pen. He stopped to wash his hands in a bucket of cold water with a large bar of carbolic soap, before he walked towards them, drying himself on a cloth as he approached.

“Well, ye have seen yer first birth, Delia. What did you think?”

“It was fascinating, and rather wonderful,” she said, smiling at him. “Thank you for letting me come.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, still studying her with interest. “Ye didnae find it too indelicate? It’s a messy business, aye?”

“So I saw,” she replied curtly. “And I meant what I said.”

He nodded, hanging the towel over the edge of the enclosure. “Dugald, ye can manage for a wee while?”

“Aye, laddie, course I can. Away with ye.”

“Would ye take a walk with me?” he asked, his voice quiet.

Delia shot a glance at Luella, who was hanging over the side of the enclosure, cooing over the new lamb.

“Alone,” Muir added.

For an instant, Delia thought to refuse him, but then she told herself not to be such a coward and nodded instead. “Very well.”

Muir rolled down his sleeves and shrugged his coat back on before offering her his arm. Delia took it and he escorted her out of the lambing shed. The day had brightened somewhat, and sunlight shimmered through the clouds. As they walked, arm in arm, Delia felt her emotions settle, the lovely countryside around her soothing her nerves.

“Do ye like it here?” Muir asked.

Delia glanced up to see his tawny eyes gazing down at her intently. “Very much,” she admitted. “I don’t ever remember feeling so comfortable anywhere before. It’s felt like coming home since I arrived, for reasons I don’t really understand.”

“Perhaps it’s because ye belong here,” he said quietly, smiling at her.

Delia looked away, unable to hold his gaze when he looked at her so warmly, for it set off sparks of eager excitement inside her, making her want things she was unsure he was prepared to give her. “What makes you say so?”

“Well,” he said, stopping in his tracks and taking one of her hands in his. “Firstly, because I want ye to stay, but maybe ye soul kens the place. Perhaps ye lived here in another life, or perhaps it is fate that brought us together for a reason, because it was meant to be.”

Delia snorted, assuming he was teasing her with romantic nonsense, trying to woo her so she would accept his proposal again. “You don’t believe that,” she said scornfully.

“Do I nae?” he retorted, quirking an eyebrow at her. “I feel this place in my bones, Delia. I have a connection to it, to the land. It feels ancient, and sometimes I feel like my ancestors are standing beside me, just out of sight. Perhaps it’s a romantic notion, but if ye feel something of the sort too, perhaps it’s for reasons we cannot explain in a rational manner.”

Delia considered this, studying his face and finding him sincere. She wished now she had not been so caustic, yet sometimes she did not know what to make of him. “Why the change of heart? From the beginning you’ve said you couldn’t imagine me in your home, could not see me as the wife of a farmer. Why should I believe you’ve reconsidered?”

“Because I have nae need to imagine it now, yer here before me,” he said simply.

She huffed and shook her head. “Too glib, Mr Anderson.”

“Ach, dinnae call me that. Come and see the lambs,” he said, tugging at her hand and taking her to another barn where the new mothers and babies were housed.

Grinning, he led her towards a pen and lifted the side so she might enter. He closed it after him and Delia gave a soft sigh of delight as she gazed down at two little lambs, snuggled against their mother’s side. At their entrance, they staggered to their feet as their mother bleated, eyeing Delia suspiciously.

“It’s all right, yer babies are quite safe,” Muir said, his tone soothing as he checked both lambs over. “Aye, yer a fine mama,” he said approvingly as the ewe gently butted at the lambs and licked them.

“May I touch them?” Delia asked, longing to do so.

“Aye, here,” he said, lifting one lamb up for her to pet.

Delia laughed delightedly as the lamb licked her fingers and tried to suck them. “Such a sweet baby, and you will grow up to be a fine, big sheep and give Muir lots of lovely wool to sell. Yes, you will,” she crooned, and then looked up and found him watching her. She braced herself to feel embarrassed, to see him look at her with bewilderment or even derision as many had done in the past. Instead, he smiled at her.

“I hope so,” he replied, with quiet approval, before tilting the lamb’s chin so the creature looked at him. “Did ye listen well, wee yin? Ye must do as the lady says, aye?”

Delia laughed. “Adorable,” she said, finding her heart lift at the wonderful sight and uncertain if she was speaking about the lamb or Muir. She studied him then, her expression curious. “Why did you invite me here today? I would have thought showing me such a heartwarming scene was the last thing you wished to do. You did not want me to have a romantic view of your life, I think.”

He set the lamb carefully back on its feet again and shrugged. “I didnae want to sell ye a fantasy that isnae real, one that you will resent me for when the truth is clear to ye, but neither do I want to deny that sometimes life here... ach, lassie, life here is the best thing in the world in my opinion, but it’s nae what ye were bred for, is it?”

“That doesn’t mean I couldn’t find a place here,” she said impatiently.

“Aye,” he said, surprising her a little. “I agree. I believe I am guilty of underestimating ye. Ye didnae swoon when ye saw the lamb being born,” he added, his eyes warm with approval.

“I knew that’s what you were expecting!” she exclaimed, glowering at him.

He shrugged, unrepentant. “Well, ye cannae blame me entirely. Many a lassie would,

even some who were born here.”

Delia made a harrumphing sound but allowed him that, for she knew it was true.

He stuffed his hands in his pocket before saying casually, “Luella tells me she asked Mr Macalister if ye could help with a lambing, but he widnae let ye.”

“Another man who thinks me a frilly bit of nonsense,” Delia remarked. “Just because I like to wear pretty things does not mean I’m weak, or incapable of learning a new skill. But really, Muir, what kind of life could I have here if I can’t be a part of your life? Do you expect me to sit about the house looking ornamental? For I assure you, if that’s what you have in mind—”

“Nay, lassie,” he said at once, holding his hands up in a peaceable gesture. “I’ll admit that’s what I expected might happen and why I felt so reluctant, for I thought ye would be bored out of yer wits by the week’s end.”

“I should never be so lacklustre and dull,” Delia retorted hotly.

He laughed at that, his eyes bright with amusement. “That much I believe. Pax, Delia. Can we be friends again?”

Delia sighed. “We were never not friends,” she said, starting a little as he took her hand, his fingers closing around hers. Delia looked down, noticing how tanned and strong his hand was, the fingers calloused and scarred in places. They were the hands of a working man, despite the fact his father was an earl. Muir worked for his place in the world, and he worked hard to make certain that place was secure.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said, stepping closer to her.

Delia’s heart kicked in her chest as he closed the space between them, still holding

her hand but settling the other at her waist. “The next weeks are going to be busy, lassie, but if ye think ye would like to, perhaps we could have lunch together. I’ll ask Mrs Paterson to make us a picnic.”

“A picnic?” Delia said sceptically, for though there had been a fair amount of sunshine in the past days, it was by no means warm.

“Aye. If yer as hardy as ye would have me believe, ye can picnic outside in April in the Highlands.” He laughed at her expression, squeezing her waist. “Dinnae fash. If it’s raining or too awful, we’ll seek shelter in one of the barns, aye? But I’d like it to be informal, to give ye a taste of how I live my life, which is a good deal spent out of doors. What do you think?”

“I think I shall wrap up warmly and enjoy it very much,” she told him, thinking it was a rather lovely notion, and a way they could get to know each other with no one else around.

“That’s my girl,” he said approvingly, and Delia felt a surge of pleasure at his words, which she told herself was ridiculous, but the sensation remained all the same.

She stared at him, aware of a sudden change in his demeanour, of the thrum of tension that prickled over her skin.

“May I kiss ye?” he asked, and Delia struggled to hold his gaze, for his eyes had darkened, a wicked glint visible there that she had seen before and had ended in her allowing him to take liberties she’d never imagined.

“That depends,” she said, wishing she did not feel so breathless, “on whether you mean to kiss me, or try to seduce me again?”

“I dinnae try to seduce ye, Delia,” he said, his eyebrows tugging together as his arm

slid tighter around her, pulling her close. “If I had been intending to seduce ye, we would be wed by now, for there would be nae choice for ye.”

“Why, you arrogant—” she began crossly, only to have her words smothered as he pressed his mouth to hers. He kissed her until the tension left her body and then he drew back.

“’Tis nae arrogance,” he said softly. “Ye want me. ’Tis as obvious as the nose on yer face, and a fine and pretty nose it is,” he added, kissing it and grinning at the glare she shot at him.

He kissed her again and Delia felt her wits dissolving as she recollected just why she had allowed him such freedom with her person. When he kissed her nothing else existed, there was no one else anywhere, no other reason to be anywhere doing anything but in his arms. The world went away, and that was at once reassuring and rather terrifying.

“You are an arrogant lummo,” she told him firmly, once he let her up for air again.

“Aye, maybe,” he conceded, amusement glinting in his eyes. “But I’m nae wrong.”

Delia sighed and reached up, linking her arms about his neck.

“No, you’re not wrong, drat you,” she said, and pulled his head down for another kiss.

The next days settled into a routine for Delia and Muir. Whilst Muir hardly knew what was day and what was night, as he snatched an hour’s sleep whenever he could grab one, he felt increasingly at peace with the idea of marrying Delia. Each day she would arrive around midday, and Muir would carry the basket to whichever spot he had chosen for their picnic. The weather had been exceptionally kind, with dry, sunny

days that even held a little warmth as the sun shone on their backs. On those days, they talked and ate and got to know each other by exchanging stories of their childhoods and their hopes and dreams for what their futures might look like. Muir entertained her with stories of his and his brothers' escapades as children, and he took delight in her reaction, for she laughed easily and without reserve. There was no false tittering or simpering giggles, like some ladies he had met over the years. When Delia laughed, she did it with her whole heart, her nose and her eyes crinkling and the sound exploding from her without a thought for being ladylike, and Muir realised he liked that about her. She spoke without thinking sometimes, and the way her mind worked fascinated him as he struggled to connect whatever they'd been talking about with the new topic of conversation she threw at him out of nowhere. They spoke about the farm, with Muir explaining about caring for the sheep, and suddenly she was talking about an Italian opera. When he had asked the connection, she had said the sheep reminded her of goats and she'd had a wonderful goat's cheese at the meal she'd had before she'd gone to see the opera when she'd been in Italy. Then they had gone from whiskey to her wondering if people would one day discover a kind of fish that could fly – because Hamilton had a distillery and the herring business, and she'd been watching the sea birds dive into the sea to catch fish. It made perfect sense when she explained it, but the leap could be dizzying.

Today, the sunshine had deserted them, and a fine, mizzling rain had settled over the landscape, shrouding everyone and everything in mist.

“Quick,” he told her, tugging at her hand as he ran inside the barn where he had set up their picnic earlier in the day. “Are ye wet through?” Muir asked, turning to her to discover her cheeks and nose were pink from the cold.

“No, though I never understand how such a fine rain can make you so wet,” she said, laughing as she took down her hood and unfastened her cloak.

“Will ye be warm enough?” he asked in concern, as she hung it up on a peg in the

timber frame. “We could go back to the house.”

“No, I’m quite warm. I just didn’t want to wear the cloak when it’s damp,” she said, smoothing her hair back from her face. “It’s rather cosy in here, and I love the scent of hay,” she added, looking around her and smiling as she saw the little nest he’d made of the stooks of hay. A tartan blanket covered the floor, and the basket awaited them.

“If yer sure, then?”

Nodding, she sat down elegantly on the blanket and began arranging the picnic things for their meal. Muir stood watching for a moment, admiring the picture she made and aware of how much he’d been looking forward to this moment all morning. Last night had been a tough one, and he was weary to his bones, but seeing Delia had chased away his exhaustion and the disappointment of things having gone wrong. Somehow, she made the sun shine even on a dismal, grey day when he was not feeling in the best of spirits.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, realising he was studying her.

“Nothing,” he said at once, smiling and sitting down beside her.

To his surprise, she scowled at him, a challenging glint in her eyes. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” he asked, perplexed. “I just sat down.”

Shooting him an impatient look, she handed him a flask of ale. “Don’t placate me and tell me nothing is wrong when I can tell it is.”

She was quiet for a moment, arranging a large slice of game pie on his plate, several pieces of chicken, and two thick slices of bread with butter. She handed it to him, and

Muir set the flask down.

“If you want us to succeed and be happy together, you can’t shut me out. Even if you think I won’t understand your troubles, you must share them with me. How else can I ever be a part of your life?”

“Ach, but it is my duty to keep ye safe and to keep trouble from yer door, nae to add to it.”

“What nonsense,” Delia replied, darting him an impatient glance as she helped herself to a slice of the pie. “I can tell there is something is wrong, and if you don’t tell me what it is, I shall spend the whole day making up my own reasons. By the time I go to bed, I’ll have convinced myself you are regretting your decision and wish to be rid of me.”

“Yer all about in yer heid if ye think that!” Muir protested but Delia held up her hand.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not, I’ll think it, and then tomorrow I’ll be distant, and you’ll want to know why, and I’ll say there’s nothing wrong. Then you’ll make up reasons why I’m not as happy as I was... do you see? If we don’t talk to each other honestly, we’ll only misunderstand each other and assume things that aren’t true.”

Muir considered her words, realising as he did how easy such a scenario was to imagine. “Yer a good deal wiser than I am, I reckon,” he said with a sigh.

“Well, of course I am, I’m a woman,” she said tartly, making him laugh.

She smiled at him, her eyes warm. “Now, won’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

Muir sighed. “The truth is, I’m tired, lassie, and last night we lost six lambs. It happens, but so many in one go is difficult. It tugs at yer heart, especially when yer

weary.”

Delia reached out and took his hand. “I’m sorry. That must have been very upsetting for you.”

Muir shrugged. “I’m a farmer, I cannae get too sentimental over such things, but aye, it’s hard when ye get so many all at once. We’ve been so lucky until now and so I suppose I wasnae expecting it, which is daft.”

“Not in the least. One ought not to look for trouble, I think, but I can see you are tired. Come, eat up and do the feast Mrs Paterson has made us justice, else she will be cross, and I do not wish to vex her.”

Muir smiled and lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers. “Thank you,” he said, meaning it, finding he felt rather lighter for having told her.

“I’ve been reading about sheep,” she said suddenly, blushing a little as he smiled at her.

“Ye have?”

Delia nodded, putting a small piece of pie into her mouth and chewing before she answered him. “A tup or a ewe three times shorn is a three shear tup or ewe. A ewe who fails to produce a second lamb is a barren ewe—which I must say seems a bit harsh—and after ceasing to give milk is a called a yield ewe. When taken from the breeding flock, she is a draft-ewe, and the gimmers, draft gimmers.”

Muir stared at her, touched and impressed that she had troubled herself to learn a little about his work, about the farm. “And what is a gimmer?”

“A yearling female sheep, a two-tooth ewe,” she said and grinned at him, looking so

delighted with herself, Muir felt an odd sensation shifting in his heart.

“A tup?”

“A male sheep, uncastrated.”

“A wether?”

“A castrated male sheep.”

She laughed at his pleased expression, her cheeks pink. “I’m not pretending I know much more than that yet, but I’m enjoying learning about it, and I intend to learn more. Perhaps... Perhaps you would teach me yourself?” she added cautiously, looking away from him and plucking at a loose thread on the rug she sat on. “You could teach me far more than a book after all, about sheep, and how the farm runs.”

Muir disliked her hesitation, knowing it stemmed from his earlier refusal to allow her to help him. “Aye, reckon I will at that, if ye would like to,” he said, earning himself a dazzling smile that left him feeling quite winded.

“Thank you,” she said, and Muir could only wonder at the happiness that filled his chest at the idea of doing so, and the anticipation of having her here with him, and teaching her about the life he led.

They ate in companionable silence, with Delia pressing more and more food upon him until he put up his hands in defeat. “Nae, I couldnae eat another morsel, I swear it. I’ll burst.”

“Very well, then,” she relented, sitting back against the stooks. Giving him a slightly shy look, she patted her lap. “Lay your head down here.”

Muir glanced at her, a little surprised. He had kissed her every afternoon during their picnics, but he had been careful to keep himself in line and treat her respectfully. She was always warm and willing in his arms, but never again had she instigated any deeper intimacy between them. Not wishing to deny her or make her uncomfortable, Muir hastened to obey, laying himself down and wondering what she had in mind.

“Now close your eyes,” she said, stroking his hair.

“I ought to get back to work,” he mumbled, but his eyes were closing of their own accord as her hand moved over his hair, her touch so peaceful and soothing it felt as though a weight was being lifted from his shoulders.

“You will. It’s just a little nap,” she assured him. “I’ll wake you again, don’t worry.”

“Aye,” he murmured as her fingers smoothed over his forehead, and he drifted into a deep sleep.

Delia watched as Muir’s eyes closed, as the lines she had noticed around his eyes eased and softened and his breathing deepened. Tenderness filled her heart as he fell asleep in seconds, proving to her just how tired he was. She understood now that Luella had been right. Muir was not only a good man, but one who felt things deeply, more than he liked people to know. Yet it had taken little persuasion to encourage him to open up once he understood her reasons. He had listened to her, had troubled himself to understand what she was telling him, and had admitted the wisdom of it too. She suspected there were few men who would do so, and that she had found a man who was not only protective and kind but fair-minded was quite the most wonderful realisation. That it had happened in such odd circumstances made her wonder about fate and whether perhaps they had been destined to meet that day. She had thought him fanciful for suggesting she belonged in this place because she had lived there in another lifetime, but she liked how he had shared the idea with her.

Delia was used to being the only one with whimsical or peculiar notions, and it was a delight to discover Muir had his own quirks that somewhat mirrored her own. It was certainly a romantic notion, but she found now it was easier to believe than she might have imagined. Though she did not have his understanding or knowledge of the land around them, she felt the pull of it, the weight of history in every vista she looked upon, a peaceful sense of being part of a story that had begun long, long ago, and would continue long after she had gone.

Muir gave a soft snore, and she smiled, accepting the feeling that pushed at her heart, expanding in her chest and filling her up. Like it or not, she was falling for this man, and if he still wished to marry her, she would say yes.

Muir stirred, aware of the scent of chamomile and a profound sense of peace. Sleepily, he registered the feel of Delia's hand toying with his hair and slitted his eyes open. She had laid back against the stooks, her eyes closed and a smile at her lips that really ought to be kissed. He watched her for a while longer, allowing himself a moment to wake fully, before he shifted to his knees, so quickly she exclaimed with alarm, but the sound was lost in the kiss he gave her as she relaxed into his embrace. She sighed, and he broke the kiss, looking down at her with a smile.

"You startled me, you wicked man, and I was having a lovely daydream too," she scolded him.

"About me, I hope?"

"You might have been in it," she teased him, then squealed as he tickled her.

Having discovered her waist was extremely sensitive, Muir took full advantage of the fact, and she shrieked and wriggled delightfully.

"Yes! Yes, you were in it!" she cried, trying to fend his hands off.

“Ah, now yer sure, aye?”

“I am sure. Very sure,” she said, breathing hard now.

His gaze drifted to the bodice of her gown, to the way her breasts rose and fell beneath the confines of the material.

“Yer laced very tightly, lassie. I reckon ye will do yerself an injury, getting all het up and squealing when Yer so confined.” Saying so, he reached for the buttons on her bodice, undoing each one deftly.

“It’s not particularly tight, and you were the one making me squeal,” she pointed out indignantly, though he noticed with satisfaction that she did not stop him. Indeed, she helped him remove the jacket and turned obligingly so he might loosen her stays.

“Yer skin is the finest thing I ever touched,” he murmured, stroking his fingers over the swell of her breasts. “Ye dinnae mind me touching ye so?”

She shook her head. “You know I like it. I like you. There’s little point in denying it. You said as much yourself.”

“Aye, and ye told me I was an arrogant lummo.”

“So you are, but you’re right. Kiss me,” she said, reaching for him.

Muir did not need asking twice, pressing her back down into the straw, delighting in the feel of her body close to his.

“Tha thu bòidheach,” he murmured, as he dragged his mouth from hers to kiss a path along her jawline, nipping at her ear and nuzzling the tender skin beneath. He tugged at her loosened bodice, giving a little groan of pleasure as her breasts were revealed

to him. Muir bent his head, taking one rose pink tip into his mouth and suckling as she gasped and slid her hands into his hair, holding him against her. His hand sought and found the hem of her gown and the froth of petticoats and slid beneath. Her silk-covered calf was warm, and his palm slid easily up and up, his body tightening with anticipation. “Yer so lovely, Delia. Ye taste like heaven. Will ye let me touch ye?” “You are touching me,” she murmured, sounding breathless and a little confused.

Muir chuckled softly.

“And I am a greedy devil. I want more, lassie. I want to touch ye everywhere, like here,” he said, and her breath caught as she felt his fingers part the slit in her drawers, tickling the soft thatch of curls he’d discovered in that private place. “Is this all right?” he asked, his voice low in her ear.

She pressed her face into his neck, her breath a wash of damp heat over his skin.

“Delia?” he prompted, hearing the husky note of his own voice. He thought he might go mad if she did not answer him, or worse, told him no.

“Yes,” she whispered, hiding her face from him as his fingers slicked over her.

“Look at me,” he commanded, smiling as she did as he asked. Her cheeks were a ruddy pink that made him want to kiss her, so he did, gently and carefully. “Yer lovely, Delia, and there’s nothing to feel embarrassed about.”

She seemed to take his words as truth, for she closed her eyes and sighed as he caressed her. Muir kissed her again, harder and deeper, and urged her on as she squirmed beneath his touch, her breath catching and holding as her body stilled, thrumming with tension.

“That’s the way, sweetheart. Now, let go,” he murmured. “I’ve got ye.”

She did as he bid her, a soft cry leaving her mouth as her body shook with pleasure. She clung to him, convulsing in his arms. Muir watched her take her pleasure with tender amazement and held her close to him as her breath came in rapid gasps, struck to the core by the trust she had put in him, and by how much it meant to him, by how much she meant to him.

For once, however, he did not spoil things by opening his mouth and demanding he marry her. He had learned his lesson about crashing in and laying down the law, stomping all over her own thoughts and desires. Instead, he just revelled in the moment, in the certainty growing in his heart that they had a wonderful future together, that her future was with him, here at the farm, and that she belonged here in his life, forever.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dear Ash,

I'm sorry to do this to you but I must leave in the morning for Sheffield. I've a deal to wrap up down there and I'm likely to be away for a few weeks. I just wondered if you'd seen much of Larkin recently. He's been burning the candle at both ends for the past two weeks and I'm worried about him. He's either painting or drinking, or painting and drinking, and whilst I'd be the first to admit the work he's producing is the best I've seen from him, I'm worried. Perhaps you could look in on him and see he eats something and gets some sleep?

?Excerpt of a letter from Mr Felix Knight (son of Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight) to Mr Ashton Anson (son of The Right Hon'ble Silas and Aashini Anson, The Viscount and Viscountess Cavendish).

18 th April 1850, Brabster Farm, The Highlands of Scotland.

“’Tis a fine sight,” Dugald said with a weary grin, watching the field of sheep with new lambs gambolling about in the spring sunshine.

“That it is,” Muir said, stretching and trying to unlock the knots in his back. “And I’m so glad it’s over.”

“Aye, well, it’s an excellent tally. We lost less than last year overall and we’ve more lambs, so ye ought to count ye blessings, aye? What with that pretty lass smiling at ye like ye hung the moon.”

“Does she, then?” Muir asked before he could think better of the question.

“Aye, she does, ye gowk,” Dugald said with a snort of laughter. He shook his head at Muir and sighed. “I swear youth is wasted on the young. Go put a ring on her finger, laddie, and do it quick afore she comes to her senses.”

Muir laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Aye, Dugald, it’s sound advice, I reckon.”

“It is at that, and she’ll be here any moment, so ye ought to tidy yerself, aye? A lass does nae want her beau smelling of sheep, or worse, when he goes on bended knee.”

Muir sniffed suspiciously at his armpit and pulled a face. “Ye may have a point at that,” he said ruefully, and then turned, his heart lifting as he heard a feminine voice calling him until he realised it did not sound like Delia.

“Ach, here’s trouble,” Dugald said sourly, eyeing the new arrival with disfavour.

Muir sighed, no more enthusiastic than Dugald as he saw Rona Telfer wave at him from atop a sturdy Highland pony. People hereabouts held Rona in high regard for the way she ran her father's sheep farm. She rode astride like a man and could curse and drink like one, too. Muir had knocked about with her a good deal as a lad, but had only ever considered her a friend, finding her temper too erratic and her tongue a deal too sharp for comfort. Rona, however, had made no secret of her desire for him, so in recent years he had done his best to avoid her as her pursuit of him had become a trial. She seemed not to be able to take no for an answer.

“Rona,” he said, nodding as she leapt down from the pony, giving him a good view of a pair of shapely legs before she strode over.

“Good morning, Muir,” she said, coming over to stand beside him and looking at the sheep with approval. “It is a fine healthy flock ye have.”

“Aye, ’tis. What do ye want, Rona?” he asked bluntly, long ago having learned that a direct tactic was best.

She shrugged, gazing at him with a glint in her eyes he did not mistake. “A private word,” she said, her voice softening.

“I’m away, then,” Dugald said, striding off before Muir could stop him.

Cursing the man for leaving him to fend off Rona alone, Muir turned back to her. “Well?”

“What this I hear about some little English princess staying here and making sheep’s eyes at ye?” she asked, moving closer to him.

Muir took a step back and shrugged. “Ye must mean my betrothed,” he said, hoping Delia would forgive him the falsehood, and hopeful it would no longer be false by this afternoon.

“Betrothed? Don’t be daft, Muir. Why the devil would ye go marrying some silly little Sassenach chit? Ye need a helpmeet, someone who can work with ye and grow the farm into something greater than it is now.” She stepped closer, reaching for him, but Muir grasped her wrists, holding her off.

“’Tis none of yer affair, and the farm is growing just fine, I thank ye. I have made my choice, Rona, and it’s not yerself. It would never be, as I’m certain I have told ye afore now.”

“But she’s nae even Scottish!” Rona said in disgust. “And she disnae ken one end of a sheep from the other. Why in God’s name would ye marry such a one?”

“That’s none of yer affair, Rona, so keep yer nose out of my business,” he said, even

as he considered the question for his own sake.

A warm feeling burst in his chest as he thought of Delia, of the way she challenged him about everything, of her earnest desire to learn about sheep, about how it felt to hold her in his arms. The realisation that his feelings for her had grown far stronger than he had ever expected over the past weeks had hit him hard yesterday and seemed to grow brighter and stronger with each hour that passed. He was suddenly nervous about asking her again if she would marry him. Though he had no reason to expect her to refuse him—why else had she stayed and begun reading books on sheep? —the idea that she might made him feel slightly sick.

His distraction was such that he did not react quickly enough as Rona threw herself at him, using an old trick she had learned as a girl, and hooking her leg around his, pulling him off balance.

It would never have worked if his thoughts had not been elsewhere but, as it was, Muir went down like a felled tree, with Rona landing atop him. She straddled his hips, pressing herself against him and putting her mouth on his. Muir froze, so shocked he could not react for a moment, and then he reached for her hands that were roaming over his chest, pushing her backwards. He opened his mouth to tell her just what he thought of her behaviour but did not get the chance to speak.

“Good afternoon, Muir. Is everything quite all right? You seem to be having a little difficulty.”

Muir glanced up, horrified to see Delia standing beside them, looking down with a placid but politely curious expression on her face.

“Delia!” he exclaimed, panic bursting in his chest. “’Tis nae what it looks like, I swear it.”

“Really?” Delia asked, wrinkling her nose. “Because it looked to me as if this young woman—I beg your pardon, I do not know your name,” she told Rona with a cool smile. “Well, it looked as though she forced herself upon you.”

“Oh,” Muir said stupidly, so relieved his wits seemed to have abandoned him. “Aye. In that case, it’s exactly what it looks like.”

Delia nodded, apparently satisfied by his explanation.

“Rona, this is Lady Cordelia Steyning. My fiancée,” he added, shooting a glance at Delia to see how she took this.

Rona, blushing for the first time Muir could ever remember, got to her feet and smoothed her skirts down.

“Rona Telfer,” Rona said grudgingly, glaring at Delia.

“Good afternoon, Miss Telfer,” Delia said with a smile. “I do hope you will excuse us, but Muir has promised to take me for a picnic, and you know what betrothed persons are like. Three is a crowd.”

“Yer really to marry her, then?” Rona said, eyeing Delia’s pretty lace-trimmed gown with a disparaging eye.

“Yes, he is. Next week,” Delia said, flashing a dazzling smile. “So, you may congratulate us.”

“Aye, well... congratulations,” Rona said sourly, before stalking off to her pony, mounting unaided, and riding off again.

Muir let out a breath as the woman disappeared. “Thank ye,” he said, the words

sincere. “And thank ye for not thinking I’d be such a numpty as to play ye false.”

“Of course,” Delia said, but her voice was uncertain now, her gaze still fixed upon the retreating figure of Rona as she rode away.

“Delia?”

She turned then, looking up at him.

“Did ye mean what ye said, lassie? Will ye marry me next week? For I admit, I have spent the morning getting up the nerve to ask ye again.”

“You have?” she asked, her soft mouth curving a little at the corners.

“Aye, and it’s nae kind to tease a fellow, so... so will ye?”

She gave him a long-suffering look, and Muir sighed. Well, really, he supposed he ought to know better by now.

He got to one knee and reached for her hand, looking up at her and realising in that moment that there was no one else he wanted. Delia was his choice and would still be his choice if had every woman in the country to pick from. “Delia, would ye do me the very great honour of becoming my wife?”

She hesitated, glancing once more at the now distant figure of Rona.

“Luella told me about her,” she said. “And that she had set her cap at you years ago. But I heard too how capable Miss Telfer is. There are those who think you’d make a fine match.”

Muir’s eyes widened in alarm. “Me and Rona? Then they’ve nae the sense they were

born with. God above, she makes a fine farmer and nae doubt some man will be lucky to wed her, but my wife? Nae, lassie. Rona is nae the woman I'd want to spend the rest of my days with and raise a family. If that's my choice I'll stay a bachelor and I thank ye, but I'd far rather marry ye, Delia, and live with a woman who makes me happy, who makes me smile and makes me think, and is clever enough to learn everything about the farm and the sheep and take me to task if I ever underestimate her again."

"That's really, honestly want you want?" she asked him, her eyes shining.

"Aye, it really, honestly is and I feel a proper pillock on one knee surrounded by sheep, so will ye put me out of my misery, lassie?"

She laughed and shook her head at him before giving a tolerant sigh. "Then, yes, Muir Anderson. I will marry you."

Muir gave a shout of delight and got to his feet, swinging her up into his arms and spinning her around while she shrieked and laughed. When he finally set her down again, she was dizzy and clung to him, which suited Muir just fine as he kissed her until she was breathless.

"Let's have our picnic," she said when he finally released her. "I'm famished."

"So am I," Muir replied, holding her gaze and making her blush, but he took her arm and guided her to the barn where he'd left the basket. It was a quiet spot and one they'd often used over the past weeks. The sun shone through the large barn door, which he left open, but it was out of the wind with a fine view over the countryside.

Delia sat down, watching him as he settled himself beside her before she leaned in and pressed her mouth to his. Surprised, but pleased, Muir waited until she drew back.

“I thought ye were famished?”

“So were you,” she countered boldly, and kissed him again, pressing her hands to his chest, pushing. Obediently, Muir lay back against the stooks of sweet-smelling hay as Delia followed him down and shifted, straddling his lap. Muir’s breath caught as she settled herself down, his nether regions taking an immediate interest in the intimate position.

“Were you not tempted when Rona—” she began, a flicker of doubt in her eyes as Muir pressed his finger to her lips, silencing her.

“Nae, lass. Not even for a moment. I have never felt that way for Rona, not even when I was a lad. Yerself, however,” he said with a wicked grin as he tilted his hips up so she could feel the effect she was having on him. “Yer a sore trial to my gentlemanly instincts, Delia.”

“I am?” she said, her eyes widening at the feel of his arousal pressing against her so firmly.

“Aye. Ye have tormented me ever since ye arrived in my life, and worse than ever since ye let me touch ye so sweetly. I have had little enough sleep of late, but what sleep I’ve managed has been filled with dreams of ye, of having ye in my bed. I may tell ye, I dinnae get a wink last night.”

She smiled at that, the expression such a feminine expression of pleased pride that he had to kiss her again. “I want to marry ye today, this minute,” he growled in her ear, making her shiver and protest.

“We can’t! Mrs Baillie would have a fit. Next week is the soonest I dare ask for,” she replied, sighing as he kissed her neck. His hand strayed to her breast and squeezed the soft mound as frustration sung through his veins at the impediment of so much fabric

between them.

“But ’tis only Tuesday,” he protested. “’Tis too long. Thursday, aye?”

“No!” she said, giggling as he nipped at her earlobe.

“Friday,” he countered, tilting his hips again and making her gasp.

“Fr-Friday is impossible,” she stammered, increasingly breathless as he took her mouth again and kissed her hard.

“Saturday.”

“Saturday?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Saturday,” she whispered dreamily as he rolled her onto her back.

“Aye, lassie. Now say, ‘yes, Muir.’”

“Yes, Muir,” she murmured, gazing up at him with a hazy look in her eyes he thoroughly approved of.

“That’s better,” he said, his expression smug, before he bent and kissed her again. His hand slid down her skirts, tracing the shape of her thigh beneath, down over her knee, reaching for the fabric of her gown. “I want ye, Delia. I need to make ye my wife and I dinnae want to wait.”

Though he knew he was an impatient wretch, and he ought not to push her, his fingers closed over the hem. He dragged the fabric higher, whispering softly... as a

heavy weight descended upon his head, painful sparks exploding behind his eyes as he fell into darkness.

Delia screamed, but the enormous man who had hit Muir so savagely over the head stuffed a foul piece of material into her mouth, silencing her. They were a long way from the farm here, the spot private and hidden from view, which was the reason Muir had chosen it, so she doubted anyone had heard her. He yanked at her arms, tugging her none too gently to her feet as another man hurried over to Muir.

“Christ, did you kill ’im?” A second fellow, smaller and wirier, stepped out of the shadows, regarding Muir with alarm. He crouched to inspect the body, his expression one of anxiety. “I don’t want to get brought up on some murder charge.”

“I doubt it. Bloody Scots have heads like granite.”

“There’s a deal of blood,” the fellow added, showing the big man his bloody palm.

Delia shrieked around the gag, struggling to get to Muir, but she was held in a bruising grip that no amount of writhing would loosen. “Head wounds always bleed. Just get on and tie him up, and make sure it’s good and tight and then cover him with the straw. I don’t want to find him on our heels.”

As the smaller man worked, the man holding Delia bound her wrists tightly together, the bindings so tight they bit into her skin. She wriggled and tried as hard as she could to get free of him, but it was entirely pointless. Delia could do nothing but stare at Muir in mute despair. He was so still, and there was a good deal of blood pouring from a gash in his head. She prayed the big man was right about him having a hard head and promised herself she would retaliate on Muir’s behalf the first chance she got, though her own situation was not looking very promising.

“Hurry,” the man holding her grunted as the smaller one covered Muir in the stooks

they'd been sitting against earlier.

He hefted Delia over his shoulder like a sack of grain and carried her through the barn and out of the back door where three horses waited. She kicked and struggled as hard as she could, but the fellow didn't seem to notice. He slung Delia over one, her head on one side of the horse while her legs dangled on the other. Tying her tightly in place, he covered her with a thick blanket and ordered the other man to get a move on. Soon they were riding, with Delia jolting over the horse's back in the most uncomfortable and ungainly manner she could imagine. It was all she could do not to throw up, but the idea of being sick with the gag in her mouth forced her to do her utmost to keep calm and her breakfast where it belonged. The painful jouncing and jolting seemed to go on forever, but finally the horses slowed to a walk and then stopped. She heard the men dismounting and Delia thought she heard other horses too, tack jingling and a carriage door opening.

Rough hands snatched the smothering blanket that covered her and undid the ropes tying her to the saddle. Delia slid to the ground in an ungainly heap. She landed on a sharp stone that struck her elbow and made her cry out in pain, but at least it brought her back to her senses. Staring about her, she blinked, trying to make sense of the scene.

"Up you come, my pretty," the big man who had attacked Muir said, grasping her bound arms and hauling her to her feet.

With no other choice, Delia stood, swaying, her gaze focusing on the carriage as a man stepped out. Rage burst through her chest, scalding fury like nothing she had ever experienced burning through her veins as she recognised the man who looked at her with a smile of smug satisfaction.

"Ah, Delia. How glad I am to see you again."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Angus,

Sorry to have left you to manage things, but I know you'll do a grand job in my absence. My brother is getting married, or at least he'd better be, and I mean to hang around to make sure it happens, and he doesn't muck things up. I hope to be back in a week, maybe ten days, depending on how pig-headed he is. Keep me informed of how things are going on, but I trust your judgement in the meantime.

It's good to be back here in the Highlands. I hadn't realised how much I have missed it, but I'm eager to get stuck back into work too, so don't go getting too comfortable at my desk, a chuilein.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Hon'ble Hamilton Anderson to his secretary, Mr Angus Stewart.

18 th April 1850, Brabster Farm, The Highlands of Scotland.

“Wake up! Muir! Come on, laddie, back to yer senses now.”

Muir groaned and clutched at his head as rough hands shook him. “The devil with ye, Dugald. Stop that or I'll boke.”

“Sit up, then,” Dugald said, hefting him up.

Muir put out a hand, demanding he stop manhandling him as his stomach churned. He breathed deeply, willing the sensation away as the barn came back into focus and his wits returned to him. Blearily, he stared at Dugald. “What happened?” he asked

hoarsely, his fingers delicately probing an enormous lump on the back of his head. They came away sticky with blood. “Did a beam fall on me?”

“Nae, someone clouted ye good.”

Muir stared at him in bewilderment. “Who—?” A cold sensation lanced through him, settling in his guts like a lump of ice. He reached out, clutching at Dugald’s arm as dread filled his heart. “Delia?”

“Aye, lad. Reckon they came here for her, which is why we must hurry.”

“They?” he said stupidly, forcing himself to stand as the barn seemed to spin around him.

“Two men. Strangers. Fergus saw them riding off, leading a third with something slung over its back.”

“A horse,” Muir said, as the world whirled around him, but no other thought in his head than to get to Delia. “I need—”

“Aye, waiting outside and—”

“Muir?”

Dugald broke off as Hamilton strode into the barn. “I just heard. Yer away to find her?”

Muir didn’t bother dignifying that question with an answer and just strode out—somewhat unsteadily—to find the two mounts Dugald had promised awaiting.

“I’ll go with him, Dugald,” Hamilton said, before the fellow could protest. “Delia is

family, aye? Ye follow on.”

Dugald nodded his acceptance of that and watched as the two of them rode away.

“Shall I take the gag out of her mouth?” the big fellow asked as Enoch stepped down from the carriage.

Enoch considered this, regarding Delia’s furious expression, before he shook his head.

“Not for the moment. I have a few things to say to the young lady and I do not wish to be interrupted. It is time she learned how to obey her betrothed.”

The smaller of Delia’s kidnappers gave a snort of amusement at that and Enoch swung around, glaring at him.

“Something to say, Mr Smith?”

The fellow shrugged. “Well, I don’t reckon she thinks of you as her betrothed, is all. She was right friendly with that big Scot we found her with, weren’t she, Burt?”

The big fellow laughed, leering at Delia in a way that made her skin crawl. “Oh, she was, and looking as though she was willing to be very obliging to the fellow. I was sorry to spoil their fun, though I’d be glad to take his place,” he added, winking at Delia, who desperately wished she could speak so she could tell the vile excuse for a man exactly what she thought of him.

“I’ll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head,” Enoch said coldly. “The young woman is a gently bred lady.”

“So you say,” chortled Mr Smith.

“That’s enough,” Enoch said. “I’ll have no more of your insolence. Put her in the carriage, and might I remind you that you’ve been well paid to see we reach our destination with no impediment. If you want the remainder of what’s owing to you, you’d best ensure I get what I want.”

“Aye, your lordship,” the fellow called Burt said, executing a theatrical bow.

Enoch scowled but ignored the jibe, watching as the two men manhandled Delia into the carriage. Desperately worried about Muir and knowing she would be far harder to find if she allowed these men to take her any farther away, Delia fought as hard as she could, but the effort only left her bruised and exhausted. They dumped her unceremoniously upon the floor of the carriage and, the moment the door closed, she looked around, searching for a weapon or a tool she could use to free herself.

Struggling to her knees, Delia spied Enoch’s leather bag, and she remembered the interminable time she’d spent with him in the carriage when she’d been kidnapped for the first time. He had kept the bottle of ether in that bag, and also the penknife he’d used to peel the apple. The one she had fantasised about stabbing him with somewhere painful. Feeling as though her heart might burst in her chest, Delia shifted so the bag was behind her, and she could reach it with her bound hands. Leaning backwards, it was an awkward business to undo the buckles, but she managed the first one despite her fingers shaking with anxiety. Outside, she could hear the men’s voices, hear directions being given, and knew she had only moments to spare.

Barely daring to breathe, she undid the second clasp and opened the bag. Delia craned her neck, looking behind her to see inside. The bottle was still there, and beside it, what looked like the handle of a knife. Desperate now, Delia did the only thing she could think of and knocked the bag over and then grabbed hold of the bottom and tipped it up. The contents spilled onto the carriage floor with a clatter and for a moment her heart seemed to stop beating, but the men were now engaged in a heated discussion and did not heed it. Wriggling backwards, Delia rummaged about until her

fingers clasped on the knife. Opening it was a good deal harder, and she cursed and swore inwardly, using every bad word she could think of, language her father would certainly have beaten her for using. Finally, she gave a little squeak of triumph as the clasp yielded to her prying fingers and the knife opened. Getting it into position to cut the ropes was another difficulty, but she persevered, fighting to keep herself calm and the seconds ticked past.

Delia sawed desperately at the bindings around her wrist, certain that the door would open at any moment. Whatever the row was about outside had become quite vocal, however, and seemed to occupy her kidnappers' attention nicely. Delia bit back a cry of pain as the knife nicked her skin, frustration lancing through her as the hilt of the knife became slippery with blood. Her efforts were rewarded, however, as the rope finally gave way. She dropped the knife, tugging off the bindings.

Delia took a moment to breathe, her instincts urging her to run from the carriage, but if she did, they would see her. It would take them mere moments to catch her and bind her again and she'd have gained nothing. So, instead, she cleaned up the mess she'd made, stuffing the cut rope under the seat cushions and pocketing the knife. Hurriedly, she gathered the contents of the bag together again, putting everything back inside, hesitating as she spied the bottle of ether. There was a wad of fabric beside it. Having decided on the best plan, she uncorked the bottle, splashing a generous amount of the foul-smelling bottle onto the cloth. Then she put everything back as it had been and hauled herself onto the seat, holding the ether-soaked cloth in one hand and the open penknife in the other. Carefully, she arranged herself with her arms behind her, her hands hidden as if she was still bound.

She did not have a moment to calm herself, for Enoch climbed back into the carriage and slammed the door behind him. That he was in a vile temper was obvious, and Delia watched him warily as the coach lumbered into motion.

"Bedamned ignorant peasants," he muttered furiously. "You'd think they'd have at

least learned how to speak to their betters by now. I ought to horsewhip them for their insolence. If I had time, I would.”

Delia could not hold back a snort of amusement at that, for Enoch was a coward and always had been. The thought of him horsewhipping Mr Smith was entertaining enough, but the big fellow who went by the name of Burt? The idea was ludicrous.

“Oh, you think I wouldn’t?” he said, turning on Delia.

Anger glinted in his eyes, and, for the first time, Delia saw something in him that truly frightened her. Even when she had first found herself in his power, she had been angry and frustrated rather than afraid, but something had changed, and not for the better.

“My temper has been sorely tried, Delia. Because of you I’ve been reduced to skulking about and spying, staying in lodgings not fit for a man of my station and biding my time. Perhaps I should show you I know what to do with a whip, especially upon sluts who give their favours away so freely,” he added in disgust.

His gaze roamed over her, making Delia’s heart skip with agitation.

“Still, I suppose if you’ve behaved like a slut with a man who’s not your husband already, you may as well do so with someone who soon will be.”

To her horror, he moved to sit beside her and for a dreadful moment, Delia thought she might freeze with the sheer awfulness of the situation. But then he reached out his hand, clasped her breast and squeezed. With rage singing through her veins, Delia struck out with the hand holding the penknife, sinking it deep into Enoch’s thigh.

He gave a howl of agony, then fell to the floor, writhing he and staring at the knife in a frenzy of panic, as if he did not know what to do.

“You stabbed me!” he shrieked. “You wicked bitch, you stabbed me!”

“Oh, shut up, Enoch!” Delia told him in disgust and smothered his mouth with the cloth.

She must have been a bit liberal with the ether, as it took barely a second before Enoch’s head hit the carriage floor with a thud. Delia surveyed his prone form with deep satisfaction, but she did not have time to congratulate herself for her cleverness before she realised the carriage was drawing to a halt. They must have heard Enoch’s hysterical screaming, she realised. They’d likely heard it in Edinburgh too.

The carriage swayed to a stop and Delia steeled herself, uncertain from which side the threat would come. She held the cloth still, fully prepared to use it. The idea of taking the knife from Enoch’s thigh was one she considered before dismissing it. She thought she’d been quite brave until now, but pulling the knife out of his body was something she could not force herself to do. There was no more time, however, as the door to her right flew open and Burt stuck his head in.

“What the bloody hell—” he began, but Delia did not wait to discover what else he might say.

Instead, she lunged for the opposite door, pushing it open and exploding from inside the carriage so fast that she fell in a tangle of skirts. Scrambling to her feet, she ran, not bothering to look back as she sprinted back up the road in the direction the carriage had come from.

Hearing hoofbeats close behind her, Delia glanced back to see Mr Smith bearing down on her. He reached out, his fingers grazing her sleeve as she fell flat to the floor to escape his grasp. Making a last-minute grab for her was his undoing, however, and she watched as Mr Smith over balanced and fell from his horse with a muttered oath. Delia got to her feet and ran once more, aware of the fellow scrambling up and

running close behind her. He threw himself forward, tackling her around the legs and bringing her down as Delia kicked. Her heel made contact with his jaw, knocking his head back.

“Why, you little hellcat,” he swore, his fingers tightening painfully upon her ankles. “I’ll make you pay for that.” He clambered over her, and Delia reached up, pressing the cloth to his face. He reared back but Delia followed, keeping the cloth tight over his mouth and nose until his eyes rolled up and he slumped on the ground.

“Good night, Mr Smith,” Delia said with satisfaction, though her triumph was short-lived as she saw Burt lumbering towards her. He was remarkably quick for a big fellow, she thought in dismay, staggering to her feet once more.

Delia ran, holding her skirts high, though they caught on every twig and piece of bracken littering the floor, impeding her progress until finally she fell, her foot going down a rabbit hole. Cursing wildly, she tugged at it as Burt halted a few feet away, breathing hard.

“Got you,” he said with satisfaction, until a bellow of fury from behind took them both by surprise.

Two men on horseback exploded out of the dimming twilight. One threw himself from his horse and landed on Burt, knocking him flat.

“Muir!” Delia exclaimed, still trying to extricate herself from the rabbit hole as Hamilton dismounted and ran to her.

“Delia, are ye well, lassie?”

“Yes, oh, yes! Never mind me, help Muir. He’s injured, he ought not—”

“Ach, dinnae fash yerself, he’s got a head like an anvil,” Hamilton said dismissively until his gaze met Delia’s once more. “All right, all right, I’m going,” he said, holding up his hands and hurrying over to where Muir and Burt were wrestling.

To be fair, Muir seemed to have the situation under control as he punched Burt repeatedly in the head and gave the impression of being less than pleased at Hamilton’s intervention. He got in several more blows before Hamilton hauled him up and suggested he tend to his fiancée while he dealt with the brute.

“Delia!” Muir exclaimed, rushing to her and pulling her into his arms with such fervour that she felt rather gratified by the experience. The last time he had come to her aid he had been a heroic stranger, but now he was beloved and so very dear, and to see the genuine fear and worry in his eyes chased away any lingering doubt that he was marrying her for honour’s sake.

“Mo ghraidh, did the bastard hurt ye? Are ye sure? Christ, I’ve been out of my head with worry. When Dugald told me men had taken ye away, I thought I’d run mad. I was feart I widnae get to ye in time. Speak to me, Delia! You’re sure you took nae hurt?” he said urgently, for all she had managed so far was to shake her head at his questions.

“Well, I would if you’d let me get a word in,” she said, laughing and crying at the same time as a rush of relief and happiness overwhelmed her.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, only ye frightened me half to death.”

“I’m fine, a little bruised and rather tired, but quite well. What does mo ghraidh mean?”

Muir made a choked sound, somewhere between a laugh and a groan. “It means, ‘my love,’ ye wee devil, because I love ye something fierce, Delia, but we are going to

have to have serious words about this habit you have formed of getting yerself kidnapped.”

Delia stared at him, uncertain whether she wanted to kiss him and tell him she loved him too or take him to task for saying something so outrageous.

“Ach, Muir, she dinnae need our help, I reckon,” Hamilton said in disgust as he stalked back to them after having tied Burt up and investigated Mr Smith’s body and the contents of the carriage. “She’s already laid two of the villains out cold. The coachman swears he’d no notion of what they were up to until it was too late. The fellow who looks like starved parson told him his wife had run off and he was fetching her back again.”

“Aye, but he dinnae help her, so he’s going nowhere,” Muir said firmly. “We’ll lock them all up at Wildsyde and hand them over to the sheriff. He can decide what to do with them, for I ken well enough what I’d do.”

“Aye, sure,” Hamilton said easily, his attention fixed on Delia with interest. “But how did ye do it, lassie? Yer a wee little bit of a thing and—”

“And don’t ask stupid questions,” Muir said hotly. “She’s to be my wife and there’s none cleverer nor braver, and that’s all ye need for the moment. Come, mo chridhe . I’m taking ye home and if ye think I am ever letting ye out of my sight again, ye have a shock in store.”

He lifted her into his arms and stalked off towards his horse.

“But what about this lot of villains?” Hamilton asked, gesturing to Smith and Burt, and the carriage inside which Enoch still lay.

Muir nodded at the figures in the distance who were growing closer by the second.

“If I’m nae mistaken, that’s Dugald and my men. They’ll help ye sort it out and, for all I care, ye can toss the lot of them in the north sea and be done with it. I’m taking Delia home now.”

“Aye, take her home and warm her up, a sheòid,” Hamilton called after them cheerfully, earning himself a warning glare from his brother.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:29 pm

Dearest Rex and Emmeline,

I have so much to tell you, but I think I shall save it all up until I see you again.

I am to be married on Saturday. I know how much you would wish to be with me on this special day, but with everything that has happened, Muir and I have decided we do not wish to wait. I am quite wonderfully happy, and we have decided fate knew far better than we two what it was about when it threw us together.

Muir understands how deeply you will regret not being with us for the celebration, and how difficult it is for you to undertake such a long journey at present, and so he has promised we will come to visit you before the end of the season. Providing you do not think us too scandalous to receive! I am only funning, of course, I know you both better than that.

So well, in fact, that I shall suggest that if you should like to throw a ball in our honour to celebrate in style and prove to the world we have nothing to feel ashamed of, I should be pleased to be a part of such a splendid event.

I have always held the two of you up as an example to myself of what a love match looks like, but I never truly believed I would find anything close to it for myself. Now, I know I have, and I am so excited about the future. I pray you will forgive me for making my life so far away from yours, but know that I am still your devoted sister, and I will continue to plague you, just as I always have.

?Excerpt of a letter from The Lady Cordelia Steyning to her brother, and sister-in-law, The Most Hon'ble Marquess and Marchioness of Wrexham.

18 th April 1850, Brabster Farm, The Highlands of Scotland.

Delia leaned into Muir as the rhythm of the horse soothed away the last of the anxiety thrumming through her veins. With his powerful arms around her, she felt safe and loved, and she knew now that he would let nothing bad happen to her if he had the power to stop it. She had discovered too that she was far from helpless and could be brave when the need arose. To have dealt with such a frightening situation and not swooned or to have considered herself helpless had given her a deal of confidence. Not that she ever wanted to endure such a drama ever again.

From close behind her, Muir let out a breath of laughter and shook his head. Delia looked up and discovered him grinning.

“What?” “Yer a force to be reckoned with, Delia,” he said, and the pride in his eyes as he spoke made her cheeks heat and a little glow of pleasure burn inside her. “To think of the way ye dealt with that blackguard, nae to mention his henchman. I tell ye now, ye will have the reputation for being a warrior, the kind of woman no man messes with if he disnae want to come off the worse for it. A story like that will make the rounds in these parts and ye will be a heroine to every woman in the Highlands.”

“Don’t be silly,” Delia said, blushing harder at his words.

“I mean it,” he said, and she knew that he did from the way he looked at her. “Yer a capable lassie, strong and fierce. I underestimated ye, and shall nae make the same mistake again. If ye want to help me on the farm, then ye shall, but only if ye wish to, aye?”

“Oh, really, Muir?” Delia said, twisting awkwardly on the saddle and staring up at him with delight. “I know I have a lifetime of knowledge to gain but I’m a quick learner when something interests me, and this does, because I want to be a part of your life, not just to exist on the edges of it.”

“Aye,” Muir said softly, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I see that now, and I want ye to be a part of it, too. For the truth is, I cannae bear the idea of ye being anywhere but beside me. Today, when I realised ye had been taken from me—” He stopped speaking, resting his head against hers and Delia put her arms up around his neck, holding on tight.

“I know,” she said, remembering her own feeling of despair as they had taken her away, leaving Muir unconscious and bleeding.

“It was the worst feeling in the world, lass.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “The absolute worst.”

“Let’s nae do that again, aye?”

“Aye,” she said fervently, laughing as he kissed her and tickled her for copying his accent.

“Yer a wee devil,” he said as she squealed and batted his hand away. “But I love ye.”

She sighed, melting against him and wishing she were not perched atop a horse, but they were together, and that was better than being anywhere else. “I love you too, Muir, and I shall make certain you never regret coming to my rescue.”

“Ach, lassie, I never did regret it, and I certainly never shall.”

To prove it, he kissed her, and didn’t stop until they were in sight of Wildsyde Castle.

The local constable guarded the prisoners, who were held at Wildsyde Castle until the sheriff came and spoke to everyone involved. From there, they were taken to the prison at Inverary until it was time to stand trial. As the Earl of Morven’s son was

involved, it took very little persuasion to keep Delia's name out of it, and knowing she would not be required to give evidence released Delia from the last cloud of anxiety that had lingered on her horizon. Though the weather had turned for the worst and the rain had lashed down for two solid days, she was living in a glow of permanent sunshine that no amount of wet weather could dim.

Luella had set the castle in a frenzy of motion as they prepared for the big day. Extra kitchen staff had been hired and Mrs Baillie was in her element, bossing everyone about and running her queendom with relish whilst making a fabulous bride cake for the celebration.

The only moment of anxiety that Delia had to endure was her first meeting with Muir's parents, the Earl and Countess of Morven. Yet she need not have worried. Lady Morven had hardly put a foot inside the door when she spied Delia and hurried over to her. She gave her a critical look up and down, making Delia flush to the roots of her hair, and then embraced her fiercely.

"Oh, you poor darling. What an ordeal you have suffered. We had no idea, but we called in on Muir at the farm on the way here and he told us all about it, and how very brave you were. Goodness, but to think you overcame two men to get away—and so cleverly, too. I'm sure I would not have been half so courageous."

"Twaddle," replied a deep voice from behind them. The countess turned to smile at her husband, who grinned broadly. Delia could not help but return the smile, for it made him look so much like his sons that she felt she already knew him. "Dinnae listen to my wife, Delia. She's the scariest woman this side of the Tweed and everyone hereabouts kens it well enough."

Lady Morven did not look displeased by this description and turned back to Delia, lowering her voice confidentially. "It's true enough, and it will do you no harm for the menfolk to think you are a force to be reckoned with. They respect strong women

in these parts, and you will need to stand your ground at times. By the by, our daughter, Georgie, was so disappointed not to be here, but she's in a delicate way, you see, and very close to her time and Rochford is terribly protective of her so he wouldn't let her move an inch. She's dying to meet you, though, and promises to come for a visit as soon as she can. Oh, and she gave me this for you," she added, handing Delia a sealed letter.

"Thank you. I look forward to meeting her too," Delia said, meaning it, for the entire family had made her feel like she belonged.

Muir adored his sister, whom he was certain would love her just as everyone else did. So, Delia could only take his word for that and look forward to the fact she was surrounded by people who thought she belonged with them very nicely.

Before Delia could think too much about it, she was taken up by Lady Morven who insisted she call her Ruth—or Mama, if she preferred—and was swept into a whirlwind of activity.

By the time Saturday came around Delia found herself dressed in her favourite gown, with her hair done by Ruth's own dresser, holding a bouquet of fragrant blue hyacinths that symbolised steadfast love as she sailed down the stairs of Wildsyde Castle as if she were living in some wonderful dream. The castle was bedecked in finery too, with huge displays of flowers and greenery everywhere she looked. Great swathes of daffodils raised their sunny faces from every corner and seemed to fill the entire castle with the scent of spring.

Much to her delight, the earl, whom she had quickly discovered was not half so intimidating as he looked, had asked her rather diffidently if he might have the honour of giving her away. Now, she found him awaiting her at the bottom of the stairs, looking splendid in full Highland rig. He made a leg, bowing to her in a rather theatrical manner and grinning broadly.

“Well, ye look as beautiful as summer’s day in Scotland, lassie, and ye do nae see many of those, so they’re special, ye ken. Will I do to walk ye down the aisle? I ken I am nae the duke, but—”

“But I am very glad of that fact,” Delia told him firmly, taking his arm. “My father is the last person I would wish to give me away. I admit, I wish my brother were here, but as he is not, I am so honoured you offered yourself in his place. I shall feel very proud walking on your arm. You and Lady Morven have been so very kind to me and have made me feel a part of the family, which I really did not expect. I said from the start that coming here felt like coming home in some strange way, but now it truly does. I’m s-so h-happy,” she stammered, feeling her throat tighten and her eyes burn.

“Ach don’t cry!” the earl said in alarm, fumbling about his person. “Dammit, where did I put that handkerchief? Ruth warned me I had better have one to hand and lummoX that I am now I cannae— Ah! Here it is!” he said, with such triumph as he flourished it at her that Delia burst out laughing instead. The crisis apparently over, he let out a breath, still holding the handkerchief uncertainly aloft.

“Thank you,” she said. “But I’m ready now. Shall we go in?”

“Aye, lassie,” he replied with relief, tucking the handkerchief away again. “For between you and me, Muir was looking a tad peely-wally and if ye dinnae appear soon, I reckon he might boke.”

So it was that the earl led Delia into the grand hall that had been elegantly decorated for their nuptials, with the bride trying very hard not to laugh, right up until the moment she spied her husband to be. Then the solemnity of the moment calmed her, the sight of him standing there, so broad and handsome in his magnificent Highland attire that she could not take her eyes from him. He smiled at her, an expression so sincere and full of happiness that her heart soared with joy and excitement for the future, for all the adventures they had ahead of them, and she could not wait to begin.

“Congratulations!” Lyall clapped Muir on the back and pressed a glass of champagne into his hand. “She’s a lovely lass. Far too good for yer sorry hide, of course, but she’s foolish enough to take ye on. Dinnae mess it up, aye?”

“I will nae,” Muir said, not looking at Lyall, his attention riveted to his beautiful bride.

He’d not been able to stop staring at her since the moment he’d seen her walking down the aisle. The gown she had worn was an explosion of lace and ribbons that fluttered and trembled with a soft feminine rustle that was the only sound in the room as she’d glided towards him. To Muir, she looked like a delicious bridecake, one designed especially for him, and his heart had almost burst with pride at the sight of her. Now she was laughing with his father and mother, and seeing the three of them together gave him a peculiar sensation, happiness and hope and excitement for the future all tangling together in his chest and making him feel sentimental in a way he was quite unused to.

Belatedly, Muir realised Lyall was still talking to him and murmured a response he hoped was appropriate.

“I hear the lambing was a great success this year,” Lyall remarked as Hamilton joined them.

“Aye,” Muir replied, still not really listening to the conversation.

“Ach, ye may as well tell him the lambs have all turned green and sprouted wings,” Hamilton said, shaking his head. “He’ll still pay ye no mind. He’s thinking of nothing but his wedding night, ye ken. Which reminds me—Muir? Muir!”

Hamilton gave him a little shake, and so Muir turned, scowling at his brother. “What?”

Hamilton adopted a serious expression and laid his hand on Muir's shoulder. "'Tis yer wedding night approaching, and Lyall and I were concerned, so we thought we had better ask ye... is there anything ye need to know? Do ye have any questions, a sheòid, because if ye do—"

"Away and bile ye heid," Muir retorted crossly. "Yer are as daft as ever, Hamilton."

"Ach, but ye cannae blame us for being feart for ye, or perhaps more for yer bride, aye?" Hamilton persisted, crowing with laughter as Muir rolled his eyes and stalked off.

The wedding breakfast was a jolly affair with music and toasts and everyone eating and drinking far more than was good for them. Muir enjoyed it a good deal to begin with but by late afternoon he decided he'd endured as long as he could. By the time his father had downed enough whisky to sing a mournful lament to them, he decided enough was enough. His brothers had been ribbing him mercilessly since the moment he'd arrived at the castle and his patience was wearing thin. He wanted Delia to himself, and he wanted her now. About to say as much, he turned to his wife, only to discover Hamilton hauling her out of her seat and insisting she dance with him.

Muir groaned. "Damn him," he muttered, finding Lyall beside him, giving him a sympathetic smile. His brother reached over, patting him on the back.

"He's the last one still single and likely feeling a bit adrift, aye?" Lyall said, proving to Muir not for the first time that his eldest brother thought about things more than he let on. "Things are changing and every time he comes home, it feels different to him. I have Wildsyde and ye have Brabster Farm, but he's in Wick."

"Aye, and making a fortune so I hear," Muir said with a laugh.

"True enough, but money doesnae buy ye happiness," Lyall said with a shrug. "It sets

him apart, ye ken. I think he feels the distance and misses the life here. If ye ask me, he wants to come home, but he cannae. Not yet.”

Muir nodded, understanding that. “He needs a wife.”

“Aye.” Muir and Lyall exchanged glances and grinned. “And there’s yer ammunition. Consider it a wedding present.”

Muir laughed and turned his attention back to Hamilton, who was sweeping Delia about the room in an energetic polka. Her blonde hair was escaping its pins, her cheeks were flushed pink, and the ribbons and lace on her gown fluttered and bounced along with her. Everything about her was movement and joy and Muir felt a rush of pure happiness watching her dancing with his brother.

When the dance finally ended and Hamilton returned Delia to him, Muir took her hand firmly in his. “Ye look bonnie when ye dance, wife, but I think I shall take ye away from all this celebrating now, if ye dinnae mind it too much.”

The colour in her cheeks deepened, but she held his gaze. “I don’t mind,” she replied, smiling shyly.

“Ach, now, Muir,” Hamilton began, but Muir interrupted him.

“It’s all right, Hamilton,” he said, using a kindly big brother tone that was sure to irritate him. “I ken yer feeling a wee bit jealous now both yer brothers have beautiful wives to come home to, but yer turn will come, laddie. Perhaps in a few weeks ye can come back and Lyall and I will sit ye down and we’ll have a wee talk about the future. I hear Rona is still on the hunt for a husband, aye?”

“Ach, yer bums oot the windae,” Hamilton retorted in disgust. “I dinnae need nae help from the likes of ye two eejits.”

“So ye say, but yer nae wed, laddie,” Muir said, wagging a finger at Hamilton and towing Delia out of the room as he did so.

Thanking the heavens that the weather had calmed and there was no rain as they hurried out to their waiting carriage, Muir hoped he’d made his escape. The guests all rushed after them, however, throwing rice and ribald comments as they went. So, he stood beside Delia, and they leaned out of the window and waved, watching the sea of smiling faces, every one of them wishing them happiness for the futures as the carriage drew them away.

The carriage jolted over a stone in the road and Delia gave a little shriek as she lost her balance. Muir grasped her around the waist and pulled her into his lap before she could fall, kissing her soundly. Her arms reached up, coiling around his neck as she sighed happily.

“Nae regrets?” he asked softly, when he finally released her.

“Not a one,” she replied without hesitation, studying his face. “And you?”

“Only that I was so daft as to nae marry ye the moment we arrived in Scotland. I am nae usually so slow on the uptake, but I’m a stubborn fellow, ye ken. I’m sorry for it.”

“I’m not,” Delia said simply. “We’ve had this time to get to know each other, and to discover that this is what we want, not something we had to do. I can’t regret that, not a moment of it.”

“Aye, well ye have proven yerself to be the wisest of the two of us, lassie,” he said, cupping her face with his hand and looking down at her. “I am glad, so very glad that I was there that day, and I shall never stop thanking providence for putting you in my path.”

“Me either,” she said, snuggling against him.

Muir held her close. Though it was only a short drive to the farm, he wished the driver would get a move on. Anticipation was thrumming through his veins and memories of the way her skin had felt beneath his fingers made his pulse speed.

Finally, the carriage arrived at the farm and Delia exclaimed over the fields of sheep and the lambs gambolling about. “I shall never grow tired of looking out in the springtime and seeing such a sight.”

“Aye, it’s a fitting reward for all the hard work, and it never gets old,” he said, kissing her again as she turned to him with a smile. “Come then, Lady Delia Anderson, for we have things to attend to.”

“So we do, Mr Anderson,” she replied with a breathless laugh. “So we do.”

Page 15

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Dearest Delia,

I hope you do not mind me addressing you with such familiarity, but I have been speaking to Evie, whom you know so well through Emmeline, and I feel like I know you already. I am so happy to know that such a lovely young woman has joined our family and will be a sister to me. I hope you and Muir will be blissfully happy together, but if you occasionally need help in lifting heavy objects to throw in his direction, I would be glad to help.

I love my brother dearly, but he can be the most exasperating creature on earth, as I'm sure you must already know. That you have been brave and kind enough to overlook this and see the good in him tells me you have the strength of character to be everything he needs.

Welcome to the family, my dear. I am so very disappointed not to be able to share your special day with you, but as soon as my 'happy event' has arrived and I am strong enough to travel, you may rely upon a visit from your very own sister, Georgie.

?Excerpt of a letter from Her Grace, Georgina Seymour, The Duchess of Rochford to The Lady Cordelia Anderson.

22 nd April 1850, Brabster Farm, The Highlands of Scotland.

Delia laughed as Muir swung her down from the carriage, stealing another kiss before he let her go and making her blush for the carriage driver and the footmen were grinning broadly. She knew all her belongings had been transported to the farm

earlier that morning along with her new maid, Ally. Lady Morven had arranged the hiring of the girl for her, assuring Delia she was a cheerful soul, hardworking and discreet, and to be relied upon. A fact Delia was heartily glad for after her own maid had disdained to come and live in Scotland.

She took Muir's arm as he led her towards the front door, where the formidable Mrs Paterson was waiting with a face like thunder. Delia quailed somewhat but stiffened her spine.

"Ye can hire more staff if ye wish to," Muir told her in an undertone as they approached the house. "I didnae feel the need for it with just me living here, but ye may do as ye see fit, and with the house, too. If ye wish to change anything, anything at all, I dinnae mind it."

"Thank you," she said, knowing he was trying hard to make her feel at ease. Delia, however, had an idea of what the trouble was with his irascible housekeeper and wasn't about to take the easy way out. "You're very kind, but I shouldn't dream of changing anything without asking your opinion first," she said with a smile.

"Ach, ye may if ye wish, but there's nae need."

Delia might have explained why it was necessary not to make sweeping changes without a word of discussion, but it was too late as they stood before Mrs Paterson.

"Mrs Paterson, ye have already met, but I shall present ye formally to yer new mistress. My Lady Cordelia Anderson, my cook and housekeeper, Mrs Paterson."

Mrs Paterson bobbed a neat curtsy, her expression remaining one of displeasure.

"I'm sure we will get along nicely," Delia told her firmly. "There is bound to be a time of adjustment for both of us, but I have seen enough of the house to know that you manage it wonderfully well, considering how little help you have for such a large

property.”

“Aye, a laundry maid once a week and that little chit of MacTavish’s who’s nae better than she should be,” she said with a sniff. “It’s not what it ought to be, that much I have said repeatedly.”

“Well, I’m sure we can do better than that now Mr Anderson has a wife to take care of such details,” Delia said, holding her gaze, determined the woman see she was ready to help, but not to be bullied. “Once I am settled, we can discuss matters, and you may tell me all the things you feel need changing or updating. Between us, I’m sure we can put all to rights.”

“Aye,” Mrs Paterson said, her expression becoming a little less forbidding. “Well, there’s that range, for one thing. Mrs Baillie has one which is far bigger and more modern than mine, ye ken, for his lordship updated it last year.”

“Did he now?” Delia exclaimed, relieved her suspicions about where much of the woman’s resentment sprang from had been correct.

“Aye, and the one I have was installed when the house was built, nigh on thirty years ago,” she indignantly. “Not that anything I cook isnae every bit as good as anything that’s served at the castle,” she added, her chin going up.

“Oh, I should never doubt it. Muir has told me what a wonderful cook you are, Mrs Paterson, and I have tasted the truth of it myself, of course, for the picnics you’ve provided us with have been wonderful. The pies were especially delicious.”

Mrs Paterson straightened, her chest expanding a little as her eyes warmed a degree. “It’s been said I’ve a fair hand with the pastry, ’tis true.”

“Indeed, you do, and that a cook of your calibre has not a modern range to work with, really... Muir, what were you thinking?” she said, praying Muir would understand

what she was about and go along with her.

He returned a sheepish look and shrugged, and she could have kissed him.

“I didnae ken it was that important, for I have had nae complaints about the food that arrives at my table.”

“That is hardly the point,” Delia said, giving him a stern look. “You ought to make Mrs Paterson’s life easier, when there is so much for her to do already.”

Delia reached out and squeezed the woman’s hand. “Don’t you fret, Mrs Paterson. You make me a nice long list of all the things you believe need changing or updating, and what staff you think the house should have to run smoothly. Then I will check that against the available budget, and you may be sure I will give you as much as I can. Thank you so much for making me feel so welcome. I am looking forward to working with you immensely.”

“Well, I... Indeed, as am I,” Mrs Paterson said, looking rather like she might mean it, and as if she wasn’t entirely certain what had just happened.

“If ye will excuse us,” Muir cut in hurriedly, before the lady could gather herself. Towing Delia past the usually indomitable woman, he swept her into his arms and carried her over the threshold.

Delia laughed and then protested as he refused to put her down, heading for the stairs.

“Muir, I can walk!” she said, pushing at his chest as he climbed the stairs.

“Not on yer life,” he replied, shaking his head. “I dinnae ken what magic ye just used on Mrs Paterson, but she was very near smiling at us, and that’s a sight I dinnae want in my head on my wedding night, thank ye very much.”

Delia snorted. “Don’t be dreadful,” she scolded him, though she had to admit a smiling Mrs Paterson was too disturbing to consider. “And the poor woman is just starved of attention. I don’t doubt you devour everything she puts before you and never set foot in the kitchen or ask her what’s for dinner. Everyone needs a bit of attention, Muir. You must take an interest and praise her efforts.”

“I always say thank ye and that it was a splendid meal,” Muir protested.

Delia kissed his cheek fondly. “I don’t doubt it, but you may leave Mrs Paterson to me. I know just how to handle her, I promise you.”

“I believe ye. I just saw it with my own eyes, though I can hardly credit it,” he added, shaking his head.

Delia fell silent as carried her towards the door at the far end of the corridor and pushed it open. The room was large and had a splendid view across the land, the crenellations of Wildsyde’s lofty tower just visible in the far distance. Turning her attention back to the room, Delia’s gaze settled upon a huge oak bed which dominated the space, the headboard embellished with Celtic knots and thistles. It was neatly turned down with sheets of pristine white cotton and thick blankets in the family tartan laid over it. Other than that, the room was fairly spartan, with a gleaming polished wood floor, a well-worn armchair beside the fireplace, where a fire blazed, and an enormous wardrobe carved with the same thistle and knot design as the bed.

Muir set her carefully down, not letting her go. “Welcome home, Delia.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to be home, here with you.”

“Aye,” he said, kissing her forehead before going to close the bedroom door. He turned the key, making her stomach leap with nerves.

“Yer nae afraid, are ye?” he asked, his expression one of concern as he returned to her.

Delia shook her head. “Not of you, just... just of doing something wrong.”

He smiled at that, stroking his fingers down her cheek. “Ye never could. Ye ken what happens between us? Did anyone explain?”

“Luella was kind enough to offer to explain things to me,” she said with a smile. “But there was no need. My sister-in-law, Emmeline, thought I ought to know such things, and she was good enough to explain everything some time ago. So, I am quite prepared.”

“Well, I’m glad ye are, for I am nae. I’m feart of hurting ye,” he admitted, the worry in his eyes chasing away any lingering anxiety she might have felt.

“You told me I could do nothing wrong, well, you could not hurt me, not really. I understand it might be a little uncomfortable the first time, but I know you would never do me harm intentionally. I’m safe with you, Muir. I have always known it.”

There was a soft knock at the door and a shy voice spoke through it.

“My lady, it’s Ally. Is there anything ye need? Can I be of assistance?”

“No, ye cannae! Run along,” Muir called back impatiently. “I’ll be yer maid,” he added in an undertone, winking at her.

“The poor girl, she’ll be mortified now,” Delia scolded him as he turned her around.

“She’ll get over it. Did I tell ye, by the way, how bonnie ye look in this gown? Prettier than the bride cake, and ye make my mouth water more than it did too.”

“You did,” she said, feeling quite smug about it. “But you are welcome to say it again, though the bride cake Mrs Baillie made was the most splendid I have ever seen. Quite magnificent.”

“Dinnae let Mrs Paterson hear ye say such a thing,” he murmured in her ear, nipping at the lobe before he returned his attention to her buttons. “Ye will undo all yer good work.”

“I should never be such a numpty,” she said, biting her lip as he moved around to look at her, his expression one of feigned alarm.

“Lady Cordelia, wherever did ye learn such dreadful language?” he demanded, one hand to his heart in mock horror.

“From you,” she retorted.

“Aye, and so ye did,” he agreed, smirking.

He moved behind her again and finally the dress fell in a soft whoosh of fabric. Delia stepped out of it as Muir tossed it over the chair and turned back to her, his gaze intent.

“Better than Christmas morning,” he said, his lips quirking. “And on to the next layer.”

With more patience than she had credited him, he undid and unhooked and unbuttoned, until only her shift and stockings remained, and it was she who was impatient. Nerves leapt beneath her skin, her every sense alert and singing with anticipation.

“Can I take this off?” he asked, reaching for the shift.

Delia nodded. “Though it seems dreadfully scandalous to be naked in daylight,” she observed. “Not that I’m complaining,” she added hastily.

He chuckled at that and kissed her cheek. “I think yer notions of scandal and mine are nae at all the same things, but I shall remedy that soon enough.”

He brought the chemise up and over her head, tossing it aside. Delia shivered as she saw the way his gaze darkened, felt the heat of his hand upon her bare skin as he reached for her, his palms hot against her waist. “Yer the loveliest thing I ever did see, Delia, my own little love. I never felt so proud in my life as when I saw ye walk down the aisle towards me.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, though her heart was beating so fast, and she was so breathless that the words were hardly audible.

“Thank ye for putting yer trust in me. I dinnae take it lightly.”

“I know,” she said, but anything else she might have added was lost as he pressed his mouth to hers, pulling her against him. Goosebumps ran over her as the press of metal clasps and buttons touched her skin and he smiled, rubbing her arms as he felt the shivers prick her skin.

“Get into bed, lassie. I’ll be with ye directly to warm ye up.”

Obediently, Delia climbed into the magnificent bed, pulling the covers over herself as she watched him disrobe. He certainly made quick work of it, considering the complications of the Highland dress, but soon enough he stood only in his shirt and Delia’s mouth felt dry, her heart thudding as he drew it up and cast it aside.

He grinned at her, an amused glint in his eyes and he put his arms up and turned in a circle for her perusal. “Nae too shabby, aye?” he said, waggling his eyebrows at her. “Ye are a lucky lassie.”

“Dreadful man,” she said, smothering a giggle at his smug expression. “You are a deal too confident, I think.”

Privately, she had to agree he had every right to be. An active life led mostly out of doors had honed his body to a landscape of rugged muscle. His chest, forearms, and legs were remarkably hairy, the hair glinting gold in the firelight as he moved to the bed.

“Ye reckon I swagger a deal too much, do ye aye?” he asked, a wicked glint in his eyes as he climbed into the bed.

“Aye,” she told him. “As it happens, I do.”

She held his gaze, knowing she was asking for retaliation and eager to see what form it would take.

“Let’s just see about that,” he growled, and leapt onto the bed, stripping back the covers she had pulled up, pouncing on her and pushing her down onto the pillows. His skin blazed against hers, the temperature so fiery she had no hesitation in clinging to him, wrapping her far cooler body about his like honeysuckle climbing a tree. She held on as his hands explored, seeming to be everywhere at once as the intimacy of their naked bodies pressing together made her mind reel with sensation.

He kissed his way down her body, lingering for a time over her breasts as his hot mouth closed over her nipples, sucking and pulling and drawing breathless sounds of approval from her that seemed to please him a good deal. After a delightful interlude, he carried on down, trailing his tongue over her skin and making her squeal by wriggling it into her belly button.

“Do you think sheep kiss before they—” Delia bit her lip, wondering what on earth had prompted her to ask such a thing at such a moment.

Muir looked up, his lips twitching. “Nae lassie. That much I’m certain of.”

“Oh,” she replied, disappointed, and then squealed as he returned his tongue to its previous occupation.

He laughed at the way she squirmed away from him and held her immobile as he moved lower still and kissed her inner thighs, trailed his tongue along the sensitive skin at the apex of her sex. Delia stilled, hardly able to comprehend what she suspected he might do next. Whilst Emmeline had been quite bold in explaining what her wedding night might be like—in Delia’s opinion, at least—it appeared she might have left out a few crucial details. Delia gave a little cry of startled shock as Muir’s tongue swept over her.

“Do sheep do that?” she demanded in outrage, before she could think better of it.

Muir gave a muffled snort and shook his head. “Nae, lassie, now haud yer wheesht and let me love ye.”

Delia had no trouble complying with this demand, for any possibility of speaking a word evaporated as her brain and body dissolved into a quivering mass that could do nothing but feel.

Delia hadn’t the slightest idea if this was normal behaviour for a man on his wedding night and Emmeline had simply been too discreet to explain it, or if perhaps Muir was simply being his outrageous self, she only knew she didn’t care. His mouth was so hot against her sensitive flesh it almost burned, and the pleasure was close to unbearable. Delia whimpered and writhed even though his hands gripped her hips firmly, holding her in place. Her sanity unravelled as she made sounds she would surely remember with mortification. For the moment she didn’t care, chasing the promise of more as something hovered just out of her grasp. She arched, her body taut with eager anticipation, holding her breath as she waited for what came next. He’d shown her this before, this glittering peak, and she careered after it, desperate

for it even as she never wanted it to end.

Muir slid a finger inside of her, sucking gently at her tender flesh, and the sensation she'd been waiting for exploded through her. She cried out, clutching at his hair as something primal and elemental overtook her, sounds torn from her throat she would never have believed possible until the pleasure dissipated, leaving her boneless, exhausted, and stunned.

Delia couldn't move, her body had no substance. Indeed, she was fairly certain it had melted into the mattress. Besides which, she did not wish to open her eyes again, for if she did, she'd have to look Muir in the eyes, and she didn't know if she could.

"Still think I swagger too much, eh?" he asked, the smug devil.

Somehow, Delia found strength enough to crack open an eyelid and gazed at him dubiously. "I think you are a very bad man," she said tartly, to which he only laughed, settling himself between her legs. Delia gasped as his sex, hot and aroused, pressed hard against her still pulsing flesh. "A very , very bad man," she said, sighing and giving herself over to him entirely, for her body seemed to have decided it preferred being under his control and she was not about to challenge it.

"Nae, lassie, I only know how to please ye, and to please myself, aye. Speaking of which," he added, pushing inside her. "Relax now, mo ghraidh, and let me love ye."

Delia tried to do as he asked, finding her body less inclined to obey him now as it tightened, remonstrating at the strange invasion as he pressed farther inside.

She gasped and Muir stilled, taking a moment to stroke her back, her sides, to kiss her and speak soft words, soothing her until her muscles responded and he pushed all the way in. At first, she could not breathe, certain she would experience pain the moment he moved, but as her body adjusted, accepting him, she relaxed further, and suddenly it was easy and instinctive and she forgot to worry, or to wonder how it would be, and

simply let it happen.

It seemed they fit together, like nature had always intended one for the other, making her wonder if fate had played a hand purposefully as he had suggested. For how else could this be so perfect, if it had not been meant from the start? But she could no longer consider such philosophical questions, for her body was taking over again, her mind forced into the background as feelings and sensations arose inside her, overwhelming her senses. The realisation that he was feeling the same things, that his strong, muscular frame shook with the same pleasure, the same delight he found in her that she experienced with him, was too wonderful for words. Instead, she tried to express it in her touch, her kiss, in the inarticulate sounds she gave him to show him how well he pleased her, until the peak came, and they found it together, crying out and then laughing helplessly as she wondered at the strange beauty of such an intimate act.

They slept for a while, dozing as the dimming light of the afternoon gave way to darkness. Muir loved her again, so slowly and tenderly that she almost cried, clinging to him and promising to be everything he needed while he hushed her, assuring her that she already was. When they woke again, it was late, a slim sickle moon visible through the window.

“I’m famished,” Muir protested as his stomach gave an audible grumble of hunger.

Delia laughed, patting his flat belly with amusement. “Then you had best raid the kitchen. Did you not ask Mrs Paterson to provide something for us?”

He returned a sheepish grin and shrugged. “In all honesty, I’ve thought of nothing but my wedding night ever since ye said yes, but my brain snagged on the pleasure of it, and I did nae think so far as supper.”

“Well, now you’re regretting that oversight,” she said, laughing at his dismay.

“Ach, and I dinnae want to leave this cosy bed and go down to the kitchen,” he grumbled.

“Well, that’s why it’s best to be prepared. Never mind. You’ll just have to hurry, won’t you?” she said, making a show of snuggling down under the covers.

“Are ye nae coming with me?”

“No,” she said, giving him a sweet smile.

“Yer a hard woman, wife,” he said, shaking his head sadly. He slid from the bed, grumbling all the while, and picked up his kilt, wrapping it around himself with a few deft movements so it covered most of his body. Padding barefoot to the door, he unlocked it, pulled it open and gave an exclamation of delight.

“God bless Mrs Paterson!” he said, as Delia heard the chink of china. He came back into the room, kicking the door shut as he turned, holding aloft a heavy tray. “I will nae have ye saying she’s crabbit, Delia, for she is a fine woman. I’ve always said so.”

Delia shook her head at him as he set the laden tray upon the bed, shed the kilt, and climbed back in beside her.

“I never said she was crabbit, for I have no idea what it means,” Delia said mildly, helping herself to a chicken leg.

Muir picked up a pie filled with minced lamb and devoured it in three mouthfuls before reaching for another.

“Is there no cheese?” Delia asked, perusing the tray once she’d finished the chicken leg.

“Nae, Mrs Paterson would nae put cheese on a tray late in the evening. It gives ye

strange dreams, ye ken.”

Delia rolled her eyes at him. “I like strange dreams,” she replied tartly, before frowning as an idea occurred to her. “Have you ever thought of making cheese?”

“Me? Nae, why ever would I?”

“Sheep’s cheese is lovely,” she said, shrugging.

“Lassie, there is enough work on the farm, I assure ye. Dinnae go looking for more, aye?” he said, laughing, and then hesitated as she continued to stare at him. “Are ye serious?”

“Maybe,” she said, holding his gaze. “Maybe not.”

Muir turned another pie between his hands, frowning over it for a moment. “I’ll ask Lyall. Happen they’ll have a book on the subject in the library. Ye can take a look and... and we’ll think on it. Aye?”

Delia smiled, reaching out and stroking his cheek. “Thank you, Muir.”

He caught hold of her hand, turning his face into it and kissing her palm. “Ye may need to give me a kick now and then, Delia, but I promise I’ll try my best not to be an ignorant lout.”

She laughed at that, and they carried on their meal. Delia discovered she enjoyed watching him eat, studying him as he reached for a bread roll, pulled it in half, slapped a generous amount of butter on each side and filled it with three thick slices of ham. He took a huge bite, and Delia viewed the sight in fascination as almost half the roll disappeared. Muir closed his eyes, chewing contentedly as she watched with amusement.

“Better now?” she asked once he’d swallowed.

“Nae, I hae to clear this tray I reckon, and then...” he said, lowering his voice and stroking an invisible moustache in the manner of a theatrical villain.

“Then?” Delia asked, quirking an eyebrow at him.

“Then I shall have other appetites to satisfy.”

Delia sniggered, shaking her head at him.

“Yer nae to laugh at me when I’m being villainous,” he said, picking up a chicken leg and wagging it at her in disapproval. “’Tis nae polite. A good wife would gasp and make out like she was feart of me.”

“Even if I’m not.”

“Especially if yer are nae feart. I have my pride, aye?”

“You are the silliest creature that ever lived, Muir Anderson,” Delia said helplessly. She set her chicken aside and moved closer to him, wrapping her arms about his shoulders and kissing his cheek. “And I adore you.”

He paused, glancing up at her. “Do ye, aye?”

“Aye, I love and adore ye, my daft Scottish laddie,” she said, trying her best to mimic his accent and failing miserably.

He grinned at her all the same. “I love ye too, Delia, something fierce, but do me a favour, lassie: never say it that way ever again.”

She snorted and shoved at him, so Muir retaliated, hauling her into his lap and

feeding himself and her in turn until the tray was empty, and the other appetites he had mentioned were in sore need of sustenance.

In the early hours of the morning, they were still talking, wrapped in each other's arms, both dreaming of the days and weeks and years to come, of the plans they had made, and the life they would share together.

“I dinnae want to close my eyes. It seems a dreadful waste to miss a moment, and I cannae wait for it all to begin,” Muir whispered, his voice heavy with sleep, pulling Delia closer to him.

Delia sighed, already drifting into dreams of him, murmuring contentedly as she closed her eyes, “It already has.”