



The Lion and the Unicorn (The Lion's Den Connected World)

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Category: Historical

Description: Love at first sight. Hatred at the altar.

Plucked from London's slums and thrust into Society as the stepdaughter of a duke, Clara Martingale should have every advantage. But rumors about her birth and her lack of refinement make her the target of cruel gossip, until a Highland marquess sweeps her off her feet.

Murdo McTavish needs to marry an heiress to save his estate, but falling for Clara wasn't part of the plan. Their connection is instant, and even his disapproving father can't argue with her dowry, or her spirit.

Until Clara's true parentage is revealed... and everything falls apart.

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The Lyon's Den, London

"The victor, he comes!"

"Unicorn! Unicorn!" Chanting rose up from the gaming room and Clara leaned over the balcony to witness the moment of victory.

Four ropes had been suspended from the balustrade. Her heart fluttered as a masked man swarmed up one rope toward her.

This is it.

Through her veil she discerned a unicorn's head, as if he were a mythical creature with the body of a man.

And what a body! With thick, powerful arms he hauled himself upward, swallowing up the rope on his quest to secure the prize.

And that prize was her.

A second competitor reached the foot of the rope, wearing a mask in the shape of a bull.

"Minotaur! Minotaur!" drunken voices cried, and Clara heard the chink of coins exchanging hands.

Surely, they weren't placing wagers? Unless the unicorn lost his grip and fell, victory

was inevitable.

The minotaur had taken too much of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's brandy, and could barely walk, let alone climb a rope.

The remaining finalists—one with the head of an eagle and the other a serpent—had already given up.

The eagle limped toward the ropes with a distinct lack of enthusiasm and the serpent had prostrated himself on the floor, to the protestations of his backers.

The unicorn lost his grip, and a ripple of gasps threaded through the crowd, followed by a further exchange of coins.

He gave a low growl then regained his purchase, grunting as the rope swung sideways.

Then he glanced up and a pair of eyes focused on Clara, glittering behind his mask.

Their expression spoke of determination—a beast ready to claim his female, then take her to his lair.

Clara retreated from the balustrade and joined her mother beside the black-clad, veiled hostess.

“Are you well, daughter?”

Clara nodded, her cheeks warming with shame at the thrill coursing through her at the prospect of being claimed . “I-I was concerned he might fall.”

“Then he'll have proven himself undeserving, Miss Martingale,” the veiled figure

said.

“A little harsh, Bessie,” Clara’s mother said. “Making men risk their necks?”

“But necessary, to find a champion worthy of your daughter’s hand,” came the reply. “The finalists have shown their prowess in intelligence, writing verse, and arithmetic. Tonight, we test their physical ability and endurance. Strength and Honor—that was the challenge.”

A growl filled the air, and Clara’s heart rate increased as a large hand appeared, followed by an arm, then a body. The victor swung his legs over the balustrade to stand on the gallery. Facing the crowd, he raised his arms and roared in victory, his voice reverberating through Clara’s chest.

Their hostess approached him, and the cheering subsided as she raised her hand.

“A worthy champion,” she said. “Unicorn, I declare you the winner of the Strength and Honor challenge. Come claim your prize—the hand of this fair maiden.”

She turned toward Clara. “Your champion awaits, my dear. Let the company witness your betrothal.”

Clara approached the balustrade.

“Reveal yourselves before the world!” Mrs. Dove-Lyon cried.

The moment had come. But Clara conquered her fear. Mrs. Dove-Lyon had assured her that all competitors were of good character—strong in body and in heart.

And handsome—their hostess had said that were she twenty years younger, she’d have been tempted herself.

But Clara cared little for a handsome face. She only required a husband who was kind—who did not judge her for the disgrace of her birth.

Unlike him .

Clara swallowed the pain that stabbed at her soul at the merest thought of the man who'd shattered her heart. But her heart was reforged—strong and impenetrable. She'd never permit the victor before her—whomever he might be—to claim her heart only to crush it into dust.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon had assured Clara and her mother several times while they negotiated the terms of the contract that her future husband would be a good man. And, according to Mama, Mrs. Dove-Lyon was never wrong.

“Come, lovers,” their hostess said, returning Clara to the present. “Why the hesitation? Do you seek to increase the anticipation for our witnesses?” She gestured to the crowd below. “Our guests are already quivering with eagerness.”

She turned to the victor.

“Sir Unicorn, don't keep your lady waiting. Let her eyes feast on your virility while you indulge in her beauty.”

She raised her hand. “On the count of three. One. Two. Three! ”

Clara lifted her veil as the victor removed his mask.

Her gut twisted in horror as a pair of intense emerald eyes focused on her.

Dear Lord—no!

The victor was handsome, as promised.

Brutally handsome, as if his features had been carved from granite, with sharp cheekbones and a nose bearing a slight kink, as if he'd endured—and won—several fights to the death. His brow furrowed and two dark eyebrows formed deep slants to convey an emotion that could only be described as fury .

It was the face that had invaded her dreams these past months—a face capable of transforming the world when he smiled, like the sun breaking through a thundercloud.

But tonight Clara saw only the thundercloud, the precursor to the storm that would wreak vengeance upon her for merely existing.

As he had done two months ago.

But not again.

“Sweet heaven! I-it's you !”

Clara's heart broke at the pain in her mother's voice.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could voice his condemnation, Clara fisted her hand, then lunged forward. Her fist connected with his jaw, and he reeled back, lost his balance, and toppled to the gallery floor.

Cheers rose up from below.

“I say! Topping spectacle, what?”

“He's won a spirited filly, I'll wager!”

“He’ll have a lot of fun breaking her in!”

Clara shivered as a low growl came from the huge male form struggling to his feet before her.

“Is this part of the entertainment, Mrs. Dove-Lyon?” someone asked.

“Of course, Lord Staffington,” their hostess said. “Don’t I always promise the best forms of satisfaction in my establishment? And now, may I present the victor of the Strength and Honor challenge, Murdo McTavish, and his betrothed, Miss Clara Martingale!”

The crowd burst into applause and the victor approached Clara again.

“No!” Clara’s mother cried. “Not him. Not after the way he treated us. Anyone but him!”

“You signed the contract, Duchess,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

“I did, but—”

“Then you must abide by the terms.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon glanced at Clara, then the victor. “Both of you must abide by the terms.”

She took Clara’s hand and placed it in his. Clara drew in a sharp breath as thick, calloused fingers curled around hers, in a grip of possession.

Those fingers were strong enough to crush a man’s neck. Yet they were also capable of drawing out the most exquisite pleasure in the woman he desired.

Clara lifted her eyes to meet his gaze once more, and she caught a glint of silver in

their emerald depths.

But she saw no desire—only savage possession.

A deep voice thickened in her mind, filling the air with a single word.

Mine.

Like it or not, the man before her was now her fiancé. In a matter of days, she would be his to do with as he pleased.

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Northumberland, two months earlier.

Devil's ballocks, was this how Sassenachs entertained themselves?

Murdo gazed about the ballroom, wincing at the violence of color before him. Women as thin as rails milled about, their bright gowns shimmering in the candlelight. Why a lass believed that wrapping herself in silk the color of poison made her alluring to the male sex was beyond comprehension.

As was the expression of discontent on the lips of every creature in the room.

Malcontents, the lot of them—with their downturned mouths and hard, glittering gazes.

“Beautiful, aren't they, cousin?” his companion said.

“Surely ye're jesting, Simon,” Murdo replied. “I've never seen such discontent. Is this how the English entertain themselves? I'd rather drink a bucket of horse's piss.”

A gasp to his right told him that someone had overheard.

“Lady Cholmondeley,” Murdo's cousin said. “What a pleasure to see you.”

A woman with iron-gray hair set in an elaborate array of curls and dressed in a somber shade of blue—at least it was somber against the vomit-inducing hues of orange and yellow circling the room—nodded in acknowledgment.

“Mr. Tuffington, I’m glad you could come,” she said, in a voice that conveyed anything but. “And your— guest ?” She arched a brow and fixed her pale-blue gaze on Murdo.

“My cousin, from the Highlands,” Simon said. “Younger son of my uncle, Laird of Strathburn. You were most gracious to extend your invitation to him.”

“Quite,” she replied. “Forgive me, I didn’t quite catch what you were speaking of, Mr....?”

“McTavish,” Murdo said.

“Mr. McTavish.” Her gaze drifted across Murdo’s form, taking in his moss-green jacket and his plaid. Then she lowered her gaze to his bare legs, and her eyes widened with a flare of unmet female desire.

Ah, Lady Cholmondeley—does yer husband fail to satisfy ye in bed?

Pink spots appeared on her cheeks as she lifted her gaze to his.

She might deny it, but Lady Cholmondeley—like most women—preferred a savage between her thighs to a vapid English lord.

“Forgive me if tonight fails to meet your expectations for entertainment,” she said. “Our customs must be foreign to you—isn’t that what you were saying?”

Shit.

Simon, the treacherous bastard, let out a chuckle.

“What were you saying, Mr. McTavish?” Lady Cholmondeley continued. “If you’ve

a particular preference, I'd be happy to oblige. I wouldn't want it said that I'm unable to accommodate my guests."

"I-I was merely telling my cousin that..."

That I'd rather drink a bucket of horse's piss.

"...th-that I was anticipating a night of—of..."

"Unbridled bliss," Simon said.

Their hostess tilted her head to one side. "Unbridled ? Yes, I thought you'd said something about horses."

She raised her hand, and a footman appeared at her side brandishing a tray of glasses.

"Do take some punch, gentlemen," she said. "I trust you'll enjoy it more than your usual drink of choice, Mr. McTavish, even if served from a glass, not a bucket."

"We will, your ladyship," Simon said. "I've told my cousin to expect the finest fare tonight. Will there be oysters, like last time, Lady Cholmondeley?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not in the habit of killing my guests, Mr. Tuffington. I only serve oysters when there's an R in the month. Please excuse me."

She glided across the room, gesturing for the footman to follow.

Simon grinned. "Of all the ways to ingratiate yourself with our hostess, I've never tried declaring my fondness for horse's piss."

"Why didn't ye stop me?" Murdo said.

“I didn’t realize she was nearby. That’s the thing about women—when you want one, she expects you to follow her about and prostrate yourself at her feet to win her attention. When you don’t want one, she’s always to be found at your side.”

“Shall ye prostrate yerself at a woman’s feet tonight?” Murdo asked, casting his gaze across the ballroom. “There’s slim pickings tonight—they look like a flock of underfed grouse. No meat on their bones—nothing for a man to hang on to, or bury his—”

“Mr. Tuffington,” a feminine voice interrupted. He glanced at the newcomer—an unremarkable-looking young woman in a gown of a shade that could only be described as puce .

Pretty enough, but she’d snap in two in the hands of a real man.

“M-Miss Goodchild.” Simon bowed. She held out her hand and he took it, brushing his lips against her glove. “A pleasure, as always. May I introduce my cousin, Mr. McTavish, of Strathburn Castle?”

“Charmed, I’m sure.” She glanced at Murdo, then resumed her attention on his cousin.

Clearly not every woman desired a savage. Or perhaps the brittle Miss Goodchild had yet to be awakened to the pleasures of the flesh.

“We’re engaged for the first dance, Mr. Tuffington,” Miss Goodchild said. Simon stared back at her with what could only be described as slavish devotion.

Clearly, he saw something in her that Murdo did not.

Well—it wouldn’t do for every man’s taste to be the same.

“Quite so, Miss Goodchild,” Simon said. “I trust the dancing will begin soon. Your gown is delightful—you’ll be the prettiest girl on the floor tonight.”

She blushed and dipped into a curtsy, before gliding across the floor toward a group of young ladies.

“Devil’s ballocks, Simon, I’ve never heard such foppish nonsense,” Murdo said. “Have ye lost yer senses?”

“I just know what a woman wants to hear from a man.”

“No woman would hear such nonsense from my lips,” Murdo said.

“Ah, but I’m not a savage.”

“Ye’ll be ruled by yer woman if ye speak to her like that,” Murdo said. “Women exist to be taken . It’s best they know ye’re the master sooner rather than later.”

“Even before you’ve put the bit and bridle on her?”

“Aye,” Murdo said. “Yer filly must at least know that she’s placing her neck in the noose. Only then will ye get the saddle on her.”

“Women aren’t wild horses to be broken in, Murdo.”

“What’s a man to do with a woman, then?”

“Woo her with delicacy and patience.”

“Such as sauntering about a ballroom in a girlish pattern to the strains of a violin?” Murdo laughed.

“Don’t criticize dancing until you’ve tried it.”

“What ye English do isn’t dancing ,” Murdo said. “It’s nothing more than walking from one end of the room to the other. Now a reel— that’s dancing. But the lasses here would faint at the thought of such savagery, given that it would make them break out in a sweat.”

“Ladies don’t sweat , Murdo,” Simon said. “They exude a healthy glow.”

“Ha! Next, ye’ll be telling me they don’t take a shi—”

“Hush, cousin! Do you want to be thrown out before the first dance?”

“It’d liven the place up,” Murdo said. “I’ve never been to a duller party in my life.”

“Then I’ll introduce you to some of the more interesting guests,” Simon said. “The Duke and Duchess of Pittchester are here, with their sons.”

“Why would I want to meet them ?”

“They’re my brother’s best friends at Oxford. Henry spent a fortnight at Pittchester Castle last vacation. The duke’s fortunes have taken a turn for the better since he remarried. His wife’s one of the wealthiest women in England, so Henry says.”

“What could I stand to gain from simpering to a duchess?” Murdo asked. “Unless ye think she’s in need of a real man between her thighs.”

“No, you fool!” Simon laughed. “She has a daughter from her first marriage. I’ll wager there’s a dowry there that could restore your fortunes and leave room to purchase a small county.”

“Devil’s ballocks, is that why you brought me here—to broker the purchase of a mare?”

“I doubt the duchess would appreciate your referring to her daughter as a mare ,” Simon said, chuckling. “But there’s no harm in looking at the goods.”

He gestured toward a party standing across the ballroom—a couple arm in arm and two young men.

In contrast to the eye-wateringly bright silks adorning the other guests, the woman’s gown was a muted gold, reminiscent of a setting sun on a summer’s evening.

Her granite-colored hair was fashioned into a simple style, with a curl cascading down either side of her face.

A handsome creature, even though her face was lined with age—in her prime she must have been an extraordinary beauty. Her eyes carried an expression of determination—of a heart of iron and a will of granite.

Her husband looked even more formidable.

He wore a jacket the color of pale charcoal, matching the color of his hair.

But despite his age, his form exuded athleticism and filled his suit to perfection.

He cast his gaze about the ballroom, and for a heartbeat, clear blue eyes stared directly at Murdo, before his gaze resumed its journey about the company.

They were not a couple to be crossed.

Their companions were barely out of boyhood, with rounded, fresh-complexioned

faces and the bright-eyed expressions of hopeful adolescence. It was plain to see they were related to the older man—the shape and color of their eyes was identical. But their hair, rather than iron gray, was jet black.

“Magnificent, isn’t she?” Simon whispered. “She was something of a sensation in her younger days. Papa says that every man was in love with her. If you ask me, I think he was in love with her, though he’d never admit it.”

“I’d hope not,” Murdo said.

Aunt Fiona wasn’t the type to suffer fools—or philanderers. Uncle Adam would be minus his ballocks if she caught him sniffing around other women.

The musicians tuned their instruments, and Miss Goodchild returned with another young lady.

But while Miss Goodchild smiled, her companion’s expression was bitter enough to turn even the sweetest dessert sour.

Pretty enough, but her nose seemed permanently wrinkled into a sneer, as if she found everyone in the vicinity beneath her.

“Miss Goodchild,” Simon said. “And you’ve brought Miss Peacock. To what do we owe the pleasure of the company of two such beauties?”

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“It’s time for our dance, Mr. Tuffington,” Miss Goodchild said.

She held out her hand, and Simon took it, then she glanced at Murdo.

“I wanted to introduce your cousin to my friend, Miss Peacock.” She turned toward the sour-faced miss.

“Louise—this is Mr. McTavish. Are you fond of dancing, Mr. McTavish?”

“I lack the talent for it,” Murdo said.

“I’m sure you’re being overly modest,” she replied. “Besides, only one partner needs to be talented on the dance floor. My friend’s an excellent dancer, aren’t you, Louise?”

Miss Peacock inclined her head.

“You couldn’t find a better partner in my friend, Mr. McTavish. She’s the perfect Society lady.”

“Well,” Murdo said, “I suppose, if that’s the case...”

“Excellent!” Miss Goodchild said, her voice increasing in pitch. “That’s settled.” Her cheeks flushed a bright shade of pink, she steered Murdo’s cousin onto the dance floor, where a number of couples formed a line, headed by the Duke and Duchess of Pittchester.

“Looks like someone’s had a little too much of our hostess’s punch,” Murdo said, as Miss Goodchild lost her balance.

“That’s my friend you’re speaking of,” a harsh, nasal voice said.

“Forgive me, Miss Peacock,” Murdo replied. “I’m known for my frankness.”

“A trait of your countrymen, I suppose.” Miss Peacock took his arm and pulled him onto the dance floor. “I hear the land in the north is somewhat savage.”

“Ye’d be surprised, Miss Peacock,” Murdo said. “We no longer live in caves, you know.”

Her eyes flared with irritation. “Do you know this dance, sir?”

“No.”

She let out a huff. “I assumed you were employing false modesty when you said you couldn’t dance.”

“Why the devil would I do that?”

“It’s a ploy men adopt to secure the attention of a sympathetic lady.”

“Then I must use it when I come across a sympathetic lady .”

She scowled, then nodded toward the line of dancers. “You’d do best to watch and learn, Mr. McTavish, lest you disgrace yourself in the ballroom.”

“I’ve disgraced myself in many rooms, Miss Peacock,” Murdo said, steering her around in a circle in time to the music.

“I daresay you have,” she replied. “No—not that way! The other way.”

“I was following the duke’s steps.”

“The duke is leading the dance and is therefore undertaking a different series of steps. You should follow Mr. Tuffington instead.”

Murdo glanced at his cousin, who steered Miss Goodchild in a figure-of-eight motion, then he matched the steps.

“That’s better,” his partner said. “With luck, Lady Cholmondeley will have no cause to regret inviting you here tonight.”

“Ye think she had cause to regret before?” Murdo asked.

She wrinkled her pretty nose into a sneer. “Lady Cholmondeley is usually discerning in her choice of guests. But we’re not in London now, so her choice is limited. However, that’s no excuse for inviting anyone of poor breeding. Do you have any family?”

“My da’s Laird of Strathburn, but...”

“Laird?” Miss Peacock fixed her gaze on him. “A titled man?”

Murdo nodded.

“Is Strathburn an earldom?”

“Strathburn’s a castle.”

“Are you being deliberately obtuse, Mr. McTavish?”

“I lack the wit to be obtuse,” Murdo replied. “And I’m not in the habit of insulting a lady—intentionally, at least.”

She inclined her head again—a gesture that seemed to convey the condescension of a monarch bestowing benevolence upon one of her subjects.

Heavens! Did every soul in the room possess the same degree of self-satisfaction? Or perhaps it was a trait of the perfect Society lady .

“Oh, Lord!” Miss Peacock huffed.

“Have I taken another wrong turn?” Murdo asked.

“It’s bad enough having to pay court to her mother, even though she’s a duchess—but to pay homage to her is not to be borne.”

“Are ye speaking of the Duchess of Pittchester?” Murdo asked.

“No, that daughter of hers—Miss Martingale. I suppose, being a newcomer, you aren’t aware of the scandal.”

“Scandal?”

“Miss Martingale isn’t the duke’s daughter,” Miss Peacock said. “She’s reported to be the daughter of the duchess’s first husband.”

“Reported to be?”

“There are doubts over her parentage. The duchess had something of a reputation when she was Lady Betty Grey—my mama always remarked on how shocking her behavior was. Outrageous parties, infamous activities—she was known as the Merry

Widow .”

Murdo grimaced as he thought of the bitter old man back home, numbing his self-pity—and drinking away his wealth—with whisky.

“In my experience,” he said, “widows—and widowers—are far from merry .”

“Then you’ve never met a woman who delighted in driving her husband into the grave. We were horrified to hear that she’d snared the Duke of Pittchester. He’s such a stickler for propriety. But then, even the most distinguished man can be fooled by a harlot.”

Murdo recoiled at the spite in her tone.

“As for that spawn of hers,” she continued, “she appeared out of nowhere, some weeks after her mother married the duke. My mama said she once saw her grubbing about in the dirt like an urchin—yet she’s paraded among her betters, as if she were a debutante.”

“I thought all young ladies entering into their first Season were debutantes,” Murdo said.

“Not her,” came the reply. “ She’s nothing but a guttersnipe who drops her aitches and never knows which fork to use.

I saw her eating with her fingers once. Poor Lady Cholmondeley must regret being forced to invite such a creature tonight.

It’s no wonder she spends most balls seated at the side.

Anyone would consider it the worst sort of punishment to stand within ten feet of her,

let alone partner her in a dance. Do you not agree?"

Murdo was spared the necessity of a response as the dance separated them for a few bars. But when they rejoined, she continued, as seamlessly as a vicar delivering a sermon. Evidently, she preferred the sound of her own voice to the music—and to anything else.

Heaven spare me from women!

Yet he was duty bound to marry one.

Well, his future wife wouldn't be the woman standing before him now—nor any woman here tonight.

"She's no social graces to speak of," Miss Peacock continued as the dance concluded and the partners bowed and curtsied before dispersing. "Stupid, ungainly, uncouth, and wild. I can't abide a person who lacks social graces, can you, Mr. McTavish?"

"I find them—unpleasing," he said.

"They're more than unpleasing . Social graces set us apart from the savage. Our world is founded on the traditions and laws by which the educated and accomplished must abide. Those traditions are manifested in social graces."

Sweet devil's ballocks —what was she prattling on about?

"I suppose she should command our pity," Miss Peacock said, giving him an expectant stare. "But you'd be advised to avoid being tainted by association with her."

"Social graces can be taught," Murdo said. "Therefore, a lack of them can be

remedied with a little tuition. But a young woman's character cannot be remedied if it stems from her very soul."

"I don't understand you, sir."

"It's quite simple, Miss Peacock. Miss Martingale can remedy her lack of social graces, but other young ladies will never be able to remedy their lack of kindness.

A young woman who's spiteful to her core will always remain so.

Therefore, it's she who commands our pity, for she deserves little else. "

She frowned, then the confusion in her eyes morphed into outrage.

"Well!" she said. "I have never been so—"

"It was my pleasure, Miss Peacock," Murdo said, bowing over her hand. "But I fear I cannot meet yer exacting requirements and would beg to be excused from a second dance."

Murdo withdrew and crossed the floor to join his cousin on the edge of the ballroom. He grimaced as a pair of young ladies he passed met his gaze and giggled.

Clearly young women hungry for a male partner hunted in pairs.

"I'm in agony," Simon said. "Miss Goodchild trod on my toe."

"Beasts, the lot of them, these women," Murdo said. "I can't think why Englishmen subject themselves to such savagery. They'd be pretty enough if they smiled—but they're all spiteful teeth, envious eyes, and brittle bones."

Simon laughed. “Miss Peacock wouldn’t do for you—she’d snap in two beneath you in the bedchamber. You need a woman as savage as yourself.” He drained his glass, then clapped Murdo on the back. “Back into the fray.”

“Not Miss Goodchild again?”

“I promised her two dances. What man would I be if I didn’t keep my promises?”

“A man with only one broken foot?” Murdo suggested.

Simon chuckled, then made his way across the floor to a red-faced Miss Goodchild.

Murdo plucked a glass from the tray of a passing footman, leaned against the wall, and cast his gaze across the ballroom.

Miss Peacock stood among a group of young ladies who glared in his direction.

He raised his glass to them and chuckled to himself as they tilted their noses in the air and looked away.

The Duke and Duchess of Pittchester were dancing, and Murdo caught sight of their sons—identical to the point where he couldn’t tell which was which—helping themselves to the contents of the punch bowl.

What a complete and utter waste of an evening.

Perhaps he could slip outside and spend the remainder of the evening with the night creatures—they’d be less predatory than the creatures inside.

The skin on the back of his neck tightened, as if light fingertips caressed his flesh, and he caught his breath.

Then he saw her—sitting alone in the corner.

She was unremarkable in every aspect save one—the unsettling expression in her dark eyes. And those eyes were fixed on him.

A jolt hit his body, as if he recognized her on a primal level. An uncomfortable heat threaded through his blood, and he curled his hands into fists to temper the shudder vibrating through his bones.

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Her gaze exuded sharp insight, as if she looked right into his soul. A knot tightened in his heart, as if an invisible thread connected the two of them. She set her glass aside and straightened her stance.

Her eyes belied her age. They were the eyes of someone who'd lived a lifetime already. As they continued to stare at each other, her brow furrowed, and she lifted a hand to her left arm and rubbed it.

Aye, lass, I see yer pain.

As if she heard his thoughts, she stiffened and lowered her hand.

Her gaze still on him, she reached for her glass, but she knocked it over and the contents spilled onto her skirts.

She broke the gaze, and Murdo felt a sharp tug at his soul, like a cord snapping.

He rubbed his eyes and glanced about the ballroom.

But the dance was in full swing, the rest of the party oblivious to the two souls who'd shared a connection.

Fool, that's what ye are, Murdo McTavish.

As he scolded himself, the gray-haired duchess approached the young woman whose dress now bore a dark stain.

Rather than admonish the young woman, she touched her cheek in a gesture of affection.

The young woman, who must be the unfortunate Miss Martingale, smiled at the duchess, and Murdo's heart soared to see it—the glimpse of joy behind the sorrow.

Then the duchess waved at a footman, who scurried over with a cloth.

The duke approached, and the young woman stiffened again, but he patted her hand and gave her the indulgent smile of a doting parent.

The kind of smile Murdo had never received from his own father.

A knot of envy swelled in his gut at the obvious love they shared.

Miss Peacock approached them, and the young woman stiffened, fear clouding her expression.

Miss Peacock issued a simpering smile to the duke and duchess, who smiled in return, then she exchanged a few words with Miss Martingale before gliding away.

Miss Martingale pulled a face at Miss Peacock's retreating back.

Then she stiffened, as if she knew she were being watched, and glanced at Murdo.

He winked, and her mouth twitched into a smile.

The dance drew to a close and a ripple of gloved applause filled the ballroom, then footmen circulated with trays, replenishing glasses.

At the far end of the room, Murdo's cousin was deep in conversation with Miss

Goodchild.

Murdo moved toward them until he caught sight of Miss Peacock, then he veered away and found himself standing before Miss Martingale, who now sat alone once more.

She stiffened, then lifted her gaze to his, apprehension in her chocolate-brown eyes.

Would it be forward to introduce himself? Might her English sensibilities be offended by a stranger approaching her while she sat alone, unchaperoned?

Why do I care about a woman's sensibilities?

Her expression hardened.

"Like what you see?" she sneered.

Murdo recognized her tone for what it was—a layer of armor protecting her unease.

"I-I wondered if ye cared to dance, Miss...?"

She reached for her glass, which had been refilled.

"No."

A refusal he might have expected, but not delivered with such bluntness. Generally, a young lady followed an insult with a social nicety.

"Is that all ye have to say?" he asked.

She sipped her drink, then mischief flickered in her eyes. "I could always ask why

you bothered to ask me to dance.”

“There’s only one reason a man asks a lass to dance.”

“Don’t take me for a fool.”

“I don’t understand.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you think I didn’t see you prancing about with her ?”

“Whom?”

“Spare me!” she said. “No. I don’t want to dance. Not with anyone—least of all with you . Why can’t you and your kind leave me alone?”

She swallowed another mouthful of punch.

His kind ? So that was it—yet another Sassenach who drowned herself in liquor and thought his countrymen beneath her.

“Are ye a poor dancer?” he said. “Or perhaps ye’re only here for the liquor.” He gestured to her skirts. “Ye’ve put it to good use—it’s all that stuff’s good for, given it tastes like rat’s piss.”

He regretted the words almost before he’d finished, and his conscience battered him at the flicker of pain in her eyes.

She blinked, slowly, and her mouth hardened into a thin line. Like all prey, her hostility was a shield to conceal her vulnerability. And, utter bastard that he was, he’d just ripped it from her.

“Miss Martingale, forgive me,” he said. “I didn’t mean—”

“How do you know my name?” she said. Then she glanced toward Miss Peacock and let out a mirthless laugh. “Of course—you heard it from Little Miss Fancy-Tits.”

Devil’s ballocks , she had a mouth on her.

“Perhaps, Miss Martingale, ye’ve had too much—” he began, but she jerked her arm forward and a splash of cold liquid exploded in his face.

He staggered back, tasting punch on his lips as the sticky liquid trickled down his cheeks. Then he lifted his hand and plucked something from his upper lip—a slice of peach.

“ Well! ” a voice cried. “I’ve never seen anything the like!”

“What can we expect from her ?” Miss Peacock said. “She shouldn’t be allowed out in Polite Society.”

Murdo turned toward Miss Peacock, then he smiled and popped the peach slice into his mouth, before resuming his attention on Miss Martingale, who now bore a look of wide-eyed terror.

“Sweet Lord! What’s happened?” The duchess appeared, her eyes gleaming with anger. “What have you done ?”

“Ma’am, don’t be angry with the lass,” Murdo said. “I asked her to indulge in a game my countrymen play on occasion. Ye see—I was thirsty and wanted to taste her drink, and she obligingly gave it to me.”

“Do all Scots toss their drinks at each other?” the duchess asked.

“Only when there’s an R in the month.”

“It’s June ,” she retorted.

“Then she can toss a drink at me when September comes,” Murdo said. “I’ll make sure to keep my mouth open.”

Miss Martingale let out a snort. Murdo met her gaze, and his heart swelled as her lips curved upward and mirth danced in her eyes.

“At last!” he cried. “If I’m not to be gifted with your hand for this next dance, then I’ll settle for a smile.” He turned to the duchess. “Ma’am, there’s nothing to admonish this young lady over. She’s committed no sin.”

She fixed her imperious gaze on him. “I know that. I was asking you what you’d done to upset my daughter.”

“It wasn’t my intention to cause her pain,” Murdo said. “If I did, I apologize unreservedly.”

He glanced at Miss Martingale, hoping for another smile, but she scowled.

“Have I caused further offense?” he asked.

“In my experience, an unreserved apology is a false one,” she replied. “It’s weak to apologize when you don’t mean what you say.”

“Are ye accusing me of falsehood?” he asked.

“No, I’m accusing you of sycophancy toward a duchess.”

“Clara, my love,” the duchess said, placing a hand on Miss Martingale’s shoulder. Then she turned her clear gaze to Murdo. “Is that what you’re indulging in, sir? Sycophancy?”

“It’s the last thing me and my kind can be accused of,” Murdo said, “though we Scots are often subjected to prejudice.”

Miss Martingale colored. “I-I didn’t mean...”

“What can we accuse you of, sir?” the duchess asked.

“Our frankness,” Murdo replied. “We’re too honest for our own good, which lands us in trouble up to our ballocks.”

Miss Martingale let out a coarse laugh, then stopped herself, her cheeks reddening further.

“Clara, my love...”

“I know, Mama,” Miss Martingale replied. “I’m trying to behave, honest.”

“But it’s difficult when such a model of bad behavior stands before ye?” Murdo said.

Footsteps approached and two identical young men joined them, their stern blue gazes directed at Murdo.

“What have you done to upset our sister?” one said.

“It’s my fault, Corn,” Miss Martingale said. “I’ve landed myself in trouble up to my...” She glanced at Murdo, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

“Ballocks?” Murdo suggested.

She giggled, but the young man frowned.

“Clarry, you promised Mama Betty you’d behave tonight. You’ll never triumph in London if you can’t learn.”

Her smile disappeared and Murdo’s heart tightened at the dejection in her eyes.

“I think your sister’s perfect as she is,” he said.

“And who are you ?” the young man asked.

“An admirer—that’s what he is,” his twin said.

“Don’t be a fool, Nate. How can a man admire our sister when he doesn’t know her?”

“Perhaps that’s why he admires her.”

“ You’re hardly awash with admirers, Nate,” Miss Martingale said, “though doubtless you’ll say that’s because you’re my brother and nobody wants me for a sister-in-law.”

“Then they can go to hell and rot, Clarry. Nobody insults my favorite sister.”

“She’s our only sister.”

“Don’t spoil the moment, Corn. I’m trying to be gallant.”

“You wouldn’t know gallantry if it stabbed you in the arse,” Miss Martingale said. Then she glanced at her mother, as if awaiting admonishment.

Murdo grinned at the duchess. “How can I not admire yer daughter when she speaks with such frankness?” he said. “Forgive me for not observing etiquette, but let me make reparation. Would ye do me the honor of introducing me to yer daughter?”

“I don’t know who you are myself,” the duchess said.

“Permit me to introduce myself,” Murdo said, clicking his heels together and bowing. “I’m Murdo Alastair James McTavish.”

“Then, Murdo Alastair James McTavish, I am Elizabeth, Duchess of Pittchester.” She gestured to the young men. “These are my sons, Lord Cornelius Martingale and Lord Nathaniel Martingale. And this”—she placed a hand on the young woman’s shoulder—“is my daughter, Miss Clara Martingale.”

Miss Martingale flinched, and Murdo understood enough, from Miss Peacock’s tales, why she was referred to as a mere Miss .

“May I dance the next with ye, Miss Martingale?” he said, offering his hand. “Though I fear I’m ungainly on my feet.”

She glanced at his boots, then lifted her gaze slowly, pausing at his bare knees. Her nostrils flared and Murdo’s manhood twitched under his plaid as he caught a spark of desire in her eyes.

Aye, lass, there’s a real man standing before ye tonight.

What might she make of him if he lifted his plaid to reveal the jewels that lay beneath?

She parted her lips, and the tip of her tongue flicked out to moisten her lower lip.

She reached toward Murdo's proffered hand, and his skin tightened in anticipation.

Then a gong sounded, and she jerked back.

"Time for supper, mes amis !" Lady Cholmondeley trilled.

"Might I escort your daughter to supper, Yer Grace?" Murdo asked.

Doubt and mistrust swirled in Miss Martingale's eyes, then she shook her head.

Swallowing his disappointment, Murdo bowed again. "Perhaps another time."

Ballocks . What had frightened her off?

More to the point—who?

Then he caught Miss Peacock watching them, spite glittering from her eyes.

There really was no predator worse in the world than the perfect Society lady .

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Clara clung to her mother as they entered the dining room.

Sweet heaven—who was that man? He seemed as out of place here as Clara herself.

Not conforming to Society etiquette, he'd approached her, his body filling her field of vision, like a huge beast emerging from his lair.

But, unlike the lords and ladies who used polite niceties to disguise their contempt, this huge Scot had spoken with a brutal frankness that resonated with her at a primal level.

She could never have believed such men existed in the circle of Society in which she now resided. Every creature she'd encountered since her stepfather brought her here stared at her as if she didn't belong—as if she were wrong .

And she was wrong—a feral creature from the slums of London, with coarse manners and unsavory ideas.

She would never be one of them. For if the ladies and gentlemen who resided in this little corner of Northumberland could spot that she was a misfit at a single glance, what hope did she have of convincing the men and women of the—what did Mama call it?

Oh yes—the ton .

Why could she never remember the names for everything? Ton, cotillion, quadrille, modiste ...

These people with whom she was now required to socialize were like foreigners—they spoke a different language. They were a different species altogether.

None of them were like Papa Harcourt, who, though strict to the point where Clara was a little afraid of him, was always fair—generous in his praise, and patient in his censure.

Not once had he raised his voice to her in anger, let alone his hand.

Instead, he left her to her harshest critic—her own conscience.

But the other inhabitants of this strange world treated her with loathing, as if they knew the blackness that resided in her soul—that piece of her that was spawned from evil.

And yet, among the swarm of enemies here tonight, she had sensed an ally—a lone man who stared at her from across the dance floor, his penetrating gaze breaking through her armor until he saw her and recognized her.

But, instead of looking away in disgust, he regarded her with understanding and desire.

And that desire was more unsettling than the contempt or ridicule she'd weathered since entering Society—more terrifying than the beatings she'd endured as a child.

Her fear was not of what he might do—but of how he made her feel .

When he'd approached her, a delicious heat bloomed in her belly, and a deep, wicked ache pulsed between her legs, in that secret place where she touched herself at night, closing her eyes to relive the memory of the wicked sights she'd glimpsed in her former life—drunken men taking their pleasures in the dark streets by London's

docks; sailors who tossed coins at painted women before lifting their skirts...

And Clara, in her wickedness, had felt her body turn to liquid at the sight as she imagined what it might be like to have a man between her thighs.

Such as Murdo Alastair James McTavish.

What might it feel like to have him touch her...there?

Her foot caught in the hem of her gown, and she tripped.

"Careful, Clara, dear," Mama said, steadying her, and Clara's heart jolted as she looked up to see the object of her fascination staring at her.

Did he know his own potency—that he could have her bend to his will and yield to his touch?

Yes, he did. With one glance of those deep emerald eyes, he could read her soul—her innermost, wickedest desires.

It was not to be borne. Not even Mama Betty knew of her wickedness. And doubtless if he learned of her desire, he'd laugh at her like the others—call her guttersnipe, as Miss Peacock did.

"Let's get you something to eat," Mama said. "Lady Cholmondeley told me she's set a place for you with the other young people."

"Can't I sit with you and Papa Harcourt?"

"My dear, you need to learn—as others do—that you're as good as the rest of them.

” Mama lowered her voice. “We wouldn’t want to give the other girls here the satisfaction of believing you fear them, would we?”

Once you’ve weathered this party, you’ll be able to weather anything in London Society.

And your brothers won’t be sitting too far away. ”

Clara hesitated, then Lady Cholmondeley appeared. “Miss Martingale, let me show you to your seat,” she said. “You can be assured, Duchess, that your daughter’s in safe hands with me.”

Mama nodded, and Clara let their hostess lead her toward the dining table where the unattached young people sat. Her gut churned with apprehension as she spotted Miss Peacock’s venomous gaze, and her heart sank as her hostess steered her toward a seat opposite her nemesis.

She’d endured worse in the slums of London—how bad could one meal sitting opposite a spiteful young woman be?

Could the evening get any worse?

Far from being able to demonstrate the table manners she’d learned in the weeks since her stepfather had plucked her from London’s slums, Clara had, so far, managed to exhibit the behavior that justified all the witticisms aimed in her direction about guttersnipes and urchins .

Her dinner companions had managed to maneuver themselves such that there was an empty space either side of her, then engaged in a whispered conversation which she was only partially able to hear, sharing the confidences of best friends.

And, given that she hadn't a single friend here tonight, Clara couldn't expect to be privy to their conversation.

Not that she wanted to—most likely the topic of their discussion was limited to ribbons, lace, and other fripperies.

Her only allies, her stepbrothers, were at a separate table for the young men.

Clearly Lady Cholmondeley didn't trust the sexes to behave appropriately together.

She had a point, if what Nate had said about Mr. Barrington-Smythe and his wife were true—they'd been caught in flagrante delicto in Lady Cholmondeley's library during a Christmas house party, after which they were married somewhat hastily.

Clara glanced across the room, where Corn and Nate were engaged in laughter, as if they actually enjoyed this hideous party. But they'd been born into privilege and knew by instinct which fork to use, how to address a countess, and how to make socially acceptable conversation.

Her stomach had growled with hunger, much to the amusement of Miss Peacock, who seemed to be watching her every move, waiting to point out each faux pas.

When Clara had audibly scraped her spoon against the bowl during the soup course, Miss Peacock had issued a gasp of horror and shared a pained expression with her neighbor.

A footman placed a plate of chicken in the center of the table, complete with serving spoons.

Heavens—was she expected to serve herself? Surely she'd drop the chicken, making herself a laughingstock.

“Do try the chicken, Miss Martingale,” Miss Peacock said, fixing her cold gaze on Clara.

“I-I think I’ll try the bread first,” Clara said, reaching for a knife.

“Oh no !” Miss Peacock exclaimed, shaking her head in mock sympathy. “My dear Miss Martingale, while I applaud your efforts at the dinner table, I feel it necessary to inform you that the knife you’re holding is not a butter knife. It’s for the main course.”

Clara’s cheeks warmed as several pairs of eyes focused on her. Only Miss Goodchild’s expression lacked the malignance of the others, doubtless due to her state of inebriation—she was on her fourth glass of wine.

“I trust you understand the kindness meant in my giving you a little advice, Clara,” Miss Peacock continued. “I can call you Clara, can’t I? While a certain degree of gaucheness is permitted in a country setting, I fear London Society will be considerably less forgiving. Is that not right, ladies?”

Her companions nodded.

“Are you to be presented at court next year?” Miss Peacock continued.

Clara nodded, and Miss Peacock raised her eyebrows.

“Well! I wish you luck in your endeavors to act with decorum before the queen. We all wish you luck, don’t we, ladies?”

The other girls nodded, their feathered headdresses dancing in unison.

“I’m sure if you put in sufficient effort, you’ll give the appearance of gentility, at

least,” Miss Peacock said. “Effort should always be applauded, even if it cannot go hand in hand with an equal degree of achievement.”

What was it about women of Miss Peacock’s class that compelled them to use as many words as possible when issuing insults?

“I’d be willing to give you a few pointers,” she continued, twisting her pretty mouth into a smile of superiority. She gestured toward Clara’s place setting. “The butter knife is the small one with the blade that’s rounded at the tip. On the side plate, there.”

Clara stared at the knife, cursing herself. Of course! Mama had told her that countless times.

“You use the plate to your left, not your right, for the bread,” Miss Peacock said. “But your wineglass is on the right.”

“I know that ,” Clara retorted.

“Then there’s hope for you after all.” Miss Peacock gestured to the knife. “Pick it up, then!”

Clara reached for the knife. Her hand shook, and it slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. Female laughter rippled through the company, which increased as she leaned over to pick it up and collided with a footman.

“Let me, miss,” he said, as the laughter increased, and Clara righted herself, her cheeks flaming.

“My dear Miss Martingale, how you amuse!” Miss Peacock said.

“It’s not done for ladies to retrieve fallen objects—that’s for servants and the lower classes.

But we should make allowances with your being new to Society.

Now, perhaps you might show us what to do next.

Ought you use the main-course knife for your bread? ”

Why did Miss Peacock continue to torment her? She was like the cat in the kitchens at Pittchester Castle when it had caught a mouse, toying with its prey as if it relished the creature’s suffering—at least until the cook shooed it away with a broom.

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But there was no cook to shoo Miss Peacock away.

Clara glanced about. Ought she take the butter knife from one of the empty spaces next to her? No—the look of relish in Miss Peacock’s eyes told her that it was best to remain still and go hungry.

As if in protest, Clara’s stomach growled again.

Then a deep male voice spoke.

“Allow me.”

Clara looked up, and her belly flipped as she saw a pair of dark-green eyes focused on her.

He gestured to the empty seat. “May I?”

She nodded, and he sat, the chair creaking beneath his huge frame. He reached for his butter knife and handed it to her.

“Very charitable, I’m sure, Mr. McTavish,” Miss Peacock said. “But Miss Martingale doesn’t appear to be hungry.”

“Well, I am,” he said.

He reached toward the plate in the center of the table and picked up a chicken thigh with his hands.

Miss Peacock gasped as he tore a piece of meat off the bone with his teeth. He continued to eat, while the remainder of the table stared, then he placed the bone on his side plate.

“Delicious,” he said. “Food is best eaten with fingers to enjoy it to the full. What say ye, Miss Martingale?”

“I...” Clara hesitated, aware of Miss Peacock’s gaze on her.

“It’s more considerate, also,” he continued, picking up another piece. “I fail to see why we should create extra work for the servants by dirtying cutlery when our fingers were made for just such a purpose. Miss Martingale, ye must try this chicken.”

He offered the piece to her and winked.

Clara took it, then nibbled at the chicken.

“There’s a flaw in your argument, Mr. McTavish,” Miss Peacock said, when Clara had finished the chicken and set the bone aside. “Fingers, as well as forks, need to be cleaned.”

“We can do that ourselves, Miss Peacock.” He licked his fingers, running the tip of his tongue along the length, before slipping them inside his mouth.

His eyes sparkled with pleasure as he fixed his emerald gaze on Clara, and she shifted her position as a wicked heat coursed through her.

“Miss Martingale will ye join me?” he said, his voice a low rasp.

Clara glanced across the dining room to where her parents sat with Lady Cholmondeley, but they were deep in conversation. Encouraged by her companion’s

smile, she slipped her fingers into her mouth.

“Oh, that’s good , Miss Martingale,” he said.

“ I don’t think so,” Miss Peacock huffed.

Miss Goodchild giggled and reached for a piece of chicken.

“Marion!” Miss Peacock said. “Would you indulge in the habits of urchins?”

“You must admit it’s easier, Louise,” Miss Goodchild said.

Miss Peacock picked up the serving spoons. She scooped up a piece of chicken, which slipped and fell onto the table.

Clara’s companion chuckled. “Miss Peacock is in need of a little more practice at the dinner table.”

Miss Goodchild let out a snort that turned into a cough, and she reached for her glass.

Miss Peacock’s cheeks reddened, and she rose to her feet.

“Aren’t you staying for dessert, Louise?” Miss Goodchild asked.

“I’m no longer hungry, Marion. I cannot eat in the company of those who lack self-control. I find myself in need of a little air and would suggest that your constitution would benefit from it. Come, ladies—let us leave these... people .”

A number of the young ladies rose, and Miss Peacock stared at Miss Goodchild.

“Are you coming?”

“What, and miss Lady Cholmondeley’s syllabub?”

“There’s more important things than syllabub ,” Miss Peacock said.

A footman approached with a tray of glass bowls filled with a pale-lemon-colored dessert and set one in front of each place setting. Miss Goodchild’s eyes widened, and she picked up her spoon and dipped it in.

Mr. McTavish let out a laugh. “I daresay there are more important things than syllabub—but not at this precise moment.”

Miss Peacock exited the dining room, followed by several others. Miss Goodchild, who’d finished her syllabub, turned her gaze to the bowl at Miss Peacock’s now-empty place.

“Take it, Miss Goodchild,” Mr. McTavish said.

She shook her head. “It wouldn’t be proper.”

“Ye want it, don’t ye?”

“Of course,” she replied. “Lady Cholmondeley’s syllabub is the best in the county, and I’ve been looking forward to it all evening.”

“But?”

She blushed. “Louise says I eat too much.”

“And she eats too little,” he said. “What’s the point in living if ye cannot indulge in a little...pleasure?”

Clara's body pulsed with anticipation as he curled his tongue around the last word. Then he pushed Miss Peacock's bowl toward Miss Goodchild, swapping it with her empty bowl.

"There!" he said. "It's yers now to enjoy."

"What if Miss Peacock returns?"

"I doubt she'd take as much enjoyment from it as ye, Miss Goodchild—and a good meal should always be relished."

He picked up Clara's spoon and placed it in her hand, curling her fingers around until her hand was engulfed in his.

Unlike the smooth hands of Society gentlemen, his were rough, with callouses that abraded deliciously against her skin.

They were the hands of a savage, a man used to toil—a man who had no time for the niceties of Society.

Yet, unlike the genteel creatures here tonight, he was the only one who'd noticed her distress and come to her aid.

Her champion.

He leaned close, his breath tickling her neck as he lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Now, Miss Martingale, it's time for yer pleasure."

His voice, thick with seduction, vibrated through her bones until her senses were thrumming with anticipation.

“M-my pleasure?”

“Oh, yes,” he growled as he guided her hand to her bowl and dipped her spoon in, lifting out a spoonful of the creamy dessert.

Then he moved the spoon to her lips.

“Eat,” he said. “Open for me.”

Oh my!

Clara glanced about the room—surely the company would see, merely from her face, what scandalous sensations he was eliciting.

But they were occupied elsewhere—Miss Goodchild with what looked like her third bowl of syllabub, Corn and Nate laughing together, and her parents deep in conversation, with eyes only for each other.

“Eyes on me, lass.”

Her body resonated with his low command, and she met his gaze while she slipped the spoon into her mouth. The flavor burst on her tongue—the tang of lemon, balanced by the creamy, smooth sweetness—and she let out a groan.

“Do ye take pleasure at my hand?”

She drew in a sharp breath. His potency assaulted her senses—the spicy scent of man, his low voice vibrating through her center, and his strong, firm hand. How was it that a man could elicit such a desire to yield on a first acquaintance?

“I—I cannot...”

He released her hand and withdrew, and she fought the sense of loss.

“Forgive me, Miss Martingale,” he said. “Miss Peacock is right—I’m a savage compared to the company tonight.”

“As am I,” Clara said, dipping her spoon into her dessert once more.

“But I’d be false if I said that I wouldn’t take immense pleasure from feeding ye each bite of that dessert.”

She closed her eyes, battling the primal desire thickening in her belly.

He leaned back. “It’s too intimate an act to perform in public—but I enjoy many such intimate acts.”

“Such as?” Clara asked before she could stop herself.

He let out a low growl. “Oh, Miss Martingale, ye shouldn’t ask a question if ye’re not prepared to hear the answer.”

The ache between her legs intensified and she squeezed her thighs together.

His nostrils flared, as if he scented her need, and shame engulfed her.

Then she glanced up and saw her mother staring across the dining room, her sharp, insightful gaze fixed on Clara.

Mama loved her dearly, but even she’d be shocked at the wicked thoughts in Clara’s mind.

Then Mama glanced at Clara’s companion and her gaze darkened with disapproval.

Mama wanted her to marry a gentleman—to lift her from the life of savagery she'd been raised in.

The man next to her—the only man for whom she felt any interest—was doubtless the very last man Mama would want to associate with her.

And the last thing Clara wanted to do was disappoint the mother who loved her more than life—the woman who had sacrificed everything for her.

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Devil's ballocks , she was a fine lass, indeed!

The wicked gleam in her eyes as she devoured the piece of chicken like a savage spoke of a wild abandon begging to be unleashed.

And Murdo had learned from the moment he knew what his cock was for that women who relished their food with such abandon made the best bedmates. If the little sighs and groans Miss Martingale elicited were anything to go by, she would howl like a wildcat in heat when she came to pleasure.

As he guided the dessert spoon to her mouth, his cock twitched with eagerness to be buried inside her, and he'd almost spent at her wicked response when he referred to intimate acts .

He'd noticed the disapproving look from the duchess—what man could fail to feel those sharp eyes burning into him?

But her daughter was a wild, wanton creature.

Did the duchess know how wild she was? No innocent young maiden would meet his gaze with such a wicked expression in her eyes and not understand his meaning.

Maidens untouched by a man carried an air about them—a lack of understanding of the pleasures that could be taken from their bodies.

It mattered not that she was unlikely to be a maiden. With a woman such as her in his bed, he'd not be starved of pleasure.

As the footmen cleared the plates, Lady Cholmondeley announced the resumption of the dancing, and the party filed into the ballroom. As Miss Martingale rose, Murdo caught her hand.

“May I partner ye for this next dance?”

“I lack the talent for it,” she said. “Miss Peacock says I’m a clumsy fool.”

“I doubt yer ineptitude would match mine,” he said. “We could be inept together and tread on everybody’s feet.”

“My mother wouldn’t approve.”

“Of treading on everyone’s feet—or dancing with me?”

She lowered her gaze.

“Would she approve if I sat with ye rather than danced?” he asked.

She nodded, and he steered her to a seat while the rest of the guests milled about.

“If ye don’t like dancing, Miss Martingale, what do ye like?”

“Long walks,” she said. “Climbing on rocks, eating out of doors in the wild.”

“And ye do that at home?”

“Yes.” She smiled, and an expression of contentment filled her eyes. “The moors around Pittchester Castle are exhilarating. I never imagined such a place could exist. Wide-open spaces with not a person to be seen for miles. What could be more perfect?”

“Ye’re not fond of people?”

“Not particularly. People believe the land exists to be owned by them, whereas we belong to the land.”

“A rather strange philosophy for a young woman about to embark on her debut,” he said.

“How did you know that?” Her smile disappeared. “I suppose Miss Peacock was kind enough to describe all my faults while you were dancing. What else did she say?”

“Nothing I cared to hear,” he said. “But I’m sure yer debut in London will be a success.”

She snorted. “I didn’t take you for a flatterer.”

“Have ye visited London before?”

She stiffened, and her eyes took on a hunted expression. “My stepfather has a house there, but I’ve yet to visit it.”

“Then perhaps ye’ll enjoy your stay. If ye’re fond of walking, I hear the parks are beautiful.”

“But filled with people,” she said. “So many people, Mama says. Besides, I’m not going there to walk. I’m going to find a husband.”

Envy stabbed at his heart.

“Do ye want to go?” he asked.

“No.”

Murdo waved down a passing footman bearing a tray of glasses and took two. He offered her one and she shook her head.

“I think I’ve had enough,” she said. “If I drink any more, I’m in danger of saying something I’ll regret. I wouldn’t want to overindulge like poor Miss Goodchild.”

“Quite so,” Murdo said, glancing across the ballroom to where Simon was steering the lady in question around the dance floor while she laughed uncontrollably, the sound reminiscent of a man sawing wood. “She’ll have a sore head in the morning, but at least she’s in safe hands with my cousin.”

“That’s your cousin?” Miss Martingale asked.

“Aye—Mr. Tuffington. Do ye know him?”

“I’ve met him once, at an agricultural show,” she said. “He seems a little less reprehensible than other men.”

“Ought I to be insulted?” he asked, laughing.

“Very well—less reprehensible than most men.”

“Am I like most men?”

“No,” she said, her eyes darkening. “I’d never describe you as being like most men .” Then she smiled. “Before you ask, Mr. McTavish, that was not an insult.”

He took her hand, and her lips parted. Desire flared in her eyes, then she stiffened and withdrew. Once again, the skin on the back of Murdo’s neck tightened, and he

glanced across the room to see the duchess staring at him, her brow furrowed into a frown.

“Your mother seems very protective of ye,” he said.

“I owe her my life.”

“Doesn’t every mother’s child?”

“I owe her more than most.”

“So, ye’re going to London for her sake?”

“Mama knows what’s best for me. She wants me to have a Season—and everything that was denied her, so I don’t have to—” She broke off and shook her head. “Why am I telling you this? I hardly know you.”

“I’m sure yer Season will be a success.”

“I fear I’ll be a disappointment.”

“I doubt that, lass.”

She let out a bitter laugh. “I told you I didn’t like to be flattered. Even you must acknowledge I don’t fit in here. In that, Miss Peacock’s right—and she’s also right when she says that the kind of man who’d want someone like me is never to be found among London Society.”

“I disagree,” he said, his heart aching at the resignation in her voice. “Ye’re everything that a sensible man would want—bright, quick-witted, and with a healthy ignorance of the ways of a lady.”

“Now you’re insulting me.”

“I’m being honest, lass,” he said, “even if it lands me in trouble up to my ballocks.”

She stifled a giggle, and his heart warmed at the spark in her eyes.

“I believe we share equal frankness, lass, that’s lacking among the company tonight—and perhaps we share a common interest.”

“Which is?”

“The wild outdoors,” he said. “If ye think Northumberland’s wild and untamed, then the Highlands are to Northumberland as a lion is to a mouse.”

Her eyes shone with eagerness. “Is that so?”

“Do ye not know of the Highlands? Didn’t yer governess teach you geography?”

She colored. “I’ve had no governess.”

“Yer schoolteacher?”

“I’ve not been to school. Mama has employed a tutor, though he says I’m terribly ignorant. But I can read and write.”

“I should hope so,” he said, laughing.

She blinked, and a sheen of moisture glistened in her eyes.

He took her hand. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to distress ye,” he said.

“Though many people know of the Highlands, few have visited. Perhaps that’s why I love it—the land is untainted by people who wish to claim it for themselves.

My countrymen treat the land with love—as ye say, we believe that we belong to the land. Everything I do is for my homeland.”

“And it’s wilder than Northumberland?”

“Aye,” he said. “Rugged and savage. The rocks are the bones of the land, and the soil its flesh. When I hear the cries of the eagles in the sky and the stags in rut in the foothills, I know I’m home, among the green foothills and the purple mountains.”

“Purple?”

“Aye, lass. Bathed in heather, they are—nature’s blanket—and topped with white. And lochs that stretch for miles along the glens, the water cool and clear, with the taste of the mountain.” He squeezed her hand. “Do ye know what Murdo means, lass?”

She shook her head.

“It means sea warrior—and that I am. There’s nothing more pleasurable than to feel the water against my skin.”

“Y-you bathe outdoors ?” her eyes widened. “Is that not improper?”

“Aye,” he said. “But, by the standards of gentlefolk, everything we do in the Highlands is improper. It’s what heightens our pleasure.

And it’s a test of our manhood—to dive into the water on midwinter’s day, then return home for a dram of whisky by the fire.

It's as close to perfection as a man can come. ”

“How I'd love to see it,” she said.

“Perhaps ye will.”

“You think so?”

Miss Martingale gazed at him with an air of childish innocence.

What a contradiction she was! Though the daughter of a duchess, she lacked the refined accent of a Society lady.

She seemed older than the other unattached ladies in the room, and her body's reaction spoke of an experienced woman, yet at times, her wide-eyed na?veté was that of a bairn.

“I'm certain of it,” he replied, pleasure coursing through his veins as she smiled at the prospect. “I could issue an invitation to yer father.”

Her smile waned. “I don't know. Papa Harcourt's very strict. He said that if I did not behave properly tonight, he'd keep me confined at home until he deemed me ready for my debut. He... Oh!”

She let out a low cry and stiffened, withdrawing her hand.

Murdo turned to see the duke and duchess approaching.

The duchess's gaze was sharp enough to split a granite boulder.

The duke's eyes, though less intense than his wife's, regarded Murdo with a level of

quiet dignity and thoughtfulness, as if he sized him up and found him wanting.

“Are you well, daughter?” the duchess said.

Miss Martingale colored. “Yes, Mama. Mr. McTavish was kind enough to sit with me at supper.”

“So I saw,” the duke said. “Did you not realize, young man, that Lady Cholmondeley’s seating plan was intended to separate the young men from the young women?”

“Mr. McTavish came to my assistance, Papa Harcourt,” Miss Martingale said.

“He did , did he?” The duke raked his gaze over Murdo’s form. “And who might you be?”

“My love, this is Mr. McTavish,” the duchess said. “The Scotsman I was telling you about.”

“I see.” He turned to Miss Martingale. “Is this the young man you threw your drink over, Clara?”

She shifted in her seat.

“It was at my behest,” Murdo said.

“I find that hard to believe.” The duke stared at his stepdaughter. “Clara?”

“Yer daughter’s behavior has been exemplary tonight, Yer Grace,” Murdo said.

The corner of the duke’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Really?”

“In fact, I’d like yer permission to court her.”

Miss Martingale drew in a sharp breath. Hope flared in her eyes, then she glanced at her stepfather and the hope died.

“That’s a little presumptuous, is it not?” the duchess said.

“Perhaps,” Murdo said, “but it’s a compliment to yer daughter that I wish to know her better.”

“Why do you wish to know her better?” the duke asked, his eyes clouding with suspicion. “Are you in search of a dowry?”

“My love,” the duchess whispered, placing a hand on the duke’s arm. Then she turned to Murdo. “My husband has a point,” she said. “My daughter is unused to Society. I wouldn’t want her taken advantage of. She’s a little different to the other young women here tonight.”

“Which is precisely why I wish to court her,” Murdo said. “She’s a free spirit, like myself. I’ve no interest in perfect Society misses.”

“That may be the case,” the duke said, “but you have no right to ask my permission to court my daughter.”

Miss Martingale’s body seemed to deflate with disappointment.

Then the duke met her gaze. “You must ask hers .”

Her lips parted and her eyes flared with joy.

“After all,” the duke said, giving her an indulgent smile, “it’s not me you intend to

court—is that not right, Clara?”

“Y-yes, Papa.”

“Then may I call on yer daughter tomorrow?” Murdo asked.

“Are you staying nearby?”

“With my aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Tuffington.”

“Ah, we know the family,” the duke said, nodding. “The younger son is a great friend of my sons, though only the elder was here tonight, much to the boys’ disappointment. Why don’t we invite you all for tea?” He turned to the duchess. “My love, will you issue the invitation?”

“If that’s what Clara wants,” she said.

Murdo took Miss Martingale’s hand and lifted it. Her breath caught as he brushed his lips against her skin, and his manhood hardened at the eagerness in her eyes. Unable to conquer the primal urge to claim her, he nipped the back of her hand. Her eyes flared with desire.

“Yes please ,” she whispered.

“That’s settled, then,” the duchess said. “I’ll write to your aunt directly. Now, Harcourt, you promised me another turn on the dance floor.”

“My love, I think I’m done for the evening.”

“Nonsense!” she chided her husband. “Dancing is good for the limbs, even at our age.” She lowered her voice and leaned toward him. “And if you ache when the

evening's done, I can apply my special liniment.”

The duke's steady expression faltered, and a flare of passion flickered in his gaze.

Devil's ballocks —what must it be like to still harbor such passion at their age?

Murdo glanced at Miss Martingale. She was studying her hand, a smile of anticipation on her lips, as she brushed her fingertips over the red mark on her skin where he'd branded her as his.

Miss Martingale was not a woman to be courted—she was a woman to be claimed .

And, judging by the eagerness in her expression, she would enjoy it as much as he.

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Clara brushed her fingertips across the back of her hand.

Where he'd bitten her—he'd actually bitten her!

Like a savage beast marking his possession.

The sharp sting of his teeth had sent a thrill coursing through her veins and a fizz of desire straight to her center.

No London gentleman would behave so inappropriately—yet she had relished it.

The little indents from his teeth had faded, leaving a faint red mark. But unlike the scar on her arm, it was not the mark of ownership, of subjugation, declaring her as nothing more than a commodity to be exploited for the satisfaction of others—it was a mark of desire.

And it was most improper. She could only imagine how Miss Peacock would react to such an act.

But I'm not like Miss Peacock, or those other ladies, no matter how much Mama wants me to be.

“Have you something to tell us, sister?”

She glanced across the carriage to see her brothers staring at her, then lowered her hand and leaned back in her seat.

Cornelius nudged Nathaniel.

“She does, Nate, doesn’t she? I recognize that look on her face.”

“What look?” she asked.

“When you’ve been up to mischief again. What have you done this time?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing, eh?” Cornelius teased. “I overheard Miss Peacock say you threw a glass of punch over someone because he asked you to dance.”

Her stepfather leaned forward. “Is that so, Clara? Mr. McTavish said he’d encouraged you to do it.”

“Surely you didn’t believe that tale?” Clara’s mother said, laughing. “I daresay Mr. McTavish was being gallant.”

“He seemed something of a savage to me.”

“I found him charming, for all that he’s a little...rough at the edges,” Mama said. “But what matters most is whether Clara finds him charming.”

“Tuffers thinks highly of him,” Nathaniel said. “He’s his cousin, you know. Tuffers calls him the unicorn.”

“Why unicorn?” Clara asked.

Nathaniel rolled his eyes. “Don’t you know your history? King James V was known as the unicorn.”

“You’re making it up,” Clara said. “There was no King James V.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Nathaniel replied. “He was King of Scotland when Henry VIII was King of England. Papa might remember—aren’t you old enough to have known him?”

“Less of that, young man,” Clara’s stepfather said. “You’re not too old to be given the strap.” He winked at Clara.

“Who’s King of Scotland now?” Clara asked.

“The same as the King of England,” Cornelius said.

“The crowns were united when James I took the throne. He was James VI of Scotland, you know. So, you see, there was a James V. Nathaniel isn’t lying—this time, at least.” He gave his brother a push.

“Stop teasing her—she can’t help not knowing.

She’s learned twice as much over the past few months than you’ve learned in a lifetime.”

Clara’s cheeks warmed at the reference to her past. But her stepbrothers loved her regardless, weathering her behavior when she’d arrived at Pittchester Castle, a savage creature, all teeth, claws, and curses, determined to hate everything and everyone.

Nathaniel grinned, a wicked glint in his eyes.

“The unicorn’s a magnificent beast, you know,” he said. “He has a single horn.”

“I know,” Clara said.

“A very potent horn. You can tell us about it when he shows it to you.”

“Nathaniel Martingale, I’m warning you,” Papa Harcourt growled. “If you’ve nothing sensible to say about Mr. McTavish, I suggest you keep quiet. I’m not above tossing you out of the carriage and making you walk the rest of the way home.”

Nathaniel folded his arms and sat back.

“Tuffers spent last summer at their home in the Highlands,” Cornelius said. “He said it was the largest estate he’d ever seen, larger even than ours. We could go hunting there if you marry him.”

“Cornelius, don’t get ahead of yourself,” Mama said. “Clara’s only met him once.”

“But you like him, don’t you?” Cornelius said. “I can tell.”

“Tuffers said his father wasn’t very amiable,” Nathaniel said. “A little too fond of liquor—he was in his cups almost every night when Tuffers was there, or so he said.”

“Clara won’t be marrying the father, Nate.”

“That’s enough!” Clara’s stepfather roared. “Can’t you spare your poor sister from your teasing for five minutes? Not to mention my ears. Dear Lord, I relish the peace and quiet when you’re at Oxford.”

“Sorry, Father,” Cornelius said. “We’re just happy that Clara’s found someone who—”

“Who what?” Clara said. “Who can tolerate my company?”

Cornelius took her hand. “No, sister, someone who might be worthy of you. And

never you worry. If Mr. McTavish does anything to cause you pain, I'll hold him down while Nate cuts off his"—he hesitated—"his..."

"Ballocks?" Nathaniel suggested, and Clara giggled.

"I'll tell him that when he visits," Mama said, "or perhaps you'd like to, Nathaniel?"

"We'll tell him together," Cornelius said.

"Very wise," Mama replied with a laugh. "You're best confronting him as a pair. He strikes me as something of a warrior, capable of felling ten men with a swipe of his hand."

Isn't he just?

"I beg your pardon, Clara?" her stepfather said.

Heavens! Had she spoken aloud?

"Nothing, Papa Harcourt."

"Hmm." He patted her hand, then he drew a blanket over Mama's lap, sat back, and closed his eyes.

Mama gave him a loving look, then leaned against him.

Shortly after, gentle snoring filled the carriage, while Clara's brothers, who knew better than to disturb their father, fell silent and turned their attention to the view from the window, where the landscape rushed by, bathed in the moonlight.

A warrior, capable of felling ten men with a single swipe of his hand.

That he was—a primal beast, savage and strong in body, yet kind and attentive.

In short, he was perfection itself.

And he wishes to court me.

Clara closed her eyes, recalling the intensity of his hungry gaze. Her stomach rippled with a strange sensation, not unlike the wicked pleasures she sought by her own hand. But this time it was deeper, more intense.

Perhaps she might begin to hope that it was possible for someone like her to find a man to love her for who, and what, she was, despite the indelible stain left by the man of whom she dared not speak.

Her natural father—the embodiment of evil who tainted her even from beyond the grave, because his blood ran in her veins.

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Murdo spooned eggs onto his plate, followed by a portion of bacon, then he sat at the breakfast table.

“Ye can take more than that,” his aunt said, eyeing his plate. “A healthy young man like yerself.”

His cousin leaned toward him. “She means huge, Murdo,” he said with a grin. “How many rashers is that, eight? I’m glad you’ve saved some for the rest of us.”

“Simon!” Murdo’s uncle said. “He can take as much as he wants. Be thankful your brother’s not here, or there would have been no bacon for any of us. I swear I don’t know where that boy gets his appetite from.”

“Says the man who ate twelve rashers on Christmas morning,” Aunt Fiona said. “It’s true,” she added, giving Murdo a wink. “I counted every one.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t have anything better to do, my dear,” Murdo’s uncle said.

“Better?” she replied. “I find yer little habits very entertaining. And don’t deny it. I saw ye pick up that bacon with your fingers—in front of our nephew.”

“Murdo doesn’t mind that,” Simon said. “You should have seen him last night—he ate a chicken thigh like a savage, tearing at it with his teeth before tossing the bone to the floor.”

Murdo’s aunt peered at him over her glasses. “I hope Simon’s jesting. We wouldn’t want those Sassenachs thinking we’re savages.”

“Oh, Sassenachs , are we?” Murdo’s uncle laughed. “You do realize, Fiona my dear, that by virtue of your marriage to me, you’re considered as English as the king.”

She let out a snort. “So, not English at all, then, Adam?”

He rolled his eyes. “If I’m to be plagued all morning, I shall retire to the library to read my paper in peace before I go into town.”

“Do, if it means ye’re not getting under my feet.”

Murdo’s uncle folded his paper and tucked it under his arm. He placed a swift kiss on his wife’s lips, then rose, plate in hand, and helped himself to more bacon. “Coming, son?”

Simon stood, scraping his chair back. “I don’t see why I must work while Murdo’s visiting.”

“Because it’s how we earn a living,” his father said. “A business doesn’t run itself, and the mark of a man is that he works, even if he doesn’t feel like working. If you want that Goldenchild lass to take a fancy to you, you’ll have to show that you can support her.”

“ Goodchild ,” Simon said. “Her name’s Goodchild. And I’m not courting her.”

“Then you’d best start, before some other fellow does. It’s how I won your mother—and what a prize I gained.”

“Be off, ye fool!” Aunt Fiona cried.

He blew her a kiss, then exited the breakfast room, followed by Simon.

Aunt Fiona let out a sigh. “I trust ye’ll not give yer wife as much trouble as yer uncle’s given me, Murdo, lad.”

“I’m sure ye give as good as ye get, Aunt.”

She grinned. “Aye. We Scots are made of stern stuff. Yer uncle may be the man, but...”

“But he knows who the real head of the family is?” Murdo chuckled.

“Aye, that he does. Are ye courting yet, nephew?”

“Perhaps.”

“Ah,” she said. “When my favorite nephew says ‘perhaps,’ that means ‘very much so.’ Is it that lass from the neighboring estate to Strathburn? The McCallum lass—what’s her name, Shona?”

Murdo shook his head. “Da wants her to marry my brother.”

“He’d have more success nailing soup to the wall. James isn’t the marrying kind.”

“We must both marry if the clan’s to survive,” Murdo said. “Da’s made it clear that he wants James to marry a Scotswoman of good breeding, to furnish the estate with heirs. It’s his duty.”

“It’ll be his misery,” she said. “I suppose yer duty is to find a rich wife to furnish the estate with cash. The McCallums are hardly wealthy. Old Hamish McCallum drinks too much, though not as much as yer da.”

The door opened and a footman entered, carrying a letter on a salver.

Aunt Fiona took the note and tore it open. Her eyes widened as she read it, then she lowered her hand and stared at Murdo.

He glanced at the note and spotted a crest at the top.

“Who’s it from?” he asked.

“The Duchess of Pittchester. She and her daughter have invited us to take tea on Tuesday. She says that she particularly wants ye to come, Murdo, lad. I wasn’t aware ye were acquainted with the duchess.

“I met her last night at Lady Cholmondeley’s ball.”

“And her daughter?”

“I met Miss Martingale also.”

“I suspect ye did more than meet her, given the color of yer cheeks. Ye always did turn a bright shade of pink when ye were up to no good.”

“I like her, that’s all,” Murdo said.

His aunt let out a laugh. “Ye more than like her,” she said. “Ye can’t fool yer aunt.”

“Do you know her?”

“I’ve met her once. A strange lass, but not unpleasant. She seemed a little shy. She’s being presented at court next Season.”

Not if I can prevent it.

“I beg pardon?”

“I said, I fear she’d be a little out of place in London.”

“Aye, ye’re right there,” she said. “She’s nothing like her brothers, but I suppose she wouldn’t be, given that she’s not related to them, not even half blood.

She seems a little... wild . Henry’s afraid of her—he said she threatened to tie him upside down to a tree when he stayed with the twins last summer. ”

“I can’t believe that, Aunt.”

“ I can,” she said, grinning, “but knowing my youngest son as I do—much as I love him—I suspect the lass was provoked, and where most young ladies would have limited their reactions to a disappointing glare, Miss Martingale would have shown her disapproval more openly. She’ll take some taming—I don’t envy the man who takes her on. ”

“ I like her,” Murdo said.

She shook her head. “McTavish men don’t like women—and ye’ve never liked a woman in yer life, though ye’ve bedded plenty. What makes this one different?” She tilted her head to one side. “I hear she has a sizeable dowry,” she said. “From her ma’s fortune. Forty thousand—so the gossips say.”

Forty thousand...

What had Simon said last night? Enough to restore his estate, and leave room to purchase a small county.

Enough, in fact, to clear the debts on the ledgers and leave the Strathburn estate with

thirty thousand.

Imagine what could be done with thirty thousand! It was almost too good to be true.

His aunt frowned and tucked the letter into her sleeve. “Counting the coins already, lad?”

Murdo’s cheeks warmed under her scrutiny.

“If it’s her fortune ye’re after, I’d tread carefully,” she said.

“The duke may be a quiet sort of man, but he’d have yer ballocks if he thought ye intended to hurt the lass.

And if he doesn’t, the duchess would. There’s naught so fierce as a mother protecting her cub.

My sister would have fought to the death to protect ye, lad, but I doubt even she’d have been a match for the duchess. ”

A small needle of pain pricked Murdo’s heart at the thought of his own mother—a woman he could barely recall.

“It’s plain to see where the lass got her wild ways from,” his aunt continued. “But if any man can handle her, then it’s ye. She’d be fortunate to have ye, as I know ye’d treat her right. But whether ye can handle her mother is another matter. I suppose ye want me to accept the invitation?”

Murdo opened his mouth to reply, and she laughed. “Of course ye do! But be careful what ye wish for, nephew. A man wishing to court the daughter of the Duchess of Pittchester is, I fear, entering the lioness’s den.”

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“T here they are!” Mama said as the carriage came into view.

Papa Harcourt glanced at his pocket watch. “They’re almost half an hour late.”

Clara’s stomach flip-flopped in anticipation. She glanced at her companions—Mama, Papa Harcourt, and her brothers—who seemed so comfortable in their finery.

Mama took her hand. “Everything will be well, daughter.”

“What if I do something wrong?” Clara said.

“How could you do anything wrong, my darling?”

“Miss Peacock says—”

“Mrs. Tuffington is nothing like Miss Peacock,” Mama said. “And you’ve met her before.”

“I can never think of what to say to her,” Clara said. “I’m sure she doesn’t like me.”

“Perhaps that’s because the last time Tuffers came to stay, you pushed him into the river,” Nathaniel said.

“She what ?” Clara’s stepfather turned his stern gaze on her.

“It was you who pushed Tuffers into the river, Nate, you dolt,” Cornelius said.

“Clarry put a spider in his breeches.”

“I did not!” Clara cried.

“Then what did you do, daughter?”

Clara met her stepfather’s gaze, battling the temptation to lie. But Papa Harcourt, with his quiet patience, had a way of prizing the truth out of her with a single glance.

“I threatened to tie him to a tree,” she said.

“You what ?”

“Upside down!” Nathaniel laughed.

“Clara, what have I told you about inappropriate behavior?” Her stepfather frowned.

“You ought to have learned by now that young ladies don’t tie boys to trees. Didn’t you promise never to disappoint me?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Clara said.

“Were you compelled to threaten the boy?” He shook his head with a sigh and resumed his attention on the approaching carriage.

His anger she might have preferred. Or even a beating—her body had weathered many beatings until she’d come to Pittchester.

But her mother and stepfather had never raised a hand to her.

In fact, they rarely raised their voices.

Instead, they expressed their disappointment calmly and clearly, before leaving her to “resolve the matter with her conscience.”

“It wasn’t Clarry’s fault, Papa,” Cornelius said. “Henry called her a—”

“Stop it, Corn!” Clara said.

“What did he call her?” her stepfather asked.

He’d called her a grubby little urchin when he came upon her knee deep in the river. At which point, Nathaniel pushed him in.

“It doesn’t matter,” Clara said.

“It does if it resulted in your threatening the boy.”

“Leave her be, Harcourt,” Mama said. “Clara knows better than to speak out of turn in front of others.”

“It seems that she doesn’t.”

“Now’s not the time to discuss it. Hush!”

The carriage rolled to a halt. Then the door opened and a woman climbed out.

“Mrs. Tuffington, I’m so glad you could come,” Mama said.

“Thank you, Yer Grace.”

Clara recognized the faint Scottish burr—softer than her nephew’s accent.

“Do forgive us for being late,” Mrs. Tuffington said. “We were delayed this morning. I’m afraid not all of us were able to come today.”

Clara let out a cry, then covered her mouth. Hadn't she just tried to reassure her stepfather that she could behave with decorum?

Mrs. Tuffington fixed her gaze on Clara. Her eyes were almost as green as the eyes of the man who'd captivated her at the ball three nights ago—the man who, since then, had occupied Clara's dreams. In fact, only last night...

Her cheeks burning with shame, she dipped into a curtsy.

"W-we're so glad you could come, Mrs. Tuffington."

"I trust nothing untoward prevented the rest of your family from coming," Mama said.

"Merely a little trouble with my husband's business. It's a misfortune of being in trade."

"Ah yes, auction houses, is that it?" Papa Harcourt said. "Cornelius, didn't you tell me Henry's father trades in horses?"

"He does, Yer Grace," Mrs. Tuffington said. "It's hard work, but honest."

"Any commercial enterprise is hard work, Mrs. Tuffington," he replied. "As it is honest—and admirable. Your husband is to be commended."

"Ye're very obliging, Yer Grace," Mrs. Tuffington replied. "I trust ye'll forgive there only being two of us here today, rather than four."

A hand appeared at the carriage door, and Clara held her breath. Then a man appeared, his huge frame filling the doorway.

Clara stepped forward, her heart leaping with joy, then a hand pulled her back.

“Not so eager, darling,” Mama whispered.

He uncurled his body, then stretched his legs and stepped out of the carriage.

In the candlelight of Lady Cholmondeley’s ballroom, he was handsome enough—but in the full glare of the summer sun, he was breathtaking. His gaze swept over the company, and Clara caught her breath as his clear green eyes focused on her.

“Ahem.”

Mrs. Tuffington cleared her throat, and he issued a deep bow, first to Clara’s mother, then her stepfather.

“Yer Grace,” he said, his deep voice warming Clara’s blood.

Mama approached him, offering her arm. “Mr. McTavish, I’m so glad you could join your aunt. Do come inside. Harcourt, my love, perhaps you could attend Mrs. Tuffington.”

Clara glanced at Mrs. Tuffington to find the woman’s eyes, once more, trained on her.

Then her gaze wandered about Clara’s person—from her hairstyle, which was already coming undone, with ungainly wisps brushing against her neck, to the silk gown that was far too elegant for her, which she’d already smudged with ink in the library, to the shoes that may look pretty, but were uncomfortable in their elegance, pinching at her toes.

Could she tell, from merely looking at Clara, that she was an outsider, a grubby little

urchin , as her younger son had once said?

Then Papa Harcourt took Mrs. Tuffington's arm and followed Mama inside.

Clara's brothers appeared at her side.

"Don't worry, sister," Cornelius said. "Mr. McTavish has more to fear than you today."

"I don't understand," Clara replied.

"You only have to impress his aunt. He has to impress Mama Betty, and every suitor knows that a mother is a considerably more fearsome creature than an aunt."

"I can always throw her in the river if she insults you," Nathaniel added.

"What if he doesn't like me?" Clara asked.

"Don't be an ass, Clarry! Did you see the way he looked at you? I'll wager he'd rather tuck into a slice of you this afternoon than the fruitcake."

"Stop it!" She giggled, though she couldn't deny the pulse of pleasure at the notion of the huge Highlander devouring her.

"If he doesn't like you, I'll throw him into the river," Nathaniel said.

"We both will," Cornelius added. "Only the best of men is good enough for our sister. Don't forget, he must win our approval as well as Mama Betty's."

Her stepbrothers were the kindest creatures in the world. Clara loved Mama and Papa Harcourt, but they were always so determined to ensure she behaved. With Corn and

Nate she could be her true self. They never judged her wild behavior, or her frankness.

How she'd miss them when she had to leave!

But marriage was inevitable and with it, the surrender of her freedom and her person to another.

It lingered in the back of her mind, a thick black cloud, moving ever closer until it swallowed her up.

But perhaps in the huge Highlander she might find a flicker of hope that she could be accepted—if not loved—for who she was.

Clara stirred the tea, wincing as the spoon clinked against the porcelain. She'd already splashed tea on the tablecloth—twice—and dropped a sugar lump on the floor. And now she was in danger of tripping over the hem of her gown and sending the cake in the same direction as the sugar lump.

Why must she be so inept at these frivolous rituals?

Had Papa Harcourt's brandy been on the table, she'd have slipped herself a measure or two to soften her fear, but knowing the way her fortunes were running today, she'd have dropped that as well, then the parlor would have reeked of liquor—just like the morning room last month after she'd helped herself to a measure of Mama's port, then knocked the bottle over, spilling the ruby liquid onto Mama's embroidery.

What must they think of her?

Clara placed a slice of cake onto a plate, then picked up the plate and the teacup. Mama Betty smiled in encouragement, but Papa Harcourt sat, body stiff, with his

usual dignified attitude.

Her stepfather disapproved of her—but he loved her also, which made her yearn for his praise all the more. Mama was always telling Clara not to strive too hard for his approval, that it would come in time, and what mattered was that he loved her as his own daughter.

But the illegitimate daughter of a harlot and her pimp could never be a worthy daughter of a duke. Deep down, he could never love, or approve of, her.

The teacup rattled as she almost lost her balance, and the cake slid across the plate. She righted herself and sat next to her mother.

Mama placed a light hand on her arm. “You’re doing well,” she whispered.

Clara’s mother exchanged pleasantries with Mrs. Tuffington, while Papa Harcourt sipped his tea in silence.

As tea progressed, Clara picked up her own fork and broke off a corner of her cake, then she looked up to see Mr. McTavish staring at her.

He picked up his cake with his hands, took a huge bite, and winked.

Papa Harcourt glanced at him, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Are you enjoying the cake, Mr. McTavish?” he asked.

“Aye.” Their guest licked his lips and met Clara’s gaze. “I can’t imagine anything more delicious.”

“Good. Are you staying with your aunt and uncle for the whole of the summer?”

“I return home in less than a fortnight.”

“What do you think of Northumberland? It must be very different to the Highlands. It’s your homeland also, is it not, Mrs. Tuffington?”

“Aye, Yer Grace,” she replied.

“Are you Mr. McTavish’s aunt on his father’s side?”

“His mother Margaret was my sister,” she replied, casting a look of affection toward her nephew. “The poor lad lost her when he was wee, so I treated him as if he were my own—until my marriage, at least. We Scots place great value on family.”

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“Aunt...” Mr. McTavish looked embarrassed.

“It’s painful to lose a mother so young,” Clara said.

“Aye,” Mrs. Tuffington said. “But ye have yer mother, Miss Martingale—something to be thankful for. It’s a loss ye cannot imagine unless ye have lived it. Barely out of the crib, my nephew was, when his mother passed.”

Mama took Clara’s hand. “My daughter and I were separated for many years,” she said. “She has known loss.”

“I didn’t know. Forgive me,” Mrs. Tuffington said. “How did ye come to be separated? I cannot imagine a mother not being with her child. Families should be together.”

Clara’s gut twisted with horror, and she glanced at her mother, fighting the onset of panic.

“It matters not, Aunt,” Mr. McTavish said, meeting Clara’s gaze. “What matters is that Miss Martingale is with her mother now—and that she is loved.”

His emerald eyes focused on Clara for a heartbeat, and she tempered the nugget of hope.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Mrs. Tuffington said. “Forgive me, Yer Grace, Miss Martingale. I only meant that it must have been very hard to be separated.”

“It was,” Mama said. “My daughter and I were reunited only recently. So you see, I have no wish to part with her unless I’m assured that she will be happier, wherever she goes, than she is here.”

“Which will prove something of a challenge, Yer Grace,” Mr. McTavish said.

Clara’s hope died. Was he saying that he couldn’t make her happy, or that he didn’t wish to court her?

Her mother set her teacup aside. “Nothing in life is worth having if it’s not achieved by overcoming challenges, Mr. McTavish.”

“Ye mistake my meaning, Duchess—I was paying a compliment to yer home. I fear my ineptitude at polite conversation led ye to believe I was being ungallant toward yer daughter. I assure ye, it’s the last thing I wish to do.”

He gestured toward the window, through which the moors were visible, bathed in the sunlight. “How could anyone fail to be happy living here? Next to the Highlands, it seems the most beautiful place in the land. Were ye not telling me as much, Miss Martingale?”

“Yes,” Clara said. “It’s beautiful here. And our gardens are filled with color now the roses are in bloom.”

“Perhaps ye might show me, Miss Martingale.”

His eyes flared with desire, and Clara’s heart fluttered at their expression.

“I’m afraid that isn’t possible,” Papa Harcourt said. “I couldn’t have my daughter wandering about unchaperoned.”

“We’ll chaperone her,” Cornelius said. “Won’t we, Nate?”

Nathaniel, his mouth full of cake, nodded.

“Perhaps we could all take a turn about the garden?” Mama suggested. “If you’ve finished your tea, that is, Mrs. Tuffington?”

Their guest glanced first at Clara, then at her nephew, and shook her head.

“I’m not a good walker,” she said. “But don’t let me stop ye, Murdo, lad.”

Aunt and nephew exchanged a smile. Then he rose and approached Clara, offering his arm.

“Shall we?”

“Don’t forget your shawl,” Mama said, as Clara stood. “It may be warm outside, but there’s a chill in the air, particularly if you’re intending to explore the wall.”

“Do not fear, Duchess,” Mr. McTavish replied, as he took Clara’s arm and steered her to the door while her brothers leaped to their feet and followed.

Then he lowered his voice to a growl. “I’ll ensure ye’re kept warm, lass.”

“Thank you, Mr. McTavish,” Clara whispered.

“I think ye can call me Murdo, lass,” he replied. “After all, we’re courting.”

“Murdo...”

A secret thrill coursed through her as she uttered his name, and his nostrils flared as

he nodded his approval.

“I like that very much,” he said, “hearing my name on yer lips. I hope to hear it again—many times—whispered in my ear, spoken with pleasure, and cried out in ecstasy.”

A fizz of need warmed her blood as she let him lead her outside.

What might it be like to have him cry out her name with pleasure?

The gardens at Pittchester Castle had been a source of wonder to Clara from the moment she arrived there.

They provided a constant source of vibrant colors—in sharp contrast to the dull, damp grays of London’s slums, where she’d grown up.

In the summer, the rose garden was at its finest, with every shade of red and pink, tended to by Mr. Grainger, who scolded Clara mercilessly if she trampled on his borders, but always presented her with a posy for her bedchamber, which filled the air with their sweet scent.

In autumn, the colors were replaced by a riot of fiery reds and oranges in the trees.

Even in the winter, when the sharp frosts blanketed the land in white, the vibrant berries on the glossy dark-green bushes provided jewels of color.

Then, as winter faded, new bright-green shoots pushed through the hard ground.

How she loved the country! It was all she could do to prevent herself from skipping with joy as she wandered through the garden, her hand engulfed in Mr. McTavish’s—Murdo’s—great paw.

Ahead, her brothers walked side by side, casting the occasional glance over their shoulders.

“Yer garden’s very impressive, Clara,” Murdo said. “The roses, particularly.”

“Do you grow roses in your home?”

He shook his head. “No, lass. I believe my ma tried to grow roses, but after she passed...”

His voice trailed away, and she saw a flicker of sorrow in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You must miss her.”

“I barely remember her.”

“What do you remember?” Clara asked, then she checked herself. “Forgive me, I oughtn’t have asked. My stepfather’s always admonishing me for speaking out of turn. He says people don’t like to speak of their sorrows, of loved ones lost.”

“But if we don’t speak of them, they’ll fade from our hearts,” he replied. “I’ve no wish for my ma to fade from my thoughts. My da speaks little of her. But my aunt...” He let out a sigh.

“She said she took care of you after your mother passed.”

“Aye, she did. She spoke of Ma so often, it was as if she were alive. But when Aunt Fiona married...”

He turned to face her and smiled. “So you see, lass, it can only give me joy if ye speak of my mother. In answer to yer question, I remember a beautiful woman with

flame-red hair and eyes the color of whisky, a soft voice singing me to sleep at night and holding me to her breast. When I'm alone, she visits my dreams and tells me all will be well. ”

“She’s an angel,” Clara whispered.

“Aye, lass, an angel. She’s the strength of the mountains, the color of the heather, and the cry of the stags in the autumn. She’s...”

He drew in a sharp breath and caught her hand.

“Heavens, lass! Can ye see that?”

Ahead was the figure of an angel—pale in the light of the afternoon sun. Her hands clasped together, she gazed at the ground, an expression of serenity in her eyes. Soft, feathered wings framed her body.

Clara’s brothers veered off the path toward the angel, then Murdo exhaled.

“It’s a statue !” he said. “For a moment, I thought...”

“Come and see,” Clara said, steering him toward the statue. “My stepfather placed her in the best part of the garden, and the view from there is magnificent.”

Murdo placed his hand on the statue and ran his hand along the marble, the carved folds of the angel’s gown. He touched the tip of one wing where a piece had broken off, running his fingers over the jagged edge.

“Beautiful,” he breathed. “Such exquisite craftsmanship. The detail on the feathers—a man could be forgiven for expecting them to move with the breeze.”

“Can you see the likeness?” Cornelius asked.

Murdo lifted his hand to the angel’s face and traced the outline with his fingertip, following a line along the nose, until he reached the lips. Clara’s heart fluttered, as if he were caressing her, and she parted her own lips in anticipation.

“It’s Clarry,” Nathaniel said. “You’ve just been running your hands over our sister.”

Murdo glanced at Clara. “It’s ye ?”

“She looks nothing like me, of course,” Clara said. “Her nose is smaller than mine.”

“I don’t like her nose, Miss Martingale,” Murdo said.

“And her arms are longer,” Nathaniel added.

“I don’t like her arms, either.”

“But her face is prettier than Clara’s,” Cornelius said.

“Corn!” Nathaniel gave his brother a push.

“As statues go, her face is pretty, Lord Cornelius,” Murdo said. “But as to thinking her prettier than yer sister, ye’re either blind, or a fool.”

He smiled at Clara. “Ye said the duke placed the statue here. Was it a gift from him?”

She shook her head. “The statue belongs to my mother. My stepfather had it brought here after they married. It was originally in the gardens at Pascombe Hall.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s where my mother lived before, when she was”—Clara hesitated—“married to Lord Grey.”

“Ah, so Lord Grey’s yer father?”

Clara opened her mouth to reply, then closed it again, engulfed by shame.

Cornelius came to her aid. “Mama Betty had the statue made so Clara would be with her for always,” he said.

“Is that so?”

Clara nodded. “We were separated when I was a baby. She spent many years looking for me, then, when she gave me up for dead, she had the statue made, as a memorial.”

“She gave ye up?” His eyes glowed with anger. “How can a mother do such a thing?”

“It wasn’t her fault!” Clara said. “She tried to find me, but was tricked into believing I’d died.

” She wiped away a tear. “I grew up not knowing my mother—until Papa Harcourt found me and brought me here. I hated her at first, because I thought she’d abandoned me.

But she never stopped thinking of me, or blaming herself for what happened. You see, she was—”

“Clarry,” Cornelius interrupted. “We should get back. We promised Papa we wouldn’t go far. He’ll be wondering where we are.”

“And wondering whether you’ve run off again,” Nathaniel said.

“Nate!” Clara said. “I don’t run off.”

“You did, when—”

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“Why don’t you tell us about your estate, Mr. McTavish?” Cornelius interrupted. “Tuffers is always enthusing about it. He says everything’s bigger than Northumberland—the land wider, the hills higher. And you call your gamekeepers gullies.”

“Ghillies,” Murdo said, laughing. “Very well, what do ye want to know?”

“How high are the mountains? Clarry here is something of a climber, but the trees hereabouts and the wall are no longer enough of a challenge for her.”

“The wall?”

“Oh, you must see the wall!” Clara said. “It stretches across the land, separating our country from yours.”

“To keep us marauding Scots out?” Murdo chuckled.

“Or to keep us in,” she replied. “Would you like to see it?”

“Perhaps another time, if yer stepfather expects us back.”

“You could come tomorrow.”

“Isn’t that a little soon?”

“Don’t you want to see it before you go back to Scotland?”

“I must wait to be invited.”

“ I’ve invited you.”

“Clarry, you must ask Mama and Papa first,” Corenlius said.

“Then I’ll ask them.”

They continued in silence, Clara’s brothers leading the way. As Pittchester Castle came into view, bathed in the glow of the afternoon sun, Clara’s companion leaned close and lowered his voice.

“Permit me to apologize, lass,” he said.

“What for?”

“For distressing ye earlier when I asked about yer real father. I’ve no right to pry, though ye can rest assured that I’d not think any less of ye whomever yer father was.”

“You wouldn’t?”

He smiled, and little creases appeared at the corners of his eyes.

“The circumstances of yer birth matter not to me, lass. Neither does the manner by which ye drink yer tea, serve cake, or conduct yerself in Polite Society. What matters is what’s inside yer heart. I see yer heart, lass.”

“And do you like what you see, Mr. McTavish?”

“Now, lass, I’d hoped ye weren’t going to disappoint me today.”

Her heart sank. “D-disappoint?”

“Aye,” he said, mischief shining in his eyes. “I thought ye’d promised to call me Murdo.”

She gave him a saucy smile. “Then do you like what you see...Murdo?”

“Och, lass. Very much. Both yer heart, and yer person. A delectable a sight for a man.”

He took her hands and drew her close, his huge frame and masculine aroma—the scent of wood and spice—overwhelming her senses. Her eyes were level with his broad chest, and she tilted her head to meet his gaze.

“Murdo...”

“Oh, Clara...”

Then he lowered his mouth to hers.

The nugget of need that had been swelling and pulsing in her body all day burst into life as he slid his lips across hers. How could such a huge beast of a man have such soft lips?

A sigh escaped her, and she pressed her body against his.

“Good lass,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble that vibrated against her. He flicked his tongue out, running the tip along the seam of her lips, seeking entrance.

She parted her lips, and with a low groan he slipped his tongue inside, sweeping across her mouth, as if to claim his territory. The mark on her hand where he’d

nipped her throbbed in recognition, and the wicked knot of pleasure in her center pulsed in response.

How could so much pleasure be had from a kiss? What might it be like if he touched her where her body ached?

Then he deepened the kiss, drawing her tongue inside his mouth, as if he were devouring a feast. His tongue curled around hers in a slow, seductive dance of mastery, and she responded, mirroring his movements with her tongue as he guided her in the dance.

The ache in her body swelled until she could no longer conquer the need to ease it, and she arched her back and parted her thighs, seeking pleasure—an unfathomable pleasure that her instincts told her only he could give...

Then he broke the kiss and withdrew.

Coldness swept across her body, and she clutched at her shawl, drawing it around herself as she hunched her shoulders. Then he pulled her against his chest and rested his chin on the back of her head, while he caressed her hair.

“Sweet lass,” he said. “I fear if I continue, I’ll not be able to control myself.”

He kissed the top of her head, then released her and hooked her arm through his.

She glanced ahead to see her stepbrothers standing side by side, staring at her.

Nathaniel grinned, but Cornelius was frowning, his eyes dark with disapproval—an almost perfect likeness to Papa Harcourt.

Then Nathaniel whispered something in his brother’s ear and they continued toward

the building.

Clara's parents were waiting for them in the parlor with Mrs. Tuffington.

"I was about to send Mr. Grainger to find you," Papa Harcourt said.

"We were showing Mr. McTavish the garden," Nathaniel replied. "He wants to see the wall, but we don't have time to visit it today."

"That's a pity," Mama Betty said. "The wall's an impressive sight, though I daresay it's nothing compared to the mountains of your homeland."

"I said he could come and see it tomorrow," Clara said.

Papa Harcourt glanced first at Murdo, then Clara, his eyes glowing with suspicion.

"That's a little forward of ye, Miss Martingale," Mrs. Tuffington said, "to issue such an invitation."

"We have no prior engagements, Aunt," Murdo said.

Mama Betty stepped forward. "The invitation is from myself," she said. "Forgive me, I forgot to mention it, Mrs. Tuffington. Isn't that right, husband?"

Clara's stepfather glanced at her mother, who had set her mouth into a determined line.

At length, he nodded. "That's right, Mrs. Tuffington," he said. "Besides, I've granted your nephew permission to court my daughter, and he can hardly do that without an invitation to return. That is, if she wishes him to continue courting her?" He focused his gaze on her. "Do you, child?"

Was he testing her? In issuing an invitation without asking Papa Harcourt, she'd committed yet another faux pas for which he'd rightly be disappointed.

If she said yes, would he point out the fault in appearing too eager?

But she couldn't bring herself to say no when her mind and body screamed at her to say yes.

In fact, Murdo could ask anything of her and she'd say yes.

Then her stepfather's lips curved into a smile and he winked. The stern duke who always observed propriety, who always judged her behavior, actually winked !

"Yes, Papa," she said, and a thrill coursed through her veins as Murdo squeezed her hand.

"Excellent!" Mama Betty said. "That's settled. We'll expect you tomorrow, Mr. McTavish. Mrs. Tuffington, you're welcome to come. Bring your husband and son, if the business can spare them."

"Ye're most kind," Mrs. Tuffington said. "Now, nephew, we must be going if we're to return to Berwick before supper."

The carriage was already waiting for them by the time they stepped outside.

Papa Harcourt bowed over Mrs. Tuffington's hand, then helped her into the carriage.

Murdo climbed in after her, the carriage once again tilting under his weight, then, with a crack of the driver's whip, the carriage lurched forward and set off.

Papa Harcourt exchanged a glance with Mama Betty and nodded.

“Come along, boys,” he said. “You’ve neglected your studies for too long.”

“But it’s the long vacation, Papa,” Nathaniel grumbled.

“Precisely, son. Almost three months where, without my encouragement, you’d be idling away rather than studying. You don’t want to lag behind your friends when you return to Oxford next term.”

“That won’t happen,” Nathaniel said. “The dean said I was exceptionally bright.”

“And you’ll have an exceptionally sore seat if you don’t do what you’re told.”

Nathaniel let out a huff, but the twins followed Papa Harcourt inside, leaving Clara alone with her mother.

“Shall we take a turn about the kitchen garden?” Mama suggested, slipping her arm through Clara’s.

Then she steered her around the back of the house to where Mr. Grainger’s vegetables formed a series of neat rows.

The white-haired gardener was digging around the base of a wooden frame on which green shoots wound their way up. He tipped his hat as they approached.

“Afternoon, ma’am,” he said, rising to his feet. “And Miss Clara.”

“Don’t get up on our account, Mr. Grainger,” Clara’s mother said. “We don’t want to keep you from your peas.”

“I’m almost done here,” he said, holding up a truckle filled with vegetables. He gave a gap-toothed grin, then plucked a pod from one of the plants and offered it to Clara.

“There ye go, miss,” he said. “There’s nowt better than peas fresh from the vine. Try it.”

She split open the pod to reveal a row of pale green spheres nestled against each other. Then she popped them into her mouth, savoring the fresh, sweet taste.

“They taste better right off the plant, don’t they?” he said.

Clara nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Grainger.”

“My pleasure, miss,” he replied. “Mind ye, don’t let me catch ye taking them yerself.”

“There’s no danger of that,” Clara said. “When I steal your vegetables, I always make sure not to get caught.”

“Less of yer cheek!” He laughed, his eyes twinkling. “Ah, ye’ll be a right handful for yer husband. But for all that, he’ll be a lucky young man.”

He touched his cap once more, then returned to the house, whistling.

They continued until they reached a bench against the perimeter wall. Mama sat and patted the space beside her for Clara to join her. Then she took Clara’s hand.

“Are you fond of Mr. McTavish, my dear?”

“I-I like him, Mama.”

“I can see that.”

“I’m sorry I spoke out of turn today, inviting him to visit tomorrow. It was just

that...”

“That you like him?”

Clara nodded. Her mother kissed her hand.

“Your stepfather approves,” she said. “Not that you’d know.”

“Of Mr. McTavish?” Clara said. “Or...of me?”

“Of course he approves of you, darling! How can you doubt it?”

“He doesn’t say anything,” Clara said. “He just gives me a look each time I do something wrong. But it’s the same look he gives when I do something right.”

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Her mother laughed. “Harcourt’s a very different creature to you and me,” she said. “As are Cornelius and Nathaniel.”

“Because they’re men?”

“Partly, and partly because they come from a world that we weren’t born into—the world of dukes and lords.

” She let out a sigh and leaned back. “Can you imagine that? Being taught, from the cradle, that to express your feelings, or say what you think, is the deadliest sin of all? But your stepfather feels a great deal, even if he cannot show it.”

She placed her hand on Clara’s cheek. “He loves you very much, Clara. It’s because he loves you that he appears so strict at times. And it’s why he—and I—want to be sure that Mr. McTavish is an honorable man. You must be careful when you speak to him. Careful about...”

Mama looked away, narrowing her eyes as if in pain.

“Careful about telling him who I am?” Clara said. “Who my real f-father...”

Mama drew in a sharp breath and nodded. “I applaud you for wanting to be honest,” she said. “But I’d advise caution.”

“You want me to lie to him?”

“No, sweet girl, but there’s a difference between being deceitful for our own ends,

and protecting ourselves.

I-I couldn't protect you when you were a child.

I know the time will come when you must strike out into the world, when you must leave me and find your own life, and I confess I live in dread of that moment, for you'll not have me to protect you.

You must rely on others—one other, at least.”

“Mr. McTavish says he doesn't value birth or decorum,” Clara said. “He values honesty.”

“A man will declare that he can weather any storm if he believes the storm will never come.”

A tear splashed onto Mama's cheek, and Clara's heart ached to see the pain in her eyes.

“Forgive me, my darling,” Mama said. “I'm so sorry that the shadow of my past lies over you, that you must protect yourself from the contempt of others because of my actions—that you bear the scars of the wickedness that entered my life.”

Almost instinctively, Mama reached for her upper arm, where Clara knew there to be a scar hidden underneath her sleeve. It was a scar that matched her own—an ugly red mark in the shape of a D .

“You've nothing to blame yourself for, Mama,” Clara said.

“You were hurt by a wicked man, yet you're kinder than anyone I know—kinder than all those ladies who've been brought up in the world of dukes and lords.

You gave me nothing but love, and I'm only ashamed of my behavior when I came here, the things I said to you. But I'm proud that you're my mother."

"And I couldn't be more proud of you, my darling," Mama said.

"Your stepfather is equally proud, even if he cannot find the words to tell you. He's always been better at showing love, rather than making pretty speeches.

And I would far prefer a man to show his feelings than give me false promises and empty words.

"She wiped her eyes and smiled. "I daresay your Mr. McTavish is adept at both showing and speaking his feelings. Highlanders are notoriously frank."

"Like wayward daughters?"

"Your frankness does you credit," Mama said. "Perhaps I was wrong to want a London Season for you. The suitors who prance about Mayfair's ballrooms are far from honest. And the truth always has a habit of revealing itself eventually—better it happen while you're able to control that revelation."

"You mean I should tell Mr. McTavish the truth about my past?"

"Only if it becomes necessary—and you'll know when that time comes," Mama said. "Well, I suppose I'd better have the cook bake another cake or two if Mr. McTavish is going to call on us again."

"I'll tell her," Clara said. "I'll bake it myself to save her the extra work."

"Dearest girl!" Mama said. "How could Mr. McTavish fail to fall in love with you?"

She drew Clara into her arms, and Clara rested her head on her shoulder. They fell into a companionable silence, watching the glow of the sun as it slid toward the horizon, bathing the landscape in a soft pink glow.

“Mama?” Clara said.

“Mm-hmm?”

“What if he doesn’t like me when I tell him the truth?”

“Then I’ll cut his—what was it?” Mama said. “Oh, yes...his ballocks off.”

Clara let out a giggle, then her mother squeezed her hand.

“If he does judge you for that over which you had no control, then he’ll have shown himself to be undeserving of you. In which case you’re best discovering that before you set yourself on a path from which you can never return.”

Clara shook her head. The notion of his turning away from her in disgust was too painful to contemplate.

She’d made the mistake of telling one of the lads from Pickton Farm that she was a natural child, and he’d taunted her about it, calling her a tart’s brat—until Papa Harcourt threatened to have the family tossed out.

If even a farmer’s boy looked down on her for having been born out of wedlock, what might the son of a laird think when he discovered her past?

“There’s no use worrying about it until the time comes, my darling,” Mama said, stroking Clara’s hair. “In time, your Mr. McTavish will show his worth. And if not, then you’ll always have a home here. I couldn’t bear to part with you for anyone less

than the finest of men.”

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The wall, though it would be dwarfed by Beinn Urraim, the mountain of Murdo's homeland, was an extraordinary sight, a vast stone structure that separated Scotland and England, stretching to the horizon in both directions and falling away to the north like a giant cliff edge.

The path wound along the top, where the wind tore at his coat, as if it sought to pull all comers toward the edge until they tumbled over the wall.

Miss Martingale—Clara—skipped ahead, swinging her basket on her arm, like a gamboling fawn in spring, seemingly oblivious of the danger.

Today marked his fourth visit to Pittchester Castle in as many days. Yesterday, his cousin accompanied him, together with his aunt and uncle. In the carriage home, Uncle Adam had slapped Murdo on the back, called Clara a fine filly, told him to “get to it,” then resumed his attention on his paper.

Clara was older than most young women—the duchess had let slip that her daughter was nearing twenty-seven—yet she had a youthful innocence that reminded Murdo of a child, with her wide-eyed enthusiasm of the countryside about her home.

“Careful, lass!” he called, as she neared the edge of the wall.

“Come and see!”

He caught up with her and took her hand. “Do ye want me to die of fright?” he said. “I couldn't survive if ye fell—yer father would finish me off.”

“I want you to see,” she said, pointing over the wall. “That’s where Mama fell. Papa Harcourt climbed down to rescue her.”

Murdo approached the edge. The wall fell sharply to the ground some twenty or thirty feet below, where a huge rock jutted upward, its jagged edge glinting sharply in the sunlight. He shuddered at the thought of the duchess tumbling over the cliff edge.

“Devil’s ballo—” He checked himself. “I mean, it looks treacherous.”

“I wanted to show you how brave Papa Harcourt is, for all that he’s a duke,” she said. “He climbed down in the middle of a thunderstorm to rescue Mama.”

“What was yer mother thinking going out in a thunderstorm?”

Clara lowered her gaze. “She was looking for me. It happened shortly after I came to live here.”

“Ye’d got lost on the moors?” he said. “Och, lass, that were foolish in a place ye weren’t familiar with. A young lad did the same near Strathburn, went for a walk in the glens and disappeared. Duncan, our ghillie—”

“That’s a gamekeeper, isn’t it?” she said. “I heard you telling Cornelius.”

“Aye,” he said. “Duncan’s as stoic as they come, but even he was reduced to tears. He found the lad’s body two days after he went missing.”

Murdo shuddered, his soul aching at the thought of Clara coming to harm. How had this strange, wild lass weaved her way into his affections such that even the notion of her being in danger sent a spike of fear through him?

Her eyes glistened with tears, and he pulled her close. “Lass, there’s naught to be

ashamed of—we're all a little reckless at times."

"I wasn't just reckless," she said. "I'd run away. I behaved so badly when I first came to live here. I wanted to hurt my mother, and Papa Harcourt. But now I only want to make them proud."

"What an extraordinarily frank creature ye are!" he said. "Most lasses would conceal their sins to deceive a man into believing them to be perfect. Are ye trying to make me dislike ye?"

"Do you dislike me?"

"Absolutely not, Clara."

He curled his tongue around her name, and she parted her lips. Then she colored and looked away.

"I know I say too much," she said. "Mama said last night after you left that I shouldn't have told your cousin about the day I let the chickens out by mistake."

"If I recall, it was yer brother Cornelius who started that story."

"No, that was Nathaniel," she said. Then she let out a giggle. "You called him Cornelius all afternoon! I wanted to point out your mistake, but Nate thought it so funny that he played along with it."

"How do ye tell them apart?"

She tilted her head to one side. "Corn's nose is bigger than Nate's."

"All well and good if they're standing next to each other and permit me to measure

their noses.”

“Corn’s the sensible one,” she said. “Nate’s more likely to play a trick or say something silly. Corn’s the heir, so he has to be responsible. I suppose that’s what happens when you’re the son of a duke.”

“And when ye’re the daughter of a duke—must ye be sensible also?”

She looked away, gazing over the wall, toward his homeland.

The land where he hoped to take her and claim her as his.

“I-I’m not the daughter of a duke,” she said. “My father—my natural father—was...”

She shook her head, and a tear splashed onto her cheek.

“Do ye miss him?”

She shook her head.

“Was he unkind to ye—to yer mother?”

She closed her eyes, and his heart ached to see her tremble. Then he placed a hand on her cheek and she opened them.

“I-I don’t remember him, but Mama and I each bear the mark...” Her voice trailed away, then she shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Did Lord Grey...” he began.

“Lord Grey ?” she replied. “No, he...” She shuddered and let out a sob.

Guilt stabbed at his heart.

“Och, forgive me, lass,” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset ye. I’ve said it matters not what happened in yer past, and I meant it. I want more than anything to see ye happy.” He took her basket. “Why don’t we have a bite to eat?”

She nodded.

“Though I’d beg ye to take me to a sheltered spot. I’d hate to yield my luncheon to the wind.”

“That’s where we’re going,” she said. “There’s a cave in the middle of the wall. You have to climb down to it. I’ll show you.”

“It is dangerous?”

“Only if you lose your footing.”

“Then take my hand, lass.”

She reached for him and he took her hand, catching his breath as he did every time their skin touched. She curled her fingers against his—fingers covered in callouses that spoke of a harsh life—then led him toward a deep fissure in the wall, resembling a staircase.

“Careful, lass.”

She let out a laugh. “I know this part of the wall so well now, I could climb it blindfold. It’s where I come when I want to be by myself.”

She stooped to pick up a stone, then stepped onto the staircase.

As they descended, the howling of the wind lessened.

About halfway down, the fissure widened out to the side, forming a dark hollow, the entrance resembling the shape of a giant mouth, with a pile of stones at the entrance.

Clara placed her stone on top of the pile, then led him inside.

After Murdo's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could make out rough shapes—a stack of logs in one corner, a crate in another, with a pile of folded blankets on top.

“Are these yers?” he asked, setting the basket down.

She picked up a blanket and laid it on the floor. “Who else's would they be?”

“I thought yer brothers...”

“Why, because they're men?” She shook her head. “I don't even know if they're aware of this place. I've not shown it to anyone—until today.”

“Then ye do me great honor, Miss Martingale.”

She kneeled on the blanket and set out the contents of the basket—two wedges of pie, the remaining cake from yesterday's tea, and a stone bottle.

“I think Papa Harcourt knows about it,” she said. “And Mr. Grainger also. But they've never said as much.”

“What makes ye think they know?”

“Last autumn I came here after an argument with Corn.”

“Why did ye argue?”

“Because he was being an arse.”

He stifled a laugh.

“I forgot the time,” she continued, “and it was dark when I returned, just before supper. Mama Betty was furious, saying she was worried. I never knew people could get angry when they were worried—I thought they only got angry when I’d been bad and deserved a beating.

When Mama sent me to Papa Harcourt’s study to tell him what I’d done, I thought he was going to beat me. ”

“Did he?” Murdo asked, struggling to imagine the dignified older man taking his hand to anyone.

She shook her head. “Papa Harcourt never shouts when he’s angry. He asked what I’d been doing, then said nobody could have supper until I told him.”

“Did ye tell him the truth?”

Her eyes flared with indignation. “I always tell the truth. I told him I’d found a secret cave in the wall and stayed there all day, and what was the harm in that?”

“The harm was that nobody knew where ye were,” Murdo said. “What if ye had an accident and couldn’t call for help?”

“I know that now ,” she huffed. “It’s just...before I came here, nobody seemed to bother where I was, as long as I wasn’t getting in the way.”

“But now ye have people who love ye, and care whether ye come to harm.”

She wiped her eyes and nodded. “My stepfather said the same thing—that my mother hadn’t sacrificed herself for me so that I could be careless with my own life.”

“Somewhat harsh,” Murdo said.

“But true. Mama did sacrifice herself for me, even if I didn’t know it then.”

She paused, and he waited for her to elaborate.

“Did yer stepfather punish you?” he asked.

“He made me light the fire in my bedchamber myself, every night for a week,” she said. “The first night he sent one of the footmen to show me—but I already knew, because...”

Her voice trailed off, and she picked up the pie plate and held it out. Murdo took a slice and bit into it.

“The next time I came here, I found these.” She gestured toward the corner.

“The logs?”

“And that crate—it contains kindling and a tinderbox.”

“And it mysteriously appeared, shortly after yer stepfather insisted you learn how to light a fire?”

She nodded. “When the pile gets too low, it’s replenished.”

“By whom?”

“I saw our gardener carrying a basket of logs across the moors once,” she said, “but when I asked him about it, he said it wasn’t his place to tell me what his master’s orders were.”

“Let me guess, when ye next came here the pile had been replenished?”

She grinned. “It’s a mystery, isn’t it?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

It was no mystery how much the duke loved his stepdaughter—the untamed creature whose defiant nature and brutal honesty would have disrupted his dignified aristocratic life. But love entered a man’s heart when he least expected it.

As Murdo was beginning to realize.

She plucked a sandwich from the plate and took a bite. Then she unstopped the bottle and handed it to him. “Try this.”

He held it to his lips, took a sip, then winced at the sharpness on his tongue.

She let out a laugh. “Too sour for you?”

“I was expecting milk, not lemonade.”

“I made it myself.”

He took another sip. “That explains why it’s the best thing I have ever tasted.”

“The cook helped.”

He handed the bottle back to her, and a fizz of need bubbled in his veins as their fingers touched. She hesitated, then caressed his fingers with hers, before taking the bottle.

On impulse, he picked up her slice of pie.

“Hungry?” he whispered.

She nodded, and he broke off a piece and held it to her lips. Her eyes glinted in the darkness and she parted her lips.

“Did I not say I’d feed ye myself, lass, when we were alone? Will ye open for me?”

Her eyes flared and he caught a spark of desire in them as she took the pie, her lips brushing against his fingers.

“Mmm,” she murmured. “That’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Sweet devil’s ballocks! His cock surged beneath his plaid, and he shifted position, lest she see the bulge.

Her lips moved as she chewed the pie, then her neck rippled as she swallowed, letting out a little groan of pleasure.

Then she leaned toward him, parting her lips once more in anticipation.

Did the lass know how what she was doing to him? Even the most accomplished whores were incapable of bringing him to the point of spending with a mere parting of their lips. But the lass before him...

Never before had he experienced such a powerful urge to bury himself inside a woman.

He tore off another piece of pie and offered it to her. This time, she lifted her hands and caught his wrist, guiding him toward her. She took the morsel and swallowed it eagerly, then she wrapped her lips around his fingers and caressed them with her tongue, running from root to tip.

He caught his breath as he pictured her kneeling before him, giving the same loving attention to that part of him that strained like a stag in rut in its eagerness to claim her.

Then she released his fingers and lifted the bottle to her lips. Her throat bobbed as she drank, then she set the bottle down, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Aye, a wild, wanton woman—and he was determined to make her his.

“Why do you smile?” she asked.

“Och, lass—do ye not know?”

“Tell me.”

Because I know that I only need ask and ye’d part those pretty thighs and take my cock.

“B-because ye drank from the same bottle.”

“Oh dear,” she said. “I’m not supposed to do that, am I? I forgot to bring cups.”

“Ah, but don’t ye know that to share the same cup is a sign of trust?”

“Is it?”

“And love,” he said. “Where I’m from, it’s tradition that a bride and groom share the same cup before their guests, as a gesture of their newfound love.”

Her lips parted once more, glistening with moisture. Unable to conquer his need, he leaned forward and captured them in a kiss.

“Is that another tradition where you’re from?” she whispered.

“Aye,” he said, his voice a low rasp.

“Even outside, on the moors? Is that not terribly wicked?”

“And all the more pleasurable for it,” he said, drawing her close. “In my homeland, we kiss our women on the slopes of the mountain.”

“You let women climb mountains?”

“Our lasses are strong. I’ll show ye how to climb the mountain at my home—to scramble over the rocks, to feel the heartbeat of the earth pulse through the granite, and...”

He caught his breath as the image filled his mind and stiffened his cock.

“And I’ll show ye how to swim naked in the loch.”

“Oh, my...”

She fisted her hands in his hair and pulled his mouth to hers. She shuffled closer, and her skirts rose, revealing a bare thigh—creamy-white flesh that seemed to glow in the darkness of the cave.

Unable to resist, he placed a hand on her thigh. A rich scent filled the cave, the sweet aroma of female need.

She slipped her tongue into his mouth and moved it slickly across his own tongue, issuing mewls of pleasure that sent a fire of need through his blood.

A wild creature, she was—earthy, untamed, and primal.

He moved his hand higher, and she gave a deep sigh and arched her back. Then his fingers met her slick heat and it was all he could do to stop his body from exploding.

Sweet Lord —what a glorious creature she was! A pagan goddess for him to worship.

And worship her he would. He ran his fingertip along her flesh, and she shuddered with pleasure. Then he found the little bud at her center. She jerked as she broke the kiss and let out a cry.

“Murdo!”

This must be what heaven was like—to hear his name on the lips of the woman he loved.

Then he checked himself. The woman he loved...

Aye. I love her.

He slipped his finger inside her. She threw her head back and cried out. Her body rippled and tightened around his finger while she surrendered to her pleasure until, at length, she grew still, pulsing faintly against him.

He lifted his plaid and his cock sprang free. Then she parted her thighs.

One thrust and she would be his.

“Murdo,” she whispered, her eyes hooded. “I’ve never...” She shook her head. “It that what it’s supposed to be like?”

She clung to him, and her trust almost broke his heart.

“Forgive me, lass,” he said. “I shouldn’t have done that. Not without your consent.”

“You did nothing I didn’t want you to do,” she said. “It was... wonderful .”

He grinned to himself. The women he’d enjoyed before had always moaned and sobbed beneath him—but most played a part to please him, or to earn themselves an extra coin.

Never before had a woman he’d pleased utter with such frankness that his lovemaking was wonderful . And never before had he wanted a woman so badly to the exclusion of all others.

He lowered her skirts and wiped his hand on his plaid. Her eyes shimmered with disappointment. She curled her legs beneath her then stared out to the landscape outside, framed by the entrance of the hollow.

“D-did you not like it?” she asked.

He pulled her against his chest, where he felt her heartbeat pulsing against his frame.

“On the contrary, lass,” he whispered. “Ye’re a goddess. I want nothing more than to worship ye with my body—on the floor of this cave, against the granite rocks of my homeland, and every night in my bed. But I cannot take ye now. I must wait and honor ye as ye deserve to be honored.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” he said, “the honorable thing. My clan places honor above all else.” He caressed her hair. “ Vi et honore, ” he whispered.

“What’s that?”

“Strength and honor. It’s our clan motto. Our mountain is called Beinn Urraim.”

“Beinn Urraim?”

“It means Mountain of Honor, lass,” he said. “Honor is the principle that’s guided me all my life. Loyalty to my clan is my reason to live—loyalty, and the woman I love.” He grinned. “Besides, yer mother and stepfather would never forgive me if I dishonored ye. They’d have my...”

“Your ballocks?” she said, with a giggle.

“Aye. And my ballocks don’t belong to yer parents. My ballocks—and every other part of me—are yours. If ye’ll take them.”

She stiffened.

“You mean...”

“Will ye consent to be my wife?”

Her eyes flared with joy, then clouded over with fear.

“Do ye not want me for a husband, Clara?”

“Oh, I do ,” she said. “B-but my past. It’s...”

“Yer past is of no consequence,” he said. “Whether ye’re the daughter of a king, the child of a pauper, or a changeling left on the moors by the faeries, it matters not. It’s ye I want, Clara. I knew it from the moment I saw ye.”

“Are you certain?”

“I’m certain, lass. Nothing could stop me from wanting ye with every fiber of my soul. Will ye end my torment, and say that ye’ll return to my homeland and become my wife?”

For a moment she stared at him and his soul stilled in anticipation—and fear—of her answer.

Then she gave a shy smile, and nodded.

“Yes, Murdo Alastair James McTavish,” she said. “I’ll gladly be your wife.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

The sun had slipped behind the horizon as Clara's home came into view, a dark silhouette against the peach-colored sky.

She glanced at the man beside her—the huge Highlander who'd captured her heart.

He squeezed her hand and ran his finger along the knot of grass he'd fashioned into a ring, a symbol of their union.

Despite his huge hands, he possessed the dexterity to plait the blades of grass before securing the ring around her finger while kneeling before her.

He was a dexterous man indeed—her body still pulsed with pleasure at his ministrations.

They entered the building to find Clara's parents in the hallway.

Her stepfather frowned, his eyes darkening with disapproval.

“Where have you been, Mr. McTavish?” he asked. “You're two hours late.”

“Papa Harcourt,” Clara began, “we were—”

“I didn't ask you, daughter. I asked your guest.”

“We've been walking on the moors, sir,” Murdo said, his voice wavering. Clara squeezed his hand, and her stepfather's frown deepened.

“I see.”

“Harcourt,” Mama said, “I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“I’d like to hear it.”

“I want to marry yer daughter,” Murdo said.

Clara’s stepfather drew in a sharp breath. “Have you taken advantage of my daughter, young man?”

“I love her.”

Papa Harcourt shook his head. “I confess I’m disappointed.”

“Why, because he loves me?” Clara asked.

“Of course not, child, but I suggest you look in the mirror. Any fool can tell that you’ve both been—”

Mama placed a hand on his arm. “Harcourt, darling, perhaps you should grant Mr. McTavish an audience. Let him explain himself.”

“There’s nothing to explain!” Clara said.

“Apart from the fact that a man I’ve invited into my home has taken advantage of my daughter?” her stepfather said.

“Forgive me, sir,” Murdo said. “I didn’t... I mean, we didn’t...”

“Papa, I love him,” Clara said. “He hasn’t done...” She hesitated. “I mean...he said

he wouldn't...dishonor me—or dishonor you.”

“I should think so,” Papa Harcourt said. “Any dishonoring , as you put it, will be dealt with severely. As it is, your actions have already compromised my daughter.”

“I’ve no wish to dishonor her,” Murdo said. “I wish to marry her.”

“And her fortune? Your estate is in need of funds, is it not?”

“How do ye know that?” Murdo asked.

“I make it my business to know that which might impact on my daughter’s happiness.”

“Papa, please,” Clara said. “He doesn’t care about my dowry. He said if I was a pauper’s daughter he’d still marry me.”

Murdo drew her close. “Sir, if Clara had nothing, still I’d want to marry her. I love her.”

“On so short an acquaintance?”

“I fell in love the moment I set eyes on her,” Murdo said. “With the passing of each day, that love has only grown. Can ye not understand how a man could fall utterly, completely in love with an extraordinary, spirited young woman such as yer daughter?”

“A pretty enough speech, coming from the man who wishes to deprive my daughter of a London Season.”

“I don’t want a London Season, Papa,” Clara said.

“Are you certain?”

“Perhaps we might permit Clara to choose her own fate, my love,” Mama said. “What guarantee do we have that a suitor in London would treat our daughter better than this man?”

“The Highlands is a long way to take my daughter,” Papa Harcourt said. “I must be assured she’ll be treated well.”

“I intend to take her home with me to meet my family before we marry,” Murdo said.

“ If I give my consent.”

“Aye, if you give it, sir. I also wish to seek my father’s consent.”

“Do you wish to marry in Scotland?”

“It’s what Clara wishes that matters to me,” Murdo said. “I believe she wants to be married from her own home. But I’d like her to see my home, and my family, before we marry.”

Papa Harcourt’s mouth twitched into a smile. “You want to give her the chance to reject you if she doesn’t like your family?”

Murdo lifted Clara’s hand to his lips. “I want her to be certain she’s making the right choice in leaving her family and entering mine. I don’t want her—or ye , sir—to regret her choice.”

He bowed toward Clara’s mother. “If ye wish, ma’am, I’m sure Clara would wish ye to accompany us to Strathburn as her chaperone. I leave next week but can write ahead so we’re expected.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you’ve considered every arrangement, young man,” Papa Harcourt said. “But this is most improper.”

Murdo dipped his head. “Forgive the impetuosity of a man in love.”

Clara’s stepfather waved his hand in a gesture of impatience. “Come along, then.” He turned and strode across the hall, beckoning for Murdo to follow. Murdo released Clara’s hand and trotted after him.

“Will Papa Harcourt give his consent, Mama?” Clara asked, after they’d gone.

“He will if you love Mr. McTavish.”

“He looked angry. I know we shouldn’t have stayed out too long, but...”

“Mr. McTavish said he didn’t dishonor you. Did he speak the truth?”

“Do you think Papa Harcourt believed him?”

Mama laughed. “Of course!” she said. “Just as I know he’ll give his consent.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Had he doubted Mr. McTavish’s honor, he’d have cut his...manly parts off. Didn’t you see the knife in his pocket?” Mama linked her arm with Clara’s. “Come, my darling, we’ll await the men in the parlor, then we can toast your union.”

Shortly after they entered the parlor, the men arrived. Clara’s stomach twisted in apprehension, but the pride in her stepfather’s eyes and joy in Murdo’s told her that Papa Harcourt had given his consent.

She was, without doubt, the happiest creature in the world. Not because she'd beaten rival debutantes to the catch of the Season, but because she had found a man who loved her for herself.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

There was no sight more uplifting than the first glimpse of Strathburn Castle, nestled in the foothills of Beinn Urraim. The carriage rounded a corner and Murdo's heart sang as the turrets came into view, pale gray against the backdrop of fir trees.

"What do ye think?" he asked.

Clara leaned out of the window, and Murdo held his breath in anticipation. Then he spotted the duchess watching him with her sharp, intelligent eyes.

"It's beautiful!" Clara exclaimed. "It looks like a fairytale castle. And the mountain stretches up into the sky!"

"Careful, lass." Murdo caught her hand. "I wouldn't want ye tumbling out."

The carriage hit a rut and lurched sideways, and she fell into his arms, laughing. Unable to resist, he lowered his mouth to hers. The duchess averted her gaze, but the smile on her lips spoke of her approval.

In fact, both the duke and duchess approved.

When the duke had ordered Murdo into his study, he'd imagined the older man challenging him to a duel.

But, after questioning Murdo's intent, he grasped Murdo's hand in a surprisingly firm grip and told him that were he to make Clara happy, then he had his blessing.

The moment had then been tempered by a soft-voiced affirmation that, were Murdo

to harm a hair on Clara's head, the duke would hunt him down and shoot him like a dog.

But if anything, the threat—or rather, promise, given the determination in the duke's eyes—made Murdo respect him even more. Irrespective of whether Clara was his daughter by blood, the man loved her with a ferocity capable of bringing a battalion to its knees.

As the carriage reached the castle and drew to a halt, Clara stiffened and straightened in her seat.

A lone woman stood before the entrance. She came forward as Murdo opened the carriage door.

“I was wondering where ye'd got to, lad,” she said. “Yer letter said ye'd arrive before noon, and it's after six.”

“We stopped for luncheon at an inn.”

“The Covenanter in West Newton?” She shook her head. “Why waste yer money when there's a perfectly good meal waiting for ye at home?”

“Forgive me, Joan,” he said.

“It's Mrs. Grant when we have guests, lad,” she said. Then she pulled him into an embrace. “Welcome home. Well, where is she? Let me take a look at her.”

Murdo exited the carriage then held out his hand. “Ye can come out, Clara.”

She climbed out, slipping on the bottom step. Blushing, she dipped into a curtsy.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said.

“Och, lass, I’m only the housekeeper!” Joan said. “Let’s take a look at ye, then. Aye, ye’re a bonny thing, all right. I can see why ye’ve captured the young master’s heart.”

“This is Clara,” Murdo said. “My fiancée.”

“I know that from yer letter,” Joan replied. “Though ye’d best wait until the laird’s taken a look at her before ye address her as yer fiancée.” She smiled at Clara. “For appearance’s sake, no more, lass.”

Clara’s mother emerged from the carriage. Compared to her blushing, nervous daughter, the duchess exuded a dignity that commanded respect, and the housekeeper lowered into a curtsy.

“This is my fiancée’s mother,” Murdo said, “the Duchess of Pittchester.”

“I-I hope ye enjoy yer stay here, ma’am,” Joan said.

“I’m sure we will, Mrs. Grant,” the duchess replied.

“Well, come inside and I’ll send Brodie to see to yer trunks.”

“Isn’t Duncan about?” Murdo asked. “They’ll be too heavy for Brodie.”

“Duncan’s been on the moors all day. Callum can help Brodie.”

“Where’s James?” Murdo said. “Or my da? I thought they’d be here to greet our guests.”

“Yer brother will be with Duncan. As for yer da, he’s visiting the McCallum. Furious

he was when he left, so I daresay he'll not be back until morning, now."

"Why was he angry?"

"He insisted James accompany him, to see Shona McCallum. But James disappeared before breakfast. I swear those two will come to blows before James settles down. But yer da will be delighted ye've chosen a bride—and ye'll be wed in time for the Lughnasadh festival.

"She patted Murdo's arm. "I always said ye'd beat yer brother to the altar.

Perhaps there'll be less need for James to take a wife, now. "

"James will do his duty," Murdo said.

"Is James your father's heir?" the duchess asked.

Murdo nodded.

"So you won't be living here if you're not to inherit, Mr. McTavish? Will you take a house nearby?"

"Och no, Yer Grace," Joan said. "All the family lives together. It's our way.

Except the daughters, of course, who go to live with their husbands' families.

But Strathburn's big enough for ye all—and a sackful of bairns in the future.

Now, let's get ye inside. There's a nip to the wind, and ye'll not be used to it, I daresay.

Ye'll be wanting yer rest after that journey. ”

She led them into the building, yelling for Callum and Brodie. Shortly after, the two young servants appeared from the side of the building and began unloading the trunks from the carriage.

Clara slipped her hand through Murdo's.

“Will ye mind living with the rest of my family?” he asked. “It's only my father and brother, and my brother's family when he marries.”

“Is that why you said you wanted me to meet them before we married?” she asked.

“I wanted to be sure ye liked them.”

“What if they don't like me ?”

He laughed. “Nonsense! They'll love ye. Now, would ye like a tour of the castle before supper?”

She gave a shy smile. “I'd love to. It's going to be my home, isn't it?”

He captured her lips in a kiss. “Aye, lass. That it is.”

“She's a fine-looking lass,” the housekeeper said as Murdo waited at the foot of the staircase. “Ye've chosen well—better than yer da would have chosen for ye. I'm sure he'll approve, don't ye worry.”

“He'll approve of her fortune.”

The housekeeper frowned. “Surely ye're not wanting the lass for her fortune?”

“It’s what Da wants.”

“And ye?” she said. “I’d hoped that ye could marry for love, seeing as yer brother...” She shook her head and sighed. “It matters not. James is loyal to the clan. He’ll marry Shona McCallum and be content.”

“Shona’s a fine lass,” Murdo said. “She’ll make him happy.”

“If ye say so,” she said, “and yer English lass will make ye happy.”

“I’m not marrying her for her fortune, Joan,” Murdo said. “I love her.”

“I ken that, lad, seein’ as ye can’t take yer eyes off her. Like a lost puppy, ye are, with yer tongue hanging out. But will she make ye happy for all that she’s an outsider? Is she a good lass?”

“The best,” he said. “She’s wild and free, says what she thinks, would rather be outdoors, and isn’t afraid of hard work.”

“Then perhaps ye’ve found that rare thing.”

“Which is?”

“Yer soul mate. We all have one, but it’s rare to encounter them in the mortal world.”

“James might find his soul mate in Shona McCallum.”

“Och, lad, ye don’t know yer brother at all, do ye?”

Before Murdo could ask her meaning, Clara and the duchess appeared at the top of the staircase.

Murdo caught his breath. She was a beautiful creature anyway, but here, in his home, as she descended the great staircase on which countless ladies of Strathburn had trodden over the years gone past, she was breathtaking.

She fitted. His beloved home seemed to mold itself around her, as if it knew she belonged here, with him.

Joan let out a chuckle. “Besotted, ye are, lad, and rightly so.”

As the two women reached the foot of the stairs, Murdo offered his hand and Clara took it.

“Ladies, would ye like a tour of the castle now ye’ve had yer rest?”

“I’d love that!” Clara replied. “Do we have time before supper?”

“Plenty of time, lass,” he replied. “Mrs. Grant, would ye tell Morag to have supper ready at eight?”

Joan nodded and disappeared along the hallway toward the kitchens.

“We’ll start with the great hall, I think,” Murdo said. He led them toward the high-ceilinged room near the back of the building, overlooking the mountain.

“Oh my, it’s enormous!” Clara said, vibrating with excitement. “And look at that fireplace, Mama!”

In front of the fireplace lay what looked like a bear-sized rug, covered in wiry gray hair. A pair of dark brown eyes appeared at one end. Then a tail moved at the other, thumping on the floor.

“Easy, Buck,” Murdo said, as the deerhound lifted its head up, its ears erect.

Clara approached the animal.

“Careful, lass—he doesn’t take to strangers.”

She crouched beside the dog and extended her hand. “Hello, friend,” she said, her voice gentle. “You’re a beautiful boy, aren’t you? I hope you don’t mind our intruding on your privacy.”

The animal’s tail thumped on the floor. Clara remained still, her hand open, as if to show she meant no harm, and Murdo held his breath as she placed her hand on the creature’s head.

Then the deerhound let out a whine and rolled onto his back.

Clara giggled and rubbed the dog’s chest. “Is that what you want, boy?”

Then the dog scrambled to his feet and nudged Clara with his nose. She teetered sideways and, with a laugh, fell to the floor, wrapping her arms around the animal.

“Buck!” Murdo roared. “To heel!”

The dog flattened his ears and let out a whine. But rather than leap to safety, Clara threw her arms around the animal’s neck.

“Don’t hurt him!” she said, her face twisted with distress. “He’s only being friendly.”

“Release the dog, darling,” the duchess said. “Mr. McTavish wasn’t going to whip him.” She turned to Murdo. “You weren’t, were you?”

“Of course not—but yer daughter...”

“Is perfectly safe, as you see,” the duchess said. “She’s good with animals. You must have seen her with my Lady Athena at home.”

“Lady Athena is a pug,” Murdo said. “Buck’s big enough to knock a grown man sideways.” The dog nestled against Clara, and Murdo smiled. “But it also seems as if he’s astute enough to recognize a friend. Come here, Buck—don’t I get a welcome?”

The dog bounded toward him.

“Been catching any hares in my absence?” Murdo said, scratching the back of Buck’s neck.

The dog thumped its tail against Murdo’s leg, and he laughed.

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Clara peered inside the fireplace. “I swear this is bigger than the pantry at home.”

Murdo followed her to the fireplace, Buck trotting at his heel. “It has to be, to heat a room of this size,” he said. “It can get very drafty, but we keep warm. That is when Buck here isn’t soaking up all the heat from the fire.”

“Clever boy,” Clara said. Her eyes gleamed with moisture, then she approached the window. Buck followed, his claws clacking on the stone floor. “The view’s wonderful,” she said.

“It’s glorious at sunset,” Murdo said. “When the sun dips behind the horizon, the trees light up as if they’ve burst into flame, the tips glowing gold and red. Each day the view is different. I could spend a lifetime enjoying it.”

She climbed onto the window seat, then placed her elbows on the windowsill and rested her chin on her hands, smiling, and the deerhound settled beside her.

“Clara, my love,” the duchess said, “we’re Mr. McTavish’s guests and he’s showing us round. There’s plenty of time to admire the view later.”

“I don’t mind, Yer Grace,” Murdo said. “After all, Clara isn’t a guest—this is her future home.”

Clara turned, and his heart lifted at the love in her eyes.

The duchess crossed the floor to a stag’s head mounted on the wall. “Did you shoot that?”

“Aye,” Murdo said. “He was my first.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. Deer hunting requires patience and an understanding of the deer and the land he occupies. Duncan knows the hills better than anyone—he did the stalking. I merely had the privilege of delivering the final shot.”

“Duncan?”

“Our ghillie.”

“Ah, the man who’s with your brother today.”

“Aye.”

“Clara will want to explore the land hereabouts. I trust you’ll not confine her to the house, magnificent as it is.”

The duchess’s voice had a hard edge. Murdo glanced toward the subject of their conversation, but she was occupied by the view and the dog beside her, who was giving her the wide-eyed, pleading gaze he bestowed on kind souls when he wanted a tidbit.

“You will look after my daughter, won’t you?” the duchess said.

“Of course, Yer Grace.”

She caught his wrist and held it in a surprisingly strong grip. “I mean it, Mr. McTavish. She may be wild and hardy, but she has a sensitive heart. The dog, for instance...” She shook her head. “My Clara has known suffering. Not only physical

suffering, but heartbreak.”

Murdo tempered the spike of jealousy. “She loved someone?”

“Not in the way you mean.” The duchess nodded toward the deerhound. “When she was a child, Clara befriended a dog. She was forced to watch as the creature was beaten to death. She blamed herself and suffered greatly for it.”

Murdo’s gut twisted with horror. “Were ye there?”

The duchess shook her head. “It happened during the years we were apart—when I didn’t even know Clara was alive.”

“Perhaps that’s why Buck’s taken to her,” Murdo said. “He recognizes a kindred spirit. And ye say she endured physical suffering? Was she beaten?”

The duchess nodded. “I saw you looking at her arm when we dined at the inn last night—perhaps you noticed the scar.”

He could hardly deny it—the ugly red mark on Clara’s upper arm, partially concealed by her sleeve. When Clara caught him staring, she blushed and drew her shawl around her shoulders.

“In the shape of a circle,” he said.

“It’s a brand,” the duchess replied. “I bear the same mark myself.”

“Devil’s ballocks!”

“Hush!” she admonished him.

Clara glanced over her shoulder. Buck pricked his ears up, then settled once more as Clara continued to caress his pelt.

“What happened?” Murdo whispered.

“It’s not for me to say, Mr. McTavish. Clara will tell you in her own time. But I want your assurance that you’ll treat her with kindness and compassion.”

“Do ye doubt it?”

“Granted, you seem a little better than most young men.”

“Coming from you , Duchess, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She smiled. “I’m not known for flattery. I prefer to speak the truth.”

“I ken that,” he said. “It’s where Clara gets her frankness from—and I love her for it. I cannot bear deceit. I’d rather my Clara scratch at me like a wildcat when she’s angry than make a pretense at happiness.”

“Clara will never flatter. But you’ll not find a more loyal soul. And if she does come to trust you, she’ll trust completely. After a lifetime of having her faith broken, my daughter’s trust is the greatest gift she can give.”

“Will she grow to trust me?”

“Perhaps she already does, Mr. McTavish. After all, she took you to her hideout in the Roman wall.”

“How do you know about that?”

“My husband loved going there when he was a boy—pretending to be a savage living off the land until the responsibility of the dukedom required him to cast such things aside. Cornelius and Nathaniel had little interest in it, so Harcourt was delighted when he learned Clara had discovered it. She never spoke about it, and we respected her need for privacy. Of course, she must have known that Harcourt made sure she had everything she needed, firewood and such. But it was her little kingdom. She never let anyone visit. Until you.” She turned her gaze on him.

“It was at that moment that I realized that if any man could make my daughter happy, it was you.”

Murdo’s heart swelled with pride.

“Of course,” she added, “that doesn’t give you the right to restrict her freedom.”

“It’s for precisely that reason, Yer Grace, that I admire you, almost as much as I love yer daughter.”

“What’s all this, brother?” a familiar voice said. “I hadn’t expected yer betrothed to be old enough to be yer ma.”

James and Duncan stood in the doorway.

The duchess withdrew her hand and frowned.

Clara turned from the window, her body stiff with apprehension, and Buck let out a low growl.

“Master Murdo, it’s good to see ye home,” the ghillie said.

“Thank ye, Duncan,” Murdo said, frowning at his brother. “At least someone knows

how not to insult our guests at first meeting. Miss Martingale, come meet my brother.”

Clara slipped off the seat and approached Murdo. He drew her close, as if to protect her from his brother’s disapproving gaze.

“James, this is the Duchess of Pittchester,” Murdo said, gesturing to Clara’s mother. “And this,” he added, lifting Clara’s hand to his lips, “is my betrothed, Miss Clara Martingale.”

James stared, unmoving. Duncan nudged him and he stepped forward.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Clara said, offering her hand. “Murdo’s said much about you.”

“Really?” A flicker of fear gleamed in James’s eyes as he stared at Clara’s hand, making no move to take it. At length, her arm began to tremble.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said.

“Afraid!” James scoffed. “What the ballocks have I to be afraid of from a lass ? Murdo, ye should keep yer woman in check.”

“Mr. McTavish, I—” Clara began.

“Will ye not tell the lass to be silent?” James sneered. “I’ll not be wanting to hear a woman’s nagging in my home.”

Duncan caught his sleeve. “James,” he said softly. The two exchanged a glance, and Duncan shook his head.

At length, James sighed. “I suppose Da’s told ye where he’s been today,” he said.

“Joan said he’s with the McCallum,” Murdo replied. “He’s still there.”

“Fuck,” James muttered.

The duchess’s eyes widened.

“Brother,” Murdo growled.

A gong sounded in the hallway, and James let out another curse. Shortly after, Joan appeared.

“Master James, I thought I heard ye! Hurry and tidy yerself up—supper’s ready.”

James turned to the ghillie. “Get yerself gone, Duncan.”

The ghillie frowned, a flicker of hurt in his eyes, then he nodded. “Aye, Master James.” He bowed to Clara and her mother. “Yer Grace, Miss Martingale, a pleasure to meet ye.”

“Don’t ye be going anywhere, Duncan,” Joan said. “Ignore Master James—he’s like a stag with a sore belly today. Come into the kitchen. Morag’s got a bite of stew for ye.”

“Duncan,” Murdo called, as the ghillie turned to leave, “would ye show the duchess and Miss Martingale about the estate during her stay? There’s none who know the land hereabouts better than ye.”

“Aye, Master Murdo, I will.”

“You’re very kind,” the duchess said. “Mr. McTavish has been telling me all about the stag. I’m sure my daughter would love to hear about it.”

“Oh yes,” Clara said. “I want to learn everything about life here.”

“Duncan’s not got time to waste showing ladies about,” James said.

“Master James, ye’re not too old to take the strap,” Joan said. “Be off with ye and clean yerself up—our guests don’t want to eat their supper with that stench on ye. Duncan, get yerself to the kitchen before I take a strap to ye also.”

The ghillie exited the chamber followed by James.

Clara stared after them, a thoughtful expression in her eyes. Then she took Murdo’s arm and he led her out of the hall.

“Don’t mind James,” he said. “He doesn’t take well to strangers.”

“Like your dog?”

He nodded.

But James would take a great deal more persuasion than Buck to warm to Clara.

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The dining room at Murdo's home was almost as big as the great hall, with an equally large fireplace, in which a fire blazed and crackled. The dog lay in front of the fire, occasionally jumping as a spark flew out, before settling down with a sigh, his dark eyes focused on the diners.

Mama sat across the table, her face glowing in the candlelight. Murdo's brother sat beside her.

While Murdo and Mama discussed the process of hunting a stag, James ate in silence. His gaze remained fixed on his plate, though it occasionally flicked toward the empty place at the end of the table.

"Do you hunt stag, Mr. McTavish?" Clara asked.

James paused, his fork halfway to his mouth, and met her gaze. His eyes were the same color as Murdo's, but unlike his brother's their expression conveyed wariness and apprehension, as if he expected a beating merely for existing.

Murdo's brother carried a secret sorrow, and her heart ached for him.

His eyes flared, as if he acknowledged her recognition, then they hardened, and he resumed his attention on his supper.

"Answer her, James," Murdo growled.

"There's no need," Clara said. "Why don't you tell me about the festival—the one Mrs. Grant mentioned. Lunar, was it?"

The man opposite snorted. “It’s Lughnasadh,” he sneered.

“What type of festival is it?” Mama asked. Her quiet dignity seemed to temper James’s incivility.

“It celebrates the harvest.”

“So it’s in the autumn?” Clara asked.

He rolled his eyes, and muttered something under his breath that sounded very like damned Sassenachs.

“It’s in late summer, to mark the beginning of the harvest,” he said. “Everyone works the land, so I doubt ye’ll enjoy it.”

Before Clara could reply, hoofbeats echoed outside. James stiffened and his fork clattered onto the table.

Heavy footsteps and a booming voice approached. Then the door was flung open to reveal a man, as wide as he was tall, with thinning silver hair and reddened, fleshy cheeks. His bright-green gaze, red rimmed and glistening in the candlelight, focused on Clara, then swept across the room.

“Ha!” he cried, droplets of spittle flying from his mouth.

“So ye’re back, Murdo, and ye’ve brought yer woman!

” He gestured to Murdo’s brother. “Not like this one here, who wouldn’t take a woman unless I kicked him up the arse all the way to the altar!

But ye’re in luck, James. Old McCallum’s willing to give ye his daughter—and a

lucky lass she'll be, to birth a McTavish laird. ”

“Da,” James said, “I don’t—”

“Be quiet, son!” The laird’s voice boomed around the room. “Ye’ll fulfil yer duty or I’ll have yer ballocks. I’ll have no weak-bellied lassie for a son.”

“Da, take some supper,” Murdo said.

“I will as soon as I can get my arse on a seat. Been riding all evening, I have, all for a young man who doesn’t know his good fortune.” The laird glared at James.

“Da, we have guests,” Murdo said, taking Clara’s hand.

The laird chuckled. “That we do. At least one of my sons is a man.” He approached Clara, and her stomach churned at the stench of liquor on his breath. “Stand up, then, lass. Let me take a good look at ye.”

How dare he!

Clara tilted her chin. “I’m not an animal to be inspected, Mr. McTavish.”

Murdo raised his eyebrows, but James drew in a sharp breath.

Mama met her gaze and frowned.

The laird’s eyes darkened and fear rippled through Clara as she recognized the expression she’d seen often enough as a child, one that was usually the precursor to a beating. She flinched as he grasped her chin.

Then he grinned, revealing a row of yellowing teeth.

“A feisty lassie, ye are,” he said, “but ye’ll learn. We McTavishes know how to keep our women obedient. Isn’t that right, son?”

“Da, I think—” Murdo began.

“Ye’d better not have gone soft, lad, like yer fool of a brother.”

Clara winced as the laird dug his fingers into her flesh and forced her face upward.

“That’s better. I can see ye now,” he said. “Aye, ye’re bonny enough. Murdo always took after his da with the lasses. Though if he’s anything like his da, he’d rut them from behind if they weren’t bonny enough.”

“Da!” Murdo said.

The laird chuckled and released his grip.

“I’m only jesting,” he said. “Ye’re welcome in our family. Daughter of a duchess, I hear, with a fine dowry. And a ripe body I can see—ready for birthing McTavishes, for all that ye’re a Sassenach.”

“Forgive my father,” Murdo said. “He’s in his cups.”

“And why shouldn’t I be, eh?” the laird said. “I’ve cause to celebrate.” He glanced around the table. “I’ve found a bride for my heir, and my younger son has found himself a...”

He froze, his eyes widening.

“Devil’s cock!” he said. “It’s you !”

“Who?” Murdo asked.

“That slut !” the laird snarled. “Get her out of my home at once!”

Clara’s gut twisted with horror. The laird was pointing at her mother.

Murdo stood. “Da, that’s the Duchess of Pittchester,” he said. “She’s not one of yer whores.”

“Ye know me, don’t ye, whore,” the laird said.

Clara’s mother set her napkin aside and rose, her face ashen.

“I recognize you,” she said quietly. “But I don’t know you. I never knew any of your names.”

“Who are ye?” Murdo whispered, staring at Clara’s mother.

“Elizabeth Martingale, Duchess of Pittchester.”

“Ye’re a whore ,” the laird said.

“Da, stop it!” Murdo said. “Ye’ve taken too much whisky.”

“Too much whisky, have I? I’ll prove I’m right, lad.”

The laird strode toward Clara’s mother and grasped her sleeve. Then he pulled it up to reveal the scar on her skin—the mark in the shape of the letter D .

“Ye bear his brand,” he said. “Ye can’t deny it now.”

“I deny nothing.” Clara’s mother met the laird’s gaze.

“Aye, Elizabeth, Duchess of Pittchester ,” he snarled. “Only I knew ye as Eliza, the filthiest whore in London. Gave me a good ride, ye did.”

“When ye were in London ?” Murdo said. “Da, that was years ago, when I was a bairn. Are ye saying ye took a whore ?”

“I’ve always taken whores, son—it’s part of being a man. Ye’ve taken plenty yerself.”

Clara drew in a sharp breath and turned to her fiancé. “You what ?”

“I’ve had women warm my bed, aye,” Murdo said, “but I’d never stoop to taking a whore.”

Clara’s mother swayed to the side, and Clara rushed across the table and took her hand.

“Mama, is it true?” she asked. “Was this man one of”—she swallowed the nausea rising in her gut—“one of... them ?”

Her mother nodded. “Oh, darling, I-I’m so sorry!”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for,” Clara said. “Not like him .” She pointed to the laird. “How could you?”

He let out a laugh. “What, take what was on offer for a coin? She was plenty willing, lass—spread her legs for every man in London, or so I was told. I’d recognize her anywhere.”

“Then you’re unique among men,” Clara’s mother said, her voice even. “Most men didn’t bother to look at our faces.”

“I always take a look at their faces,” the laird said. “I remember yer face, looking up at me with those lips wrapped around my—”

“No!” Clara cried. “Stop! Murdo, make him stop!”

“I-I can’t,” Murdo said. “Does he speak the truth?”

“Of course I do!” the laird said. “Would ye listen to this slut over yer da? Would ye...”

He hesitated, his gaze fixed on Clara.

“Devil’s cock! Are ye the brat of a whore?”

Mama took Clara’s hand. “Clara is my daughter.”

“And her father...her natural father...” Murdo’s voice trailed away. Then he shook his head. “Sweet Lord Almighty—Da, are ye her father?”

His face twisted in horror, and Clara’s heart shattered at the disgust in his eyes.

“No,” Mama said quietly. She touched her scar. “Clara’s natural father is the man who did this to me. I was already with child when your father—”

“No!” Murdo said. “I cannot bear to hear any more of this.”

“Why, Mr. McTavish,” Mama said, her voice hardening, “I didn’t take you for—how did your father put it?—a weak-bellied lassie.”

“So he speaks the truth?”

“Your father visited the brothel where I worked,” Mama said. “If I recall, he came every day for a month, and paid an extra shilling because I was with child.”

“He p-paid...” Murdo shook his head.

“Don’t be too hard on your father, Mr. McTavish,” Mama said.

“He didn’t part with the shilling willingly—it took some persuasion.

I’d hate it if you thought him an extravagant man.

” She glanced about the dining room, then turned to the laird.

“Your son said your finances were in a pitiful state, and I now understand why—an excess of liquor and exploitation of women driven out of necessity, or captivity, to sell their bodies.”

“Say what you want, woman,” the laird said. “I’ll not have a whore’s daughter in my family.”

“I believe we are of one mind, Lord McTavish,” Mama said.

“Don’t ye want to foist yer brat onto my son?”

“Not now I know what kind of creature his father is.”

“Why ye...” He balled his hands into fists, but she stood firm.

“Strike me if you wish,” she said. “It’s what I’d expect.”

“Da, that’s enough !” Murdo said. “Get to yer chamber and sleep off the whisky. I’ll deal with this.”

Clara’s heart stung with pain. “ Deal with this?”

“Aye,” Murdo said, averting his gaze.

A huge, cruel fist punched through Clara’s chest and clawed at her heart.

“Won’t you look at me, Murdo?” she asked.

“Not if he wishes to remain under my roof,” the laird said.

“Da,” James said quietly, “perhaps ye should—”

“Silence!” the laird roared, clipping him over the head. “Don’t be such a milkmaid.”

“Murdo?” Clara whispered, but he still wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“Why didn’t ye tell me, Clara?” he said.

Clara’s mother caught her hand. “Come along, daughter, we’re leaving.”

“No fight in ye, Duchess ?” the laird sneered. “Ye had plenty of fight when I spread yer—”

“Da, that’s enough!” Murdo roared.

“What would be the point?” Mama said. “I could shoot you dead, but death’s too good for you. You deserve to live out the rest of your pathetic life knowing that you’ve deprived your family of the brightest jewel in the world—my daughter.”

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She drew Clara close. “I’m only thankful that my daughter has been saved from making a terrible mistake. My dearest wish is that she’ll have the happiness she deserves. I wish the same for you, Lord McTavish—that you have the happiness you deserve.”

“Yer Grace, I...” Murdo began, then he lifted his gaze to Clara’s. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Mama said. “I’m sorry for being so mistaken in my opinion of you. Please send for your carriage to take us to the nearest inn.”

“At least stay until the morning,” he said. “Da will have slept off the whisky. I’ll speak to him.”

“And say what?” Clara asked. “Beg forgiveness for offering your hand to a whore’s brat?”

“Don’t say that, Clara.”

She laughed bitterly. “You were content to call my mother a whore.”

“Aye,” the laird said. “That’s because she is.”

“Da, stop it!”

Murdo’s brother let out a cry and leaped to his feet. He swept his plate off the table, and it shattered on the floor in an explosion of crockery and stew.

The laird approached him, fists raised. “I’ll beat ye raw!”

“Go on, then, Da—I dare ye!”

“Miserable lad!”

“Sweet heaven, what kind of a place is this?” Clara’s mother cried. “I’ve no wish to stay here a moment longer.”

“Then get ye gone,” the laird said.

“With pleasure.”

“Murdo?” Clara said, but he remained still.

Her heart breaking, she let her mother steer her into the main hall, where the housekeeper and ghillie were approaching the dining room, followed by a young man.

“What the devil’s happening?” the ghillie asked.

“As if ye need to ask, Duncan!” the housekeeper said as the angry voices continued from inside the dining room. “Ye ken what happens when the laird comes home after a bout of drinking.”

“We’re leaving this instant,” Mama said.

“But—”

“I won’t spend another minute in this place. Have the carriage take us to the nearest inn. Failing that, give us directions and we’ll walk.”

The housekeeper glanced toward the dining room. “Yer Grace, it’s just the laird’s way. He’ll have slept it off by morning. It’s dark outside, and—”

“Do as the duchess says,” a quiet voice said.

Murdo stood in the doorway, defeat in his eyes.

He gestured to the young man. “See to it, Callum. Now!”

The young man nodded and scuttled off. Murdo’s gaze wandered about the hallway, settling anywhere but on Clara.

Why did he not look at her? Did she repulse him now he knew what she was?

“Murdo?”

“Duchess, tell the driver to take ye to the Kelpie’s Inn,” he said, ignoring her. “They’ll accommodate ye if ye mention my name and will set ye on a coach to Edinburgh. I’ll settle the account, of course.”

“Can you afford it now you’re not getting your hands on my daughter’s fortune?”

He flinched and closed his eyes.

“Murdo...” Clara said, pain swelling in her heart.

He opened them, and her heart shattered at the defeat there.

“I think it’s best, lass.”

“For whom? That vile, drunken bully you call a father?”

The housekeeper drew in a sharp breath.

“Now, lass, there’s no need—” the ghillie began.

“There’s every need!” Clara cried. “Did you hear what he said to me, to my mother? Damn you, Murdo. Why can’t you even look at me—the brat of the whore your father fucked?”

“Sweet God Almighty!” The housekeeper crossed herself.

“Joan, see that our guests’ trunks are brought down,” Murdo said.

The housekeeper nodded, then scuttled up the stairs. “Elsbeth! Marsaili! Come here this instant!” she cried.

Fists raised, Clara strode toward Murdo, but a hand caught her wrist.

“He’s not worth it, my darling,” Mama said. “He’s not worth anything .”

Murdo’s brother appeared from the dining room. “He’s passed out,” he said. “Help me get him upstairs, will ye?”

“Not now, James,” Murdo said.

At that moment, the crunch of wheels on gravel could be heard outside, and the young man reappeared, panting. “The carriage is ready.”

“I’ll show ye to the parlor where ye can wait until yer trunks are loaded,” the ghillie said.

“We’ll wait in the coach,” Mama said crisply. “I don’t wish to spend another

heartbeat in this house.”

The young man led them outside. At the threshold, Clara glanced back at Murdo. A flicker of despair pulsed in his eyes, and for a heartbeat, she thought he might call her back.

But he didn’t. He glanced at his brother, who stood, red-faced, by the dining room door, while snores could be heard from inside.

Then Clara turned her back and followed her mother into the carriage.

As soon as Mama drew her into an embrace, Clara surrendered to her sorrow, shaking with sobs.

“I’m so sorry, my darling,” Mama whispered.

“Why didn’t he defend me?” Clara cried.

“Because some men are weak. They care for honor, propriety, and bloodlines, yet, deep down, they’re nothing more than bloodless little boys desperate to please their fathers.” She let out a sigh. “Even Harcourt—much as I love him—once cared more for propriety than for love.”

“But Papa Harcourt loves you, Mama, doesn’t he?”

She kissed Clara’s forehead. “He does. But when I first knew him, he was bound by the rules of Society that his father insisted he follow. We both suffered as a result, but perhaps we needed to suffer to appreciate what we have now—the love we share.”

“I-I thought Murdo loved me.”

“He did, darling. Perhaps he still does.”

“But not enough,” Clara said. “Will there ever be anyone to love me enough?”

Her mother caressed her hair. “There will, my darling. And I know just the place to find him.”

Clara’s skin tightened in apprehension. “Not London? A Season would be far worse than this. Men like him —ladies like Miss Peacock. I don’t fit in. Please don’t make me have a London Season.”

“I won’t, my darling,” Mama said. “I’m thinking of somewhere—and some one—very particular. The hand of fate who reunited your stepfather and me.”

“Who?” Clara asked.

“My dear friend Bessie Dove-Lyon,” Mama said. “It’s time to take you to the Lyon’s Den.”

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The Lyon's Den, London, two months later

Devil's ballocks—it was her !

Had he endured a Herculean challenge in this den of iniquity—penning verse, balancing ledgers, heaving his body over those godforsaken obstacles in the gaming room, and, finally, burning the skin of his hands hauling himself up on a rope—to find himself standing before the woman he'd spent the past two months striving to obliterate from his mind?

Murdo rubbed his chin where she'd struck him. For a lass, she packed a fine punch. But anger was known to fuel a person's strength—and Clara Martingale had every right to be angry.

Guilt stabbed at his soul as the duchess approached, her face illuminated by the candlelight—the woman Da had...

No!

The last thing he wanted to do was imagine the depraved acts his father had committed.

The duchess jabbed a finger in his direction. "No!" she said, fury in her eyes. "Not after the way he treated my daughter. Anyone but him!"

"But you signed the contract," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

“I did, but—”

“Then you must abide by the terms.” The veiled creature turned to Murdo. “Both of you must abide by the terms.”

She placed Miss Martingale’s hand in Murdo’s.

Sweet Lord ... To feel those little fingers of hers again—to breathe in the scent of her...

A shock of desire coursed through his blood as he curled his fingers around hers, trembling with uncertainty.

Would she strike him again? She had just cause, given that he’d stood by like a coward while his father ripped open her secret.

And what a dreadful secret! To have been branded by the man who held her mother captive in a brothel, selling her body to the vilest of men—including Murdo’s own father.

“Are you displeased with your prize, Mr. McTavish?” the veiled widow said. “Or are you too weak bellied to wed a woman of whom Society disapproves?”

He shook his head. “No, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Yer man, Demetrius, made it perfectly clear that the brides on offer here were not debutantes. But I hadn’t expected to see...”

The woman I love—the woman I’ve yearned for since the day I broke her heart.

“Hadn’t expected to see what?” Clara said.

Murdo's body tightened at the sound of her voice—how he'd longed to hear it again!

"You disappoint me, sir, if you had unrealistic expectations as to the respectability of the woman you've sold yourself to," Clara continued.

Gone were the coarse tones of the wild creature he'd fallen in love with. Her voice now carried an edge, as if her natural character were concealed beneath an armor of cold, hard steel.

"Clara..."

She snatched her hand free, and he caught a blur of movement before her fist connected with his jaw once more. He staggered back and lost his balance to the cheers of the crowd below.

"Devil's ballocks, woman! Why did ye have to do that?" He struggled to his feet, the metallic taste of blood on his lips.

"Miss Martingale," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, "I must protest."

"How so?" Clara said, her eyes bright, face flushed. "Did you not say that a little bloodletting was necessary for a man to demonstrate his strength and honor? Though I question your definition of honor, given the creature that lies before me."

Strength and honor...

Had he been taken for a fool?

"Vi et honore," he said, anger warring with disbelief. "I should have known."

"Known what?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

“Strength and honor,” he said. “My clan motto. Did ye use it to lure me into a trap?”

Clara let out a bitter laugh. “Do you think I’d have agreed to this—this charade”—she gestured toward the gaming room below—“if I, for one moment, thought I’d be subjected to your company again?”

“Then why use my clan motto as the name for the challenge? It cannot be a coincidence.”

“Why, you...” Clara lunged forward, but the duchess caught her hand.

“Daughter, no.”

“Thank ye, Duchess,” Murdo said.

“It wasn’t for your benefit, Mr. McTavish,” she replied. “I was thinking of my daughter. I’ve no wish for her to bruise her knuckles striking a man less worthy than a piece of horse dung on the bottom of her shoe.”

“Strength and honor,” Murdo said. “I told ye they’re the principles that guide me.”

Clara lifted her gaze, and her wide, expressive eyes focused on him, giving no trace of deceit or subterfuge in their dark depths. He only saw the naïve girl he’d fallen in love with.

“You also told me that my past was of no consequence,” she said. “Men make pretty speeches when they believe their honor will never be put to the test.”

“Why use my clan motto?”

“Because I realized I’d never find love in marriage. Not after...” She gestured toward

him. “But a man who could prove himself worthy of...of vi et honore was a man whom I might be content to surrender my body to, if not my heart.”

“Women enter the Lyon’s Den not to trade in hearts , but in flesh—the purchase of titled men.”

“Not always, Mr. McTavish,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

“Some women are prepared to surrender everything they have for a chance at happiness with an honorable man. I pride myself in my ability to ensure that everyone entering my establishment secures the match they need —even if, at first, it may not be the match they want.”

“Well, Bessie, I think my daughter is the exception,” the duchess said. “She neither wants nor needs this man. Your matchmaking skills have failed.”

“The contract is signed,” came the reply. “There’s no reneging.”

“Not even if both parties object?” Clara said.

A sliver of pain cut through Murdo’s heart. She justly hated him—but he could bear her hatred more than the prospect of losing her a second time, no matter what his daughter might say.

That bitter old man had ordered Murdo to secure a rich wife to atone for the dowry he’d lost. And so, Murdo had found himself in the Lyon’s Den—where ladies of doubtful virtue purchased husbands.

The Black Widow spoke, unexpected softness in her voice.

“Don’t you trust me, Miss Martingale?” she said. “Duchess, I recall, you objected to

the match I secured for you in this very establishment. Yet am I right in thinking that you're happy with the man you love, and who loves you with all his soul?"

Murdo stared at the duchess. "Ye secured yer match with the duke here?"

Clara rolled her eyes. "Isn't that what Mrs. Dove-Lyon just said? What are you, an imbecile? Is that why you Highlanders are so huge and ungainly in body—to make up for your lack of wits? Or perhaps because you have little to no... accoutrements."

She lowered her gaze to his groin and curled her lip in a sneer.

Her arrow hit home.

"Ye've a foul mouth on ye, lass," he growled. "Ye ken very well I've accoutrements in abundance."

"Drop your breeches, then," she said. "I'm in need of a good laugh tonight."

"Now, lass," he said. "Should ye be speaking to yer future husband with such disrespect?"

"Future husband—ha! You're too weak bellied to take me for a bride."

"Strength and honor, lass," he said. "If ye didn't want to be ruled by a strong man, then ye shouldn't have bound yerself to one." He stepped toward her, and her eyes flared with fear.

He yearned to take her in his arms. But, wildcat that she was, most likely she'd scratch out his eyes.

"Are ye afraid, lass?" he asked.

The defiance returned to her eyes—the strength of will that had captured his heart.

“No,” she said, tilting her chin, “but you are.”

“I’m afraid of nothing,” he growled, the primal beast within him stirring his cock.

“Prove it.”

He pulled her hard against his chest and crushed his mouth against hers.

A cheer rose from the crowd.

“All hail the mighty unicorn!”

“He’s tamed the wench at last!”

What the ballocks am I doing, claiming her like a savage?

But, with a mewl of pleasure, she parted her lips to invite him in, and he deepened the kiss, relishing the taste of her that was better than the finest whisky. He swept his tongue across her mouth, drawing her tongue around his, while he devoured her like a man starved.

And he was a man starved—from the moment he’d first seen her eyes darken with pleasure at his touch in that remote little cave on the Roman wall, he knew that no other woman would satisfy him again.

The world believed women were ruined by an association with a man, but the world was wrong. She had ruined him, utterly and completely. And holding her in his arms, while he claimed her with his mouth as he yearned to claim her with his cock, he welcomed that ruination.

He broke the kiss, and for a heartbeat she remained in his arms—face flushed, lips swollen and glistening from his kiss. Her eyes were closed, long lashes curving gently upward. Then they fluttered open and his soul sang at the desire in them.

Then she blinked and the moment was gone. She struggled in his arms, though she made little effort, as if she were trying to convince others of her reluctance, and he released her, his groin tightening with want.

“I think that settles it,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

“Daughter?” the duchess asked.

Clara blinked and glanced at her mother. Murdo held his breath in anticipation. If she consented, he was, most likely, surrendering himself to a lifetime of defiance, challenge, and tribulation. But if she refused...

Then she nodded.

The duchess let out a soft cry, her face contorting with pain. She took Clara’s hand and lowered her voice.

“There’s no shame in refusing, daughter,” she said. “I can weather the cost, and my old friend’s anger.”

“You’d be putting the Lyon’s Den into disrepute,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. “That comes with a heavy price.”

“No price is too great to pay for my daughter’s happiness,” the duchess said. “Clara deserves to be loved, not judged.”

“Duchess,” Murdo began, “I assure ye that I don’t judge yer daughter. I...”

He hesitated as three pairs of eyes settled on him—one gleaming behind the shroud of black lace.

I love her.

“I’ve already made arrangements for the wedding,” he said.

“You have?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. “Didn’t Demetrius tell you I could secure a special license?”

“There’s no need if the marriage takes place in Scotland. Ye see...”

She raised a black-lace-gloved hand. “I’m aware of the law regarding marriage in Scotland, Mr. McTavish. Where will the marriage take place?”

“In Melrose. A date is set for next week.”

“Next week?” The duchess raised her eyebrows. “Were you certain of success tonight? Somewhat presumptuous.”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon assured me that I’d secure the perfect bride by the time I left London.”

“You once told me that you disliked the notion of perfection,” Clara said.

“The perfect Society lady, aye,” he said. “But I see no Society lady before me tonight.”

Three sharp intakes of breath told him that his remark had been received about as well as a lump of deer shit in a stew.

“Yes, well, that’s enough of the pleasantries,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

She turned to the crowd and raised her hand. “Until tomorrow night, mes amis ,” she said, “when eight gallant young men will vie for the hand of a fair maiden in the game to be called the Twelve-Inch Challenge.”

Coarse laughter filled the room as the Black Widow ushered the party through the door leading to the hallway.

“Come,” she said. “We’ll toast your union with a glass of madeira.

The ’97 I think. Duchess, I recall your partiality to it.

I will, of course, gift your daughter with a case.

” She tilted her head and regarded Murdo, her eyes bright behind her veil.

“What say you, Mr. McTavish? A fortune of forty thousand plus a case of madeira?”

“I prefer whisky, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

She let out a chuckle. “But you’ll not say no to the forty thousand.”

He grimaced, but couldn’t deny that Mrs. Dove-Lyon spoke the truth. After all, he was here to secure himself a fortune, even if it came with the inconvenient addition of a wife.

A wife who would, no doubt, devote her life to despising him—no matter how much her body might say otherwise.

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“I now pronounce ye husband and wife.”

As the vicar’s words resonated around the chapel, Clara heard a small intake of breath from where her mother and stepfather sat.

It was nothing compared to the gasp the groom elicited as she’d repeated the vows—or not.

Love, honor, and obey, indeed! Did he think her weak enough to pledge obedience ? She’d vowed to honor and respect him—what more did he want?

When Mama married Papa Harcourt, she’d pledged to “tolerate, honor, and direct.” But the expression in Murdo’s dark-emerald eyes told Clara that she’d have a challenge trying to direct the huge highlander.

The man to whom she now belonged.

The groom lifted her veil for the marital kiss.

For a moment, Clara surrendered to the anticipation.

Then she turned her head aside and his lips brushed her cheek.

Hurt flickered in his eyes, then he turned to face the congregation—Mama, who sat stiffly next to Papa Harcourt, and Clara’s stepbrothers in the pew behind.

Not even Nathaniel, who found amusement in the most dire circumstances—such as

the day he'd broken his leg falling out of a tree—could muster a smile.

She's making a monumental mistake!

Clara recalled Papa Harcourt's angry exchange with Mama the night they'd returned home from the Lyon's Den. Only once before had she witnessed him losing his composure so completely—when her mother had gone missing and his fear for the woman he loved had unleashed his fury at the world.

But Mama persuaded him to permit the marriage, though he threatened to slice the groom into bite-sized pieces to feed to the pigs were he to come within ten feet of him.

And now, he sat in the church next to Mama, displaying his usual stillness, save his right hand, which occasionally moved toward his jacket pocket to give it a reassuring pat.

Murdo led Clara down the aisle. He tensed as they passed her stepfather, but Papa Harcourt merely fixed a cold stare on the groom, then rose to follow them outside.

Across the town, the crumbling ruin Clara had noticed from the carriage gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. Melrose Abbey—fashioned from rose-colored stone, with huge, sweeping, broken arches, stretching toward a roof that had been stripped away centuries before.

Over the years, the abbey had crumbled away, enduring the ravages of time and the men who valued it not for itself, but for what it could give them.

She glanced at her husband.

Will I crumble away at your hands until I'm nothing but bare bones?

He narrowed his eyes, as if he'd read her mind. Then the rest of the party joined them.

Murdo released her hand. "Permit me a moment to settle things with the vicar."

"It's done," Papa Harcourt said. "There's no need to remain here a minute longer—at least once I've had a word with you , young man."

The vicar raised his eyebrows. "Your Grace, I think—"

"A vicar is not paid to think . I trust my donation was sufficient?"

"Aye, sir."

"Then that's settled," Papa Harcourt said. "All that remains is for my daughter and her husband to embark on a life of wedded bliss."

"Very good, Yer Grace," the vicar said, evidently not recognizing the irony in Papa Harcourt's tone.

"Shall we take tea?" Mama said. "Reverend, you're welcome to join us. The woman at the inn—Mrs. McReady, is it?—has offered to accommodate us."

"It's a long drive to Strathburn," Murdo said. "My family's expecting us tonight."

"And you wouldn't wish to disappoint them ," Clara bit out.

She caught a flash of guilt in his eyes.

"Daughter, what do you want?" Mama asked.

“I want to go,” Clara said. “I’ve made my decision and intend to abide by it, no matter what.”

A smile played on Murdo’s lips, but it disappeared when she glared at him.

“I’ve weathered considerably worse in my life,” she added. “We both have, Mama.”

Her mother pulled her into a tight embrace. “There’s my stout-hearted girl!” she said. “The unicorn will need to earn the respect of my little lioness.”

Mama released her, and before Clara could catch her breath, her stepbrothers pulled her into their arms.

“We’re going to miss you, little wildcat,” Nathaniel said. “I pray you’ll be all right.”

“She will—won’t you, sister?” Cornelius said. “Give him hell, Clarry. Like a true Martingale.”

He lifted his little finger and curled it into a hook. Clara hooked her little finger around it and Nathaniel followed suit.

“Like a true Martingale,” they said, in unison.

Then her stepfather approached. He pulled her into a tight embrace, as if his life depended on it.

Clara clung to him, inhaling the scent of wood, pine, and cigars that had terrified her when she first set eyes on him, the aristocratic stranger who’d wrenched her from the slums. But as she grew to trust him, his scent became an enduring comfort.

“Forgive me, Papa,” she said. “I know you wanted me to be a lady.”

“You’re my daughter,” he whispered, his voice wavering. “I care for nothing else.”

“You mean it?”

“Of course I do, dearest girl. Be happy, and write as often as you can.”

He lifted her hand to his lips. Then he helped her into the waiting carriage.

Murdo moved to follow her.

“Mr. McTavish, if you please,” Papa Harcourt said, catching Murdo’s sleeve.

The apprehension in Murdo’s gaze intensified as Papa Harcourt drew back the front of his jacket until the polished wooden handle of a pistol came into view.

“You’re now a member of my family, young man,” he said.

“Thank ye, sir. I—”

“Do not forget it, because, rest assured, I never shall.”

Then he pulled Murdo close and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“I’ve suffered the misfortune today of witnessing you promise to love, honor, and keep my daughter. Be assured that if you harm a hair on her head, you’ll have me to answer to.”

“Do ye intend to shoot me, sir?”

Papa Harcourt gave a cold smile. “The punishment I have in mind is best carried out while you still live. And I promise I’ll take immense pleasure from it.”

He released Murdo, then wiped his hand on his jacket.

“Sir, I—” Murdo began.

“There’s no need to speak, Mr. McTavish. I form opinions based on actions, not words. And, in contrast to your behavior to date, I keep my promises. Remember that and I might just leave you to live out your life unmolested.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Make sure you do.”

Papa withdrew, and Murdo bowed to Mama.

“Have ye anything to say, Duchess?”

“My husband has said all that needs to be said.”

Murdo bowed again, then climbed into the carriage and closed the door, then Clara leaned out, fear curling inside her stomach.

“Write to me!” she said, as her family raised their hands in farewell.

Then the carriage lurched into motion. Clara memorized the image of her parents—the two people who loved her best in the world—as their figures receded into the distance. Then the carriage turned a corner and they disappeared.

She settled into her seat, rubbing the scar on her arm. Then she glanced up to see her husband staring at her.

“Does yer stepfather always speak for ye, lass—fight yer battles?”

“My father speaks for himself,” she retorted, “and though the blackened heart of a scoundrel may be a tempting target for a caring father with a pistol, his throat is also a tempting prospect for a woman with a knife.”

His cast his gaze over her body.

“Looking for a weapon?” she said. “You’ll never find it. The first time you see it will be when I plunge it into your chest.”

“Yer sharpest weapon’s yer tongue, wife .”

She flinched at his emphasis on that last word.

“I didn’t pledge to obey you,” she said.

“But ye must obey me by law, no matter what ye said in church. Like it or not, ye belong to my family, and ye must show me respect tonight before my family, whether ye like it or not.”

“Or what?” she challenged.

“Or I shall be forced to apply the law as I see fit.”

He settled back into his seat, a cocktail of determination and guilt in his expression. Then he closed his eyes, and they continued in silence, the carriage rocking to and fro.

Show me respect tonight...

What did he mean?

The air grew cold and Clara reached for a blanket, but he was sitting on the corner. When she tugged at it, his eyes flew open, and her heart skittered at the raw desire in them.

“What is it, lass?”

“I’m cold.”

She tugged again. The blanket came free and she placed it over her shoulders.

“What else?”

“There’s nothing else.”

“I can read ye like a ledger, lass,” he said. “What is it?”

“Wh-what’s happening tonight?”

“It’s a clan tradition.”

“What is?”

“The consummation,” he said, lowering his voice and leaning forward. “The moment ye truly become mine .”

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By the time the carriage reached Strathburn, Murdo's bride had fallen asleep.

She'd spent most of the journey with her eyes closed, but the tension in her body told him that she was awake, and alert—like a rabbit attempting to remain still before a predator in the hope she could escape unobserved and unscathed.

Only Clara wasn't unscathed. Outwardly she bore the scar of her past, the ugly red mark on her upper arm that elicited in Murdo the desire to rip apart the limbs of those who'd hurt her. And inwardly...

Inwardly she carried the scars of a broken heart. Scars he had inflicted.

But how could he help her to heal when she looked at him with such fury?

When the tension left her body, he knew she'd fallen asleep. Only then did he retrieve the blanket that had slipped to the floor and place it over her sleeping form. Holding his breath, he placed his palm on her cheek, and his heart swelled at the smile curving her lips.

Whom did she dream of? Was it him? Or, perhaps, the man she had thought he was—a man of honor, not the sorry creature who'd betrayed her?

The carriage drew to a halt and a manservant rushed toward it. Murdo leaned out of the window and glanced at the mountain dominating the horizon.

Beinn Urraim —Mountain of Honor.

“Master Murdo, welcome!”

“Hush, Callum. My bride’s asleep.”

“We’ve been wanting to take a look at her. The laird’s in a right fine mood, and Morag’s been cooking all day for the celebration.”

“And my brother?”

“H-he’s well. Been taking too much of yer da’s whisky, if ye don’t mind my saying.”

“Is Duncan with him?”

“They were on the hills today, but Master James sent Duncan to the kitchens as soon as he heard the carriage. Everyone’s gathered in the hallway.”

Murdo turned to Clara and placed his hand on her cheek again, tracing the outline of her mouth with his thumb.

“Mmm...” She caught his hand and curled her fingers around his wrist, a smile of contentment on her lips. Then she opened her eyes. The contentment—and the smile—died.

“We’re home,” Murdo said.

She tensed and sat up.

“Devil’s arse!” Callum cried. Then he blushed. “Beggin’ yer pardon, Miss—I mean, Mrs. McTavish. W-welcome to Strathburn.”

“Callum, isn’t it?” Clara said.

“Aye. We all...” Callum glanced at Murdo. “We’d best get ye inside. Everyone’s waiting.”

Murdo helped Clara out of the carriage. She glanced about, her eyes bright with fear.

Callum lowered his voice. “Ye’d best tell the laird before comin’ in with yer bride, Master Murdo. It’ll come as a shock, and Dr. Munro said we mustn’t—”

“Hush!” Murdo said, but the damage had already been done. Moisture gleamed in Clara’s eyes as she took in every word.

Murdo took her arm. She had naught to be ashamed of, and he’d be damned if he couldn’t march her into his home with pride as generations of McTavish men had done so in years gone by.

“Lead the way, Callum,” he said. “I wish to take my bride over the threshold.”

Callum muttered something that sounded very like “let the wrath of the devil fall on yer own head,” then retreated through the main doors, through which Murdo could hear excited chatter.

He squeezed his wife’s hand. “All will be well, lass. Ye’ve naught to fear.”

“What do you think I am—a weak-bellied debutante?” she bit out.

Her defiance was tempered by the tremor in her voice. Tightening his grip in a gesture of reassurance, he led her through the doorway.

Da stood at the foot of the stairs with James.

Surrounding them were the tenants of the estate—young Braeden and his five

brothers with the eldest brothers' wives, wee Struan McTavish, and his wife and mother.

Parson and Mrs. Stewart stood halfway up the stairs, as if to affirm their moral superiority over the party by their elevated position.

Joan stood flanked by Elspeth and Marsaili, the redness in her cheeks evidence that even she had taken a nip of whisky in celebration.

There had to be at least fifty people. But a McTavish marriage was a rare occurrence. The last had been Da's over thirty years before. They'd not need to wait so long for the next one—when James wed the McCallum lass.

Murdo's father stepped forward, coughing, and Clara shifted toward Murdo in an almost instinctive need for protection.

“Welcome, son—and yer bride. At last, ye've honored the name of McTavish by...”

Da paused, then let out a deep hiss.

“Master Angus?” Joan said. “Are ye—”

“Devil's cursed cock!” Da cried. “What are ye doing with that...that spawn of a whore!”

A collective intake of breath rippled over the company.

“Sweet Lord Almighty!” Joan said. “Master Murdo, do my eyes deceive me?”

“They don't, Joan,” Murdo said. “Forgive me if—”

“There’s naught to forgive.”

“There is ,” his father growled. “Didn’t I say I’d not have ye bring a whore into my house again?”

“Master Angus, ye can’t speak to yer son like—”

“I’ll speak to him as I see fit!” Murdo’s father said. “I’m head of the clan. I should have known that slut would trick ye into marriage. What did she do, offer her cunny to—”

“Da! This isn’t the place to discuss the matter,” Murdo said. “Everyone, go to the great hall.”

As the company dispersed, Clara addressed Murdo’s father, her eyes flashing with fury. “Do you think I’d willingly return here ?” she said. “The thought of being in the same room as a creature such as you repulses me!”

“Wife, that’s enough!” Murdo said. “Joan, take my bride to the great hall and make sure she’s ready.”

The housekeeper took Clara’s hand. “Come, lass. This is no place for women.”

“What, this hall,” Clara said, “or the whole godforsaken house?”

“Why, you little...” Da began.

“Get her inside, Joan,” Murdo said. “ Now! ”

Clara shot him a look of venom, but she let the housekeeper lead her away.

Murdo's father raised his hand, but Murdo caught it, curling his fingers round the old man's bony wrist.

Devil's ballocks , his da had grown thin.

A life of lairdship and bitterness took its toll on a man. And James was unwilling to take on the mantle even though he was the heir.

As for Murdo himself...

He couldn't even defend the woman he loved.

"What the fuck are ye doing, son, bringing that whore's spawn into my home?"

"She's my wife, Da," Murdo said. "Ye sent me to London to sell myself to a wealthy woman, and I've returned with one. Forty thousand, if ye recall."

"I wouldn't suffer that slut for a hundred thousand! She'll taint the clan with her filth—yer children would carry the stain of being a whore's brats."

"My children will be sons and daughters of the clan," Murdo said. "Clara is my wife."

"Clara!" Da scoffed. "Why couldn't ye wed a good Scottish lass rather than a Sassenach?"

"Because ye sent me to the Lyon's Den."

"How do ye know she's not riddled with the pox, eh?"

"That's enough!" Murdo roared. "Like it or not, Clara's my wife! We each uttered

our vows, willingly entering into marriage. We're man and wife."

"Man!" his da snorted, sending out another cloud of spittle.

"Ye're no man—guided by yer cock, ye are.

Yer brother's no better, as he doesn't know where to stick his.

What did I do to be cursed with such piles of deer shit for sons?

Mark my words, she'll mark ye with the pox.

Ye'll wake up one day to find yer cock's rotted off.

And don't think she'll keep her thighs closed—she'll be letting every lad in the clan dip his cock into—"

Murdo grasped his father's arms and slammed him back against the wall.

"In the name of the devil, will ye desist!" he roared. "Utter one more word against her and I'll strike ye down!"

He raised his fist, and his father flinched. Then a sly smile crept across his lips.

"So my son has a pair of ballocks after all—which is more than I can say for yer brother. Go on, then, strike me if ye dare."

"I've no need to strike ye, Da," Murdo said, lowering his voice to a cold, hard tone. "But I promise ye this. If ye fail to respect me and my choice of wife then I'll grant yer wish and make sure my wife never sets foot here again."

“Ye will?” The slyness intensified in Da’s eyes.

“Aye, I will,” Murdo said. “I’ll take my wife—and her fortune—to England.”

His da paled. “Y-ye wouldn’t.”

“Ye wouldn’t mind, aye?” Murdo said. “After all, James is the heir.”

“Aye, but James is...”

“James is what?”

His father let out a sigh, and for a moment, Murdo caught the flash of despair in a broken old man—before the contempt returned.

“James isn’t a real man. But marriage to Shona McCallum will make a man of him. Ye must make him marry her, Murdo, or the clan will die.”

A raucous cheer came from the great hall, followed by laughter.

Devil’s ballocks , what were they doing to Clara?

But Murdo knew. They were preparing her for her wedding night, as was the clan custom.

He smoothed down his plaid, then strode toward the cheers, his father following.

The great hall was filled with people dancing reels, lifting glasses into the air with a song, then draining them with raucous laughter and fervent belching, before filling them once more.

In the center of the throng stood Murdo's bride.

She still wore her bridal gown, but her hair now hung loosely round her shoulders.

A crown fashioned from heather had been placed on her head, and Elspeth and Marsaili were braiding her hair, weaving yarn into her tresses in the McTavish clan colors—scarlet, sky blue, and peat brown.

Clara stood, transfixed, like a deer surrounded by a pack of hounds, while the revelers toasted the forthcoming loss of her maidenhead.

Their gazes met, and Murdo felt a sharp pull in his heart—the invisible thread that attached their souls. Her eyes widened in a plea, and he uttered a prayer for forgiveness for what must be done.

“The groom is here!” a voice cried out.

“Yer bride is ripe and ready.”

“Go on, then, son,” Da said. “If ye're as much as a man as ye'd like yer da to believe, then prove it in front of yer clan.”

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Murdo strode toward his wife and offered his hand. Relief shone in her eyes as she took it.

“Come, woman,” he said. “It’s time for the bedding.”

Another cheer rose up, men toasting his prowess and making crude remarks while their wives issued sharp admonishments.

Clara glanced about the hall, as if seeking an escape. Then she withdrew her hand, but with a swift gesture, Murdo pulled her to him and tossed her over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” she shrieked.

“A feisty wee lass ye’ve got there!” a voice cried.

“She’ll take some taming!”

“That’s where the pleasure lies. Go claim yer bride, young master!”

“Let me go!” Clara kicked out, and a yelp rose as she caught someone with her foot. Murdo glanced around to see Braeden’s eldest brother toppling to the floor.

“Little savage!” he snarled. “What sort of a man are ye, Murdo, letting yer woman misbehave on her wedding night? It’s time ye broke her in.”

Uttering a silent prayer for forgiveness, Murdo slapped his wife on the rump and carried her out into the hallway and up the stairs, while she writhed in his grip, her

angry protests echoing through the house.

When he reached the door to the bedchamber—decorated with sprigs of heather—he kicked it open, strode toward the fur-covered bed that dominated the room, and dropped his wife onto it.

She leaped to her feet, but the fury he'd expected was absent from her eyes.

Instead, they widened with horror as the company followed them into the bedchamber, headed by Murdo's father and brother.

"Wh-what's happening?" she said.

Murdo turned to the party. "Get out," he said. "All of ye."

"But clan tradition—"

"Clan tradition be damned!"

"Son," his father said, "the least ye can do is respect the clan's tradition, even if ye don't respect yer da. Ye need to give proof. Besides, it's time ye showed yer brother what goes where."

James cringed under his father's contempt. "Da..."

"Just go!" Murdo roared. "If ye want proof, I'll give ye proof. But wait outside until the deed is done."

He slammed the door, slid the top bolt home, then turned to face his wife.

"Wh-what's happening?" she said, stepping back. "Were they going to w-watch?"

“It’s clan tradition when a bride is brought back.”

She shook her head. “What sort of a place is this where a man’s desire to watch a”—she gestured between them—“is justified by clan tradition ?”

“That’s why I sent them outside, to spare ye the humiliation.”

“It’s a little late for that,” she said. “You expect me to”—she wrinkled her nose in distaste—“give myself to you while all those people wait outside?”

Murdo caught the whispering and muttering outside the door, and the occasional stifled giggle.

He’d be damned if the party were witness to something his body had been yearning for since he met her.

He tore a scrap of lace from his cuff with his teeth and stuffed it into the keyhole. A chorus of protests followed.

Then he reached for his belt, where he kept his dirk, and pulled it out. Holding the knife aloft, he advanced on Clara.

“What are you doing?” she cried.

He strode to the bed and drew back the furs. Then he pulled up his sleeve and pierced his arm with the blade.

Clara screamed, and a cheer came from outside, followed by applause.

Murdo fisted his hand until a red droplet formed where the tip of the knife had impaled the skin. He twisted the blade sideways, and the droplet swelled then

splashed onto the bedsheet, followed by several more. Then he sheathed the knife.

“‘Tis done,” he said, fighting his self-loathing.

It had to be done. To protect her. Only in giving a show of strength would he earn the clan’s respect. And if they respected him, they would respect her and, in time, grow to love her.

As he loved her—even though she loathed him.

Murdo removed the bloodstained bedsheet then strode to the door and unbolted it to several leering faces, shiny with eagerness. He held the sheet to a raucous cheer.

“Ye’re a quick worker!” someone cried. “Takes after his da, aye?”

“Yer wife will be walking bow-legged for the rest of the week!”

Murdo forced a laugh. “Go back to yer women now ye know how a real man satisfies his wife!” he said.

The crowd dissipated, clattering down the stairs. The noise lessened to a dull rumble of far-off laughter that Murdo knew would last through the night and end with sore heads and bellies in the morning.

As for the night that lay before him...

The deed itself was still to be accomplished.

He held out his hand, and Clara stared at it.

“Come, lass,” he said gently. “We can now perform the act without an audience.”

“I-I don’t understand,” she said. “Why did you bleed on the sheet?”

“Did yer ma never tell ye about yer wedding night?”

She colored and looked away.

Of course! The brand on her arm—the mark of a pimper’s ownership. Doubtless she’d lost her maidenhead years ago.

“It matters not,” he said. “It was...a clan tradition.”

“So you’re going to lie with me?”

“Not if ye don’t wish to.”

“It’ll happen whether I wish it or not,” she said, sighing. “I’m not a debutante who’ll break at the slightest touch. I’d rather get the deed done.”

“Ye might like it,” he said, smiling. But she didn’t return the smile.

“It matters not whether I do,” she said. “But I’ve weathered worse—far worse—in my life. I’d as soon do it than not.”

Not the most alluring of requests from a bride.

“Are ye sure?” he asked.

She nodded, her expression showing nothing but raw honesty.

“Then, lass,” he said, tempering the urge to fling her to the ground and rut her into oblivion, “take off yer dress.”

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A little pulse of pleasure throbbed in Clara's center as her husband ordered her to remove her gown.

The laird—her new father-in-law—had called her a filthy whore .

Perhaps she was. No respectable debutante would shiver with a secret thrill as her husband tossed her over his shoulder like a savage, subdued her with his hand, then carried her to his lair.

Maybe she deserved the laird's insults.

Trembling, she unlaced her gown, then glanced up to see her husband looking directly at her.

The raw lust she'd expected—but not the compassion that shimmered in his eyes.

He approached, hand outstretched.

“There's no need for ye to do anything ye don't want, lass,” he said. “I can't deny that I want yer body—but I want yer consent also.”

Clara fought the urge to bury herself in his arms. Did he think to fool her with fine words and pretty speeches?

She grasped her gown and pulled it over her head. Then she tore off her undergarments, her body tightening at the cold air on her bare skin.

“Lass, I—”

“You’ve nothing to concern yourself with, husband,” she said. “I know exactly what to do.”

After all, she’d seen the dogs on the streets of London, and the pigs on the farms near her home in Pittchester.

Her former home.

Gritting her teeth, Clara climbed onto the bed on all fours.

“Lass, I—”

“Just get on with it!” she said.

She heard a deep sigh, followed by the rustling of clothes as he dropped his garments, then silence.

Her breath hitched at the sound of bare feet against stone.

Then a hand touched her thigh, and she flinched.

“H-husband, please...”

“Won’t ye say my name, lass?”

“Murdo.”

“That’s better,” he said. “Did I not say, that afternoon on the moors, that I longed to hear ye speak my name?”

Moisture stung her eyes at the memory of the pleasure his hands wrung from her body, and the hope he'd ignited in her heart.

The bed shifted under his weight, and she braced herself for the onslaught. But, instead, he caught her shoulders and pushed her sideways. She resisted at first, but his touch was firm, though gentle, as he coaxed her onto her back.

She drew in a sharp breath. He was as naked as she. His body glowed in the firelight, sharp shadows emphasizing his maleness—the sculpted muscles rippling with barely suppressed power, the deep V near his waist, and...

Oh my!

...the thick part of him that jutted from the nest of wiry chestnut curls.

I've never seen anything so—so...

“So big ?” he said, his eyes flashing with pride.

Sweet heaven —had she spoken aloud?

“It pleases me, lass, that ye appreciate what I give ye,” he said, “that ye’ll know the pleasure of being taken by a real man at last.”

At last?

He crawled over her, his manhood bobbing, and she caught her breath as his body heat seeped into her skin. A rich aroma of wood, spice, and sweat flooded her senses—the primal scent of man. She drew in a deep breath, and he gave a slow smile, his nostrils flaring.

“Aye,” he said, “the most delicious scent known to man. The air is thick with it.”

“With wh-what?”

“With the need to mate.”

He settled on top of her. An unfathomable sensation fizzed through the skin of her breasts, and her nipples ached. He leaned over and kissed her mouth.

“Yer lips taste as sweet as I remember,” he said. “Does the rest of ye taste as fine?”

Before she could ask what he meant, he dipped his head and took her nipple in his mouth. She drew in a deep breath as the ache in her breasts turned into a burning need.

“Oh!”

Her voice came out in a rasp as he suckled her breast, teasing the nipple with his tongue. When he grazed his teeth across the tip, she let out a cry at the exquisite nip of pain. Then he soothed it with his tongue before withdrawing to place a kiss on her other breast.

“I could feast on ye, lass, like a man starved,” he growled, “until I could take no more.”

“Wh-what do you...” she began, then let out a low cry as he dipped his hand between her thighs and ran it along her slick flesh.

“Ye’re ready for yer husband,” he said, triumph in his eyes. “I hardly need touch ye before yer body weeps for me.”

He withdrew his hand, and she bit her lip in frustration. Then he teased her thighs apart.

She closed her eyes, fighting her shame at being utterly exposed to him. What pleasure could he take out of looking at her... there ?

Then she felt his lips on her thigh and opened her eyes to see his head nestled between her thighs.

“Murdo, what are you doing?”

His tongue flicked against her flesh, and she tried to close her legs.

“I didn’t think—I mean, I haven’t...”

He paused and lifted his head, astonishment in his eyes. “Och, lass, have ye never had a man tend to ye with his tongue?”

She shook her head, and tears welled in her eyes.

“Aye,” he whispered. “I’ll wager the men ye tended to only thought of their pleasure.”

“The men I’ve what ?”

But he shifted position, and she caught her breath as she felt his hardness against her thigh.

“Ye’re mine now, lass.”

He thrust forward, and she cried out at a deep pinch of pain.

“That’s it, lass. Take all of me.”

She clung to him, trembling while the pain subsided.

Then he withdrew, slowly, and pushed himself in again.

A spark of pleasure flared as he withdrew once more, then slipped inside her again, forming a slow rhythm, his breath caressing her cheek.

Pleasure replaced the pain as he seemed to swell inside her, filling and stretching her body with an unfathomable deliciousness.

“Oh, lass...” he said, his breath coming in short, sharp puffs, “the way yer body grips mine... How did ye learn to do that ? Ye’re a glorious creature—so tight, so sweet—I could die from it!”

He quickened the pace, and the pleasure swelled, then Clara tilted her head back and cried out as a wave of ecstasy tore through her.

He continued to thrust, the pace growing frenzied, until he gave a shout and fell forward, drawing her into his arms while her body flooded with heat. He continued to thrust weakly, then grew still, his heartbeat pulsing thickly against her bare skin.

“My wife...” he murmured. His body rose and fell in a deep sigh, then his breathing grew even, settling into the rhythm of sleep.

Her body still pulsed faintly where the inferno settled into a delicious heat.

Was this what it was like, what a man and woman did together? Was that why men and women cast themselves into ruination for a taste of such pleasure, why women such as her mother were exploited to satisfy the men who purchased her for a coin?

Men such as Murdo's father?

Had she surrendered her freedom merely to satisfy her base needs?

A wave of shame engulfed her. She tried to move, but his huge body pinned her to the bed. She lay back, fighting her self-loathing at how much her body relished the feel of him on top of her—still inside her. At length, she surrendered to the comfort and safety of his arms, and sleep claimed her.

When Clara woke, the warm glow of the fireplace had gone, replaced by the cool light of the dawn.

She lay cocooned in a fur, her husband beside her, his chest rising and falling with each breath. In his sleep he looked younger, carefree, an expression of serenity on his face. She sat up and stretched, and he stirred.

"Mmm, Clara..." he murmured, then he rolled onto his back and gave a deep sigh, before his breathing steadied once more.

She slipped out of bed and tried to take the fur with her, but it was trapped beneath her husband's body. Abandoning it, she padded across the floor, wincing at the cold stone against her bare feet. A dull ache throbbed between her legs, and her thighs were sticky and slick.

She reached down and grimaced as she saw a smear of red on her fingertips. Her monthly flow must have come early.

But whom could she ask to tend to her? Certainly not her husband. Mama said such a subject was not for a man's ears.

A breeze rippled through the air and she shivered.

None of her shawls would be warm enough.

But a blanket was draped over the back of a chair, in the colors to match her husband's plaid—scarlet and blue, contrasting against dark brown.

She draped it over her shoulders and tiptoed out of the chamber.

The castle was quiet, hardly a sound apart from snoring coming from behind one door. She made her way to the staircase and descended, her footsteps echoing against the stone floor.

As she reached the ground floor, she heard sobbing, then caught sight of one of the maidservants—Marsaili, was it?

—limping along the hallway. Another woman approached her and Clara recognized the housekeeper.

She shushed the girl, then steered her away.

When their voices faded, Clara slipped outside through the main doors, flinching as they creaked open, and made her way around the side of the building, seeking cover, where none of the windows—great black eyes embedded in the walls—could stare at her with disapproval.

The rush of the wind in the trees filled the air, together with the distant cry of birds—and an irregular thudding.

Perhaps the footsteps of far-off giants.

Then she shook her head. What nonsense! She was no longer a fanciful child. She was a wife, subservient to the man who owned her, and his family who despised her.

What the devil was she doing here?

Only yesterday, Papa Harcourt had taken her aside to warn her of the mistake she was making. But she'd trusted in the skills of Mrs. Dove-Lyon, who was renowned for making perfect matches out of unlikely pairings.

"I've been a fool," she said to nobody. "A damned, bloody fool."

"Is that so?" a deep voice said.

Clara startled and turned toward the voice. "Who's there?"

She glimpsed a figure between the trees and approached it, finding herself in a clearing with a small wooden hut and a pile of logs to the side.

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In the center of the clearing a man stood next to a large section of a tree, an axe in one hand.

Shirtless, he wore dark brown breeches and thick boots.

Blond hair with a shimmer of red framed his face in shaggy, unkempt locks, and a thick beard covered his chin.

His body tensed, and he gripped the axe as if he intended to wage war on the world.

Anger flared in his eyes, and Clara stepped back.

He dropped the axe with a sigh, and the anger softened into resignation.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I was just taking the air.”

“There’s plenty of air hereabouts, lass.”

She pulled the plaid blanket closer around her shoulders. “I’m Clara,” she said. “Clara Marting...” She hesitated. “Clara McTavish.”

“I ken that, lass. I’m Duncan, the ghillie. Don’t ye remember me? We met some weeks ago, when...”

His voice trailed off and he picked up the axe. He swung it in an arc over his shoulder, then embedded it in the tree trunk at his feet with a thud that reverberated through the ground. The trunk split in two, each half falling to the side at his feet.

“I-I remember you,” she said. “The ghillie. You were kind to me when...”

Her throat constricted as she recalled the pain and humiliation as her mother had steered her out of the building, vowing never to return.

“Why did ye come back here, lass?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Ye don’t know ?” He shook his head. “Ye married the laird’s son. Don’t ye realize what...”

Tears spilled onto her cheeks, and he broke off and approached her, hand outstretched.

“Ye saw what it’s like here, lass,” he said, gently. “Why are ye here?”

“I-I don’t know,” she said. “But h-he—Murdo—made me feel so...” She shook her head.

“I can’t describe it. I’ve never been a lady.

I was different, and people talked about me.

They didn’t think I noticed, but I saw the contempt in their eyes.

‘Who’s she?’ they said. ‘Not one of us.’ Then he came, as if from nowhere. ”

“Master Murdo?”

She nodded. “In the middle of a ballroom filled with people who looked down on me,

he was the only one who didn't turn away in disgust." She drew in a shuddering breath. "At least, not then."

"He didn't turn away from ye in disgust when you came here before, lass."

She might have taken comfort from his kindness had he spoken the truth.

He drew near and placed a hand on her shoulder. The small act of consideration unlocked her heart, and she surrendered to the tears while he pulled her into an embrace.

"Hush, lass. There's naught to gain from surrendering to despair. I ken that more than most."

She shook her head. "Perhaps I hoped for too much."

"Foolish lass," he chided her, his voice gentle.

"I only w-want to bathe today," she said. "After last night..."

"Of course ye do," he said. "Master Murdo should've sent for Elspeth to tend to ye. Are ye well?"

She shook her head. "It hurts."

"Your heart, aye?" he said with a sigh. "Love does that to a lass..." He turned his gaze to the castle and whispered, as if to himself, "And a man."

"No, my..." She bit her lip in shame. "My body."

Shame warming her cheeks, she lowered her gaze, and he drew her into his arms.

“Ye’re in need of a friend,” he said. “Whatever ye may think of Master Murdo, he’ll see ye right.”

“I have no friends.”

“Ye’ve one right here,” he said. “Why don’t I take ye back inside? I’ll ask Joan to have a bathtub sent to yer chamber. Are ye...are ye bleeding, lass?”

She nodded, and he muttered something under his breath.

“Och, he should have been gentle yer first time. He’s so...”

The words hung in the air between them.

He’s so big.

“Do ye want me to speak to him?” he asked.

Clara shook her head. “No, you mustn’t tell my husband.”

“Tell him what?” a sneering voice said.

Duncan stiffened and released Clara. She turned to see the laird approaching, one hand curled around a cane, the deerhound following several paces behind.

“I might have known,” he said. “Have ye come fresh from my son’s bed to offer yerself to a servant? Ye’ll get no joy with him ,” he said, jabbing a finger at the ghillie. “Will she, Duncan?”

The ghillie withdrew from their embrace. “Master Angus, I was just comforting—”

“Ye’re not here to comfort anyone,” the laird snarled, “though that doesn’t stop ye. Must ye taint my whole family? Or perhaps ye see yer kind in this little whore.”

The deerhound at the laird’s feet let out a whine, and he aimed a kick at it.

“Filthy beast!” he snarled. “Always whining and mewling. Just like a woman, but less easy to train into obedience.”

He raised his cane to strike the animal, and Clara dashed toward the creature and wrapped her arms around the dog’s neck.

“Don’t touch him!”

“That beast is like a woman,” the laird said, “whining and nagging when it wants something. Ye both deserve a lashing if my son’s too weak to beat ye for carryin’ on with other men.”

“Is that what you do?” Clara said. “Beat those who dare to have minds of their own?”

“Aye, I’ll beat ye if my son’s too soft to do it himself. What kind of a man is he, bringing yer filth into my home?”

“And what kind of a man are you ?” she snapped. “You took what you wanted from my mother, and you condemn her for it. Did you beat her as well? Perhaps you beat your own wife—that is, when you weren’t betraying her in brothels.”

“Why ye little...” He raised the cane to strike her, but Duncan grasped the shaft.

“Ye don’t have the right to lay a finger on her, Master Angus,” he said. “Only Master Murdo has that right.”

Anger flashed in the laird's eyes, and he lowered the cane.

"I'll make sure my son knows where his duty lies." He aimed another kick at the dog, but the animal scrambled out of the way. Then, shooting Clara a look of venom, he started toward the castle. "Buck! Come here, ye useless mutt."

The dog made no effort to move.

"Beautiful boy," Clara whispered, stroking the animal's fur. "I'll protect you from him. Perhaps you can be my friend also—then I'll have two friends here."

She glanced up at the ghillie, who watched her, a smile on his lips.

"Ye're good for the clan," he said. "It's high time we had a lively lass in the family, to fill the castle with bairns to rule the clan as it ought to be ruled."

"My children won't rule the clan," Clara said. "James is the heir."

The ghillie frowned. "Perhaps. But it would be good for the clan if ye and Master Murdo had children. It'd bring life and laughter to Strathburn. And love—especially love. A love that can be celebrated and valued, rather than..."

He let out another sigh.

"What are you saying?" Clara asked.

"I'm saying, lass, that I know what it's like to love but wish ye didn't.

I can't understand all yer pain, but I can understand that, at least." He nodded toward the castle building.

“Be careful of Master Angus. As laird he commands loyalty among the clan, the tenants, the servants. And his sons. But if ye’re lonely, ye can speak to me.

I know what it’s like to be an outsider. ”

“But you were born here, like everyone else.”

He smiled, though the expression in his eyes remained sad. “A man can be an outsider for many reasons.”

“A woman also,” she said, scratching the dog behind his ears. He thumped his tail on the ground. “Two whole friends,” she said. “What shall I do with such an abundance of riches?”

“Ye make the most of it, lass.”

On impulse, she kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Duncan.”

“We’d best get ye inside, lass, and see Joan about yer bath—but before ye go, take a look.

There’s no more beautiful sight to see on a morning.

” He gestured toward the castle, and Clara caught her breath.

The outline of the building was bathed in light, the gray stone glowing pink and orange, as if it were on fire.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“That it is,” he said. “The only thing finer is the view of Beinn Urraim in the evening

light. The name means Mountain of Honor. And Murdo is an honorable man, for all that he's his father's son."

"Ben Oram," she said.

"Och, lass, ye need to speak our language better than that," he said, chuckling. "Beinn Urraim," he repeated, his voice taking on a musical note.

"Beinn Urraim."

"There!" he said. "We'll make a Highlander of ye yet."

Arm in arm they returned to the castle. Clara spotted movement at one of the windows, and froze.

Murdo was staring out of the window, his face clear in the sunlight, his brow furrowed into a frown.

He was staring at her.

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“Y e should leave that to the steward.”

Murdo glanced up from the ledgers to see his father in the doorway.

“I can manage,” he said, gesturing to the numbers on the page. “It’s how I won...”

My bride.

He suppressed a smile at the memory of that night at the Lyon’s Den.

Clearly the proprietress had expected most of the competitors to lack the wit to add two numbers together when she’d devised the Strength and Honor challenge.

It was by virtue of his being able to complete the calculation that he’d won the right to compete in the final challenge—to don the mask of a mythical beast and climb a rope to claim the prize.

Clara.

The woman who loathed him and saved her smiles for another.

At first he’d thought her courses had darkened her temper. Women were known to turn into harridans each month, and he’d spotted the telltale blood on her night shift the day after their wedding. But even though he’d left her alone the next two nights, she refused to soften toward him.

When he resumed his attentions, she accepted them with indifference, until her body

yielded and she cried out her pleasure. But by the time her climax subsided, she'd already reforged the armor around her heart.

She needed to protect herself—aye, he understood that, given what she'd endured in her life. But he couldn't deny the pain in his soul at knowing that she sought to protect herself from him .

But they'd only been married a fortnight. He couldn't expect her to forgive him within days of their wedding. This wild lass he'd married, who trusted nothing but her own instincts—he couldn't force her to come to him. She'd have to come of her own accord. Only then would she be truly his.

He was not like his da. He wasn't going to force his woman into submission.

Nor am I going to drink and piss away the legacy of my ancestors.

“Is that right, son?”

His father's angry voice returned him to the present.

Devil's ballocks—he'd spoken aloud.

“How did ye get to be so lacking in respect for yer da?” his father said, the stench of sour whisky on his breath. “I'll tell ye—it's since ye married that slut.”

“My wife is the reason why the estate isn't ruined,” Murdo growled. “And I told ye not to speak of her in that manner.”

“Ye're a fool, son. I'm only saying what I see.”

Murdo set his pen aside. “What do you see, Da?”

“Nothing I wouldn’t expect,” his father said. “How many men, I don’t ken.”

“That’s enough .”

“Duncan, for one. I can’t tell how many more.”

“Da, I’ll not listen to yer lies about—”

“I’ve seen them,” Da said. “The morning after yer wedding night I was outside before dawn, and—”

“Visiting a whore, no doubt.”

“A man has needs, son, and I’ve no wife to fulfil those needs.”

“Ye fulfilled yer needs elsewhere even when Ma was alive,” Murdo said. “She wasn’t enough for you.”

“And ye’re not enough for her . I speak the truth—ye know it deep down.” Da placed a hand on his arm. “Son, I won’t see ye humiliated by a faithless wife. I saw them embracing by the wood hut.”

By the wood hut...

Murdo recalled what he’d seen the morning after he woke to an empty bed and peered out of the window: the ghillie with a woman. At first he’d thought it was Marsaili—she was a comely enough lass, and he’d stumbled across Duncan comforting her before over something or other.

A flicker of doubt threaded itself into his mind.

His father might be a faithless man, strict, unkind, rarely fair. But he never spoke an untruth. Even when he'd broken his vows with Ma and taken another woman, he didn't bother to conceal it. Da always said: he was the laird, and the laird was law.

With that level of arrogance, why bother to lie?

"There's one way to tell if yer wife's betraying ye," Da said, "and that's if she denies ye in bed."

Murdo averted his gaze.

"Has she denied yer rights as a husband?"

"Aye," Murdo said. "But her courses..."

His father wrinkled his nose. "Must ye speak of that?"

"Da, I—"

"Weak fool! Ye should take yer rights whether her courses run or not. Yer ma was the same, whining and mewling each month. And ye know what I did?"

"No, Da."

"I took her from behind to spare me her miserable face. Mark my words, son, if ye let yer woman deny ye, the clan will see ye as weak. And a weak man is unfit to rule." He gestured toward the ledger.

"Ye're already doing the work of a clerk."

What will she have ye do next, scrub the kitchen pans?

Empty the piss pots? Wash her bloodied sheets? ”

“That’s enough!” Murdo rose to his feet.

“Where are ye going, son?”

“To see my wife.”

His father curled his lip into a sneer. “Ye’ll find her with her lover.”

“Don’t be a fool.”

“I saw her with my own eyes, chopping wood like some peasant’s whore, not the wife of the laird’s son.”

Ignoring his father’s jibe, Murdo exited the study. He paused at the main doors, then strode outside, passing young Callum carrying a basket of logs across the yard.

Surely Clara wouldn’t play him false? She’d seemed overly shy about her courses when he spotted the stains on her nightgown yesterday. Almost as if she were an innocent...

Devil’s ballocks! Why hadn’t he noticed it before? Their wedding night had been a fortnight ago, and yet her courses had run again. Which meant...

“Fuck!”

Callum yelped and dropped the logs. “Are ye well, Master Murdo?”

“Aye,” Murdo replied. “I’m also a fool.”

He helped the lad retrieve the logs then made his way to the wood store. But Clara wasn't there.

Clara, who, he now realized, had been a maiden on their wedding night. And he'd taken her like a rutting boor. He'd had no need to cut himself to give the revelers evidence of a maiden's blood. The bedsheets had been stained with it the next morning—and not her courses.

In his arrogance he'd thought her cries that night had been cries of pleasure, not pain.

No wonder she hates me.

He caught a ripple of laughter in the wind, coming from the path that wound up the slopes of the mountain and disappeared into a band of trees that concealed the ghillie's cottage. Beyond the trees, the path climbed higher until it was no longer distinguishable from the rocky summit.

Beyond the summit, two dark dots circled in the heavens, an eagle and his mate.

As Murdo's gaze followed the path back down, he caught sight of a man and a woman arm in arm.

His wife—and Duncan.

Murdo suppressed the surge of jealousy as she threw back her head in laughter at something the ghillie said. Unlike Society ladies who tittered elegantly behind their fans, Clara laughed with her whole body. She stumbled sideways, and her laughter increased as Duncan caught her in his arms.

Murdo strode to meet them while they chatted animatedly, like the best of friends. Then the ghillie glanced up and met his gaze. He stiffened and withdrew his arm.

“What’s wrong?” Clara said. “Have we been...”

Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of Murdo. She glanced at Duncan, then her color, which was delightfully pink from the fresh air, deepened into a blush.

“Master Murdo,” the ghillie said. “We’ve been on the mountain.”

“So I see,” Murdo said.

Clara’s smile disappeared and discomfort filled her eyes.

Or was it guilt?

“Duncan’s been showing me how to chop wood,” she said.

“I see no wood.”

“It was for his cottage. The view up there is wonderful. It looks straight up to the mountain.”

“I know,” Murdo replied. “I’ve lived here all my life. Ye must have made an impression on Duncan to be invited into his cottage. He doesn’t relish guests—especially women.”

“Mrs. McTavish isn’t a guest,” Duncan said. “She’s yer wife.”

“Aye,” Murdo said, lowering his voice to a growl. “My wife.”

Clara folded her arms. “Why don’t you ask a direct question, husband?”

“Such as?” he said.

Her eyes darkened. “Do you want to know if I’m fucking your gamekeeper?”

Devil’s ballocks! Murdo’s gut twisted at the reminder of how savage she was.

“Sweet heaven, lass!” Duncan said. “Why would ye say such a thing?”

Clara tilted her head to one side. “I’m more concerned about what my husband has to say. Tell me, Murdo, are you accusing me of whoring?”

“Is that not what yer mother—” he began, then he caught a blur of motion before she slapped him across the cheek.

He staggered back, and she raised her arm again, but the ghillie caught it.

“No, lass,” he said. “Ye shouldn’t strike yer husband.”

Her eyes flashed with defiance, but the undercurrent of sorrow in them needled at Murdo’s conscience. How could he have said such a despicable thing?

I’m not my da.

“Forgive me, lass,” he said. “I’ve no wish to hurt ye. I know ye’ve not broken faith with yer vows. Ye’re too honest for that.”

“Oh, am I?” she goaded him.

“Ye’re the most natural creature in the world—unconstrained by the niceties of Society.”

“A savage,” she said. “That’s what you call me, isn’t it?”

“It’s why I…” He hesitated, unwilling to reveal his heart.

Why I fell in love with ye.

“Why you married me?” she said. “I thought it was for my dowry. You came to the Lyon’s Den seeking a rich bride, no matter how much of a harlot she was.”

She flinched as he took her hand.

“I’d never break faith with the vows I uttered,” she said, “no matter what you said—or did.”

“If I recall, ye refused to utter the vow of obedience.”

She snatched her hand free, and he sighed. He met Duncan’s gaze, and the ghillie frowned.

Yes, Duncan, I know I’m a boor.

“I know ye’d not break faith because I trust ye, Clara,” Murdo said.

“Ye wouldn’t be so open with yer friendship with Duncan if the two of ye were lovers.

No, lovers who have no right to be lovers in the eyes of the Almighty are deceitful.

It’s what a man doesn’t see that raises suspicion. Isn’t that right, Duncan?”

“Aye,” the ghillie said. “F-forgive me, I’ve left the fire burning in the cottage. I’ll bring that heather with me when I return, Mrs. McTavish.”

“Heather?” Murdo asked.

“For the Lughnasadh festival,” Clara said. “Duncan said it’s tradition to make garlands of heather for the children.”

Duncan? By what right did she address the ghillie with such familiarity?

“Is that so?”

“Yer wife’s been helping Joan with the preparations,” the ghillie said, “haven’t ye, lass?” He patted her on the arm. “Well, lass, I’ll leave ye in yer husband’s capable hands.”

Then he nodded to Murdo and retreated along the path, toward his cottage.

Murdo reached for his wife. “Forgive me, lass.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she said. “At least, you’ve done nothing that I wouldn’t have expected.”

“Perhaps, to atone for being such a boor, I could show ye the loch up in the mountain.”

She raised her eyebrows in question, and he drew her close.

“Do ye remember the meaning of my name, lass?” he whispered. “Murdo, the sea warrior who rises from the loch, made virile by the water on his skin, ready to claim his woman.”

Her eyes flared with desire.

“Ah, ye remember,” he said. “I see it in yer eyes. Then, with yer permission, I’ll take ye there—and claim me for my own.”

Her fingers curled around his as her body’s instinct warred with her hostility.

“I’ll take ye when ye’re ready for me.”

“R-ready?” she said, her voice tight.

“When yer”—he hesitated, his cheeks warming with embarrassment—“yer monthly...”

She looked away. “I-I should be... ready tomorrow, or the day after.”

“I shall await the day after tomorrow with eagerness.”

She gave a quick, tight smile, and he slipped her arm through his and steered her back toward the castle.

“It pleases me to learn that ye’re helping with Lughnasadh,” he said. “The clan comes together to mark the festival, and we invite the clans nearby.”

She stiffened. “You mean there will be guests?”

His heart ached to see the fear in her eyes. He drew her into an embrace, and though she made no move to reciprocate, at least she didn’t resist, remaining passively in his arms.

“Ye’ve nothing to fear,” he said.

But rather than reassure her, his words only seemed to distress her more.

“Do ye not trust me, Clara?”

She opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again. At length, she shook her head.

Aye, a truthful lass, she was. And, in truth, she neither trusted nor loved him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

“O ch, lass, ye shouldn’t be spending all yer time below stairs. Ye’re not a servant.”

Clara looked up from scrubbing the carrots to see the housekeeper in the doorway, hands on hips. “I’m happier here, Joan, and Morag could do with the help.”

The deerhound at Clara’s feet opened an eye and thumped his tail on the floor at the sound of her voice.

“Morag knows better than to ask the laird’s daughter-in-law to help in the kitchen,” the housekeeper said, glaring at the cook, who stirred a pot over the fire. “That’s what Marsaili’s for. Where is the lazy lass, anyway?”

The cook frowned, then shook her head.

“Taken another fall, has she, Morag?” the housekeeper asked.

“Aye, Mrs. Grant. Poor lass. She needs a husband to take care of her.”

“Is she not permitted to take care of herself?” Clara asked.

The two women stared at her.

“That’s what husbands are for,” the housekeeper said. “Master Murdo looks after ye, doesn’t he?”

“I can look after myself.”

“And when ye become round with his child?”

Clara resumed her attention on the vegetables.

The cook let out a chuckle. “Aye, he takes care of ye, all right. I can tell a woman who’s been well bedded.”

“Morag, that’s enough!” the housekeeper said. Then she grinned. “If only all men were like Master Murdo.”

Clara suppressed a snort.

Oh yes, because he’s the epitome of male perfection.

Silencing the petulant little voice in her mind, she continued scrubbing the carrots.

She couldn’t deny the pleasures her husband gave her body.

And he’d sensed her shame when her courses ran, leaving her alone the moment the blood came and promising not to touch her until she was well again.

Last night, he’d kissed her forehead, then rolled over and fallen asleep, the bed trembling with the vibrations of his big body as he snored, while she lay on her side, cradling her stomach to ease the monthly pains.

The next morning she’d woken cocooned in his embrace, his arms like chains binding her to him while his breath caressed the skin of her neck.

When he’d woken that morning, he released her, dressed himself, then invited her to visit the tenants.

But she'd declined. After church last Sunday, the parson's wife had called her a whore, hissing the insult like an adder in the grass.

Many clanswomen looked at her with suspicion, whispering among themselves.

Was it any wonder she preferred the company of the servants? After all, most of her life had been spent scrubbing floors, obeying whatever order was thrown in her direction, and dodging blows. Only the past year had been spent in luxury, with her learning how to be a duke's daughter.

Only she wasn't a duke's daughter. She was the illegitimate child of a pimper.

The dog scrambled to his feet. Clara scratched his head and he nudged her, sniffing the pocket of her apron, his tail swishing from side to side. Smiling, she drew out a piece of bread she'd saved for him.

"That's all I have for you, Buck," she said.

"I don't take to animals in the kitchen," the cook said. "What next, will Duncan bring the deer down from the hills when it gets cold, or will old Braeden bring his cattle in to feed?"

"Buck's a good dog, Morag," the housekeeper said. "There's no harm in it."

"I want him out of here when we start preparing for Lughnasadh. There'll be plenty to do without tripping over that great, hairy beast. The laird's invited the McCallums and the Chisholms this year, and he'll be furious if there's anything out of place."

Clara's stomach clenched with apprehension. "How many people are coming?"

"At least a hundred souls," the housekeeper said. "And they'll not be wanting to

come down to the kitchen to see ye, lass. Yer place is above stairs. There's no finer sight than the Lughnasadh ball, is there, Morag?"

"Aye," the cook said. "To see the clans come together and dance a reel, with their plaids filling the place with color and music. Master Murdo loves a reel, he does. Nothing makes him happier."

"Will you show me how to dance a reel?" Clara asked. "Then perhaps..."

Perhaps Murdo might not regret his choice of wife.

"I'd like to learn to dance," she said, "if it's a clan tradition— my clan tradition."

"The festival's less than a fortnight away," the cook said. "Master Murdo won't expect ye to have learned a reel so soon, what with ye being a Sassenach."

"Och, Morag, that's no way to speak to the lass," Joan said. "I'll get Elspeth to teach ye, Mrs. McTavish. She taught Master Murdo and Master James when they were wee."

She patted Clara's hand, then lowered her gaze to her calloused fingers.

"Ye're a good lass," she said. "The clan will accept ye in time, especially when ye give us a child or two. We Highlanders don't always take kindly to strangers—we don't trust easily."

"Neither do I," Clara said.

"Sensible lass. Now, what say ye to a pot of tea? I'll have Marsaili take some to the west parlor. Ye'll not be disturbed there. Callum can light a fire, then I can send Elspeth for yer first lesson."

“I’d like that very much, thank you.”

“Good lass. Ah! There she is.”

Clara glanced up to see the ghillie enter the kitchen, together with Marsaili. The young maidservant seemed to be in a state of perpetual sorrow, though she turned hostile eyes on Clara.

“Marsaili, would ye put some water on to make tea?” the housekeeper said.

The girl frowned. “It’s not time for tea.”

“Less of yer lip, girl!” the cook snapped. “It’s for Mrs. McTavish.”

Marsaili shuffled toward the fireplace. She picked up a pan, then let out a cry and dropped it, cradling her arm.

“Marsaili!” Clara said, approaching her. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m all right! Leave me be!”

Marsaili’s eyes flashed with defiance, but Clara saw a flicker of pain in them, and when she lowered her gaze, she spotted a dark mark on the girl’s skin, peeking out from beneath her sleeve.

A mark in the shape of a handprint.

“That’s no way to speak to yer mistress, Marsaili,” the ghillie said.

“It’s all right, Duncan,” Clara said. “Marsaili, may I see your arm? I recognize a handprint when I see one.”

“What, from when ye were whoring?” the girl sneered.

“Marsaili!” the cook cried, raising her hand to strike the girl. “How dare ye...”

Biting back the pain at the Marsaili’s words, Clara caught the cook’s wrist as the girl dissolved into tears.

“No harm done, Morag,” she said. “I’ve heard far worse since I came here.”

The ghillie pulled Marsaili into his arms, and she clutched his jacket, sobbing.

“I’ll take care of the lass,” he said. “Marsaili, ye shouldn’t say such things when Mrs. McTavish was only being kind.”

“But the laird said...”

Before she could reveal what the laird said, footsteps approached, and Murdo’s brother appeared.

“Ye heavens, Master James!” the cook said. “I don’t know why everyone sees fit to plague my kitchen. At this rate I’ll never get supper ready, and I need to put those bones to boil.”

“Can I help ye, Master James?” the housekeeper said.

He stood in the doorway, his eyes darkening as he stared at the ghillie with Marsaili in his arms.

“No,” he bit out. “Nobody can.”

Then he turned and disappeared, his angry footsteps fading into the distance.

“Poor lad,” the housekeeper said, as the ghillie’s face turned pink. “Duncan, let me see to Marsaili. Get back to yer business. That deer fence won’t mend itself.” She turned to Clara. “Mrs. McTavish, why don’t ye wait in the west parlor and I’ll send Elspeth up?”

Considering herself dismissed, Clara exited the kitchen, the dog trotting after her.

Shortly after, Elspeth arrived, and Clara found herself forgetting her troubles and enjoying her lesson.

The older woman was a patient teacher, and Clara warmed at her gentle praise.

But the distinction of rank prevented their becoming friends.

When Clara invited Elspeth to take tea with her, the woman declined, then returned to her duties.

Clara spent the rest of the afternoon with Buck, who took pleasure from bringing her gifts such as a rag, a wooden toy boat, and what looked like a pair of the cook’s drawers for her to throw across the chamber to fetch.

When the dog tired of the game, he lay on the hearthrug and Clara settled in the window seat.

She looked outside and spotted two men arguing.

One appeared distressed as he shouted at the other, who raised his hands in supplication.

They glanced up and froze as they looked toward her, and she recognized James and Duncan.

She darted behind the curtain, ashamed at being caught.

When she next looked out of the window, they had gone.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

Murdo couldn't help smiling at his wife's sure-footedness as she skipped along the path that clung to the mountain slopes, Buck at her side.

The deerhound seemed to have appointed himself as Clara's constant companion. He followed her everywhere and had taken to settling down at night outside their bedchamber door, as if to protect her.

Which was Murdo's responsibility—but his wife still didn't trust him.

The path reached the edge of the trees, and Murdo paused to adjust the bag over his shoulder. He drew in a lungful of mountain air.

He'd never tire of the view. The land sloped toward the tiny loch, a haven from the rest of the world. A waterfall tumbled down the rocky slope of the mountain, sparkling in the air before splashing into the loch, feeding it with fresh, clear water.

Clara caught him up and gazed across the landscape.

"What do ye think, lass?" Murdo asked.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

"It's where I come when I want to be by myself," he said, echoing the words his wife had uttered what seemed a lifetime ago.

"Like my cave at home," she said.

“Aye,” he said. “Only ye’re wrong, Clara. This is yer home now.”

He held out his hand, and his heart soared as she took it. Then he led her toward the loch, Buck trotting behind. As they reached the edge of the water, the dog lowered his head and lapped the water.

“Thirsty?” Murdo asked his wife. “Buck here will say that ye’ll not taste better.”

“Well, if Buck recommends it, I’ll have some,” she said. “I can trust his opinion.”

She crouched beside the dog and scooped up a handful of water.

“And me?” Murdo asked. “Do ye trust me?”

Ye fool! Ye need to show her ye can be trusted, not demand her trust like a belligerent bairn.

She sighed and rose to her feet.

“Why don’t ye explore for a bit, lass?” he suggested.

“On my own?”

He nodded. “Then ye can discover the wonders of the place for yerself. But ye must promise to take care by the waterfall. The rocks are slippery by the water.”

She arched an eyebrow, and he raised his hand in appeasement.

“I know ye’re at home in the wild, lass, but it would break my heart if ye came to harm.”

Her expression softened, then she turned and circled the water's edge, picking her way over the rocks that grew denser toward the waterfall.

"Buck, take care of yer mistress," Murdo said, and the dog trotted after her.

Intelligent beast. Buck knew whom to trust, whom to fear...and who needed a friend.

By the time Clara returned, Murdo had set out the plaid blanket and the food he'd brought.

"Well, Buck," she said, "we neither of us believed a man capable of preparing a meal."

"I can feed myself, lass," Murdo said, patting the blanket, his manhood stirring with want as she sat beside him. "And, if ye remember, I can feed ye also."

He caught the curve of her lips.

"A smile!" he teased. "Buck, what do ye think yer mistress is telling us when she smiles? That she approves of her husband?"

She turned her gaze to the loch.

"Tell your master, Buck," she said, "that he knows full well he has no need of his wife's approval, given that she's his to do with what he likes, whether she wishes it or not."

Devil's ballocks . Was there no pleasing her?

Aye, there was—she softened at the point of dissolution when he claimed her body in bed.

He rose to his feet and began undoing his belt.

“What are you doing?” she asked, eyes widening.

“Bathing,” he said. “Ye recall what I said about bathing in the loch?”

This time, her eyes flared with desire.

Aye, she remembered.

“Shouldn’t we eat first?”

“The loch’s so cold that the meal will lie heavy on ye,” he said. “We can take our meal as a reward for braving the water.”

She glanced at the water’s surface, the ripples flashing in the sunlight. “It looks warm enough.”

“Wait until ye dive in,” he said, pulling off his plaid, his body already tightening in anticipation of the feel of the water against his skin. Then he shed the rest of his garments until he stood, naked, before her.

His pride swelled at the raw desire in her eyes. Many a woman had admired his body, screamed with ecstasy as he took them. But he only wanted one woman now, the woman before him who exuded raw, primal desire, no matter how hard she tried to conceal it.

“There’s nothing so good for swelling a man’s”—he hesitated, glancing to his stiffening cock—“a man’s appetite than a dip in the water of the mountain. But I’ll not insist ye bathe with me.”

He turned to the deerhound, who stared at him, one ear up, the other flattened. “Tell yer mistress, Buck, that contrary to what she believes, her husband is not her gaoler. She’s free to do what she wishes.”

He strode into the water, gasping at the drop in temperature that he could never quite conquer.

Then he drew in a deep breath and dove in.

The cold stabbed at his skin like a thousand needles, then, as he swam through the water, the cold turned into a fizz of life.

When he surfaced for breath, he flicked his head sideways to remove the hair from his eyes, then dove under again.

He yearned to glance back to where his wife sat, but he steeled himself to ignore her.

Let the quarry come to ye, Master Murdo.

That was what Duncan had said years before, when he first took Murdo stalking. Deer were shy creatures, and the hunter needed to wait until curiosity conquered the shyness. Clara was like a deer. Her curiosity needed to conquer her mistrust.

Then a scream came from behind him, and he turned to see his wife disappearing beneath the water’s surface.

“Clara!” he cried, fear clawing at him. He swam toward her with powerful strokes, then her head bobbed up through the water’s surface. “ Devil’s ballocks —are ye well?”

She made a gulping sound and shook her head from side to side. As soon as he

reached her, Murdo pulled her into his arms.

“I’ve got ye, lass.”

She shook, then let out a cry.

No—not a cry. She was laughing .

“Sweet bleedin’ heaven! I hadn’t expected that .” He clung to her, weak with relief.

“I’d like to see those prim little debutantes swim here,” she said, her laughter continuing. “We should invite Miss Peacock for a house party, then I can take her for a mountain walk and push her in.”

She met his gaze and her laughter subsided. Despite the cold, he could feel the warmth of her body pressed against him. He looked down and caught his breath as he saw her breasts pressed against his torso, her nipples forming hard little points that poked at his chest, demanding attention.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I-I heard ye cry out,” he said. “I thought ye were drowning.”

“I hadn’t expected it to be so cold.”

“Ye’ll get used to it, lass.”

He shifted position until his manhood pressed against her belly, and her eyes widened.

“Aye,” he said. “Contrary to opinion, the cold can invigorate a man—when the right

woman is in his arms.”

She lifted her legs to wrap around his waist. He let out a cry as his manhood rubbed against her flesh, then he placed his hands about her waist and closed his eyes to savor the sweet sensation of his woman, ripe and ready for him.

He only need lower her body a fraction and he’d be buried inside her.

“Ah, my woman,” he sighed. “I’ve dreamed of this moment, taking my woman in the fresh waters of the loch. And what a woman ye are! Ye’re better than the finest...”

She stiffened, and his voice trailed off.

“Finest what?” She withdrew.

“It matters not,” he said, pulling her close. “I didn’t know ye were a maiden when I took ye on our wedding night. I thought...at least after what my da said...”

“You thought I was a whore, like my mother.”

Guilt gnawed at his soul.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I had no wish to hurt ye.”

“I knew it would hurt the first time,” she replied, “but my mother said a considerate husband would be gentle, to ensure his wife’s pain was as bearable as possible.”

“I’m sorry I hurt ye, Clara.”

“I didn’t know any different. And I’ve endured worse.”

Endured.

“Perhaps we should eat,” she said. “I wouldn’t want Morag to have gone to the trouble of making a meal for nothing.”

She waded out of the loch, and Murdo followed. But this time, her boldness had been replaced by self-consciousness. She shielded her body with her hands, then pulled a blanket over her shoulders, making a fuss of Buck as he thumped his tail on the ground.

They ate in silence, and when it was time to dress, Murdo averted his gaze to preserve his wife’s modesty. Da would have called him a fool—a man had every right to look at his wife, given that her body belonged to him. But Murdo didn’t merely want Clara’s body. He wanted her trust, and her love.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon had assured him that anything could be purchased for the right price—a wife, a husband, and a title. But the one thing that couldn’t be purchased was his wife’s heart.

On their return home, Murdo spotted a young boy limping across the path, and he recognized Gregor Stewart, the parson’s youngest.

The boy stumbled and fell with a cry, but before Murdo could react, his wife sprinted toward him.

“Are you hurt, little man?” she asked.

“Who are ye?” the boy said.

“I’m...” Clara glanced toward Murdo. “I’m Mrs. McTavish, and I’m pleased to meet you.” She held out her hand, and, after a moment’s hesitation, the boy took it.

“I’m Gregor,” he said.

“Are you alone, Gregor?”

The boy nodded. “Da’s in his study.”

“Foolish lad!” Murdo said. “Ye ken the mountain’s not safe for a lad yer age.”

The boy wrinkled his face into a frown, but Clara placed a hand on his arm.

“You’re a brave young man venturing onto the mountain alone,” she said, “but I’m sure your parents will be worried, and with good cause.”

“My foot hurts,” the boy said, sniffing. “If I’m late home, Da will give me the strap.”

“Well, if ye went out without telling yer ma...” Murdo began, but Clara frowned at him.

“May I see your leg, Gregor?” she asked.

The boy nodded, and she placed her hands on his shin, feeling along the leg until she reached the ankle and the boy yelped in pain.

“Have I broken my leg? Ma will be ever so angry.”

“It’s just a sprain,” Clara said, “but we’ll need to bind your ankle.”

She tore at the hem of her petticoat, then wound the strip of material around the boy’s ankle and secured it with a knot and helped him to his feet.

“Better?”

“A little,” the boy said, clinging to her hand.

“Shall we take you home?”

“What if my da gives me the strap?”

Clara glanced at Murdo. “We can say you were out walking with us.”

The boy grinned and gave her a hug, then they set off.

Murdo’s heart swelled at her warmth toward the boy. What might she be like tending to her own child?

To their child...

As the parsonage came into view, Gregor pointed ahead. “That’s my home.”

Murdo saw his wife stiffen.

“Your father’s the parson?” she said, her voice tight.

“Aye,” Gregor said, tugging at her hand. “Come along, Mrs. McTavish—I want ye to speak to my ma.”

Clara glanced over her shoulder at Murdo, then let the boy lead her to the house, where she hesitated for a heartbeat before knocking on the door.

The parson’s wife opened it.

“Ma!” Gregor cried. “I’ve brought Mrs.—”

“What are ye doing here?” she snarled, almost baring her teeth at Clara. “And with my son! I thought I told ye...”

“Mrs. Stewart,” Clara began, “your son hurt his—”

“Keep away!” The parson’s wife pulled Gregor to her, then slapped him on the rump. “Get inside, child, and clean the filth off ye.”

She turned to Clara. “I already said I don’t want a whore near my family,” she snarled. “It’s bad enough that on Sundays we must endure— Oh! ” She yelped as she caught sight of Murdo approaching.

“Please continue, Mrs. Stewart,” Murdo said, taking Clara’s hand. “There’s nothing ye can say to my wife that ye shouldn’t say to me.”

She had the grace to blush, if nothing else. “Forgive me, Mr. McTavish, but—”

“It’s not my forgiveness ye should seek,” Murdo said. “But I’ll not ask it.” He lifted Clara’s hand to his lips. “Not because I think my wife undeserving of an apology—she’s the most deserving soul I know—but because no apology is worth the words uttered if it’s not given with sincerity.”

Her color deepened.

“Ye might well blush, Mrs. Stewart, being a parson’s wife,” Murdo said. “Gossip doesn’t become a woman. Does Mr. Stewart share yer opinion of my wife?”

She shook her head. “He’s said I mustn’t listen to talk, but yer father said—”

Murdo raised his hand. “ Nobody here has the right to speak about my wife, least of all him,” he said.

“My wife is kind and virtuous. Since she’s come to Strathburn, she’s done more to benefit the clan than my father ever has, and ye know why?

Because she cares whether the people here live or die—unlike some, who wish to see others as subordinates.

” He thrust his face close, and her eyes widened in fear.

“If I hear one word against my wife, uttered on the lips of any woman hereabouts, I’ll hold ye personally accountable. ”

“Mr. McTavish, that’s hardly fair. I—”

“Oh, isn’t it?” Murdo said. “Just because I’m a man doesn’t mean I’m not aware who peddles gossip. Or perhaps ye’d like me to discuss the matter with yer husband?”

She shook her head.

“Good,” he said. “Now go and see to yer son. Consider yerself fortunate that my wife was there to tend to his injuries. And remember,” he added, jabbing a finger at the woman’s chest, “one word against my wife and ye’ll face the consequences.”

She nodded and retreated inside, and Murdo steered his wife toward the castle.

Before they reached the building, he felt her little hand slip into his.

“Thank you.”

“I promised to cherish and protect ye, didn’t I?” he replied. “I failed ye once, but I’ll never fail ye again.”

He met her gaze, and the smile in her eyes gave him a shred of hope that one day, she might once more be able to give him her trust—and her love.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

Gripping her wineglass, Clara gazed about the great hall. She had always believed that a Society ball was where she felt most out of place.

Until tonight.

Earlier that evening the great hall had looked warm and welcoming—a fire blazing in the hearth, plaid ribbons adorning every surface, and garlands of fir and heather that Clara had spent the past day fashioning under Elspeth’s gentle tutelage.

Then the people arrived.

Some of them spoke in thick accents, which, though musical in their articulation, were as incomprehensible to her as if they’d spoken in Latin. She could only ask them to repeat themselves so many times before their cordiality turned into hostility.

“Cursed Sassenachs,” she heard one guest say.

Others were less hostile, but they made no attempt to disguise the fact that in taking an Englishwoman for a wife, Murdo had acted against the good of the clan.

“I daresay ye must think our festivities extraordinary compared to yer English Society parties,” a voice said.

Clara turned to see the woman who’d been introduced to her earlier as “the McCallum’s wife.

” On their introduction, she’d given Clara a polite smile, then pulled Murdo into an

embrace and kissed him warmly on both cheeks, declaring how much she wished for their two families to be united—while her prettier, more elegant daughter stood by her side.

The McCallum himself hadn't deigned to speak to Clara, merely giving a nod of acknowledgment before clapping Clara's father-in-law on the back and steering him toward the edge of the hall to indulge in a glass of whisky.

"Extraordinary in appearance only, Lady McCallum," Clara said.

"But our Society here must be very different to that in England."

"In essentials, I believe it's the same."

"I cannot accept that," the woman said. "What say ye, Shona?" She turned to her daughter standing beside her.

"Yes, Mama."

"Shona always agrees with me."

Her daughter blushed. The poor girl likely understood the consequences of not agreeing.

"All societies are the same," Clara said.

"At the top sit those who set the rules by which everyone else must abide—what to say, how to behave, whom it's acceptable to associate with.

In the center are those who abide by the rules, acquaintances seeking to maintain their position.

And at the bottom are the outsiders, newcomers or those who don't conform to the rules.

They are treated with suspicion merely because they're different. ”

“What an extraordinary notion!” the woman said. “It's as if ye're describing a herd of deer, not men and women.”

“We're all animals, aren't we?”

The woman wrinkled her nose. “What a dreadful notion—where did ye gain such an opinion?”

“From my mother,” Clara said, recalling Mama's advice the night of Lady Cholmondeley's ball.

“And yer mother is...?”

“The Duchess of Pittchester.”

“Oh!” Lady McCallum's hostility seemed to drain from her. “Is she here tonight? And...the duke?”

“They're in England, Lady McCallum.”

“What a shame! I'd have liked to meet them. Wouldn't ye, Shona?”

“Yes, Mama.”

The girl cast her gaze down, and Clara suppressed her smile at Lady McCallum's sycophancy. How might the woman have reacted if Clara said she was the

illegitimate daughter of a doxy?

Then her stomach churned as she spotted her father-in-law striding toward them, his eyes already glazed.

“Lady McCallum!” he said. “And young Shona, ye’re looking more beautiful each time I see ye. Why are ye hiding in the corner with”—he cast a glance at Clara—“with her?”

Would he ever be able to refer to her as his daughter-in-law?

But then, her was better than that slut .

“Come, lass,” he said, offering Shona his arm.

“The dancing is about to begin, and a true Scotswoman doesn’t hide in the corner.

Lady McCallum, my son is eager to dance a reel with ye.

” He threw Clara a look of contempt. “The principal guests dance the first reel.” Then he steered Shona toward the center of the hall, Lady McCallum following, and Clara resisted the temptation to poke out her tongue at his retreating back.

A fiddler played an air as the dancers lined up. Clara saw a man bow over Lady McCallum’s hand, but it wasn’t James. Her heart sank as she recognized her husband.

Would he rather spend the evening with anyone but me?

“Does Master Murdo not know what ye’ve been doing, lass?”

Clara turned to see the ghillie, his usual crumpled clothes replaced by a plaid and

jacket.

“What I’ve been doing?” she asked.

“Aye,” he said, a broad grin on his face. “I know yer secret. Ye’ve kept it well hidden.” He offered his hand. “Would ye like to test yer new skills on the dance floor and partner me in a reel? Or I could ask yer husband to cast Lady McCallum aside in yer favor.”

“I-I don’t think that’s wise,” Clara said.

“Quite right, lass.”

“Why, because Lady McCallum is a better partner?”

“Och, no, lass. It’s because Master Murdo can admire ye better from a distance, while that flat-footed matriarch stamps on his toes.” He winked, then lowered his voice. “Elspeth tells me ye’re the best pupil she’s ever had, and she doesn’t give praise lightly.”

“She told you?”

“Aye. Now, lass, shall we dance?”

“The laird told me it was for the principal guests only,” Clara said.

“As Master Murdo’s wife, ye’ve as much right to dance as anyone. Ye also have a right to show yer husband what he’s missing.”

“Very well.” Clara took Duncan’s hand, and he steered her toward the line.

As they drew near, Murdo raised his eyebrows in question, while his father's eyes darkened in anger.

“Duncan, what are ye—”

“He's partnering me , father-in-law,” Clara said. “I wish to dance a reel, and my husband isn't available.”

“Clara—” Murdo began, but Lady McCallum interrupted.

“Come now, Murdo,” she said. “We should commend her efforts. I shan't be offended if she doesn't know the steps. She must learn somehow.”

“I'm most grateful for your condescension, Lady McCallum,” Clara said, giving her a cold smile.

The dancing began, and Clara's apprehension lessened as she recognized the tune Elspeth had taught her.

She followed the steps, twirling in time to the music with Duncan, who proved an adept partner.

When it came to Clara's turn to lead, Duncan smiled encouragement and clapped in time to the music as she danced the steps she'd memorized.

Then she glanced up to see Murdo staring at her, open-mouthed in astonishment.

Their eyes met, and her heart soared with joy as the astonishment turned to admiration.

The rest of the party joined in the clapping, and the noise of merriment filled the hall.

Duncan spun her around as the music increased to a crescendo, then ended with a flourish, to the sound of cheering.

As Clara caught her breath, her heart pounding from the exercise, her husband released Lady McCallum, then, his emerald eyes glittering with desire, strode toward her, hands outstretched. She took them, and he laced his fingers through hers and pulled her to him. She clung to his jacket, panting.

“A reel’s a strenuous dance for those unused to it, lass,” he said, his voice reverberating against her body. “I didn’t know ye could dance like that.”

“I-I couldn’t until a week ago.”

“And ye’ve been learning?”

“Elspeth has been teaching me every day.”

“So that’s where ye’ve been disappearing to.”

He placed a finger under her chin and tipped her face up until their gazes met.

“Ye’ve no idea how much it pleases me that ye’ve learned our dance, lass.” Then he glanced down to where his hardness pressed against her thigh, and a wicked glint glimmered in his eyes. “Or perhaps ye do. Ye’re a true Highlander now.”

He turned to the ghillie as the music struck up again.

“Duncan, forgive me for cutting in. I’d like to dance with my wife now, unless she prefers to sit this dance out.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I wouldn’t want ye tired out by the end of the evening—not with what I have planned for ye.”

Tempering the spike of desire, Clara nodded. “Perhaps I’ll sit out this dance.”

The laird approached, and Clara’s husband tightened his hold on her, almost as if he wished to protect her.

“Where’s yer brother, Murdo?” the man slurred. “He’s supposed to be dancing with the McCallum lass, the steaming lump of shite.”

“Da,” Murdo growled. “Not in front of the guests.”

“I’ll look for him,” the ghillie said, and the laird wrinkled his nose.

“Ye’re going nowhere, Duncan.” He gestured about the dance floor. “Find one of yer own kind to dance with. Murdo, go find yer brother.”

Clara placed a hand on the ghillie’s arm. “Duncan, why don’t you ask Marsaili to dance?” she said, gesturing toward the young maidservant standing on her own. “She could do with cheering up.”

The ghillie nodded and approached Marsaili, but she shook her head and ran out of the hall.

Her heart aching for the girl’s distress, Clara followed her into the passageway, but Marsaili was nowhere to be seen. Then she heard movement behind the door to the laird’s study.

“Marsaili, are you in there?”

Clara pushed open the door to see her brother-in-law sitting at the desk, a glass of deep amber liquid in his hand. He gave her his usual scowl.

“James, you’re not dancing,” she said.

He drained his glass. “Aren’t ye a perceptive wee lassie?” he sneered.

“Aren’t you an angry man?” she retorted.

He reached for the whisky bottle, but she snatched it from his grasp.

“I guarantee that no matter what you’re suffering,” she said, “the solution to your problems won’t be found at the bottom of a glass.”

“Ye know nothing of my problems.”

“Don’t I?” she said. “You think I don’t know how it feels to be an outsider here? For my very existence to be an insult to those who’d rather not accept me for who I am?”

His eyes widened and she set the bottle down.

“You may think I’m a savage,” she continued, “a cursed Sassenach, but I’m not completely lacking in wits.”

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“I don’t think ye’re a...” He hesitated and gestured toward her. “My da said—”

“I know exactly what your father said about me,” Clara said. “He continues to say it, and there are many here who listen to him.”

He picked up his glass, then, realizing it was empty, set it aside.

“Shall I tell you why I think you’re unhappy?” Clara said. “It’s because you’ve no wish to marry Shona McCallum. Are you in love with another? Someone of whom your father wouldn’t approve?”

“My da...or anyone .”

“I’d approve,” Clara said. “We cannot help whom we love. All we can do is love them, even if we cannot love them openly.”

His expression hardened. “Are ye playing my brother false?”

She let out a laugh. “You think I love another? Duncan, perhaps?”

He caught his breath, and she shook her head.

“No, James,” she said quietly. “It’s not I who loves Duncan.” She held out her hand. “Like it or not, James, you’re my brother- in-law. I don’t want to see you unhappy. You don’t have to like me, but can we at least agree not to be enemies?”

He stared at her hand, his eyes glistening. Then he took it and sighed.

Footsteps approached, and he withdrew his hand.

“I’ll leave you in peace,” Clara said. “I was looking for Marsaili. Have you seen her?”

He shook his head.

“Murdo’s looking for you,” she said. “Your father wants you to dance with Miss McCallum. I won’t tell them I’ve seen you.” She approached the door.

“Clara,” he said softly.

“Yes?” she said, turning.

“I don’t see ye as my enemy.”

She nodded and exited the study, then collided with a solid form. Her gut twisted as she recognized her father-in-law.

“What are ye doing here?” he growled.

“Nothing, I—”

He pushed past her and opened the door.

“There ye are, ye useless lad!” he said. “What are ye doing hiding in here like a sniveling wretch? Yer betrothed’s waiting for ye.”

“Yes, Da,” James mumbled.

The laird slapped him on the arm. “Less of yer lip,” he said. “Ye should be thanking

me, finding ye a bride. If I left it up to ye, our line would die out.”

“Clara might have a son,” James said.

The laird wrinkled his nose at her. “How can ye be sure it’d be Murdo’s, given that she’s a—” He broke off into a fit of coughing, spittle misting the air, and his face turned a deep shade of red.

Serves you right—I hope you choke.

James’s eyes widened, and he glared at Clara.

Heavens! She’d spoken aloud.

The laird clung to James’s arm, and they returned to the great hall.

Clara followed, cursing herself. She might dislike the old man, but she had no right to wish him into the grave, no matter how much he loathed her. Better to have him live to see her children grow up as McTavishes, knowing that his family line was tainted with her blood.

She placed a hand over her belly. Mama said that she’d know when a baby came—when her courses stopped and her belly grew round. Would she love it as much as Mama loved her?

What pain must her mother have suffered from being parted from her, not knowing whether she lived or died?

Nobody deserved to suffer the loss of a loved one, not even a drunken bully. And however much Clara disliked the laird, he was Murdo and James’s father.

As Clara returned to the great hall, she spotted Shona McCallum standing in a corner, her eyes filled with despair.

James, who looked equally miserable, stood by the fireplace with Murdo and the laird, together with Lord and Lady McCallum.

Duncan stood across the hall, his expression one of broken resignation.

Clara approached Shona.

“Is anything the matter, Miss McCallum?” she said. “You look unhappy.”

A tear slid down Shona’s cheek. “My da says it’s a good match. I’m to be Lady McTavish—my son will be laird and I’ll bring pride to my family.”

Her voice was flat, as if she recited a laundry list.

“Are you pleased?” Clara asked.

“It’s what Ma wants.”

“What about your father? And you—what do you want?”

“A daughter’s duty is to obey her parents,” Shona said, “and a wife’s duty is to obey her husband.”

“So you’ve resigned yourself to a lifetime of obedience?” Clara said.

“Haven’t ye done the same?”

Clara smiled. “I refused to pledge a vow of obedience to my husband.”

“And yer mother? Yer father?”

“My mother wanted me to make the right choice,” Clara said. “Both my mother and stepfather disapproved of my choice—but, in the end, they respected that choice as mine.”

“Then ye’re fortunate, Mrs. McTavish.”

“You must call me Clara if we’re to be sisters.”

Shona flinched, and another tear spilled onto her cheek.

“You don’t want to marry James, do you?” Clara said.

“It’s what Ma wants.”

“And your father?”

“He wants me to marry, but...” Shona hesitated.

“But he’d rather you had a say in the choice of husband?”

Shona nodded, and Clara’s heart ached to see the sorrow in her eyes. She placed a hand on Shona’s arm.

“Do you love another?”

“Murray Campbell,” Shona said. “We danced at the ghillie’s ball last year, and he asked me to wed him. Da liked him well enough, but Ma refused.”

“Why did she refuse?”

“Because he’s a Campbell . Ma says they’re treacherous—thieves in the night, filthy blackguards who’d stab ye in the heart for a coin. They’re even worse than the English, and—Oh!” She let out a cry. “I didn’t mean...”

“You didn’t mean me ?”

Another tear splashed onto Shona’s cheek.

Clara reached up and wiped it away. “If your mother loves you, then she’d want you to be happy.”

“I’ll not be happy here ,” Shona said. “I don’t want to be a laird’s wife. Murray’s a younger son. He likes the simple life. He wants to farm the land—he already knows how to look after a herd of cattle.”

Clara smiled at the pride in Shona’s voice—pride in the man she loved.

“And you want to be a farmer’s wife?” she said.

“Aye. I don’t want to be lady of a castle, and certainly not here .”

“Then, Shona, you should tell your mother.”

“But Ma would be so angry!”

“And your father?”

The girl glanced across the hall to where her father stood beside Clara’s father-in-law.

As if they sensed they were being watched, both men turned their attention to the two of them.

Clara's father-in-law gave his usual scowl of contempt, but the McCallum smiled at his daughter with the kind of fatherly affection Clara had never seen growing up—until Papa Harcourt had taught her that children were to be cherished and loved, not sold off like chattel.

"I think your father loves you, Shona," Clara said. "He'll understand if you didn't want to marry James."

"Ye don't think James could love me?"

"No," Clara said. "Like you, he loves another."

"Then what should I do?"

"Follow your heart before it's too late. Love is everything."

Before Shona could respond, Clara's father-in-law raised his hand and the guests' chatter faded. Then he moved to the center of the hall, taking James with him.

"Friends!" he cried. "It gives me much pleasure to have ye here tonight to celebrate the festival of Lughnasadh. The land has been bountiful, and I pray it continues to do so until the winter comes upon us, so that we might reap the fruits of our labors."

A ripple of approval threaded through the company.

"It gives me greater pleasure to announce that I've reaped the fruits of my labors and secured a match for my heir!"

A cheer rose, and Shona glanced at Clara, her eyes glazed with panic, while James stood beside his father, his mouth set in a grim line.

“My eldest son, James Alastair Malcolm, will ensure the continuation of the McTavish line with pure Highlander blood. His sons—my grandsons—will rule our clan in the knowledge that they have an ancestry to be proud of. Their blood shall not be tainted. Tonight, before ye all, my son shall pledge his troth to—”

“No!” Shona cried.

The guests drew in a collective breath.

Shona reached for Clara’s hand.

The laird’s expression darkened. “What did ye say, lass?”

Still clutching Clara’s hand, Shona stepped forward and tilted her chin up.

“I said no. I will not marry James.”

“Daughter!” Lady McCallum said. “Stop playing the simpleton. Forgive her, Lord McTavish—she has a fanciful nature, but she’ll do her duty, even if she needs a little”—she turned her pale gaze to Shona—“marital discipline.”

“But Ma,” Shona said, “I—”

“Silence!” Lady McCallum cried. “Must ye dishonor yer poor mother? And yer father? He wants the match more than I—a union between two fine families.”

“Do ye want the match, Da?” Shona asked, her eyes bright with moisture.

“Of course he does!” Lady McCallum snapped. “Stop playing the fool, and do yer duty.” She extended a ringed hand that glittered with jewels toward her daughter.

Shona released Clara's hand, approached her mother, then hesitated, as if her heart warred with her duty. Then she shook her head.

"I-I cannot," she said. "I don't love him."

Her mother scoffed. "What has love to do with—"

"Love is everything !" Shona said. "I must follow my heart, before it's too late."

"What nonsense is this?" Lady McCallum said. Clara's stomach fluttered with apprehension as she turned her attention from Shona to her.

"Please, Da," Shona said. "Don't make me marry him. I'd be so miserable, I—I'll run away."

"Ye ungrateful little mare!" Clara's father-in-law stepped toward Shona, raising his hand to strike, but Lord McCallum caught his sleeve.

"That's enough, McTavish," he said. "Ye've no right to take a hand to my daughter."

Shona burst into tears. "Da!" she wailed. "Forgive me, b-but I can't marry James McTavish. I love another."

"Whom?" Lord McCallum asked.

"M-Murray," Shona said, her lip wobbling.

"Sweet Lord, save me!" Lady McCallum cried. "That Campbell boy? But he...he's a..." She shook her head. "He's a Campbell !"

"I love him!" Shona said. "I love him, and I"—she glanced about the hall, her cheeks

scarlet—"I'd hate it here!"

"Lord McCallum," Clara's father-in-law said, "yer daughter's taken too much whisky. We needn't be governed by the whims of a lass barely out of the nursery."

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Lord McCallum shook his head. "If she loves the Campbell lad..."

"That's of no consequence, McCallum. What matters is what my son wants, and James wants Shona. Don't ye, lad?"

James stared at Shona, resignation in his eyes. Then he opened his mouth to speak.

"No, he doesn't!" Shona said. "He loves another."

Laird McTavish's eyes glowered with raw fury. "He what?"

"He loves another!"

"Who told ye that, lass?"

"I..." Shona glanced at Clara. "I just heard it."

"Aye, I'll wager ye did," Lord McTavish said, and he strode toward Clara. "I might have known, ye little slut! Not satisfied with tainting my family with yer whore's blood, ye seek to ruin my heir's marriage. It was a bad day for the clan when ye snared my son. It's time I taught ye a lesson!"

Clara leaped back, lost her balance, and fell to the floor.

"Aye, that's where ye should be," Lord McTavish said. "Crawling in the dirt like yer whore of a mother!"

He fisted his hands. Clara raised her arms to protect herself, but the blow never came. Two hands pulled him back, and Clara glanced up to see her husband, his face red with rage.

“Don’t touch her, Da!” he cried. “She’s my wife.”

“She should be beaten raw, like any disobedient, meddlesome woman.”

“I’m her husband,” Murdo said. “If anyone has the right to beat her, it’s me.”

Clara’s gut twisted at her husband’s words.

“You’d what ?” she said. “And you think I’m the savage?”

“No, lass, I didn’t mean—”

“Do ye lack the stomach for it?” the laird taunted him. “I thought yer brother a weakling, but ye’ve been like a lassie with no ballocks since that slut came!”

Whispers rippled through the company.

“Do ye like what ye see?” Lord McTavish said, casting his gaze over the guests. “The destruction of the McTavish clan by the viper in our midst who spreads her favors all over the place? Get thee gone, the lot of ye!” The whispering increased, and he let out a roar. “I said, leave ! I’ll not have—”

He broke off, bending over in a fit of coughing, and James ran toward him.

“Let me help ye, Da.”

“Get away from me, ye weak fool!”

Murdo reached for Clara, and she flinched. “Take my hand, lass.”

She took it, and he pulled her to her feet. Then he addressed the guests.

“The festivities are over. Duncan, Elspeth, would ye see our guests out?”

“Well!” Lady McCallum said, as the company began to disperse. “I’ve never been so insulted in all my—”

“Stop yer griping, woman,” Lord McCallum said. “If it weren’t for yer meddling, I’d never have agreed to the match. Look what’s come of it.”

“It’s not my meddling,” she said, pointing toward Clara. “It’s that Sassenach.”

“She’s not our concern. It’s our Shona we should be thinking of.” He turned to Lord McTavish and extended his hand. “I trust there’s no bad blood between our families.”

“I don’t blame ye, McCallum,” the laird snarled. “I blame her .”

He lunged toward Clara, and Murdo blocked his path.

“I told ye, Da, my wife’s mine to deal with.”

“See that ye do.”

“I’ll do what’s right, Da,” Murdo said, and Clara shivered at the determination in his voice.

“I trust ye’ll—” Lord McTavish broke off with another fit of coughing, and droplets of spittle and blood misted the air. “I-I’m...” he began, then let out a gasp and clawed at his throat.

“Here, Da, ye need rest,” Murdo said.

“But yer wife...”

“I’ll deal with her later.”

Murdo glanced at Clara, then helped his father out of the hall, as the rest of the guests dispersed.

Shona slipped her hand into Clara’s, her eyes wet with tears.

“Thank ye,” she whispered. “I couldn’t have borne it here. Not with him .” She gestured toward the retreating laird. “I’ve heard... things about him. I’m glad of what I did. I only wish that ye’d done the same and married another.”

“So do I,” Clara said.

“You witch !” a voice said, and Clara cursed as she saw James standing nearby. “Ye wish ye’d married elsewhere? I wish ye’d married elsewhere. Ye’ve brought nothing but shame on the McTavishes. If my brother won’t punish ye, then I’ll—”

“No, James,” a quiet voice said, and Duncan appeared at his side. “Striking the lass won’t serve any purpose. What’s done is done. Go help yer brother with the laird. He needs ye.”

“Come along, Shona,” Lady McCallum said. “Ye’ve nothing to gain from speaking to that Sassenach.”

Shona squeezed Clara’s hand then followed her parents out of the hall, leaving Clara alone with Duncan.

She curled her hands into fists, digging her fingernails into her palms to suppress the sob swelling in her throat.

The ghillie placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Och, lass, what were ye thinking ?”

His gentle touch threatened to breach her defenses.

“I-I thought I was doing the right thing, Duncan,” she said, her voice wavering.

“What ye did was wrong.”

“How so?” she said. “I saw three unhappy souls who each want to be with the one they love. What’s wrong about wanting to be with the one you love?”

Isn’t it a greater sin to force lovers apart, make them miserable?

And for what? For honor? How old is Shona McCallum?

Sixteen? Where’s the honor in forcing her to marry a man she can never love, and who’ll never love her? As for James...”

She met the ghillie’s gaze.

“I didn’t only do it for Shona,” she said. “I did it for you—you’re my only friend here.”

“Och, lass, Murdo cares for ye also, even if ye refuse to see it.”

“You’re the only one who understands me—an outsider, a misfit...”

She caught her breath on a sob, and the ghillie drew her into his arms.

“Daft lass,” he whispered. “Ye may have had good intentions, but ye’ll find that honor is something the McTavish clan values. You see, it’s—”

“Oh, I know ,” she said with a huff. “‘Strength and honor’ is the family motto. The Mountain of Honor is an ever-present monolith looking over the castle. You say that your lives are governed by honor, but none of you understand its true meaning.”

“What do ye think honor is, lass?”

“It’s doing what you know to be right, not what furthers your family name or the purity of the ancestral line. Honor isn’t obeying the orders dictated by a parent, or a husband. Sometimes disobeying is the honorable thing to do.”

“And ye’d know all about that,” a deep voice said.

Clara’s stomach fluttered in apprehension as the ghillie stiffened and withdrew his arms.

Murdo stood in the doorway, his eyes dark with anger.

“H-husband, I was just—”

He raised his hand. “I know what ye were just doing. I’m here to ask ye to come to bed.”

How dare he show anger after what he’d done! And how dare he order her to his bed as if she were nothing more than a body to service his needs?

She folded her arms. “No. I’m in no mood for a beating.”

His expression hardened and he crossed the hall, his boots clomping on the floor.

“What did ye say?”

“You heard,” she snarled. “If you’re going to beat me, then do it here, in front of Duncan, not behind the bedchamber door like a sniveling coward!”

“Lass, surely ye didn’t think I—”

“Just go!” she cried. “I’d rather sleep in the kitchen with Buck. I’d rather sleep anywhere than with you !”

He opened his mouth to respond, then gave a sigh and shook his head.

“As ye wish.”

He turned and exited the hallway, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls until they faded into silence.

“Och, lass,” Duncan said, “surely ye didn’t think Master Murdo would beat ye? I’ve known him since he were a lad, and he’d never hurt a soul.”

“Is that right?”

“He’s loyal to his da, that’s all, as is his brother. Loyalty to the clan is etched into his bones. But he’d never hit ye. Surely ye ken that?”

“B-but he said...”

“I heard what he said. But did ye not think what might have happened had he said nothing? The laird would have taken a whip to ye, and to Master Murdo also, for

disobedience. The clan—every man, woman, and child—is loyal to the laird.”

“Even if the laird is wrong?”

He nodded. “’Tis our way, lass. Ye should know—yer father’s a duke, is he not?”

“Papa Harcourt would never lay a hand on me,” Clara said. “No matter how badly I behaved.” She smiled at the image of her stepfather’s face, the gentle patience in his eyes when she tested him to the limit of his endurance.

“And why’s that?”

“Because he loves me.”

“Then perhaps ye should ask yerself why Master Murdo would never lay a hand on ye, no matter what ye did.”

She wiped her eyes, and he took her hand.

“Whatever ye may think of him, lass, he needs ye.”

“What about you ?” she said. “What do you need, Duncan? What does James need?”

“There’s nothing to be gained thinking on what can never be.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, then released it.

“Go to yer husband, lass. Ye’ll regret it if ye don’t.”

Then he exited the hall, leaving Clara alone. Shortly after, the servants slipped in to clear the remnants of the celebrations—Joan, Elspeth, and Callum, though Marsaili

was nowhere to be seen—and whisper to each other in hushed tones.

Were they whispering about her? Did loyalty to their laird lead them to also believe his claim that she was a slut who dishonored the name of McTavish?

She crossed the floor, nodding in acknowledgment as they stared at her. When she reached the foot of the staircase, she glanced upward. Then, with a sigh, she turned away and made her way to the kitchens.

Ye'll regret it, lass...

Duncan was right. She did have regrets—regrets that she was foolish enough to have believed Murdo could have made her happy.

Regrets that she had ever believed in the magic of the Lyon's Den.

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“I love you, Murdo.”

The soft, tender voice filled his mind as he relished the warmth of his wife’s willing body beneath him—the body that still rippled with an echo of their climaxes.

How he’d yearned to hear those sweet words fall from her lips!

Murdo rolled onto his side and reached for her, but there was nothing but a cold, empty space in the bed. He sat up and drew the furs back, but the bed bore no imprint of her body.

He was alone, with nothing but the memory of a dream to taunt him.

Clara hadn’t come to bed last night, having preferred to sleep in the kitchen.

As she’d declared, unashamedly, last night.

Devil’s ballocks , what would they all think if they knew he was unable to control his wife—the wife who despised him?

She’s nothing but a savage, son—she’ll destroy the clan.

His da’s words still echoed in his mind.

Aye, Clara was a savage, untamed and headstrong, and he’d been drawn to her spirit as a moth to a flame. But she’d made her loathing of him all too evident last night, preferring to run into the arms of other men than seek comfort from her husband. And

he...

And I—foolish moth that I am—have been scorched.

Perhaps he shouldn't have married her.

A scream ripped through the air, and Murdo's gut twisted with fear.

Clara...

He leaped out of bed, ran toward the door, and yanked it open.

"Clara!"

Another scream came, followed by sobbing. But it came from his da's bedchamber, not the kitchen.

"Clara?"

The sobbing continued, then a door opened and a woman rushed out. But it wasn't Clara.

"Marsaili!" Murdo said. "What the devil's wrong?"

"I-it's the laird!" she sobbed. "H-he's been taken ill. He was—" She broke off, her cheeks reddening.

He reached toward her, and she flinched and stepped back. Only then did he notice her appearance—the dark mark on her cheek, the swollen lips, her tangled hair...

...and her thin shift with a tear along the front.

“What are ye...” he began, then the skin on the back of his neck tightened as a deep wail came from inside.

Pushing the sobbing girl aside, Murdo rushed through the doorway.

His father’s chamber seemed to be devoid of color, the cold blue light of dawn having smothered the reds and browns of the plaid furnishings. The empty fireplace resembled a huge, toothless mouth—a black chasm in the center of the wall. And in the bed...

Murdo’s blood froze at the ghoul-like figure, its face deathly white, with dark gray rings beneath red-rimmed eyes.

The figure let out a groan. “Son...”

Murdo approached the bed and took his father’s hand. Clawlike fingers curled around his wrists with a strength that belied the older man’s frailty.

“Da, what’s happened?”

His father pulled him close and hissed in his ear.

“M-my chest. C-can’t br...” He drew in a shallow breath. “I-I—”

He broke off, coughing, shaking, and Marsaili let out another wail.

“G-get rid of that slut,” Da whispered.

Marsaili’s sobs continued and footsteps approached. Then Murdo’s father lifted his free arm and pointed toward the doorway.

“Witch!” he croaked. “Ye bring nothing but ill to the clan, cursed whore! What have ye done to me?”

Murdo turned to see Clara in the doorway. She stared at his father, her eyes filled with remorse.

Remorse...and guilt .

Elsbeth and Joan appeared beside her.

“Elsbeth,” Clara said, “send for a doctor—quickly!”

“Aye, ma’am.” The woman bobbed a curtsy and disappeared.

“What have ye done, Clara?” Murdo asked.

“What have I done?”

“Aye, that’s right, ye whore,” his father croaked. “Ye’ve brought about my death. So I curse ye! Ye’ll never know satisfaction. Ye’ve set out to ruin Clan McTavish with yer whoring and yer savagery, but I say to ye that ye’ll be cursed forever !”

Clara’s expression hardened. “It’s you who’s cursed, Lord McTavish. You’ll meet your retribution in hell for what you did to my mother.”

Murdo caught his breath at the fury in her voice.

“Clara,” he said, “ye shouldn’t—”

“Let her spill her poison,” his father said. “Let her show what she truly is.” He grasped Murdo’s nightshirt and pulled him close. “Son, ye must make yer father one

final vow before he departs this earth.”

“Ye just need to rest, Da, then ye’ll be well.”

“Promise me, son!” the older man said through gritted teeth, fervor in his eyes.

A swell of sorrow thickened in Murdo’s gut.

Despite how he’d treated Murdo’s ma—despite the beatings he’d given Murdo and his brother—the old man before him now was his father, the man who’d taught him the meaning of clan loyalty.

His father’s harshness had made him strong, and he needed to be strong, for a weakling stood no chance of survival in the rugged Highland landscape.

His da had taught him strength. And he’d taught him honor.

Strength and honor...

The essence of what it meant to be a McTavish.

Murdo blinked, and moisture stung his eyes.

“Aye, Da,” he said. I promise.”

“Rid yerself of that whore, lad. Honor the deathbed wish of yer da and find another wife. For if ye don’t, then the clan will be no more.”

“But James—”

“Yer brother’s no man!” his father snarled. “It’s up to ye , son. Ye’re the future of the

clan. But ye'll have no future if ye remain wedded to that slut."

"My wife's..." Murdo began, and his father sat up with a flare of life.

"She's a whore, son!" he cried. "All women are whores—deceitful sluts who'll ride any cock if it serves their purpose, then spin their lies to suit themselves. I curse them all!"

His breath rattled in his chest, then he fell back.

"Da!" Murdo cried.

But the spark of life had gone. His father lay still, his lifeless eyes staring at the ceiling, mouth twisted into a grimace of loathing.

Marsaili let out another wail.

"For the love of heaven!" Murdo cried. "Will ye desist?"

"Leave her be!" Clara said, pulling Marsaili into an embrace. "You see to your father. You can congratulate each other on your superiority over the female sex."

"How can ye speak so?" Murdo said.

Clara opened her mouth to respond, then she shook her head and turned to Marsaili.

"Are you hurt?"

The maidservant glanced toward the bed, her eyes widening in fear. Then she met Murdo's gaze and shook her head.

"N-no, but I..." Her lip wobbled. "Leave me be—Sassenach!"

“Marsaili!” Joan said. “That’s no way to speak to yer mistress.”

Hurt rippled across Clara’s expression, but she placed a gentle hand on the girl’s cheek.

“Marsaili, let me at least tend to that bruise.”

The girl burst into tears, and Clara drew her close.

“Wh-what am I going to do?” Marsaili wailed. “Where will I go?”

“What do you mean?” Clara said. “This is your home.”

“B-but...I’m ruined. I’ll be cast out. I-I...”

She shook with sobs while Clara shushed her with gentle words.

Murdo glanced at the lifeless form of his father, biting back the swell of grief.

“I-I’m carrying his child,” Marsaili said, almost in a whisper.

“ Whose child, lass?” Murdo asked.

“The laird’s.”

Joan drew in a sharp breath, but Clara merely nodded.

“My da ?” Murdo shook his head. “No, lass ye can’t be speaking the truth. Whose child is it? Or perhaps ye don’t know?”

“How dare you ask such a thing!” Clara said.

“I’ve every right to ask, if she claims to be carrying my da’s child,” Murdo said. “But no matter whom the father is, the clan has enough money to support her.”

Clara snorted. “Courtesy of my fortune.”

“It’s the clan’s fortune now.”

“And my mis fortune. Tell me, Murdo, do you think as your father did? Do you think me a deceitful whore as well as poor Marsaili here?”

Murdo flinched, recalling his father’s words, and he glanced across at his father’s still form—the man he’d sworn undying loyalty to.

“I thought as much,” Clara said. Her voice was quieter, but the quietness heightened the impact, for it spoke not of her fiery anger, but of sorrow and despair.

Joan placed a wrinkled hand on Clara’s arm.

“Ye must understand, lass,” she said. “Master Murdo’s remembering the man his da once was.

Every wee laddie looks up to his da. And for all that he had his flaws, Master Angus valued the honor of Clan McTavish above all.

Honor is the bones around which the flesh of our clan is molded.

Master Murdo loved his da. Every father has the love of his child. ”

“Not mine,” Clara said. “I hated him.”

“The duke?”

“No. The creature who sired me.”

“Aye,” Murdo said. “He was filth—a violator of women who ran a whorehouse.”

“He’s no different to the man who frequented that whorehouse,” Clara snarled, gesturing toward the lifeless form in the bed. “I hated him also—a violator of women.”

“A man who paid a whore to spread her legs is no violator,” Murdo said. “He’s merely the recipient of service provided by—”

He checked himself as her eyes filled with hurt. “Forgive me, Clara,” he said, his conscience tearing at his soul, “I didn’t mean...”

“You didn’t mean my mother?”

Before Murdo could reply, footsteps approached and a silver-haired man appeared in the doorway, holding a black case.

“I came as soon as I could, Mr. McTavish.”

“Ye’re too late, Dr. Munro,” Murdo said.

The doctor approached the bed and lifted the laird’s wrist. After a moment, he nodded.

Then he reached for the laird’s face and closed the eyelids with his fingertips.

Murdo gave an involuntary sigh of relief to be no longer subject to that demanding, judgmental gaze.

Then guilt overcame the relief and his eyes misted over with moisture.

“Forgive me, Da,” he whispered. “What have I done?”

“The end comes to us all, Mr. McTavish,” the doctor said. “Yer father’s end was closer than most.”

“I-I don’t understand.”

“He’d been ill for some months,” came the reply. “When I last visited, I told him he had a matter of weeks. He did well to survive this long.”

Murdo glanced at his wife, tempering the relief flooding through him.

“Then it was inevitable?” he asked. “Nobody—”

He broke off as Clara paled.

“Nobody what, husband?” she said.

“It matters not,” Murdo said. “I spoke out of grief.”

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“Perhaps your grief enables you to speak the truth,” she said, her voice hardening. “You thought I had a hand in his death?”

Murdo shook his head. “No, I meant...” He hesitated, fighting the swell of sorrow. “It’s just... Ye can’t understand, Clara. I remember my da when he was a better man.”

“Spare me your pretty speeches!” she said. “But perhaps you’re right in one aspect. Your father was the better man. At least he didn’t try to hide his loathing for me and my mother, or his disgust of the women he violated.”

Marsaili burst into tears again.

“I’m sorry, Marsaili,” Clara said. “Let’s get you something to eat. Rest assured, you no longer have to endure anything more in this room. And neither do I.”

She shot Murdo a look of disgust, then exited the bedchamber, taking the maidservant with her.

Other than a light coloring of his cheeks, the doctor gave no sign he’d heard as he busied himself tending to Murdo’s father.

“I must tell the clan,” Murdo said. “And my brother—dear Lord, James !” He shook his head. “Poor James.”

“Master James will be a fine laird,” Joan said. “He’ll rule with a kinder hand than yer da. But he’ll need his brother more than ever.”

“Aye,” Murdo sighed, his heart aching at the thought of his brother bearing the burden. “James will have to take a wife now. But after last night’s humiliation caused by Clara’s—”

“No,” Joan said, her voice firm. “Do not say it, lad, much as ye wish to. I ken that yer da wanted James to marry—it is, after all, his duty to give the clan heirs. But last night, Mistress Clara acted out of consideration.”

“Consideration for whom?”

“Foolish lad!” Joan scoffed. “Do ye see nothing with those big green eyes of yours? Did ye not see the relief in yer brother’s eyes when the McCallum lass rejected him?”

“I saw only anger.”

“That’s because yer brother’s spent his entire life striving to gain yer da’s approval, if not his love.

” She glanced toward the bed. “Yer da’s now free from pain,” she said softly.

“Perhaps James will be free now also. But he’ll have need of ye.

” She glanced toward the door. “And it’s not only yer brother who needs ye.”

Murdo shook his head. “My wife needs no one, Joan. She’s wild and free. I cannot tame her.”

“Why would ye want to? Isn’t it enough to just love her?”

Murdo glanced once more at his father’s form, his da’s advice echoing in his ears.

A wife is there to do her husband's bidding, son. Ye're not a real man if ye cannot tame yer woman.

Joan squeezed his arm, and the tender act unlocked the tears that stung Murdo's eyes—tears for the man he'd idolized as a boy, the man his father could have been had he not placed his twisted ideal of honor above the happiness of his sons.

“Ye know it as I do, lad,” Joan said. “Master Angus's heart was blackened near the end.

Mistress Clara didn't know him when he was younger.

She only saw the harsh man he'd become when the burden of lairdship became too much to bear.

But ye're free of that now. Ye and James can rule the clan as it ought to be ruled—with passion, kindness, and love. ”

Murdo patted the older woman's hand. “Ye're a good woman, Joan. The clan is fortunate to have ye.”

“And we're fortunate to have that lovely young lassie ye've wed,” she replied. “She'll give ye fine bairns who'll rule over the clan after ye.”

“But James...”

“Trust me on this, lad—yer brother may be laird now, but ye're our future, and I would ask ye to do one thing for yer Joan.”

“Which is?”

“Don’t make that lass any unhappier than she is now.

For all her wild ways, she’s brought kindness back into the house—a kindness that places others before herself.

Why else would she risk yer da’s wrath by persuading Shona McCallum to break off her engagement to James?

And why would she seek to comfort young Marsaili, who’s never had a kind word for her?

’Tis because she cannot see the pain of another without wanting to ease it.

But I ask ye this, Murdo McTavish—who does she have to ease her pain? ”

“She has me.”

“Have ye shown her, lad?”

“I made my vows.”

She shook her head. “Men! Ye think to win the love of a woman like Mistress Clara by plying her with empty promises? If ye love her, then ye need to show it. Or did ye only wed her for her fortune?”

“I went to the Lyon’s Den in search of a dowry, Joan. I’ve made no secret of that.”

“And wedding her made ye rich—not only in coin, but in what matters. Ye’d be richer still if ye loved her for herself. Tell me, why did she go to the Lyon’s Den?”

Murdo’s conscience squeezed at his heart. “To find a man who wouldn’t judge her

for her past,” he said. “She went there because the man she’d fallen in love with had betrayed her trust.”

Joan nodded. “Then it’s time for that man to earn her trust again, for I’ll wager he loves her still.”

“Aye,” Murdo sighed. “He does. Forgive me, Joan.”

“Och, ye’ll be the despair of me!” she said. “It’s not my forgiveness ye should be seeking.”

Murdo nodded. His da might have ruled the clan, but Joan had more wisdom in her little finger than he had in his whole body.

“Go to yer wife,” she said. “Yer father has no more need of ye. I’ll see to Dr. Munro here.”

Murdo pulled the gray-haired woman into an embrace. “If women could rule the clan, ye’d make a fine laird, Joan.”

“Don’t speak such nonsense, ye great, lumbering fool!” she said, slapping him on the arm. “Now, be off with ye.”

He kissed her on both cheeks, and she wriggled free.

“None of that, lad—save it for yer wife.”

“I intend to.”

He was a coward—a witless coward—for placing his father’s ideal of honor over his wife’s happiness.

He loved Clara, of that he was in no doubt. Now, at last, he could express it freely and without restraint.

His body tightened at the prospect of loving her as she deserved to be loved—in their bedchamber, on the hearthrug, against the hard stone walls of the great hall...

And out in the open, among the heather, while the birds circled overhead, catching their cries of pleasure as he brought her to exquisite ecstasy.

Tempering the surge in his heart and his manhood, he exited the chamber—without a backward glance at the man who'd held his soul prisoner—and went in search of his wife.

How dare he!

Clara strode across the landscape, anger driving her forward. After leaving Marsaili in Elspeth's care, the urge to remove herself from this godforsaken castle had been too strong.

I'm a fool to have believed I could ever have been happy here—with him!

The ground sloped more steeply upward, and she paused to catch her breath. She'd long since lost sight of the path.

Damn. I'm lost.

She picked her way over the rocks, then slipped and fell to the ground, turning her ankle and cursing at the spike of pain.

Then she heard a noise from behind.

"Leave me be!" she cried. "Haven't you done enough?"

A whine came in response, and she turned to see the huge deerhound standing behind her, his ears flattened. He stepped forward and nudged her with his nose.

"Sorry, Buck," Clara said, struggling to her feet. "I didn't mean you."

She scratched him behind the ears, and he let out a growl of satisfaction.

Then he leaped ahead, his claws scrabbling on the rocks, and trotted ahead before pausing to look back.

Clara followed. But before she caught up, he leaped off again, stopping to wait farther up until, after moving out of reach several times, he lay down, his ears upright. When she reached him at last, she spotted the path.

“Bless you, Buck,” she said. “You’re my best friend, aren’t you?”

The path disappeared into a cluster of firs, and she recognized the route to the ghillie’s cottage. A thin column of smoke rose into the air.

Duncan must be at home.

Did he know the laird was no more?

Icy fingers crawled across her skin as the wind rose and the trees uttered a harsh whisper, recalling the laird’s final demand to Murdo.

Rid yerself of that whore .

Murdo had promised to honor his father’s deathbed wish. He would abandon her for the sake of honor.

Would Duncan abandon her also?

The dog at her heel, Clara followed the path to the ghillie’s cottage. Male voices came from within, and the scent of wood and smoke filled her nostrils.

She knocked on the door and the voices stopped. Then Duncan opened the door.

“What are ye doing here, lass?” he said, frowning. “Are ye alone?”

“May I come in?” Clara said.

Duncan glanced back inside, then shook his head. “Another time. It’s best ye go.”

“It can’t wait,” she said, her eyes stinging with tears. “Please let me in.”

“No, lass.”

“Would you curse me also?”

“Curse ye?” he said. “Whatever for?”

Behind the ghillie, Clara caught a glimpse of a male form sitting on a bed.

“Who’s that with you?” she asked. Then she drew in a sharp breath. The man on the bed was James.

“Duncan, what the devil are ye doing ?” James said, fury and fear in his eyes. “Get rid of her!”

“James,” Clara began, “I—”

“Come to spy, have ye?” he snarled. “Haven’t ye caused me enough misery?”

“Greater misery than what you’d have endured married to Shona McCallum?” Clara said. “I did you a favor, and you know it!”

“Don’t talk nonsense.”

“Shona didn’t love you,” Clara said. “She loved another man. As do you.”

Duncan frowned and shook his head. “Och, lass, ye shouldn’t speak such foolishness.”

“Why not?” Clara said. “Why shouldn’t a man be permitted to love whom he wants?”

“Be quiet!” James cried, panic in his voice. “Ye’ve dishonored the clan and defied my father—he’ll punish me for what ye’ve done.”

“No, he won’t.”

“He will,” James said. “He’s—”

“He’s dead,” Clara said.

The color drained from James’s cheeks.

“Sweet Lord Almighty! Is Murdo...”

He pitched forward, and Duncan caught him.

“No...” James whispered, shaking.

“Murdo’s alive and well,” Clara said. “But your father...”

The ghillie caught his breath. “Master Angus?”

Clara nodded. “He had a seizure in the night. Marsaili was with him.”

James clung to the ghillie, dipping his head until it rested on Duncan’s shoulder. Then

he let out a long, low moan.

“Now then, Master James,” the ghillie said, “ye’ve had a shock. Let’s get ye on the bed.”

James lifted his head, and for a heartbeat Clara saw nothing but the most intense relief in his eyes. Then a flicker of fear shone in their depths. He glanced at the crumpled sheets on the bed then back at Clara.

He withdrew from the ghillie’s embrace. “I must go home. I-I’m the laird now.”

“You’re not just the laird,” Clara said. “You’re free .”

“Free? I’ll never be free.”

“Don’t you see?” Clara said. “As laird, you can do what you want, love whom you want. Your father’s death has—”

She broke off as James stepped toward her, raising his arm.

“What did ye do to him?” he said. “Sweet Lord, woman, I swear I’ll whip ye raw if ye...”

He fisted his hand, but the ghillie grasped his wrist.

“Leave the lass alone, James. She’s not to blame.”

James wrenched himself free and backed toward the bed. “Did you kill my da, woman?” Then he stiffened. “Brother!” he cried. “Did she kill our da?”

Clara turned, and her stomach clenched as she saw her husband in the doorway.

He entered the cottage, his dark-emerald gaze fixed on his brother. He glanced toward the ghillie, then Clara. Then his gaze settled on the crumpled bed, and his expression hardened.

“What’s going on?” he said.

Duncan glanced toward James.

“Sweet Lord, save me!” James whispered, and Clara’s heart ached at the raw terror in his eyes.

“It was me!” she said.

Murdo frowned. “What were ye doing, wife?”

“Brother, I—” James began.

Rid yerself of that whore, lad.

I promise.

“I-I was unhappy,” Clara interrupted, her husband’s vow in her ears. “Y-you don’t love me—you never have. You made your father a promise on his deathbed. So I came here. Duncan’s my only friend.”

She stared at him, using defiance to hide her pain.

“And James?” Murdo asked.

Clara glanced at the trembling man. “He—he came to tell Duncan about your father, and...”

Murdo closed his eyes, and when he opened them, they were glistening with moisture. The anger drained from his expression and he nodded.

“He found ye with Duncan,” he said. “It seems I’m too late.”

He turned to his brother. “James, there’s much to be done. I’ll await ye at the castle. There’s no need for either of us to be here.”

His shoulders slumped and he exited the cottage. Clara watched as he trudged along the path then disappeared into the trees.

“Och, lass, ye shouldn’t have done that,” the ghillie said.

“I daresay he’ll recover,” Clara said bitterly. “It’s no great loss, and he’ll be fulfilling his father’s deathbed wish.”

“His what?” James said.

“Your father told Murdo to rid himself of me,” Clara said. “‘That whore,’ he called me with his last breath—as I’m sure you’ve called me many times.”

“Was I wrong? Ye’ve just broken my brother’s heart.”

“Your brother has no heart for me,” Clara said. “He never did.”

“That’s where ye’re wrong, lass,” the ghillie said. “Did ye never wonder why Master Angus hated ye so much?”

“Because I’m English, and the daughter of the woman he violated.”

“Plenty of Sassenachs have married Highlanders, lass,” Duncan said. “And Master

Angus lay with more whores than there are raindrops in a storm. He hated ye because he saw what I've seen with my own eyes—that Master Murdo loves ye.”

“Is that why you hate me, James?” Clara asked.

James's eyes filled with shame, and he shook his head slowly. “I don't hate ye. I just...” He wiped his eyes. “My da, he...” He shook his head. “I didn't want him to be ashamed of me.”

“Why would anyone be ashamed of you?” Clara asked.

James shuffled from one foot to the other and glanced at Duncan.

“Love is nothing to be ashamed of,” Clara said. “We cannot help whom we love. All we can do is love them, and give thanks if they love us in return.” She glanced at Duncan. “You both have much to be thankful for.”

“Do ye love my brother?” James asked.

Clara opened her mouth to deny it, then closed it again. She blinked and nodded as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“And did my da really tell my brother to rid himself of ye?”

Clara nodded.

“Then,” James said, “my first order as laird will be to the whole clan—to welcome ye as one of our own.”

“And Marsaili?” Clara said.

“What of her?”

“She’s pregnant.”

“Och, poor lass.” Duncan shook his head. “Free of him at last, but burdened with his child. James, ye must reassure Marsaili she’s not to be cast out, that her bairn will be cared for.”

“Aye.” James nodded.

Pride shone in Duncan’s eyes. “Ye’ll be the finest laird Clan McTavish has ever had,” he said. “And yer brother will be there for ye.” He turned to Clara. “Master Murdo will be there for ye also, lass.”

James tucked his shirt into his breeches and wrapped his plaid around his body. Then he extended his hand to Duncan. “Come with me.”

The ghillie hesitated. “Are ye certain?”

James glanced at Clara and smiled.

“Aye,” he said. “As the lass says, we should be free to love whom we want. Are ye coming, lass?”

Clara shook her head.

“Forgive my brother,” James said. “He and I lived in our da’s shadow. We all did. But now that shadow’s lifted, we can be the men we were meant to be—I, the laird, and he, the man who can love ye freely. Because he does love ye, lass.”

Clara glanced at the path in the direction her husband had gone.

Then she shook her head.

“But not enough.”

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Ripples danced across the surface of the loch. At the far end of the water, Murdo caught a flash as something moved—a fish, perhaps, swimming free, unburdened by honor or duty.

“I’m free of you at last, Da!”

The wind caught his voice and tossed it aside, as if it knew the futility of his words. The curse Da uttered on his deathbed would fester in his soul.

The curse he’d placed on Clara.

And now she’d disappeared.

Murdo had waited for her to return to the castle, but she hadn’t. After James arrived with Duncan, Buck trotting at their heels, Murdo went in search of Clara, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps his da had won after all.

A piercing cry came from overhead. The snowcapped peak of Beinn Urraim glistened in the sunlight, and above, two shapes circled in the air.

The eagle and his mate.

When had they known they were destined for each other? Was it at first sight, or had their love grown over the seasons until they could no longer be parted?

Murdo sighed. When had he known, inside his soul, that Clara was his mate?

He lowered his head in shame.

“I’ve been a fool,” he said. “A weak fool.”

“I’ll not disagree, brother,” a voice said.

James stood before him, silhouetted against the sky.

“I thought I’d find ye here—hiding in the wilds rather than doing yer duty.”

“The clan’s yer duty now,” Murdo said.

James picked up a stone and tossed it into the water. “See the ripples from the stone?” he said. “They travel to the farthest edge of the loch, then back until the whole surface is covered, shifting the water to their whim. Even after the stone is long gone, it strives to rule the water.”

He sat beside Murdo.

“We can’t let the stone rule us after it’s gone. We should make our own ripples—live our lives as we wish, not as that bitter old man might have demanded.”

“Ye speak nonsense,” Murdo said.

James’s clear green eyes sparkled in the sunlight, and, for the first time, there was not a glimmer of discomfort or fear in their expression.

“Do ye know how I knew ye’d be here, Murdo? It’s because this was where we used to come as children, somewhere our da never came. A place where we could be free.”

“Ye are free,” Murdo said.

“And so are ye, but ye’re too much of a fool to realize it. So ye hide here rather than tend to yer wife.”

Murdo’s heart lifted with hope. “Have ye found her?”

James shook his head. “No, but she’s a clever lass. She’ll come to no harm, at least, not to her body. As to her heart...”

Murdo’s conscience pierced his soul.

“James, do you know what Da said to her when he died—what he said to me?”

“Aye, Joan told me. Are ye foolish enough to let herself be ruled by the final words of a bitter old man determined to hate that lovely lass?”

“I thought ye hated her, brother.”

“I never hated her, Murdo,” James said. “I feared her.”

“What could you have to fear from her?”

“Her honesty. She sees beyond that which we want the world to see. And when she saw me, she knew me.”

“How so? Ye’d never met her before I brought her here.”

“She saw my soul,” James said. “What more is there to fear?” He took Murdo’s hand.

“Are ye really going to deny yerself the love of that fine woman merely because of

what our da said? Ye should look at what she's done.

She's worked hard here, weathered my insults, yet cared enough about me to defy our father.

And she looked into my heart and didn't condemn what she saw.

She weathered Da's fury and the condemnation of the entire clan to further my happiness. She was even..."

His voice wavered, and he wiped his eyes.

"She was even willing to let ye believe she'd broken faith with ye to protect me from yer condemnation."

"I'd never condemn ye, James."

"Wouldn't ye?" James blinked, and the moisture in his eyes glimmered in the sunlight. "Only Clara understood whom I truly love—and why I could never have married the McCallum lass."

Murdo stared at him.

"Ye know, don't ye, brother?" James said. "Inside yer heart, ye know whom I love, whom I've always loved. If Clara had the courage to defy our da to protect that love, then I should have the courage to admit it to ye now."

Murdo recalled the moments he'd pushed to the back of his mind—the tender touches, the lingering glances, and the crushing fear in James's eyes when Murdo came upon them in Duncan's cottage, moments before Clara placed herself between them to protect James from his anger.

“Aye, brother,” he whispered, reaching for James’s hand. “I know whom ye love.”

James looked out across the loch, the breeze lifting the ends of his hair, which shone golden in the sunlight. The ripples at the far end seemed to be moving closer. Perhaps the fish were dancing in the water.

He sighed. “He’s the granite beneath my feet, the air in my lungs, and the strength in my bones. Without him, I am nothing.”

Murdo’s heart tightened at the sorrow in his brother’s voice. “I only wanted ye to marry Shona McCallum because I believed she might make ye happy.”

“I ken that,” James replied. “But yer wife knew otherwise. She wasn’t afraid to act. Of all the souls here, hers is the most open—the most honest. Yet she was willing to act false to protect me. Oh, brother, imagine what it’s like to have such a lass willing to sacrifice herself for yer happiness?”

“Yer happiness, brother, not mine,” Murdo said.

“Och, ye’re a fool if ye think she doesn’t care about ye!

Perhaps she’s unwilling to risk her heart for a man beholden to his da.

But we’re free of him now. I’m free to love the one who owns my heart.

And so are ye.” James grinned. “Besides, ye need to furnish the clan with heirs, fill Strathburn Castle with children—lads and lasses with their da’s iron will and their ma’s fiery temperament. ”

“Ye want me to reconcile with my wife to give ye heirs?”

James slapped him playfully on his shoulder. “Fool! I want ye to reconcile with yer wife because she’s yer soul mate, as much as the eagle’s mate in the sky above, or the fish’s mate in the water below.”

“Aye,” Murdo said, as the ripples in the water moved closer. “She’s my soul mate. I knew it when I first saw her in that ballroom all those months ago—my wild, headstrong lass who outshone the other women as the sun outshines the moon.”

“Then tell her,” James said. “Show her.”

“If she comes back to me,” Murdo said, rising to his feet.

“She will,” James said, standing beside him. “Let her come of her own free will and she’ll be yers forever.”

Murdo nodded. “Ye’ll be a fine laird.”

“Aye—with Duncan at my side, and my brother at my back.”

James glanced toward the water again, and his smile broadened.

“What is it?” Murdo asked.

“I believe yer wife is coming to ye of her own free will.”

Murdo glanced at the loch. The ripples were moving closer. Then a pale arm lifted out of the water. A head came into view, then bobbed under the surface.

The swimmer drew near, then rose from the water, like a sea god.

No—not a god.

A goddess .

Murdo's mouth watered at her naked form—soft skin flushed from the exertion, droplets of water cascading over her curves, following the line of her breasts...

...and two pink nipples jutting proudly toward him.

“Sweet swiving heaven—ye’re a fortunate man indeed,” James said.

“I thought you didn’t like women,” Murdo said, tempering the possessiveness in his soul, which mirrored the lust surging in his cock.

“Any man can appreciate a beautiful female form,” his brother said. “Ye’ll have no concerns about bairns, not with those ripe, round—”

“That’s enough!” Murdo fisted his hands, his groin aching with need.

“Ha! Ye’ve got it bad, brother.”

“And ye’re no man if ye can’t respect my wife’s modesty.”

But Murdo saw no shame in Clara’s eyes—only pride.

She approached them, her gaze bold and direct, making no attempt to conceal her nudity, and his heart ached to see the scar on her arm—the brand in the shape of a D .

“Clara,” he whispered.

She turned her gaze on him, and though he waited for her expression to soften, she remained goddess-like—aloof, unattainable...

...and lost to him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

Clara fought to conquer her shame as she stood before Murdo and his brother. She fisted her hands to stop her body from trembling.

Her husband stared at her with frank appraisal, and she braced herself for his judgment.

But she no longer cared. She had nothing to be ashamed of. Even her scar she now wore with pride, the mark of her survival—and her mother’s survival—against men who thought women were possessions to be used, exploited, then tossed aside.

I’m finally free—free from the burden of honor and duty.

James met her gaze, and, for the first time, she saw admiration in his eyes.

“Come out of the water, lass,” Murdo said. “Where are yer clothes?”

Her nipples pebbled in the air, and she fought the little pulse of need ignited by the fire in his eyes. Then he shifted his gaze to the scar on her arm and his eyes darkened.

“I’m not ashamed of my body,” she said, touching her scar, “or of this . Nor am I ashamed of who I am. Neither should your brother be ashamed of who he is—or whom he loves.”

James shifted from one foot to another and lowered his gaze.

“Are you ashamed, husband?” Clara challenged.

Murdo's gaze wandered over her body, and her blood warmed at the raw desire in his eyes.

Then he nodded.

"Aye," he said. "I am ashamed—more than I've ever been in my life, and more than I ever hope to be again."

He lifted his hands to his face. When he lowered them again, his eyes glistened with moisture.

"Oh, Clara..." he whispered. "There's one thing of which I am most heartily ashamed, and I'll carry that shame until I draw my last breath."

He stepped toward her, then dropped to his knees and bowed his head.

"I'm ashamed of myself."

He extended his hand, but she resisted the temptation to take it.

Despair flickered in his eyes, and he dipped forward and kissed the ground at her feet.

Then he wrapped his arms around her waist, burying his face in her stomach.

"Oh, my love, forgive me!" he said, his voice reverberating through her bones.

"I've mourned the loss of the father I loved—but that man died years ago, replaced by a bitter soul.

I know I'm not even worthy to kiss the ground before ye.

But ye can teach me to be worthy, Clara.

Teach me to be strong, and brave—to stand up for what’s right, no matter the consequence to myself.

Teach me to be considerate, to be a man who has a chance of coming close to being worthy of ye. ”

Clara placed her hand on his head and buried her fingers in his soft locks. He let out a sigh, his warm breath caressing the skin of her belly.

“I love ye, Clara. I want to spend the rest of my life showing ye how much.”

He kissed her thigh, and a pulse of need flared in her center. She squeezed her thighs together to temper the surge of moisture, suppressing her shame at the scent of her own desire.

Murdo inhaled, his nostrils flaring, and let out a low rumble of satisfaction.

“Ahem.”

Clara glanced up to see James, his face as red as fire.

“I ought to leave.”

“No, brother,” Murdo said, lifting his head.

“Ye must witness this. I want ye to hear my declaration to the woman I love—my soul mate, my goddess. When we return to the castle, I want the whole clan to witness my declaration. I want to climb to the summit of Beinn Urraim and shout my love to the whole world.”

“I ken that, brother, but I’ve no wish to intrude on ye when ye’re begging yer wife’s forgiveness.”

“Why’s that?” Clara asked.

James’s mouth twitched into a grin. “Lass, I’ve no wish to make ye feel compelled to forgive him merely because he has a witness to his plea.

If ye wish to bash him over the head with a rock and toss him in the loch, ye have yer laird’s full blessing.

In fact, lass, ye have my blessing to do anything ye like. ”

He issued a bow. “Ye’ve done my brother a great honor by marrying him, lass, and I’m proud to call ye sister. But now”—he lowered his gaze to Murdo and grinned, revealing white, even teeth—“I’ll leave ye in peace. Brother, heed yer laird’s command.”

“What do ye command?” Murdo asked.

“Atone for yer sins toward yer wife,” James said. “Spend the rest of the day atoning for them, in any manner ye see fit that gives pleasure to her and absolution for yerself.”

He winked at Clara, then made his way back along the path, singing to himself. His voice carried through the air even after he disappeared out of sight.

Murdo tilted his head and gazed at Clara, a plea in his eyes.

“I pledge, here and now to ye, Clara, that I shall love, honor, and cherish ye. I shall honor ye with my soul, and worship ye with my body. I only ask that ye give this

wretched husband of yers another chance.”

He reached for her hand and peppered her fingers with kisses. Then he flicked his tongue against her skin, tracing her finger from root to tip, taking it into his mouth and curling his tongue around it.

“Oh, lass, ye taste so sweet!” he said. “I yearn to feast on ye—if ye’ll let me.”

Her heart swelled at the love in his voice.

“Did not your laird command it?”

He tilted his head up, and she caught her breath at the desire in his eyes, pulsing with a deep-emerald flame.

“I love ye, Clara,” he said, “more than life itself. But I’ll not waste my breath telling ye—I wish to show ye.”

He grew still, hope flickering in his eyes while he waited for her response.

Then she lowered herself to her knees.

Hope morphed into joy—the pure joy of a soul no longer imprisoned by the chains of filial duty. Then he claimed her mouth in a hungry kiss, his lips sliding over hers. Tongues clashing, they relished the taste of each other as he pulled her to the ground.

He entered her swiftly, sliding into her body with ease, and she parted her thighs in welcome, wrapping her legs around his waist to pull him deeper inside.

“Och, lass—ye’ll be the undoing of me!”

His breath came out in short, sharp puffs, then he tilted his head back and cried out her name, which echoed across the landscape, reverberating into the earth as she writhed beneath him, surrendering to his touch.

The wave crested as she shattered around him while he roared out his pleasure.

He plunged into her, finding completion at last, and a delicious heat swelled within her, threading through her body.

They lay together, Clara relishing the ground against her back, the land to which she now belonged, their bodies rippling with the aftershocks of their climax, while the breeze rippled over the loch, and she fell into a doze.

When she opened her eyes, she saw her husband staring down at her, his hair illuminated against the backdrop of the sun. He dipped his head and brushed his lips against hers, and she lifted her hand and placed it on his cheek.

“I love you, Murdo,” she whispered.

He blinked, and moisture gleamed in his eyes. She brushed his cheek with her thumb to find it wet with tears.

“Don’t cry for me, my love.”

“They’re tears of joy,” he replied, “and relief—that while I deserve never to be forgiven, ye’re willing to let me atone for my sins.”

“Oh, atone, is it?” she said mischievously.

“Aye,” he said. “There’s much atonement to come.

In the loch, while the water engulfs us, and our love sends ripples across the water.

Against the granite rock with its warmth on yer back after it's been in the sun all day.

Among the heather on the slopes of the mountain, where I can roar out my love for ye to rival the stags in rut... ”

Her body pulsed with desire at the raw need in his voice.

“And then I'll carry ye home and make love to ye all night in our bed while ye scream my name for all the clan to hear.”

“Murdo!”

“Aye, lass,” he said, and pleasure flared as he shifted inside her. “It's time to take my wife home.”

“Home...”

He withdrew, and she shivered at the sense of loss before he pulled her into his arms.

“Aye, lass,” he said. “Home. Strathburn Castle is yer home as much as it's mine.”

She took his hand and kissed it. “My home is with you, Murdo.”

His manhood twitched as if in eagerness at her words, and she lifted her eyebrows.

“Husband, are you ready for me again, so soon?”

“Aye,” he said, helping her to her feet. “I'm always ready for ye. Ready to worship ye, and to love ye. In securing yer hand, I'm the victor.”

“Then claim your prize.”

“With pleasure.”

She let out a shriek as he swooped her up into his arms and waded into the loch. Then he entered her once more, sending ripples across the water’s surface, and roared into the sky.

“I love ye, Clara McTavish!”

His voice echoed across the landscape, declaring his heart, unfettered by duty of convention. Her sea warrior, her unicorn.

Her soul mate.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:22 am

“I , Murdo Alastair James McTavish, affirm before the whole clan, and our guests, that I shall love, cherish, and honor ye, Clara McTavish, until I draw my last breath.”

Murdo stared into his wife’s eyes, and his heart soared as they mirrored his love.

“When the sun has grown cold and faded into nothingness and the mountain has crumbled into dust,” he added, “my soul will still love ye, for eternity.”

He took her hand, and they turned to face the guests, who burst into applause.

James appeared at his side, resplendent in the McTavish plaid, having just been anointed as laird.

“My clan!” he said. “Neighbors, friends, allies—today we forge ahead into a new life. A life of strength and honor. Where we honor each other, serve the land, and love as we were meant to love. And with my brother and his wife on my left-hand side, and my faithful ghillie on my right”—he gestured toward Duncan, who stood at the front of the crowd—“we’ll ensure that Clan McTavish remains strong and honorable forever. ”

He raised his hand in salute. “To strength and honor!”

“Strength and honor!” the company cried in unison.

“And now, we celebrate,” he said. “Eat, drink, dance, love. And most of all... live .”

He clapped his hands, and a piper began to play, filling the great hall with a lively air.

The guests cheered and the dancing began.

To one side, Murdo spotted his wife's parents. He took her hand and led her toward them.

"Yer Grace," he said, bowing to the duke, "and Duchess. I'm glad ye came."

The duchess focused her sharp gaze on Murdo, and icy fingers caressed the back of his neck, to match the frost in her eyes.

"I confess a reluctance to visit here again," she said. "I came to see whether my daughter's being treated in the manner she deserves."

Murdo's cheeks warmed as he recalled the duchess's last visit.

"Words cannot express my regrets at what happened when ye were here before," he said. "I can only assure ye that I love yer daughter with all my heart. I honor yer ferocity in championing her."

She arched a perfectly formed brow, and he shuffled from one foot to another, in the manner of an errant schoolboy awaiting a thoroughly deserved thrashing from his housemaster.

"My ferocity?"

"Mama," Clara said, unable to disguise her mirth, "you said you'd be kind."

The ice melted a little, and the duchess extended her hand. Murdo took it and brushed his lips against her skin.

"Ye honor Clan McTavish by gracing us with yer presence, Duchess."

“I abhor foppish gallantry...”

“My love,” the duke warned, smiling.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “I suppose I can suffer gallantry this once from the man who proclaimed so beautifully that he loves my daughter.”

She drew Murdo into an embrace, then lowered her voice to a whisper.

“Give me cause to believe you don’t love Clara, and I’ll bite off your manhood.”

“I-I... What?” Murdo stammered.

She withdrew and gave a genteel smile before exchanging a look with the duke.

“There, Harcourt,” she said. “Didn’t I promise to be gracious?”

Clara giggled and squeezed Murdo’s hand.

He suppressed a surge of desire at the image her mother’s words had elicited in his mind.

Last night, his wild, passionate wife had kneeled before him and taken him into her mouth, while he succumbed to pleasure, only wincing once when she grazed him with her teeth.

He glanced at the satisfied expression on the duke’s face. Perhaps the mother was as equally without restraint in the bedchamber as the daughter.

Ye’re a lucky bastard, Yer Grace.

No—they were both lucky bastards.

“Will ye be dancing tonight, Duchess?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin!” she replied.

“Harcourt and I shall enjoy watching the young people—and I can keep that lovely young girl company.” She gestured to Marsaili, who sat by the fireplace, cradling her swollen belly, the deerhound at her feet.

Marsaili glowed with health and happiness as she tapped her foot on the floor in time to the music.

“Marsaili’s dancing days are over,” Murdo said, “at least until the spring.”

The duchess approached Marsaili, and at first, fear filled the young woman’s eyes, but the duchess’s natural friendliness put her at ease and the two women were soon deep in conversation.

Murdo brought his wife’s hand to his lips.

“We can dance, my love, can’t we?” he said.

“It would be my pleasure, husband,” Clara said. “But you must enjoy the moment while it lasts.”

“How so?”

She gave a shy smile. “I fear, husband, that my dancing days will soon be over also. At least until the summer.”

Murdo’s heart soared with hope. Did she mean...?

Clara stood on tiptoes and brushed her lips against his. Then she placed her hand over

her belly and smiled.

With a whoop of joy, Murdo lifted her into his arms.

“Careful, my love!” she said, laughing, and he set her down.

“Forgive me,” he said. “Do ye wish to sit?”

Her laughter increased. “I’m not an invalid, Murdo. I’m merely carrying your child.”

“But I must be gentle with ye.”

“Not too gentle, I hope,” she said, a wicked gleam in her eyes. “It’s well-known lore that a woman’s appetite for her husband increases when she’s expecting his child. I’m anxious to know whether there’s any truth in it.”

“Anxious, are ye?” he said, his manhood stirring at her saucy smile.

“Oh yes,” she said. “Any rational soul will tell you that a theory must be tested on a frequent basis. Nightly, at least.”

“Perhaps in the daytime also.”

“Is that a promise, husband?”

“Aye,” he said, a primal growl reverberating in his body at the thought of claiming her. “The kitchens will be warm just now, and the table is sturdy enough even for our lovemaking.”

“But the guests!” she said, her face turning scarlet. “We cannot leave James to deal with them alone. He needs you.”

“Later tonight, then,” he said, fire igniting in his blood. “But for now, let me dance with my beautiful wife, the woman who completes my soul—my greatest gift from the Lyon’s Den.”

He took her hand and pulled her into the company, relishing the happiness that now filled his home, his heart soaring in anticipation of the night ahead, and the life to follow.