



Three Days to Be Ruined (The Winemakers #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: What happens when a Highlander becomes a winemaker? The grapes don't just crush. They faint.

An English lady with everything to lose...

Beth Croft is all poise and propriety—or so she tells herself. To save her father from financial ruin, she proposes a marriage of convenience to Boyd Sandeman, the ruggedly handsome, infuriating Scotsman and wine tycoon. She expects some challenges, but she didn't expect Boyd himself—a man with a dry wit, a commanding presence, and a knack for turning her world upside down.

A Scotsman with a taste for revenge...

For Boyd, Beth's offer is a chance to settle an old score with her father, who once humiliated him. He agrees, but only if Beth can prove she's up to the task. At a festive Christmas house party, Boyd devises three challenges to test her mettle, from blind wine tastings to keeping up with his demanding (and often maddening) expectations. Yet as they spar and spark, Boyd's own defenses begin to falter in surprising ways.

Three trials, one Christmas, and undeniable chemistry...

Beth didn't expect proving herself would mean more late nights than she'd bargained for—or that her heart would be on the line. Can she survive Boyd's trials, break through his defenses, and make it to Christmas morning with her pride—and her heart—intact?

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Chapter one

Oporto, Portugal, December 1876

" A true lady must maintain composure even when faced with the most uncivil company. " – The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace

“ H ighlanders have a disagreeable habit of tossing a woman over their shoulders and carrying her off to their caves.”

Beth's gaze flicked to the secretary, but the haughty man gave no sign he'd heard her maid's outrageous remark. “Dora, that's enough. We're not here to discuss barbaric folklore.”

Beth sat rigid, her gloved hands folded tightly in her lap. Her corset pressed against her ribs, tightening with every passing second she spent waiting.

Everything about Mr. Sandeman's office was sharp and unadorned—no unnecessary flourishes. The dark mahogany furniture had clean lines and a polished gleam, the opposite of the old Georgian decor of her father's wine-trading company down the street. Unbidden, a memory surfaced of her afternoon visits to Croft & Associates when Father greeted her with sweetmeats and called her his perfect little princess. That was before she'd lost the interest of the first suitor he had arranged for her.

Dora sighed. “At least they say Highlanders are handsome...”

“A lady's concern lies not in physical appearances but in the grace of character.”

Despite Beth's resolve to remain firm and businesslike, her mind conjured the image of Laird Mac-Ivor from her favorite novel, *Waverley*. A fictional hero, doubtless nothing like the man behind the closed door. Look at her, an Englishwoman who had never even seen a Scotsman. Granted, the English community in Portugal lacked such specimens, but Mr. Boyd Sandeman was to blame—he never appeared in polite society.

“Only a true lady would be so poised in this situation. Your old governess would be proud. Oh, this green silk is too soft. If only you had worn the blue velvet—much more suitable for back-carrying.”

Beth's stomach swirled. She gave her maid a sharp glance. “No back-carrying for me today, Dora. Do you mind? This is a delicate matter.”

“Delicate is hardly a Highlander's strongest trait.”

“I'm aware of the stereotypes, thank you. But Mr. Boyd is a businessman. I'm sure he can manage a civil conversation.”

Dora's wide-set eyes gleamed with feigned innocence. “A businessman, aye. Who likely cuts deals while swallowing whiskey and wearing a kilt. You know they're known for their bluntness. Ever heard of caber tossing?”

Beth smoothed her silk skirts, which were unsuitable for either caber or back tossing. “Yes, I've read about it. But I'm quite sure Mr. Sandeman won't demonstrate any feats of strength during this meeting.”

Dora leaned in, lowering her voice. “Well, you never know. If the conversation doesn't go as planned, you might have to dodge flying furniture. Highlanders, they do have tempers.”

The secretary cleared his throat and gestured to her with the finality of an executioner's axe.

Only her good breeding kept her from flinching as he opened the door.

It gaped open, not ten feet from her. What awaited inside?

Beth rose, gripping her muff so tightly she feared she might ruin the fur.

Dora fluttered about, smoothing Beth's gown and adjusting the plume of her toque. "Good luck," the maid whispered, like a second offering last words before a duel.

Beth nodded. It was a universal truth that a woman jilted by her fiancé could not afford to be a chooser. Still, nausea churned in her stomach as she entered Boyd Sandeman's office, her gait heavy as a funeral march.

The Scotsman was there, behind a massive desk. Frowning, he applied his quill to an unsuspecting paper.

Beth halted atop the Persian rug. Her palms grew clammy inside her gloves, and her corset seemed intent on depriving her of air. If only the carpet's thick fibers could hide her discomposure.

How in the world would he receive her proposition? At least the furniture looked too heavy for even a man of his stature to toss.

Her heartbeat thudded loudly in her ears, a relentless pounding she was sure he could hear. When the clock ticked the half-hour, and he still didn't look up, Beth drew a sharp breath. The barbarian was ignoring her!

She had been warned he lacked social graces, but sitting while a lady stood seemed

the epitome of ill-breeding.

She blinked once, then twice, her spine straightening. If she stood tall enough, perhaps she could impose the decorum he so clearly lacked.

Perhaps this was how business was conducted in the Highlands—brusque and brutish—but there were standards. Etiquette. Respect.

And yet...

Her gaze snagged on his features, her indignation faltering. Dark hair curled just enough at his temples to soften the sharp angles of his jaw. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had the physique of a warrior from one of Sir Walter Scott's novels.

Still, she had imagined Highlanders wild and untamed, their kilts swaying in the wind, their faces rugged from battle and weather. But here sat Mr. Sandeman—impeccably groomed. No kilt. No tartan. His tailored black frock coat and precisely tied silver cravat spoke of wealth. New money, certainly. He didn't look the romantic Highlander—he looked a modern, calculating businessman.

But what of the man beneath the polished surface? Could he be as loyal and tender-hearted as Scott's heroes—the kind who lived and died by their clans? She doubted it. From what she'd heard of Boyd Sandeman's ruthless deals and amorous conquests, he was more rogue than gallant. Yet here she was, about to propose an impossible arrangement.

A brisk ocean breeze carried the briny scent of the sea, pushing the unruly feather of her toque into her eyes. Beth had been satisfied with her choice of attire: the rich forest-green gown hugged her figure with a perfect balance of elegance and modesty.

The toque, however—heaven help her. Why had she chosen such a fanciful thing? It

had seemed like a whimsical addition to her winter wardrobe, something to set her apart. Now, as the feather arched precariously over her brow, tickling her forehead, she regretted the impulsive purchase.

Just as she blew the plume away, Mr. Sandeman finally lifted his head, his blue eyes piercing through her.

“What do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Miss Croft?” His voice was deep and smoky, yet shockingly refined—not a trace of a Scottish brogue.

Her brow shot up. Now he decided to acknowledge her? Beth pressed her lips into a firm line, forcing her indignation under control. A lady’s virtue lay in mastering her temper. Calm composure, after all, was true strength. Besides, she had promised her father she would try her best. She should do this quickly, like drinking foul medicine, and then he could say no. She would return to her house and pretend this had never happened.

“I came in the name of my father, Mr. Sandeman. I have a business proposition to make.”

“I don’t have deals with Croft.”

Of course, they didn’t. Her father despised the ‘Uncouth Scotsman’, and by Mr. Sandeman’s expression, the feeling was mutual.

“I’m aware of that, yes. But conditions change, don’t they?”

This felt wrong to her in so many ways, but a lady’s first loyalty was to her family, was it not? What of her own sense of pride? Nonsense. Pride was a sin. Hubris. People had burned at the stake for less.

Mr. Sandeman leaned back in his chair, one hand slipping into his coat pocket. His tanned complexion was a disconcerting detail in winter. Portugal's sun was merciless, true, but his bronzed skin seemed an effrontery.

“What could your father possibly offer me, Miss Croft? I already own vineyards here and in Spain. I dominate the port wine and cherry market, while Croft & Associates flounders.”

The disdain in his voice pierced her chest, but she maintained her calm facade. A lady might feel as fragile as crystal, but she kept her cracks well hidden.

“My father's health is failing,” she said carefully. “He needs someone to assume control of the company.”

His expression iced over, his stare unrelenting.

“Is he offering me a job? Tell him he is sixteen years too late—”

“He is offering my hand, Mr. Sandeman. In marriage.”

The moment the words left her mouth, she had to use all her composure to keep from cringing. This was a mistake. Even if her father required it, if their future required it. Gripping her muff, her eyes darted to the door. If she crawled out now, would he forget all about this mortifying situation?

The silence was deafening. He stared at her, a muscle ticking in his jaw. If he could just please say no and relieve her misery.

He rose from his chair. Beth held her breath, dreading the moment she would glimpse naked knees. But alas, he wore no kilt. His perfectly tailored frock coat marked him as a modern businessman, devoid of the romantic wildness she'd imagined. Instead of

Laird Mac Ivor from Waverly, he was a slick tycoon—the type who stuttered along the street, pockets loaded with new money and self-importance.

Sans a kilt and long legs encased in fitted black trousers, he left his trench. There had to be a finishing school for Highlanders. In the absence of manners, it taught them how to lift their weight to a standing position and stride toward a woman with an intensity designed to make her stomach flutter.

When he stopped before her, far too close, she swallowed hard.

His arresting blue eyes burned bright against his sun-darkened skin. If she were feeling fanciful, she might compare them to a Highland loch—clear, yet hiding untold mysteries. But fanciful, she was not. His eyes were sardonic at best, cruel at worst, and they were fixed on her as he circled her slowly.

Her breath hitched as his fingers grazed the edge of her sleeve. The touch was fleeting yet deliberate, and her skin prickled where it had been.

“Do you have what it takes to be a winemaker’s wife, Miss Croft?” His beard, neatly trimmed, framed full lips that quirked as though savoring some private amusement.

Beth lifted her chin, merely to avoid speaking to his buttons, not to look down at him. No, that would’ve been an impossibility because he towered over her.

“I am skilled in managing a household, I play the piano with some talent, I’m fluent in French, of course, and I can be an asset as a hostess.” Her voice did not falter, though she knew well the precariousness of her position. A woman jilted by one suitor had little choice but to recite her qualifications with dignity—or risk sounding desperate.

“I have no doubt you would be the perfect Lalique wife to adorn an aristocrat’s hall,

Miss Croft. But that wasn't my question."

Her feather chose that moment to flit into her eyes. She brushed it away with a sigh. "I'm sorry if I missed your meaning, sir."

"What use do you think a man like me could have for an aristocratic wife?"

He got her at that, didn't he? She looked at her polished slippers, waiting for him to refuse her then. Her chin trembled. Which was quite ridiculous and uncalled for, but she managed to keep the horrifying spurt of emotion by taking a deep breath and holding her muff as if it were a lifeline.

He stared at her, his gaze unsettling. Speak, then. Say no. Instead, he whirled on his heels and returned to his desk.

Would he not even deign to give her a reply? Would he work again and ignore her? The image of her, her back stooped with age, her red hair turned grey, staying at the same spot swept over her mind, and hysterical laughter bubbled in her chest.

But no. After writing something, a public refusal, perhaps? He came back to her.

"This is the address of my new vineyard by the Douro River. I expect you there in a week."

"I beg your pardon?"

He glanced at his pocket watch with exaggerated impatience. "It is simple, Miss Croft. You want to be a winemaker's wife. I won't marry unless I find out if my intended has what it takes to be my partner. I'll give you three days to prove yourself."

“This is highly irregular. I can’t spend Christmas unchaperoned with you anywhere, least of all the Douro—”

“You won’t be unchaperoned. I’ll have friends for the holidays.”

“What friends?” She couldn’t congregate with ruffians and women of ill repute.

“Julia and Griffin Maxwell.”

Beth stilled.

He studied her like a peregrine, drinking her reactions. Did he know? Of course, he knew. The whole of Oporto knew she had been engaged to Mr. Maxwell... before he married a Portuguese woman.

For a moment, the emotions swirling in her breast seemed too much for whalebone and velvet to contain. Perhaps if her corset was made of steel... She gazed away from him, anywhere but at his curious, matter-of-fact eyes.

“Will their company be a problem, Miss Croft?”

“You’re nothing like the Highlanders in Sir Walter Scott’s novels.” She blurted and cringed. Why in heaven’s name would she say such a thing?

“Och aye, lass, maybe I should be swingin’ a claymore an’ drinkin’ whiskey all day. But then, who’d run my vineyard?”

She had longed to hear a Highlander’s brogue, but his mocking tone sent a shiver down her spine. She didn’t reply. Instead, she clutched her muff tightly, her fingers trembling against the fur. Then he touched her. The rough pad of his fingertip grazed her lips. Beth froze, her heart pounding like a war drum. She was not accustomed to

being handled in such a way.

“How badly does your father want you to marry me, Miss Croft?” His voice was velvety.

She dropped her chin. What could she possibly say? That after her failed engagement, rumors had spread from Portugal to England, tarnishing her family’s name? That her father was accused of dishonesty, of trying to swindle Mr. Maxwell’s new wife? That her mother raved day and night, cursing their misfortune, while her father’s health deteriorated? And that his instruction to her was not to leave Mr. Sandeman’s office without securing a proposition?

Mr. Sandeman chuckled. “Badly, indeed.”

He was not a Highlander from Scott’s novels. Not on the outside, and certainly not on the inside. She hated him then—his arrogance, his knowing smirk. But she’d be damned if she let him see even a flicker of the tempest swirling beneath her corset.

Lifting her chin, she straightened her spine. “What sort of attributes must a winemaker’s wife demonstrate, Mr. Sandeman?”

The way he smiled at her reminded her of a large cat, eyes narrowing as it played with a mouse, trapping the tiny creature under soft paws. “You will have three days and three nights to prove your worth.”

“How is that even—”

“Three challenges, one for each day, to see if you are a suitable partner in my business. And three nights—”

She gasped, her voice catching as the unruly feather brushed against her nose,

obscuring her left eye. “Three nights?”

He stepped closer, and Beth knew she should stop breathing, but her lungs betrayed her, drawing in his scent—earthy musk and the faint tang of crushed grapes.

His gaze flicked to the treacherous feather, and though his face remained impassive, she swore his eyes twinkled with restrained amusement. “Three days and three nights,” he repeated, his voice laced with a disarming lightness, as if the notion amused him.

He reached for the feather in her toque, his fingers brushing it gently. The contact sent an unexpected ripple down her spine, as though he’d touched bare skin. “To see if you will suit me in the bedroom, Miss Croft.”

She jerked back. “You mean to visit me in my bedroom? No! If I lose my virtue—”

“You won’t.” With a swift flick of his fingers, he plucked the feather from her hat. “More importantly, I won’t. And If I do, I will marry you, of course. I’m a man of honor, Miss Croft. I break it, I pay for it.”

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Chapter two

"A lady's worth is not determined by circumstance, but by how she carries herself in the face of it." – The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace

Beth stepped out of the carriage, the firm tap of her heels against the stone driveway a steady reminder to keep her composure. Behind her, Dora and the footman trailed in silence. She had kept a calm, resolute face for their sake, but as her eyes fell on the grand facade of her family home, a flutter stirred in her chest.

The house was the same—symmetrical brick walls, ivy curling over mullioned windows, the perfect picture of English refinement amidst the coastal beauty of Portugal. Solid, imposing, unchanging. Yet, standing before it now, something felt off. As if, after today's encounter, nothing would ever be quite the same.

The butler opened the door, and she stepped into the foyer on the tips of her feet. Was there a worse kind of silence than inside a house where a sick person lived?

Jenkins cleared his throat. "Your father awaits you, Lady Beth."

A wry smile tugged at her lips. Lady Beth. That's what the staff had called her since she was a little girl—everyone's princess. What use was that title now? All her life, she'd been labeled—a port trader's daughter, an heiress, the future wife of a polished gentleman. But a winemaker's wife? What did that even mean?

Surely, she wouldn't have to follow through with this farce. Her father would see reason and release her from her vow. She could return to her routine, her life.

The steps creaked beneath her as she climbed, her slippers feeling heavier with every tread. Outside her father's room, she paused, gathering herself. When she opened the door, the miasma of laudanum and sickness hit her like a wall.

Her father lay propped against a mound of pillows, his once-robust frame now frail beneath the heavy blankets. His sharp eyes turned to her immediately.

“Well? What did Sandeman say?”

Her mother stood abruptly, clutching her needlework to her chest. “Please tell me that uncouth brute realized he can never marry a jewel like you. That he sent you away after understanding he's not fit to tread the same carpet as you.”

“Silence!” Her father coughed violently. “Let my little lady speak.”

Beth's gaze flitted between them, and her chest ached. Her chin trembled as she stepped closer. Poor Father, ailing as he was, and here she stood, yearning for his protection. Needing him to say she didn't have to go to the Douro. That no Scotsman would take his princess from him. That she had nothing to prove.

She swallowed hard, forcing calm into her voice. “Mr. Sandeman invited me to his property in the Douro Valley for the holidays. He believes it will be an opportunity to see if we... suit.”

The word suit drifted from her lips like a faint breeze, carrying an unspoken warmth that made her shiver. How could she possibly explain this to her dignified parents? Tell them about his eyes, watching her with that unsettling intensity, or his hands, caressing her feather before stealing it?

Her mother's face flushed scarlet. “This is preposterous! He cannot mean to abscond with you into the wilderness. Really, John, this has gone far enough.”

“The Douro isn’t a wilderness these days,” her father rasped, his tone clipped. “The train reaches it in a few hours.”

Beth’s stomach sank. Was her father giving credence to this scheme?

“It’s Christmas. I don’t—”

“Must I remind you we reached this point because you failed to win Maxwell’s affection?” Her father’s voice rose, brittle with frustration. “If you had married him, Croft & Associates would be secure.”

Would he ever let her forget? Six years had passed since her brief engagement. She had been eighteen then, naïve and enamored with the idea of marrying the dashing Mr. Griffin Maxwell. But she had barely known him before it all fell apart.

“Enough of this, John,” her mother interjected, her voice quivering. “Why don’t you sell the company? We could return to England. Surely, we could find her an impoverished aristocrat. Then she could have the grand marriage I always dreamed of for her.”

Her father slumped back into the mattress, his face pale with exertion. “Mr. Boyd Sandeman is her only chance.”

Beth didn’t like the finality in his tone.

“Stop saying that! I raised Elizabeth to be a duchess. Why is it so imperative she marry a nameless Scot?”

“Because she is no longer rich!” Her father’s voice cracked as a fit of coughing wracked his frame.

Beth gasped, clutching her throat as if the truth had struck her physically.

Her mother shrieked, her frame trembling. “You are old and speaking nonsense. Of course, she is—what—”

“Croft & Associates is bankrupt,” he rasped. “Marrying that uncouth Scot is her only chance.”

Her mother dropped into a chair, her face blank as she stared into the flowery wallpaper.

Bankrupt? Beth’s head swam, her limbs numb as she approached her father’s bedside and knelt.

“You had better prepare your luggage,” he said hoarsely. “The train may be faster than the diligence, but it still takes eight hours to reach Vila Nova de Régua.”

Her mother began wailing, rocking back and forth. “What if he ruins her? What if he robs her virtue and returns her in shame?”

“Mr. Sandeman said he wouldn’t,” Beth replied, the words escaping before she thought better of them. Why was she defending his honor? “He said that if such an improbable event occurred, he would marry me.”

Her father’s sharp gaze focused on her, clarity cutting through the haze of sickness. “Then, my princess, you have three days to be ruined.”

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Chapter three

"A true winemaker doesn't just savor the right wine—he savors the satisfaction of proving the world wrong." *The Rogue's Guide to Refinement*

Boyd braced his foot against the gangplank, muscles flexing under the barrel's weight as he grunted, hoisting it into place among the others in the cargo hold.

Elisabeth Arabella Croft. Gracing his humble office. Of course, she'd been poised—women like her were trained from birth to be ornamental. But it had taken courage to stand before him, that absurd feather quivering in her hat, offering her hand in marriage like a lamb to the slaughter. Brave... but foolish.

When the dockworker turned his back, Boyd slipped a hand into his coat and retrieved the feather, holding it close. Beneath the faint scent of hatboxes, her delicate perfume lingered—likely worth a dockman's yearly wages. Impractical, beautiful girl. Why did your father send you to me? If his aging mind had forgotten the insult he dealt me when I first arrived in Portugal, mine hadn't.

The mist of port-soaked wood clung to the air, a reminder of everything Boyd had built—not from titles or bloodlines, but from sweat and grit. No pretense here, no velvet gloves or empty compliments. Just barrels, ships, and honest work.

Turning back to the dock, Boyd spotted a familiar figure approaching. Polished boots clicked against cobblestones, a cane gripped casually in one hand. Trust Griffin Maxwell to arrive at the docks dressed in full British finery, top hat gleaming.

“Still doing this yourself?” Griffin raised an eyebrow, smirking. “You’ve got half of Oporto working for you now. Couldn’t let them handle the heavy lifting?”

Boyd wiped his hands on the rough cloth hanging from his belt. “Keeps me fit.” And kept his mind off a certain befeathered lass.

“Can’t you keep fit at the tennis club like a civilized man?”

Boyd grunted. The powdered Englishmen at the country club, with their gleaming rackets and idle chatter, were intolerable. A place for men who inherited their lives, not built them.

“The sport I prefer can’t be done in the city.”

Griffin’s smirk deepened. “Since when can’t wenching be done in Oporto?”

“I mean hunting. But you wouldn’t know the difference, would you? Not with the monk you’ve become since marrying Julia.”

“Portuguese women prefer their men to practice sports in public places.” Griffin chuckled, nodding toward Boyd’s barrels. “So, these are the famous casks of Sandeman Port. Couldn’t stay behind Julia’s idea, could you?”

Boyd smiled faintly. Julia, Griffin’s brilliant wife, had pioneered the selling of port by the bottle, not in bulk. Boyd had adopted the strategy quickly, though many still preferred to buy casks. To mark his territory, he branded every pipe with Sandeman’s trademark. Nobody drank his wine without knowing where it came from.

“Indeed,” Boyd said. “But I didn’t call you here so you could steal my superior business strategies.”

Griffin sidestepped a cask as it rolled perilously close to his polished Hessians. “If not to show off your physique, then what?”

“Come spend Christmas with me at my new vineyard. Julia will enjoy the estate, and the kids can run wild in the gardens.”

Griffin tilted his head, skeptical. “What’s this? You never stay here for the holidays. Don’t you usually waste your money in French cabarets and Venetian bordellos?”

Boyd grimaced. His private railcar and all the provisions he’d arranged for a two-day trip to Paris would go to waste. What had possessed him to concoct this scheme? He knew why. Damn it, he knew exactly why. From where he came, humiliation was repaid in kind. And he had been in John Croft’s debt for too long.

“Call it a housewarming,” Boyd replied. That marble monstrosity would need considerable warmth. The last payment to Bernard Shaw, Europe’s most celebrated architect, could have built an entire village.

“If you’re so keen on domesticity, stay with us at Vesuvio. Anne is coming this year, and wherever she goes, Pedro Daun will follow.”

Boyd liked Maxwell’s sister well enough. Until she married Pedro Daun, the Duke of Almoester, and became a duchess. He seldom spoke with Almoester beyond trade matters, but having them at his vineyard would lend heft to his plan.

“Bring them with you,” Boyd said.

Griffin stroked his clean-shaven jaw. “It’s too sudden. Julia already has plans. She won’t agree—”

“Heavens, Maxwell. A soft Englishman who can’t control his own wife? What a

disgrace.”

Griffin didn't take the bait. “Why the sudden holiday spirit? Don't tell me you've been visited by one of Dickens's ghosts.”

Boyd chuckled, shaking his head. He had indeed received a visitor, though not spectral. More like porcelain. With red hair.

“Miss Elisabeth Croft will spend the holidays with me,” Boyd said casually.

Griffin froze, his blue eyes narrowing. “Why?”

Boyd rolled another cask into place, his muscles straining. “Because she's courting my hand in marriage.”

Griffin grabbed Boyd's arm, his expression incredulous. “She's what?”

“Her father sent her. The old man's terrified of dying without securing Croft & Co.'s future. And they say I'm the savage.”

Griffin fell silent, his gaze heavy. Boyd's throat tightened under the weight of it.

“The girl isn't to blame for her father's faults,” Griffin said at last, his tone surprisingly sharp.

Why the defense? As far as Boyd knew, Griffin hated John Croft as much as he did. But to make the father pay, Boyd wouldn't spare the daughter. Once society learned Croft had begged Boyd to marry her, and Boyd refused, the humiliation Croft had once served him would be repaid in full.

“Did you know Croft's been buying wine on credit,” Boyd said, “spreading word that

his daughter will marry me? Imagine their surprise when they find out I won't."

Griffin's jaw tightened. "And wound Miss Croft in the process? That seems ruthless. Even for you."

Boyd lowered the barrel and studied his friend. "Do you still have feelings for her?"

The thought of Beth with Griffin sent a wave of heat coursing through Boyd, sharp as whiskey straight from the distillery.

"I never had feelings for her," Griffin snapped. "When Croft arranged the marriage, she was eighteen—not even out. I was relieved when her reputation didn't suffer. She seems like a good girl."

"Of course. Society's crystal princess."

Griffin frowned, his tone wary. "What do you plan to do with her?"

Boyd flashed a grin, all teeth. "What do you think? Eat her as the main course at Christmas dinner?"

He'd do something better. He'd show Beth that she wasn't cut out to be a winemaker's wife. Prove how shallow high society was, once and for all.

"If this is your idea of revenge for something that happened sixteen years ago—"

"Never mind the invitation," Boyd interrupted. "I'll hire someone from the village to act as a chaperone."

Griffin grunted. "Don't bother. We're coming."

“Mr. Sandeman, I present the Quinta do Sussurro. If I may say, it’s a mansion that rivals any estate in Europe. Italianate in design, yet softened by local stonework.” Shaw made a sweeping gesture.

Boyd paused outside the courtyard, his eyes trailing over the manicured bushes, lavender tufts, and the impressive facade adorned with arched windows and marble statues. The house lorded over the Douro River as if it owned it—the kind of house he’d once dreamed of possessing. Now it was his. For a moment, he hesitated, almost afraid of dirtying the pristine white Portuguese stones lining the path.

He had to admit, the architect had done a superb job. The sun was setting beyond the hills, painting the vineyards in gold and red. His chest swelled with the sweet scent of the river and a sense of pride he rarely let himself feel.

He doubted Miss Elisabeth Arabella Croft would find fault with it. Her brilliant green eyes would no doubt widen at the display of his wealth. The house was grand enough to impress even her shriveled mother, with all her notions of grandeur. And the local dignitaries? They would flock to his door like dogs sniffing for scraps around a trestle table.

For once, no one could call him uncouth or unrefined.

This was it. The summit of all he had fought for. No more freezing winds off the loch. No more ragged shoes trudging through dirt roads.

He closed his eyes, but the memory clung to him like the dampness that had seeped through the walls of their stone cottage. The howling wind, the barren land refusing to yield. The blight had taken what little they had, and the rest had been fenced off, leaving his family with nothing but stones. He could still see their pale, hollow faces as they boarded the ship to America, leaving him behind.

Boyd opened his eyes and squared his shoulders, imprinting his vision with the luxury before him. He wasn't in Scotland anymore. That life was buried.

“Note the proportions, Mr. Sandeman,” Shaw continued. “A broad central building, with symmetrical wings extending on either side, crowned by corner towers high enough to catch the river breeze and command views of the valley. The entrance—grand yet restrained—features Doric columns.”

“You’ve put thought into this, Mr. Shaw. I’ll give you that.” Boyd adjusted his collar, his tone even. “Well then, show me this mountain of marble that cost me more than a king’s palace.”

The architect dithered, but led him inside.

“Notice how the skylight floods the grand hall with light, casting a golden glow on the arches. Pure Italianate design—a marvel of symmetry and grace.”

Boyd stepped into the grand hall, waiting for satisfaction to settle over him. The echoes of their footsteps faded, leaving only silence. No crackling fire. No hum of bustling servants. Not even the creak of wood settling. Just... emptiness.

The silence seemed carved from the same marble—cold, slick, and unyielding. It left a raw bite in the air, a snowless winter, grinding between the teeth like the sound of distant shivers.

Boyd clenched his jaw, his chest tightening. Boyd was suddenly fourteen, back in Glasgow, in January. Nights awaiting to stow away on a ship, when the streets lay dead and everything, everything—rats, insects, even the shadows—slept, paralyzed by the cold. Only he remained, his body shaking, his fingers numb inside his coat pockets, the last soul awake.

He shifted his stance, the soles of his boots echoing across the room. The sound was swallowed immediately by the void. His gaze drifted to the polished walls, the untouched furnishings, and the vaulted ceiling above. The house felt like a stage—built for admiration, not for living.

“Not a stitch of wood to warm the place,” Boyd muttered, his arms crossed.

“Ah, yes, the marble. Quite the contrast to, shall we say, more rustic materials. Perhaps the second floor will be more to your liking.”

They ascended the grand staircase, Shaw leading with a practiced air of pride, Boyd trailing with an increasingly sour expression.

“Here is the master bedchamber. Positioned to capture the morning light, as requested.”

Boyd stood in the center of the room, his hands behind his back, inspecting the high ceilings, the chandelier, and the intricate moldings. It was the epitome of modern luxury, just as promised.

Shaw gestured toward the far wall. “And—behold—the marble pool. Heated, an extraordinary feature. The tiles are a nod to Portuguese design.”

Boyd’s mind conjured an image of Beth’s gleaming white skin as she luxuriated in the bath. What sounds would she make while the water lapped at her breasts? But alas, he would not see her in there. Not unless he wanted to put that noose around his neck. Still, the room felt more suited to her than to him.

“Marble again,” Boyd said. “Thought this was supposed to be a place to live, not a blasted museum.”

Shaw clasped his hands, his expression unruffled. “A masterpiece is sometimes... an acquired appreciation. Perhaps the landscape will be more to your liking.”

The architect led him onto the veranda, where terraces blended the natural beauty of the Douro with cultivated gardens. Native plants flowed into the vineyards, seamlessly merging art and nature.

Shaw pointed toward the riverbank. “The property’s crowning piece—a fountain from Dunkeld, Scotland. We restored it.”

Boyd’s gaze fell on the marble bears frozen mid-hunt in the circular pond. In Lochaber, bears had been everywhere: carved into stone, etched into wood, painted on doorways. Guardians. Threats. Allies. Symbols of a land that gave nothing freely.

“The bears symbolize your roots, your heritage.”

Boyd’s laughter was mirthless. No matter the wealth or distance, he could never truly escape his past.

“From Dunkeld, you say?”

“Yes, Dunkeld.”

“Tear it down.”

Shaw sputtered as Boyd strode back inside. The marble walls, the gilded hall—it was all pressing in, threatening to bury him alive.

Midway down the stairs, a middle-aged woman stepped into his path.

“Mr. Sandeman, welcome. I’m Mrs. Abernathy, the housekeeper. Whenever you have

time, I'd like to discuss menus. The staff is wondering how long—"

"My secretary will send you the guest list for Christmas. Expect thirty guests, plus my friends and Miss Croft, who will stay for the holidays."

Mrs. Abernathy stiffened. "But the decorations—"

"Do as you please. Spare no expense."

"The master bedchamber is ready, sir. Your luggage arrived this morning, and dinner—"

"I'll be staying at the hunting lodge tonight."

"As you wish, sir."

As Boyd advanced toward the exit, a wiry lad materialized from the shadows, his coat a garish display of brass buttons and tartan trim. The poor soul looked like a peacock forced into a kilt.

"Mr. Sandeman, this is Reginald, the footman in charge of the doors," Mrs. Abernathy introduced with a faint sigh.

Boyd groaned. "Mrs. Abernathy, remind me to shoot the devil who chose the servants' livery."

Reginald, wide-eyed, bowed. "Welcome, sir. It's my honor to... open the door for you."

Boyd grabbed the handle before he could. "Not this time, Reggy."

“It’s Reginald, sir.”

“Of course it is.”

Boyd crossed the threshold, the night air far more welcoming than the silence inside.

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Chapter four

"A winemaker's wife must never arrive unannounced; it's important to give the husband ample time to feign indifference." – The Rogue's Guide to Refinement

B oyd paced the hall of his new house, the soles of his boots echoing against the polished floor. Servants scurried about like hens dodging a fox, caught up in the chaos of holiday preparations. A pair of children bounded down the stairs and into the garden—Julia and Griffin's brood. He hadn't bothered to learn their names yet. Almoister and Anne were already partaking in his hospitality, their presence adding some much-needed noise to the place.

All was set, except for Her Highness—Beth Croft.

He told himself his nerves were justified. After all, it would be hard to exact revenge on her father if the daughter didn't appear. He didn't hold out much hope for her, though. The girl's spine had to be as flimsy as a parasol—only fit for fluttering and twirling.

She was surely prepared to find him the uncouth Scot everyone believed him to be. But he'd prove her wrong. Let her think she could fluster him. He'd be the perfect gentleman—a paragon of politeness—just to unsettle her.

Reginald stood off to the side, stiff as a sentinel in his ridiculous uniform, eyeing the door from his post near the grandfather clock. The lad looked as if he were preparing for a sprint in the Highland Games.

Boyd pulled out his watch, checking the hour. She should have arrived by now. Where was she? He hadn't taken her for a coward, but perhaps all that poise was nothing more than the illusion of stiff taffeta and whale bones. Beneath the veneer, she was likely no different from the rest of high society—spoiled and eager to take advantage of others.

The sound of a carriage rolling into the courtyard made his pulse race. He glanced at Reginald, who sucked in a breath, his eyes wide with anticipation.

Boyd lunged for the door. Reginald sprang into a speed walk, his eyes riveted on the knob.

Boyd got there first. Before the footman could blink, Boyd flung the heavy oak doors open.

“Perhaps next time, Reggy.”

The lad groaned. “It’s Reginald, sir.”

“Whatever you say.”

When Boyd stepped outside, the sun momentarily blinded him. Even dazed, he couldn't mistake the Croft crest emblazoned on the lacquered carriage door. The spiked crown glared at him, a sharp reminder of the same emblem that had slammed in his face when Croft tossed him out.

He squinted, resentment prickling hot along his spine. Of course, Croft would send her in his damn coat of arms. Like father, like daughter.

Boyd squared his shoulders, his posture rigid, braced as if preparing to battle a Highland bear.

Reginald sped past him. Flashing Boyd a look of restrained satisfaction, he opened the carriage door with a flourish.

Boyd tensed, expecting to see Croft's tuft of white hair and bulbous nose. Instead, peeking from beneath the velvet skirts emerged the daintiest pair of shoes he had ever seen.

Boyd could swear the crushed river pebbles sighed, finally tread upon by footwear worthy of the king's ransom they must have cost.

Exquisite ankles followed.

His mouth went dry, warmth rising low in his stomach and spreading into his chest, catching him off guard.

Christ's teeth! It was only an ankle.

Too soon, the velvet skirts rushed out, concealing the tantalizing glimpse. He cursed the stinginess of the rich fabric. One sight of her ankles had his blood boiling. Ach, he must be a daft gowk for embarking on this holiday without a visit to the brothel.

Boyd held his breath, waiting for her to fully emerge.

A delicate hand, encased in impractical kid gloves the color of whipped cream, fluttered over Reggie's forearm. The footman flushed as brightly as a lad wearing his Sunday best in a mud pit.

Boyd was about to push the lad aside when he came face to face with Elisabeth Croft in all her Lalique glory.

His gaze trailed from the flaring skirts of her gown to the most delectable waist he'd

ever beheld, then to the high collar that framed the porcelain smoothness of her neck. Finally, he met green eyes half-hidden beneath a black net.

Her hat—if it could even be called that—was a delicate creation of velvet and lace, better suited for a drawing room in Belgravia than for a journey to the rugged Douro Valley. His hand twitched to pluck it off her head, letting her red hair cascade freely down her back. But no. He would be on his best behavior, damn it.

Boyd squared his shoulders and raised his chin, mimicking one of those apes from the British community.

“Mr. Sandeman, thank you for your gracious invitation.” Her gaze swept over the house, and her lips curved in the faintest hint of a smile. “Your estate is breathtaking.”

Boyd tilted his head, his breath catching at the admiration in her voice. Was she impressed? Or was this simply the polite thing to say—words she gifted carelessly to appease? He shouldn’t care either way. This wasn’t a courtship.

Boyd crossed his arms. “Do you remember our agreement, Miss Croft?”

“How could I forget? Nonetheless, I appreciate your hospitality.”

His servants emerged, marching toward the carriage to unload her luggage. Boyd’s eyes narrowed as he watched the spectacle. Of course, she’d bring an army of trunks. No one who’d ever scraped by in life would think to carry such excess. Just more proof that her world was all fluff and privilege.

“A winemaker’s wife doesn’t need her entire wardrobe for a short visit.”

“This isn’t even one-tenth of my wardrobe. And I assure you, Mr. Sandeman, a lady’s

appearance reflects upon her host's own refinement. It's only proper to present oneself fully equipped."

His lips twitched. So the lass had a tongue.

"Fully equipped?" he drawled. "Looks more like you're outfittin' an army." He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a teasing whisper. "A winemaker's wife doesn't need all that finery. Makes it harder to keep her balance on a rocky hillside."

Miss Croft arched a brow, her composure unshaken. "A lady should know how to keep her balance, Mr. Sandeman. It's called poise—something a gentleman should recognize."

Reggie struggled with a cumbersome crate, his arms straining and his grip slipping as he tried to maneuver it onto the steps. Miss Croft charged forward just as it tipped dangerously to one side.

"I've never claimed to be a gentleman," Boyd said under his breath, mouth dry as he watched her trim back and flaring hips.

Before she could reach it, Boyd's hand shot out, catching it mid-fall. He steadied it, grunting as he felt the surprising heft of the thing.

With a raised brow, he lowered it to the ground. "Ach, for the love o' God, what've ye got here, Miss Croft? The crown jewels? Or maybe the Stone of Destiny?"

Miss Croft straightened, brushing off her skirts as if she hadn't just bolted across the courtyard. Looking down her nose at him, she said coolly, "It isn't polite, Mr. Sandeman, to pry into a lady's luggage."

So she'd implied he was both nosy and ill-mannered, all with a sweet smile. Boyd

pressed his palms flat against his sides to keep from retaliating.

A sudden gust of wind whipped around them, sending the black net fluttering atop her nose. Before she could adjust it, Boyd plucked it off her hat.

He held it aloft like a prize, his grin slow and wicked, then tucked it neatly into the pocket of his greatcoat.

“Mr. Sandeman!” Her fair skin flushed redder than a rowan berry.

A thrill shot through him as he shrugged, feigning innocence. “What? A winemaker’s wife should be able to see where she’s going.”

“That net is part of my ensemble.”

He gave her an exaggerated bow, tipping an imaginary hat. Beth crossed her arms, lips pressing into a thin line. Yet beneath her glower, Boyd noticed the faintest twitch at the corner of her mouth. Was she amused?

“Oh, aye, and quite the practical one,” he said. “But we can’t have you tripping over your finery while you cart your precious luggage, can we?”

She gasped, her composure finally cracking. “Cart my luggage? But—”

Griffin and Julia appeared, their postures radiating the exasperation of parents dealing with unruly children.

Laughing, Julia slipped her arm through Beth’s. “Never mind this grouchy boar. I will show you to your room. Cart your luggage, indeed. I’m sure Boyd’s sense of humor will mature with age. Perhaps if we place him in an oak barrel to speed the process a bit.”

They climbed the front steps, Julia's black hair and petite form contrasting with Beth's lithe frame and red hair. Reggie sped ahead, bowing so low he nearly scraped his chin against the floor as he opened the door with the flourish of one welcoming foreign royalty.

Left standing in the courtyard, the sun baking his nape even in the height of winter, Boyd glared after Julia. Why was she so comfortable with Beth, anyway? Her husband's former fiancée? He hadn't accounted for the possibility that his friends would take Beth's side, treating her like the princess she was, while making him out to be some uncouth Scottish beast.

Maxwell bumped his shoulder. "What the hell is bloody wrong with you?"

Boyd growled at his friend, just like the animal Julia had implied he was. Curse his temper.

Chapter five

"To maintain grace, a lady ensures her coiffure remains flawless, no matter the winds—or the whims—she encounters." From *The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace*

“Where is your toque, Miss Beth? The one with the black lace?” Dora rummaged through Beth’s valises and chests.

Where was it? Mr. Sandeman had taken it with his inquisitive fingers, just as he’d stolen her peacock feather. No doubt to vex her.

Beth studied her reflection, willing the flushed color in her cheeks to recede. A lady shouldn’t allow herself to feel so... unsettled. He was every inch the barbarian her mother had warned her about. Loud, brazen, with all the subtlety of a winter gale. A strong, impossible-to-ignore Gaelic gale.

Beth exhaled sharply, straightening her shoulders to shrug off his lingering presence. Her goal here had to come first—she needed this marriage. But she would do it on her terms. Like a lady. “Don’t you think yellow makes me look confident?” she asked. She’d need every ounce of poise if Boyd Sandeman insisted on being, well... himself.

Dora raised her eyebrows, arms crossing impudently. “Oui, confident. A beacon in the middle of the Douro. I’m certain Mr. Boyd won’t have difficulty finding his way home.”

“It’s striking, not... excessive. Besides, yellow complements my hair,” Beth said firmly. Hopefully, it would show her in the best possible light.

Dora pursed her lips, stepping forward to pin a curl in Beth’s coiffure. “Oh, absolutely, Miss Beth. If the challenge is blinding him with your radiance, I’d say you’ve already won.”

“The gown is perfectly appropriate for whatever awaits me. Thank you for your ever-helpful insight.”

“My pleasure, Miss Beth. Just promise me, if you get stuck in the mud, do it with grace. Your mother will sack me if you come back with muddy skirts.”

After assuring her maid that she would mind her accessories, Beth left her room. She traversed the corridors, pausing to touch a Constable painting and a Canova sculpture. The mansion was grander than anything she’d imagined—gilded frames holding works of art, elaborate carvings on the banisters, and chandeliers casting golden light over the marble floors. Boyd Sandeman, the Scotsman turned wine tycoon, had spared no expense. Unlike the garish parvenu statement she had expected, the house was classic and beautiful.

If she told herself she didn’t imagine being its mistress, she would be lying. It wasn’t just the grandeur or the tastefulness of the place—though those mattered, of course—but the idea of belonging here. Living in the future, not stuck in the past as the girl whose fiancé had left her, as if the most interesting thing about her life had come and gone.

It had been so long since she’d glimpsed something fresh, something new, that she filled her lungs with the scent of polished wood. She could be Mr. Sandeman’s wife. He would give her security, and she would be a suitable, civilizing companion for him.

The thought bubbled inside her, a breathless giddiness—hope. But what could she do, really, to impress a man so... different? Whatever the job description for a winemaker's wife entailed, she would strive to deliver.

The other option? There was no other option. She would not return a failure, and she certainly wouldn't ruin herself, no matter what her father had crudely suggested.

Perhaps she could dazzle Boyd with her management skills, taking charge of his household. But cunning as he was, he'd see right through her ploy. Besides, the house already seemed well managed. Whoever Boyd had hired as housekeeper was doing an excellent job.

A faint noise echoed from the left, and Beth walked gingerly, half-afraid Mr. Sandeman would pounce on her.

She caught herself biting her lip and forced her hands to relax at her sides.

An open balcony at the end of the hallway drew her forward with the promise of fresh air. When she reached the balustrade, the sight stopped her in her tracks.

The Douro River spread out before her like a ribbon of silver and green, flanked by terraced vineyards that rose into the hills beyond.

"Remarkable, isn't it?" A singsong voice called from her left.

"It is the most beautiful view I've ever seen," Beth said, awestruck.

Lady Almoester smiled warmly. "Careful, dear. The river has enchanted many a Brit. Before long, we flung out top hats and toques, eager to stay."

Beth startled. Remembering her manners, she curtsied. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't

have intruded.”

Lady Almoester glided closer, her smile luminous and inviting. Beth had met her before, back when she was simply Anne Maxwell, at drawing rooms and balls within the English community in Oporto. But that was before Anne had married Pedro Daun, Portugal’s prime minister, and become the Duchess of Almoester.

Beth’s mother had raved endlessly about Anne’s achievement, marrying into Portuguese royalty, while Beth had sighed over their romantic story—a forbidden love, filled with thrilling adventures, the stuff of fairy tales.

Anne interlaced their fingers, lifting Beth from her curtsy. “No need for formalities here. Are we not among friends?” She kissed Beth’s cheeks in the French manner. “Now, come. Meet my babies.”

“Babies?” Beth laughed nervously.

Sleeping in a pram beside Anne were two perfect beings with cherubic features and golden hair.

“This is Inês Daun, Countess of Salgueiro, and this strapping boy is my tiny knight, Pedro II, Marquess of Luz.”

“They are so lovely. Congratulations, My Lady.”

“Anne will do. Now, come and sit with us. Tell us all about you and Boyd. Inês promises not to repeat a word, and Pedro is a gentleman. You can trust his discretion.”

Beth followed dutifully, still dazzled by Anne’s bright presence, her blonde hair catching the afternoon sun.

Mrs. Julia Maxwell was perched on the table nearby, rocking the pram with one hand.

Julia Maxwell. The perfect winemaker's wife. In fact, the perfect winemaker. The best in all the Douro.

How could Beth compete with her striking black hair and ebony eyes?

Who was Beth fooling? She'd already lost the competition once. Precisely six years ago.

Their encounter by the entrance had surprised Beth. While she had expected a cold shoulder from the woman who had won Mr. Maxwell's heart, she had instead been greeted with a kind smile. Did Mrs. Maxwell hold no grudges against her?

"I'm afraid there's nothing much to say. He invited me here, and I... I came." Beth sat daintily, waiting for their reactions. Would they think her desperate? Wanton, even?

"Well, that's Boyd for you. Straight to the point." Mrs. Maxwell stared at her matter-of-factly, as though a lady coming to a house party to test her mettle as a winemaker's wife were a common life occurrence.

"I don't know him enough to pass judgment," Beth said.

"We've been waiting for him to settle down for ages now, and when he told us he had invited you, we celebrated his wisdom." Julia twirled her spoon through the air. "Don't be afraid of his gruff demeanor. He's a dear man underneath all that," she paused, "exterior carapace. Like all superb wines, his essence is hidden deep inside. It's just a matter of persevering... and continuing to taste."

Beth lifted her gaze to her former rival. They both seemed to accept her presence, even cheer for her. The unexpected camaraderie warmed her from the inside out.

“Thank you, Mrs. Maxwell.”

“It’s Julia. And you can count on us. We women should support each other, don’t you think?”

The doors burst open, and Boyd strode through, his gaze tunneling straight to Beth. “Miss Croft, there you are.” He paused, noting her company.

Anne beamed. “Come join us. We were just talking about recalcitrant wines.”

Beth straightened her posture, producing a bright smile to rival her dress. This was her opportunity—to show her expertise and prove herself worthy.

Settling into polite conversation, her voice smooth and measured, Beth responded to Anne’s remarks with the perfect balance of attentiveness and charm. Out of the corner of her eye, she felt Boyd’s gaze lingering on her.

“The estate is magnificent,” she said. “I imagine it takes a man of vision to create such a place.”

He shrugged, slouching into a chair beside her. “It takes money, not vision. I’m sorry to interrupt, but Miss Croft didn’t come to the Douro to enjoy tea. She promised me a walk about the vineyards, didn’t you, Miss Croft?”

Under his unflinching gaze, her pulse quickened, though she kept her expression placid. She glanced from the tempting Portuguese pastries to the terraces and vines, which looked more picturesque than welcoming.

Boyd leaned back, his grin slow. “Don’t be afraid, Miss Croft. Your reputation will be safe. I can’t ravish you in plain view of these ladies, now can I?”

Beth's smile turned thin, but she kept her face impassive, refusing to take the bait.

Anne laughed. "Our Beth just arrived. Let her enjoy a refreshment before you drag her off."

Boyd crossed his arms, his expression closing. "Fine. Be quick about it."

To pour tea with flawless etiquette was the mark of a true lady, for in such small graces, elegance and refinement were revealed. Beth tipped the teapot with precision, the liquid streaming in a graceful arc—no splashes, no falters.

She glanced up through her lashes and caught Boyd's gaze before offering him the cup with a demure smile.

He pushed it away. "I never drink tea. Tea's for ladies and old men."

Her cheeks heated, but she drew a deep breath. It was only tea. She would have other chances to prove her worth.

The babies began to howl and wail.

Anne picked up her daughter. "Someone needs a change of diaper. Julia, would you help me?" A subtle communication passed between the women.

Anne handed her son firmly into Beth's lap. Julia winked as she followed Anne from the veranda. "Remember to keep tasting, Miss Croft."

Beth stared at the boy in her lap, whose mouth turned into a sad bow.

"There now, no need to cry."

She bounced him gently. He stared back at her with caramel-colored eyes so intelligent she half-expected him to start declaiming poetry—or worse, reprimanding her.

How did one hold a wiggling baby while showing herself in the best possible light?

“The weather is just perfect, don’t you think, Mr. Sandeman?” she asked, attempting small talk.

“If it doesn’t rain soon, the year’s vintage will suffer. Are you sure you know your way around lads, Miss Croft?”

“Oh, of course. I take care of children all the time.”

If porcelain dolls and the one time she held her cook’s newborn daughter counted as “children,” that was.

Beth felt a tug on her hair and winced. Before she could react, little Pedro had both hands tangled in her curls. A lock tumbled loose. Her practiced smile slipped like the pins from her coiffure.

“Red,” the baby said, his fingers twisting deeper into her hair.

“Oh, he can speak!” she said with a wince, glancing at Boyd as if to say, Isn’t this darling?

Pain shot from her scalp, but she masked her gasps with genteel laughter.

Boyd raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. “Are you all right, lass?”

Her neck strained under the baby’s determined grip, tears pricking her eyes. “A

mother should remain calm and composed in the face of a child's misbehavior, don't you think?"

Boyd shifted closer in his chair. "Aye, or she could get untangled before the bairn scalps her. Here, let me."

His fingers brushed her cheek as he weaved between her strands and the baby's fingers. Who could guess that a man's hands could produce so much heat? He spoke with the baby, not in the tycoon's polished speech, but in a mellow brogue that had her forgetting all about the pain.

Her eyes flicked to his lips, her pulse drumming wildly at the gentleness of his voice and touch.

When the baby's left hand released Beth's hair, it promptly latched into Mr. Sandeman's brown locks, and quite suddenly, their faces were pulled together.

Her heart smashed against the confines of her corset as his bristled cheek rasped against her lips. Heat curled in her stomach, and her gasp was so loud that no laughter—genteel or otherwise—could conceal it.

She prayed he wouldn't notice her wild reaction while little Pedro continued to coo, oblivious to the chaos he had caused.

"This is one cunning bairn," Mr. Sandeman said, his voice lowering as his breath warmed her neck. "Here, have this."

He handed Pedro his watch.

"Shiny," the baby declared, releasing them as his gaze riveted on the ticking amusement.

But Mr. Sandeman had yet to let go of her hair.

No one besides Dora—and now little Pedro—had ever touched her strands. Yet here he was, twirling a lock over his finger. She inhaled deeply, catching the scent of clean linen and crushed grapes clinging to him, and tucked it away into this strange new part of herself that seemed determined to catalog every nuance of him.

His touch was quiet, reverent, and Beth held very still. If she moved even a muscle, he would stop.

But he should stop, shouldn't he?

A lady didn't allow a man to touch her hair. Such an intimate gesture should be reserved for the closest of bonds. But as much as propriety screamed for her to pull away, she couldn't muster a single reprimand past her parted lips.

"You have beautiful hair, Miss Croft," he murmured. "No wonder the lad wants to entangle himself in it."

Her gaze rose to his, and the blue of his irises entranced her. The Douro River, the vineyards, little Pedro, even the corset keeping her spine from melting—all of it faded. Her heart flapped desperate wings against her ribs, and she closed her eyes, her lips tingling.

A throat cleared behind them.

Beth's eyes snapped open. Anne and Julia stood nearby, brows arched in unison.

Her breath caught. What must they think?

Catching her and Mr. Sandeman so close together—with her coiffure in shambles, no

less? Grand ladies were ruined by less. She drew a steadying breath, willing her composure back, even as her scalp tingled from his touch. So much for doing things her way.

Boyd chuckled, reclaiming his watch from little Pedro's grip. "Now, before ye point fingers, I'll have ye know it was this wee scoundrel who did the ravishing."

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Chapter six

"Elegance shines brightest when paired with quiet determination." From *The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace*

"Work those legs, Miss Croft. I promise your first challenge will be more entertaining than being stuck in a stifling ballroom," Mr. Sandeman's voice rang out ahead, more taunting than encouraging.

"I suppose a winemaker's wife must be quick on her feet, then, Mr. Sandeman?" she yelled at his back, hoping he'd slow his brisk steps. If only the Scotsman had shorter legs—or wore a kilt—then she wouldn't have so much trouble keeping up.

Still, if he thought a few rocks and several leagues of walking would make her give up, he was sorely mistaken. Whatever rustic challenge he proposed, she would pass.

"Quick feet, brawny arms, and a stomach for bad wine. I hope you're prepared."

"Well then, traipsing through rocks. How romantic." She looked back longingly at the house, now a speck down the hill. "Exactly what I envisioned when I imagined the allure of vineyards..."

"I can hear you, Miss Croft. These terraces are from Roman times, and those Romans were experts in acoustics."

"Romans? More like barbarians to me," she mumbled.

Boyd stopped suddenly, and she bumped straight into him.

“Here we are.”

The river shimmered below, winding around the mountain and stretching to the horizon. The browns, russets, and golds of winter glowed under Portugal’s incomparable blue sky. Mr. Sandeman looked perfectly at ease among the vineyards and rustic terraces, the afternoon sun kissing his bronzed skin.

Beth quickly averted her gaze to the dangerous slopes below, a much safer location. “The view is most enchanting.”

“We didn’t climb up here for sightseeing.”

He reached for her wrist, and before she could protest, he began peeling the glove from her fingers. The gesture was so unexpected, so intimate, that she scarcely breathed. His touch was deliberate, his rough fingers brushing against the fine fabric as he slid it free. Did he know how he stirred her pulse?

A brisk breeze ruffled his dark hair. She found herself wondering, absurdly, what it would feel like to reach up and tuck that stray lock into place.

Once the glove was off, he tucked it into his pocket as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

She wanted to ask why he kept her things. Why he always took. But the words slipped away, replaced by a soft warmth spreading through her chest. She could only watch, her ungloved hand feeling strangely exposed, strangely... his.

She had been prepared for tea, polite conversation, perhaps a walk through the vineyard. But not this. Not this quiet boldness.

Boyd traced the subtle calluses on her fingers. The dull skin, muted from hours of playing, seemed to come alive under his touch.

“From the hard labor of embroidery?” he asked. “Or perhaps wielding a teacup with excessive zeal?”

He saw her only as a society lady, didn’t he? What would he think if he knew about her instrument? “Can I have my hand back now, Mr. Sandeman?”

“Not yet. I have a gift for you.”

Cold steel touched her palm.

“A scissor? How terribly romantic.”

Grinning, he tugged her toward the nearest terrace. “The vineyard is a demanding mistress, Miss Croft. A winemaker’s wife must learn how to prune the dead branches in winter, so the plant can produce the best crop in summer.”

He knelt before a row of vines. Sunlight streamed through the red and brown leaves, dancing across the schist. She cringed at how ruined his perfect trousers would be after this pointless exercise. Thank heavens he didn’t expect her to sully her sunshine dress by doing the same.

He glanced up at her, lifting his brows.

He did. God help her, Mr. Sandeman did.

Gingerly, she lowered herself beside him, carefully arranging her skirts to ensure no glimpse of her legs was displayed. “Rustic work. How incredibly appealing.”

She picked up the dratted instrument—a Greek present, more likely.

Staring at the vine before her, she grimaced. It felt almost violent, cutting the poor plant. Placing the blades against a brown twig, she pressed. The blasted thing refused to cooperate. While cuttings surrounded Mr. Sandeman's knees, she had yet to chop her first branch.

His hands moved over the vines with an ease she couldn't understand—but wanted to. Why did he have to make it look so effortless?

The shear slipped from her hand, snapping her nail. She sucked in a breath, barely suppressing the impulse to hurl the instrument at the Romans who built these vineyards.

Boyd raised a judgmental brow. “Has no one ever taught you how to hold a scissor, Miss Croft?”

Ridiculously, tears sprang to her eyes. Would he find fault with everything about her?

“It's only a broken nail. It will grow again.”

“A lady's hands should be clean and delicate.” How would she play the Variations on One String with a bruised nail?

“A winemaker's wife has dirt under her nails. Ye'll learn tae love it.” Boyd traced the long line of her palm, his mellow brogue caressing her as much as his words. She much preferred it to the polished tones of the tycoon.

“I doubt that.”

“Here.” He held her wrist, leaning closer.

His chest brushed her back as he positioned their hands over a withered branch. His touch was strong, rough, and steady, making her head spin.

“This one.” He guided the scissors to the brittle vine.

Together, they applied pressure, the blades snapping through the branch with a satisfying crunch.

She flinched at the sound.

“Aye, there ye go now, lass.” His hand steadied hers, guiding their movements.

The work was tiring—or perhaps it was just his presence that left her overheated. With each cut, her heart beat faster, her senses overwhelmed by the intimacy of the moment. His warmth against her back, the texture of his skin on hers, the quiet focus they shared as they pruned the sleeping vineyard.

Her world, so often defined by fine manners and polite restraint, felt impossibly small—insignificant in the face of his silent, assured presence.

When the last branch fell, he didn’t release her hands.

“See, Miss Croft,” he murmured, his lips brushing her ear, “ye’re a natural.”

His hand lingered over hers.

Beth closed her eyes. “I am?”

He stood up abruptly, and only then did she notice they had an audience. A burly worker stood nearby, waiting to speak with him.

Mr. Sandeman cleared his throat. “Find a vine, Miss Croft, and show me some progress. I’ll be right back.”

There went her brogue.

He moved away, his stride deliberate, as if eager to place distance between them.

Beth exhaled and straightened her back, her hands tightening around the shears with renewed purpose. When he returned, she would surprise him with the best-pruned vine he’d ever seen.

Her gaze swept the rows of vines until she spotted it—a particularly unruly one, its branches shooting out in every direction like defiant limbs. Its gnarled base was thick and twisted, an ancient gnome standing guard over the vineyard.

With a determined breath, she crouched beside it and began cutting. One twig fell, then another.

As the stubs dropped to the ground, something unfamiliar stirred in her chest. It wasn’t a cramp. It was... pride.

For some mystic reason, each little cut felt like a victory. The once-overgrown vine now stood bare, its knotted base exposed and its branches stripped down to thin, quivering stumps.

Let him come and see.

It wasn’t the delicate touch he had shown her—she had perhaps pruned the thing within an inch of its existence—but she had done it. She had conquered this wild, unruly thing.

Who knew I'd be so good at this?

The sound of his steps approached behind her, steady and measured. Beth shuffled backward, eager for him to admire her work.

“Well, Mr. Sandeman? Did I... pass?”

“Ye pruned an olive tree.”

The insufferable Scot raised an eyebrow, his expression as dry as the schist. “A fine job, if we were makin’ olive oil.”

The lass was giving the olive tree a glare fierce enough to wilt it, her stubborn chin quivering like it had betrayed her. She gripped the shears with knuckles that had seen more dirt in a day than they likely had in a lifetime, her ridiculous egg-yolk skirts gleaming like a bloody beacon.

Chest tight, Boyd stepped toward her. If she wanted to make a grapevine out of an olive tree, then by thunder and glen, he'd find a way to grant her wish.

The intensity of his own thoughts shook him. Was he really drooling over her entitled girl's charms? What the devil was wrong with him? She was a delicate English doll, a symbol of everything he despised—and yet, here he was, wanting to give in to her whims like some foolish knight.

Her moist gaze lifted to him, trembling with equal parts defiance and vulnerability.

“I knew it was an olive tree,” she said.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Aye, and ye turned it tae firewood.”

He needed to leave. To put some distance between his weary boots and her teary smile before he gave in to the fool notion of brushing her frown away with his lips.

“We’d best get ye back to the house before yer new allies send an expedition.”

His shoulders tightened as he descended the terraces, his gaze fixed on the expanse below, feigning interest in the land rather than the woman trailing after him.

“Mr. Sandeman, is this part of a winemaker’s attributions? To race downhill? Perhaps instead of an English lady, you should have invited a thoroughbred.”

Boyd grunted. A vision of himself riding Miss Croft like a dainty filly speared into his mind with the force of a battle charge.

Eyes forward, Boyd hastened his steps, refusing to glance back. The schist was safer. Anything was safer than looking at Beth Croft, who somehow managed to be out of place and disturbingly right among his hard-won empire.

Pruning an olive tree. What a sight. Crouched there, that impractical gown blazing like a daffodil in a thicket, her delicate fingers fumbling with the shears. A misplaced flower, stubbornly bright against the dull winter brown.

And yet, her determination—impractical and absurd as it was—carried a stubborn charm that gnawed at him.

Had she fallen behind? What an arse of a gentleman he was. No doubt her complaints about his lack of manners would find their way back to Oporto. Since when did he give a damn what those perfumed English folk thought of him?

And yet, he strained his ears for even the faintest clatter of her impractical shoes.

Halfway down the vineyard, a panicked gasp made his heart stutter. He halted, a surge of protective instinct flaring in his chest. Muscles tense, he spun on his heel just in time to see Beth flailing her arms on the terrace above him—a wild flurry of lace, her yellow gown billowing, her eyes wide as she headed straight for disaster.

Boyd lunged forward, arms outstretched.

She crashed into him, a blur of skirts, elbows, and the sharp point of a hairpin jabbing his collarbone. They went down in a tangle of limbs. Boyd's back hit the earth with a jolt, his hands tightening around her to cushion the fall.

Her startled gasp was muffled by his coat as she collapsed against him with a force that knocked the breath from his lungs.

Her bright yellow dress splashed across the rough ground as they sprawled on the schist, both catching their breaths. Too soon, the dust settled, and Boyd found himself with Beth nestled atop his chest, her face mere inches from his.

Boyd swallowed as his pulse hammered in his ears, a traitorous rhythm that kept him all too aware of her softness. Her jasmine scent curled through him like smoke—intoxicating, unwelcome, and a heady reminder of just how foreign she was to this rough earth—and how damn well she fit against him.

He knew he should release her, sit up, make some quip to break the silence, but the words eluded him. She was close—too close.

He let out a huff.

She lifted a stray lock from her forehead, clearly struggling to keep her poise—a difficult task with her velvet bonnet askew and a twig in place of a hairpin.

Boyd bit back a grin. “So, Miss Croft, is this what they call ‘poise’ these days? Or did ye leave that behind with the rest of your wardrobe?”

She responded with a strangled sound that might have been a groan, her lips pressing together as if she could will her composure back. But the effect was ruined by the smear of dirt on her cheek and her obvious reluctance to touch the ground.

“I... I had it under control.”

“Did ye now? Then I’d hate to see what happens when ye’re not in control. My poor ribs might not survive it,” he murmured, wishing she wasn’t wearing such a thick corset so he could better feel her curves.

“I imagine winemakers do take their falls with a bit more grace than that...”

Do they? He was quite insensible to falling and grace—unless it was a fall from grace. The lass felt too good in his arms. As if she belonged there.

Get up, get away. But he couldn’t bring himself to move. What’s gotten into you?

He brushed the smudge from her cheek, his fingers lingering, marveling at the smoothness of her skin.

“I know my chest makes a fine cushion, Miss Croft, but if you’d rather settle in proper comfort, we might think about getting off the ground, aye?”

“Oh, of course.” She slid from atop him.

He was already missing her warmth when he felt a surprising resistance. Lifting his chin, he glanced down to see the bow of her skirt tied up with the placket of his trousers. The sight sent heat to his face, and he sucked in a sharp breath.

Saints preserve me.

“Seems we’re in a bit of a... knot, Mr. Sandeman,” Beth said, oblivious to how much in a knot he really was.

She tugged at the fabric, her brow furrowing as she worked the button with exasperatingly clumsy fingers.

Boyd’s jaw clenched as her knuckles brushed against his groin. The maddening sensation ignited a warmth that traveled low, settling with vengeance in his cock.

“Now, if you would just... let me...” Beth huffed, her voice full of focus and effort, utterly unaware of the telltale tension in his nether regions or the flush creeping up his neck.

He should move, pull away. But damn if he could—not when every instinct screamed to keep her close, to... what? Blast it all, the lass didn’t even ken what kind of blaze she was igniting.

A groan escaped his chest.

She paused, glancing up at him. “Are you quite all right, Mr. Sandeman? Have you a sprained ankle, perchance?”

He would have a sprained erection if she didn’t stop rubbing. “Just. Release. The. Bow. Miss Croft.”

“No need to worry. A lady is ever adept with buttons, for grace is found even in the smallest of tasks...” Her voice strained as she redoubled her efforts.

His head fell back against the earth with another groan, his breath fast and shallow.

“Honestly, Mr. Sandeman, you ought to consider the merits of less elaborate closures. These buttons are remarkably resistant.”

Resistant like tempered steel—and just as hard. Groaning like a pig to the slaughter, Boyd forced his gaze anywhere but her tempting lips, clearing his throat in a desperate attempt to regain control.

She shifted closer, leaning over his stomach. Her warm breath ruffled his shirt, teasing the skin beneath. A vision of her lips closing around him burst into his mind, forcing all the air from his lungs.

He needed to take her dainty hands out of his crotch before he took her right here, above the treacherous schist.

With both hands, Boyd snapped the cloth free. He didn’t care if he became a eunuch in the process—this torture had to end.

Beth looked up, startled.

“Maybe we’ll rethink the entire wardrobe, aye? Last thing I need is another close call with yer skirts.”

His balls wouldn’t survive another encounter.

Boyd rose with her still draped over him like an expensive doll. Placing his arms beneath her armpits, he sat her atop the terrace, her knees level with his chest. If he but lifted her skirts, he could be inside her, damn the consequences.

She needed to go back to the house. Preferably behind a locked door. And he needed a damned drink.

Straightening, Boyd rubbed his nape, fighting the impulse to reach for her again. A treacherous part of him even calculated the merits of tossing her back onto the schist just to catch her again.

Keeping her gaze trapped, he grasped her calves. Her delicate stockings bristled against his calloused palms. She gasped, a question flickering in her green eyes. She wasn't sure what had shifted between them, but he knew damn well. His balls would be blue to tell the story later.

Boyd reached for her ankle, his fingers brushing along her calf. Her skin was impossibly soft, her foot delicate and light in his grip.

He took hold of her shoe, his movements deliberate. Her breath hitched again—he heard it and saw the way her eyes widened, uncertainty pooling in their depths.

Without a word, he grasped the heel and snapped it clean off.

“Right. Those heels of yours. A winemaker's wife doesn't skitter over gravel like a fawn on ice.”

“Mr. Sandeman! This is Italian craftsmanship—”

He broke the second heel, ignoring her indignant glare as he tucked the broken pieces into his coat pocket.

Before she could protest further, he caught her under her arms and placed her gently on her feet.

Beth sputtered, trying to salvage her composure as she steadied herself on her new, shortened shoes.

“There. Much better. Now, let’s return, Miss Croft. Before the others think I’ve devoured ye.”

The thought was painfully true—in want if not in action.

So bloody much for keeping his distance.

Beth dragged her feet into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. Panting, she leaned against the surface, eyes shut. Yet still, Mr. Sandeman’s jewel-blue eyes seemed to follow her, searing into her thoughts wherever she turned. Her pulse fluttered, the warmth of his touch lingering far too long for comfort.

“I see the vineyards were a resounding success, Miss Beth. Should I send for the cobbler now, or do we wait until you lose the rest of the shoes?”

Groaning, Beth turned to find Dora perched on the edge of the bed, her curious gaze traveling over Beth’s disheveled state. What a sight she must be. Beth resisted the urge to wince, though her cheeks burned as she recalled the way Boyd’s hands had gripped her ankles.

Why was the man so insufferably close and so completely... solid? If she flapped her skirts, she was sure the whole Douro schist would tumble out of her pockets.

“Mud, no heels, and hair like a windstorm hit it,” Dora continued, plucking a twig from Beth’s disheveled locks. “I’m assuming Mr. Boyd wasn’t quite as taken with your fashion choice as you hoped?”

“Oh, no, it’s not that. It’s just... he was... very close. Very, very close.” Beth’s voice dropped to a whisper as she moved toward the bed, her calves tingling with the ghost of his touch. “I’m going to lie down now. Just for a minute.” Or maybe an hour. Or until the memory of his hands faded. “Please wake me in time for dinner.”

Dora's teasing smile vanished, replaced by a rare flicker of alarm. "Did that Scotsman hurt you? If he did, I will—"

"It wasn't like that!" Beth cut her off, sitting heavily on the edge of the mattress. "He was helping me, but then—oh, Dora, I've never—"

"Fallen in the mud for a man before?" Dora grinned again. "There's a first for everything, Miss Beth. I'm sure it's very romantic."

Romantic like an overturned cart in a rainstorm. Or an encounter with a lion. A big, grouchy, rugged lion... one with smoldering eyes.

"Dora, stop. This isn't romance at all."

"Of course not. He only swept you off your feet. Seems he's done a fine job of that, even if he's left your shoes behind."

Beth sank back onto the bed, wrapping her arms around herself. "Shoes have nothing to do with this."

It was his hands... those strong, unyielding hands that had made her feel... She shook herself, trying to banish the thought. "A marriage of convenience is just that, Dora—a union of compatible minds, not hearts."

"Ah yes, because nothing says compatibility like tearing your heels apart in a vineyard."

"Mr. Sandeman is no storybook knight," Beth muttered, staring up at the ceiling. "He's certainly no noble-hearted hero. This isn't a fairy tale."

She wanted to lock the thought away, to fold it neatly into some closed drawer in her

mind. But it lingered, half-formed and obstinate, like the dirt still clinging to her nails.

Dora tapped her chin thoughtfully. “He had a mind to ruin your gown. Should I prepare the green one for round two? Or perhaps something sturdier next time?”

Beth huffed. “Really, Dora, I won’t allow some foolish notions to affect my goals here. One afternoon doesn’t mean anything.” She stretched on the plush bed, though she couldn’t stop herself from recalling the feel of Boyd’s rugged chest against her back.

“Doesn’t it?” Dora perched beside her, the mattress shifting under her weight. “Mud, missing heels, and one very smitten Miss Beth.”

“Smitten? Certainly not.” Beth’s scoff sounded weak even to her own ears. “I’d sooner be swept away by a thunderstorm.”

Dora laughed softly. “I thought you came here to marry the Highlander?”

“Yes,” Beth admitted, frowning. “But not to fall in love with him.”

“And is it not better to love one’s husband?”

Beth scoffed again, though this time the sound felt heavier, as though it carried a faint pang she couldn’t quite ignore. If only Dora understood the reality of society’s marriages. A woman of Beth’s class knew the heart was a piece of anatomy better kept hidden inside the corset—protected from wreckage.

A wife’s realm was the house. A husband’s, the world. And other women’s parlors.

“A wife should cherish a deep, quiet affection for her husband, grounded in respect,

loyalty, and gentle devotion,” she recited, the practiced ease of the words falling hollow to her own ears.

Dora raised an eyebrow. “Respect, loyalty, devotion... sounds like you’re choosing a hunting hound, not a husband. Love, Miss Beth, is what makes you run after him through the mud and break your nails to impress him. And I’d wager you are closer to it than you care to admit.”

Chapter seven

"A winemaker knows that boldness in action, like boldness in flavor, leaves the strongest impression—whether sweet or scandalous." *The Rogue's Guide to Refinement*

When Boyd entered the dining room, four heads lifted to meet him with varied shades of reproach. What was the matter with them? Could a man not write correspondence and be five minutes late for dinner without incurring their collective wrath?

Look at them, all basking in privileged domesticity. Griffin held Julia's hand like a lovesick poet, while Almoster—Portugal's most powerful politician—looked at his wife with a hunger that should have been forbidden in married couples.

Boyd, on the other hand, was content living alone, free from the rules of marriage. No one to chastise him for lateness or question his choices in his own house. Whoever invented marriage had to have been a woman.

Only Miss Croft seemed unbothered by his tardiness. She was fixated on the Sèvres porcelain, her gaze avoiding him entirely. He sought her eyes anyway, willing her to stop inspecting the tableware and brave the laird on his throne.

"Did you rest well, Miss Croft? Or did the vineyard get the better of you?"

She tapped her lips with an embroidered handkerchief—the table linen napkin no doubt far too coarse for her delicate fingers. Perfectly poised again, she looked every

inch the proper lady.

Boyd hated it. He preferred her hair askew, mud on her flawless skin.

“I recovered just fine. Thank you, Mr. Sandeman.”

Boyd could not say the same. His back ached, his boots were full of pebbles, and his balls would be blue for a week.

Maxwell cleared his throat, his gaze flicking pointedly between Boyd and Miss Croft. “A gentleman treats a lady properly, no matter the setting.”

Boyd slouched into his chair at the head of the table, throwing Griffin a devilish grin. Let him protect the delicate English rose from the big, bad Scotsman during dinner. But who would defend her later, during tonight’s challenge?

He cast a sidelong glance at her, his voice laced with faux concern. “Did you get mauled by a bear, Miss Croft? Last I checked, she’d dirtied her nails but returned in one piece.”

She could wash her hands. Hell, she could soak in that blasted marble tub all night, scrubbing every speck of dirt from her pristine fingers. But who was going to look after his dignity—and his damn balls? Certainly not her guardians, who gave not a whit about his suffering.

Miss Croft clutched the handkerchief tighter. “Of course not. It was very instructive.”

Maxwell lounged in his chair, though his knuckles whitened against his glass. “You should have taken Julia with you to the vineyards, Boyd. She’d have loved to help explain the vines.”

Julia started, her gaze darting between her husband and Miss Croft. “Would I? I think Boyd is perfectly capable of explaining winemaking.”

Smiling, Anne elbowed her brother. “If you weren’t such an unromantic ox, Griff, you’d realize they don’t need a third wheel.”

Miss Croft flushed a glorious shade of red, her color rivaling her fiery hair. Would the rest of her skin turn that pretty shade, too? Boyd’s mouth went dry at the thought of uncovering all the places that might blush. He swallowed the lewdness with a smirk.

“Yes, Griff. Don’t be such an unromantic ox.”

While Maxwell bristled, Miss Croft covered her lips with the handkerchief again. That prim little scrap of cloth was a shield, her polished weapon of choice. Boyd’s fingers tingled to snatch it from her.

Why did he feel this strange pull to claim it? He couldn’t say, only that he must. A fair token after the trials she’d put him through this afternoon. A private mark of victory—clutched on the field of battle.

He was leaning forward, ready to swipe it, when Almoister cleared his throat.

“After the holidays, I’d like you to come to Lisbon for a foreign trade meeting. The country would profit from your presence. If, of course, you won’t be detained here.”

Almoister’s gaze flicked briefly to Miss Croft.

Boyd leaned back, narrowing his eyes. Was the duke trying to lure him to Lisbon to distract him from Beth? Why?

The duke stared at him with an unreadable expression, candlelight catching his blond hair and aristocratic features. Almo's old-world charm masked a calculating nature, one that measured the worth of every inch of the table—including its guests.

Boyd was an expert judge of people's intentions. What game was Almo playing? He wouldn't offer a seat at the king's table for nothing. Unlike Maxwell, Almo wasn't concerned about Beth's delicate sensibilities.

But then... what?

"I'm always open to conversations," Boyd said, inclining his head.

Conversations that benefited Sandeman Company, not a circle of entitled aristocrats.

Reggie and the other footmen entered, bearing the first course. The scent of roasted game and rich sauces filled the air. The housekeeper had outdone herself tonight—Boyd made a mental note to increase her paycheck. Everything was as it should be: delicate china, glinting crystal glasses, a display designed to silence even the most critical aristocratic eye.

Boyd's gaze flicked to the handkerchief folded neatly in Beth's lap. He could practically feel the smooth fabric between his fingers. His pulse quickened, a strange thrill rising in his chest as he imagined her reaction when he took it.

Anne caught Beth's attention, and Boyd leaned in, fingers twitching toward his prize.

She turned her head abruptly. "Mr. Sandeman, what on earth are you—"

Boyd leaned back, smirking. "Admiring your handiwork, Miss Croft. A fine handkerchief for a fine lady."

Beth clutched the kerchief closer to herself. Damnation. Now she'd be on her guard. Barring a frontal attack that would cause too much of a scene, he'd have to wait.

Dinner proceeded without further chances to claim his boon. He proposed a shooting excursion for the gentlemen, Miss Croft invited the ladies for a picnic, and all congratulated the cook. Boyd put his table etiquette lessons to use, ensuring even the escargot passed without incident.

But his attention kept straying to Beth. Her voice floated above the table, filling the space effortlessly. She didn't just occupy a room; she inhabited it, scattering the edges of the silence he knew so well.

Then she laughed at something Anne said, and the sound tugged at him. Silvery, like a stream tumbling over rocks. His lips twitched involuntarily, and before he knew it, he was leaning toward her laugh.

What would it be like to have her at this table every night? To hear her voice cut through the loneliness that often settled over his meals?

Boyd forced his gaze to his calloused hands, gripping his glass tightly. That's a steep price to pay to eliminate the silence. He drowned the thought with a mouthful of port.

Julia lifted her glass to him. "I saw the advertisement for Sandeman Port in the newspaper this morning. Bold and eye-catching. I'm sure it'll make quite the impression."

Boyd tapped the table lightly. "The art came from Paris, commissioned by Jean d'Ylen." Only one of the most famous—and expensive—artists in Europe.

The Parisian had delivered. A striking image of a centaur carrying a lady, her fiery hair streaming as she clung to him, eyes alight with something between fear and

exhilaration. The centaur, triumphant, held her and the wine in equal possession.

“It caused quite the stir when it hit the streets of Paris,” Boyd said, swirling the wine in his glass. “Some called it diabolical. Lustful, even. But I call it effective. By the end of the month, it’ll be in every newspaper from here to London, plastered on every tavern wall on both sides of the channel.”

Almoester narrowed his eyes. “That’s quite an aggressive move. I wonder if stirring public opinion so boldly is wise.”

The colors were bold, too vivid for delicate sensibilities. But that’s what made it stand out. It wasn’t meant for the quiet married sheep locked in their homemade bliss.

Anne, smiling, kissed her husband’s cheek. “Oh, but I think it’s rather romantic. A centaur and a lady? It sounds like something from a novel—a daring, thrilling adventure.”

Beth’s gaze turned to Boyd. “I’d love to see it. It sounds... fascinating.”

Pulse quickening, Boyd stared at her lips as they formed the word, the last syllable closing like a sultry kiss. What would it take for her to call him fascinating? If he became a centaur and carried her on his back, would that be enough? Hardly.

An uncouth brute like him could be ruthless, relentless—never fascinating.

Maxwell cleared his throat. “I’m not sure it’s suitable for young ladies, Miss Croft. Mr. Sandeman has had more than a few complaints on that front. Isn’t that right, Boyd?”

“Ah yes, complaints,” Boyd said, smirking. “A certain Mrs. Smith of Leicester was particularly scandalized. She wrote asking if a proper lady would have to ‘climb the

devil's back for a bottle of port.' My staff even wrote a limerick for her.

'It seems there's a young lady from Leicester,

Who would not say no if you pressed her.

But the trollop who rides,

On the wild horse's sides,

Has put her off port and depressed her.'"

The room burst into laughter—except for Maxwell, whose frown deepened.

As the words hung in the air, Boyd seized his chance. He leaned forward and snatched the handkerchief from Beth's lap.

She stiffened, her face flushing as her hand grasped at empty space. Still, she couldn't openly react without causing a scene.

She shot him a sharp glance. Boyd met her eyes with a lazy, satisfied grin, smoothing the soft fabric between his fingers. It was warm, holding the ghost of her touch.

Maxwell glowered at him. "That's hardly suitable conversation for mixed company, Boyd."

Boyd's teeth clenched. Maxwell's British Don Quixote act was grating on his nerves. "I didn't realize someone appointed you the arbitrator, Maxwell."

Julia's face flushed, her black eyes flashing as she glanced at her husband. Boyd smirked. There, old fool—you've infuriated your wife as well. Good luck explaining

your sudden interest in your former fiancée.

Griffin took Julia's hand, entwining their fingers in a gesture of quiet intimacy. Though her shoulders stiffened, there was a complicity between them that left Boyd's chest hollow.

His gaze shifted to Anne and Almoister, who shared the same kind of closeness. Even as Anne engaged Beth in conversation, the duke's protective presence hovered like an unspoken promise.

At his end of the table, silence closed in again, dull and unwelcome.

Boyd looked away from them all, brushing his thumb against the handkerchief. Miss Croft's initials, stitched with genteel care, felt strange beneath his calloused fingers—a poor substitute for her hand in his.

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Chapter eight

"A lady ensures her virtue remains untested by steering clear of any moment that invites temptation." From *The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace*

Beth opened the door to Mr. Sandeman's room gingerly. Darkness enveloped the vast space. When her gaze landed on the lone figure sitting in the shadows, her heart stuttered. The faint light from the hearth caught the roughness of his stubbled jaw, darkening the line of his mouth. His cravat hung loose around his neck, the starched elegance undone.

He seemed tired and... intense. But his eyes—God, those eyes. The too-vivid blue glowed, the only real color in the room, piercing through the dim light and rooting her to the spot.

Surely the long day or the vineyard air was to blame for her reckless actions. What am I doing here? Complying with his summons was one thing, but to meet him here, alone, was entirely another. Was she truly more concerned about passing his challenge than preserving her virtue? Why couldn't this be a drawing-room courtship, with clear rules of engagement, where poise and restraint were her allies?

"Close the door, Miss Croft."

His voice made her gasp. Beth jumped, fumbling with the latch, and did as he bade. Perhaps she could convince him these night challenges were simply not done. But how could one instruct a man on propriety when he recited obscene limericks in mixed company? Beth Croft, you are not reasoning.

The tingle in her stomach hadn't left, even after an entire day in his company. If anything, it had grown, pulling her further off balance.

Her eyes flickered to a heavy crystal decanter on the side table beside him, filled halfway with a deep, garnet-colored scotch that seemed to absorb the room's low light, turning it into something dark and dangerous. Had he been drinking?

"Mr. Sandeman, if I may... a few words. I don't think this is quite necessary. In fact, I believe I should—"

"Are you going to give up so easily, Miss Croft? Perhaps the backbone I felt in you this afternoon was merely the steel of your corset."

Her spine snapped straight. She gave him a look that she hoped conveyed precisely how much she liked him at that moment. "What will be my challenge, Mr. Sandeman?"

"Come closer. I'm not about to eat you. Not while you are lurking in the doorway, anyway."

His tone had shifted back into the polished tycoon's, but the way he sprawled in the chair—knees apart, cravat loose—made a shiver race up her spine.

She crossed the Persian rug, stopping a few paces from him. Again, he was sitting while she was standing. He could pretend good manners at the dinner table, wielding cutlery and wine glasses with ease, but no man could feign certain traits.

He glanced at the distance between them and raised an eyebrow.

Her legs moved of their own accord, bringing her closer until she stood just shy of his knees.

“Kiss me, Miss Croft.”

She gasped. Her fingers twitched at her sides, and she clenched them tightly, willing her hands to hold on to some semblance of composure.

His brow shot up, and his lips lifted in a sardonic smile. “A proper winemaker’s wife knows how to kiss.”

Beth stared at him.

“I’m waiting, Miss Croft.”

Should she give up? Hurl the decanter at his head and leave? But what of her father? Her family’s desperate situation?

Clenching and unclenching her hands, she shuffled to his side. She didn’t have a butterfly in her stomach—she had a whole swarm of them. With all those wings flapping wildly inside her, she pressed a kiss to his forehead.

Feeling quite pleased with herself, Beth straightened—until his hand shot up to catch her chin. He tilted her face, his gaze locking on hers.

“On the mouth, Miss Croft.”

On the mouth? A lady’s lips were a promise she held dear, saving her first kiss for the sanctity of marriage. Beth exhaled all the air in her lungs. This was just one more test.

Shutting her eyes tightly, she pecked his lips.

“This is all you got, Miss Croft?”

Remembering when she spotted a maid with a footman in the servant's quarters, she glued her lips to his. Her heart sped out of control. Panting, she opened her eyes.

“That’s better. If you want to marry a priest.” His judgmental brows lifted.

The tone of his voice, the glacier in his gaze, her exhaustion... It was too much. Beth sighed, her chin trembling, and she was again, for the second time of the day, on the verge of tears. Which was ridiculous. Before Mr. Sandeman’s challenges, she had seldom cried. “I don’t know how.”

Silence. A heavy exhale. Now he would send her away, and she would have to—“Use your hands, Miss Croft.”

Beth hesitated for a full five seconds before cupping his face. He caught her hand in his and removed her gloves.

“A winemaker’s wife never touches his husband with her gloves on.”

“I feel you are inventing these as we go, Mr. Sandeman. Soon, you’ll have more rules than my etiquette book.”

He peeled away the lace and silk, baring her fingers to the cool air and his hungry eyes. He then placed her gloves in his pocket. There went another piece of her trousseau. Would she still have one after these tests were over?

“Now, touch, Miss Croft.”

Beth obliged. Later, perhaps, she would reprimand herself or regret this, but the soft shadows and the cocoon of light made it all too intimate. She touched his brows first. Why? She didn’t know, but they seemed so mobile. If she became friends with his eyebrows, they would stop judging her so fiercely. Approve of her for a change? She

caressed his bristled cheek next, marveling at how rough his skin felt compared to her own. He twitched when her fingers reached the bridge of his nose, and when she brushed his bottom lip, he stopped breathing.

She met his gaze. The expression he wore made her heart retreat, cowering behind her ribs.

“You know, Mr. Sandeman, that sitting while a woman stands is rude?”

“I’m a rude man, Miss Croft. You do not know how much. But, never say, I cannot learn.”

His hands slid from the armchair and settled around her waist. Before she could process what he was doing, he pulled her into his lap.

By Heavens, the heat of a Highlander. It climbed from her buttocks to her chest until she felt as though she were inside a furnace. Perhaps a winemaker’s wife would never need to worry about heating in winter—at least not in the bedroom. The thought alone made her cheeks burn.

Her breath came in shallow gasps, more erratic than her cousin Victoria’s at her worst. Beth immediately smoothed her skirts, desperate to cling to a modicum of modesty.

He caught her wrist. “Leave them as is. Proceed, Miss Croft.”

His thighs were hard beneath her, and thank the stars he wore no kilt. How much more improper would this challenge be if his legs were bare? Perched on his lap, every inch of him gained a boldness she couldn’t ignore—the firm muscles beneath her, the solid warmth of his chest, the quiet command in his grip.

“I—I presume a winemaker’s wife sits in her husband’s lap to kiss him?”

He grunted.

Beth leaned forward, eyes closed.

It was his turn to touch her. He cradled her face, his lips brushing hers before nibbling softly. “Open for me, Beth.”

“Mr. Sandeman, I don’t think—”

Slowly, his tongue traced the seam of her lips. She hesitated, every refined instinct urging her to pull away, to preserve that final barrier. But when his hand slid up her spine, fingers splaying over her back, her defenses melted. Her lips parted, and he deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding against hers.

Boyd’s possession was deliberate, warm, and—God help her—utterly consuming. The taste of him, forbidding and Scotch, made her head spin. His arms closed around her, pulling her flush against him, his heartbeat steady and strong beneath her fingertips. Madness. Utter, ruinous madness.

She shivered, and her fingers curled against his chest. The warmth of him, the sheer scandal, all blended into a moment that would haunt her every quiet hour. Her hands lifted, then hesitated at his shoulders. She wanted to hold on, to steady herself, but the sensation of his mouth against hers sent her pulse into a frantic quadrille dance, and she caressed his cheek. This time, when his tongue pushed inside her lips, she... she tasted him.

A groan escaped him, low and unguarded. “There now, that’s how a winemaker’s wife steals a man’s breath.”

His kiss grew bolder, his tongue sliding against hers in a deep, searching rhythm that left her dizzy. The firmness of his chest against hers, the rough scrape of his stubble along her jaw—it was too much.

A shiver ran through her as his hand rose to cup her face. Heat unfurled through her, awakening parts of her that had no decent names. Her fingers found his shoulders, clutching to keep herself steady even as his kiss threatened to unravel every careful boundary she'd clung to.

He relinquished the mouth invasion to brush his lips against her cheek. "Call me by my name."

his voice was hot on her neck, hot everywhere.

"That would not be proper," she panted, her lips tingling, missing the contact.

"A winemaker's wife calls her husband by his name."

"I'm not a winemaker's wife. Propriety—"

"You have my tongue in your mouth, Beth. Fuck propriety. Say my name."

"Boyd."

His groan was low, unexpected, sending a jolt through her.

He pulled away abruptly, his forehead leaning against hers as his breathing grew harsh.

She was sitting in his lap, willing his mouth back, when he caught her by her forearms and set her on her feet.

“The challenge is over, lass. Now, away with ye.”

Beth wobbled, silently congratulating her legs for holding steady. Straightening with as much dignity as she could muster, she met his gaze.

His jaw clenched, his breath ragged.

“Did I... pass?”

Mr. Sandeman’s eyes darkened. “Aye, Beth, ye passed—if the test was to kill the prospective groom.”

Her brows furrowed. “Kill? I... I don’t understand. Should I try again, then?”

The insufferable man groaned. “Lass, if ye don’t want to know just how well ye passed, I suggest ye race back to yer room.”

Beth’s eyes widened at the intensity in his voice. A drawing-room groom would never look at his bride with such heat.

She lifted her fingers to her lips. The kiss they had shared—unbridled, electric—had little place in a drawing-room courtship. Well... Perhaps a drawing-room courtship was not so sublime after all.

Grinning, she took a hasty step back, giving him a polite nod. “Thank you, Mr. Sandeman. A lady knows when to heed well-meaning advice.” Without another word, she turned, hurrying toward the exit, her heels clicking against the floor.

“The name’s Boyd. And, Beth, lock your damn door, aye?”

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Chapter nine

"The secret to a lasting blend, whether in wine or marriage, is knowing when to let each element breathe and when to hold it close." *The Rogue's Guide to Refinement*

Julia drifted to the marble bath, the chill of the stone tiles seeping through her thin robe, sending a shiver up her spine. She trailed her fingers through the steaming water, watching as lavender salts dissolved into pale, listless spirals. If only her worries were as easy to fade.

Perhaps a long soak would wash away the memory of the dinner—the way Griffin had needled Boyd over Miss Croft. Just look at her. Six years of marriage, and that same spark of jealousy still clung to her, as sharp as it had been in their first months together.

"This is heavenly. Hot water in the bathroom," she raised her voice so her husband could hear, but if he did, he made no sign of joining her.

Griffin paced the bedroom, his tall frame casting shadows on the parquet. Now and then, he ran his hand over his dark hair and then at his shaved chin. His hands twitched like when he wanted to do something but couldn't. "Boyd spent a fortune in this house to flaunt it to his guests. I bet the Highlander still bathes in the freezing river, like when he arrived in Portugal."

"Perhaps he changed." People could change, couldn't they? The thought brought tears to her eyes, but she swallowed them quickly.

“Did you see how he treated Miss Croft? And the hunger in his gaze? The Scotsman has no shame. No shame at all.”

Julia gasped, her chest squeezing so hard it hurt to breathe. Was this how it ended? They had lived happily and desired each other for six years, but how many happy couples had succumbed for less?

Julia tightened the knot of her robe. “Why are we here, Griffin?”

“You know why. Boyd invited us—”

“Don’t lie to me. Please.” She had spent months preparing for Christmas back at home. All thrown to the wind because he decided to come here instead. “We are above that, don’t you think?” Tears clogged her throat.

“Love, is something the matter? Are the children all right?”

“They are in their rooms already. Asleep.” Blissfully unaware of the tempest brewing in her breast.

He came behind her, his heat making the hairs of her skin stand on end. She pulled in a sharp breath, hoping to store his scent in her lungs.

Julia turned in his arms. If she was doing this, she needed to see his eyes. “Why are we here?”

He glanced away. “You know I—”

Julia closed the faucet. “I’m going back to Vesuvio. You can spend Christmas here if you wish.”

“Leave? Are all Portuguese women mad? What bit into you?”

“I will tell you what—Boyd wants to marry Beth. And you are jealous.” Her chin trembled so much that she had difficulty intoning the words. But she said them, didn’t she? Now, it was out in the open, like a ruined vintage, tainting the floor.

He stilled. “What did you just say?”

She pushed past him and into the bedroom and started flinging her things into a bag. Flor could take the rest later. “Do you regret it? Having ended the engagement with Beth Croft? You can be honest. We are adults, and our bodies and minds are sometimes beyond our control.”

“That is the point. Boyd doesn’t want to marry Beth. He hates Croft even more than you do. As a gentleman, I cannot allow him to toy with Miss Croft. I feel responsible for her after I—”

“After what? You met me? Do you wish you hadn’t?”

“What? I didn’t know Portuguese women were so jealous.” He took the bag from her.

His voice, even his teasing tone, were so dear to her, she couldn’t speak, couldn’t move.

“Please, don’t—”

He pulled her into the cradle of his chest. She brushed her wet cheeks against his shirt. His arms around her felt so precious, the first blush of summer, the first tiny flower of a vine.

He exhaled against her hair. “I love you more than I love my life. You are my soul

wine. Forgive me if I don't show you enough."

Julia's breath hitched, and she felt the pulse in her throat, a heartbeat so intense it almost hurt. His words lingered, perfuming the air like a precious vintage.

"You show me, it's just—" Her voice wavered, the words catching like silk on a thorn. "My heart wilted when I saw you fighting with him over her."

Griffin's eyes softened, like embers calming to a glow, and she felt a tension in herself release, an invisible knot coming undone.

He stepped closer, his face leaning in, his mouth meeting hers in a kiss that was at once tender and fierce. She melted into it, tasting the faint hint of wine on his lips, breathing him in as if to press him into every corner of herself.

Cradling his face, she kissed him back with a longing that felt as vital as air. She held him tight because this was her Englishman, and he might be irascible and unreasonable, but he was thoroughly hers.

They never made it to the bed. The armchair was closer, sturdy, and inviting in the dim light. Julia's fingers trembled as she helped him loosen his trousers, the heat between them building with each brush of skin, each small, urgent movement. When she lowered herself onto his erection, a shiver traveled up her spine, and her eyes fluttered shut, her head tilting back, offering herself completely. They groaned in unison, the sound of surrender, of home.

They lingered there, bodies entwined, savoring the closeness. They had the luxury of familiarity, of knowing just how to hold back, letting each sensation bloom and ripple.

Julia traced his jaw, his nose, his eyes, then lowered her hands to his chest, feeling the

tautness in his muscles, the subtle tremor of restraint that only heightened her desire. She opened her eyes to find his face inches from hers, and their gazes locked, foreheads pressed together, the world narrowing to this moment, to him.

Time had not oxidized her responses to him. They had made love many times now, to celebrate successes and to soothe life's little grievances, and each time was special in its own way, as if their lovemaking lived in a bottle and they could savor it at will, finding new nuances. Movement didn't come for a long time. There was no need to rush. They let their love decanter, breathe, flaring its notes and aromas.

Her hand slipped up, tangling in his hair, and she tugged him closer, capturing his mouth in a kiss, her teeth grazing his lip. When she moved, rocking her hips against him, his hands tightened on her waist, grounding them both in the exquisite, slow-burning ache that only they knew.

Her eyes closed, her head falling back against his shoulder.

"You are mine," he licked her cheek, his voice rough with need, his hands gripping her waist as if she might disappear. "I won't allow you to think otherwise, Julia."

"Make me yours," she breathed. "I love you."

She tightened around him, and he groaned, his hips jerking up in response. Leaning back into the chair, he cupped her breast in his hand, his mouth closing around her, tasting her, drawing a soft cry from her lips. His erection stirred inside her, his hips lifting to meet hers, a powerful rhythm that made her gasp.

"You are wrong about Boyd." She took his earlobe between her teeth, hearing his sharp intake of breath as he filled her even more deeply.

He gasped, his grip tightening on her waist. "Englishmen are never wrong," he

growled.

“This one is.”

She traced his mouth with her tongue, tasting him, savoring his familiar flavor—warm, earthy, and spiced with desire. “I don’t think Boyd hates Beth. Perhaps there is hope for them. Boyd is lonely and a bachelor for too long.” Julia increased her tempo, grinding her hips faster. “And Miss Croft...she deserves some happiness.”

“Julia,” he exhaled, pleasure making his voice rough. “You sound as you do before blending wine and brandy to make port. As if you rule the laws of nature.”

Her laughter was breathless. “In matters of the heart, you are oblivious.” She slid her fingers over his shoulder and pressed herself closer to him.

“I’ll show just how much I know about such matters.” He lifted her in his arms and pushed her against the wall, his hips rolling in and out of her.

Julia laced her arms behind his neck, her mouth parting in bliss, and she forgot everything that was not her Englishman.

Pleasure burst from her core, spreading through her limbs. She bit his shoulder, muffling her cry, her whole body tightening as her climax rippled through her, anchoring her to him in a shared moment of exquisite release.

A while later, they were both in the marble bath, their legs entwined beneath the water, the warmth surrounding them like a comforting cocoon. Julia felt the rise and fall of Griffin’s chest against her spine, each steady beat of his heart a grounding rhythm that soothed her own.

His body tensed, his arms tightening around her. The shift was subtle, but she could sense his sudden unease, a ripple in the moment's stillness.

"What is it?"

"I have a daughter now." His voice was rougher than usual. "When I think of what I did to Beth, what I did to you then, and what some reckless buck might do to Clara, I want to punch my own face."

A wave of tenderness swelled within her. He was a good man, this Englishman of hers. She reached her hand back, resting it over his, threading her fingers through his, letting him feel her reassurance.

"You never set up to hurt me or Beth," she whispered, tilting her head to catch his gaze over her shoulder. "We should support her and Boyd in this. They seem clueless about this matter of love. Instead of interfering or making ridiculous plans, we should be their friends. That's what we'll do for our daughter when it's time for her to marry."

Griffin scoffed. "Clara will never marry. That's been decided, Julia."

She smiled, charmed by the gruff protectiveness in his voice, the way he could be so possessive and yet so endearing. Life with him was like the best vintages—layered and rich, revealing unexpected pockets of sweetness and hidden depths. She reached up, brushing a hand along his jaw, feeling the scratch of his stubble beneath her fingers. Leaning forward, she turned on the bath until their chests were level, her gaze meeting his.

"Your daughter Clara?" she murmured, a playful lightness in her voice. "That whirlwind with blue eyes and raven hair? I hope she chooses a Portuguese husband because an Englishman stands no chance against her."

Chapter ten

"Even the proudest cask has cracks—some are simply better at hiding the leaks." The Rogue's Guide to Refinement

Boyd tossed in bed like a trout flopping on dry land, cursing the lass who'd barricaded herself into his thoughts. His heart pounded, his legs twitched. Did I pass? she'd asked. You damn well passed, infuriating woman. He'd fought battles with less aggravation than resisting the memory of her kiss. Look at him, a bloody Sassenach, mooning over the chit because she tasted good.

The silence was thick and oily—a lousy bed companion. He strained his ears, longing to hear her murmur his name again. Her sigh when he caressed her spine. The way her breath hitched as his cheek brushed hers. Still, nothing. Just this blasted silence, pressing down on him like a burial shroud. He clutched her handkerchief, trying to see her initials in the dark. It tore in his rough hands, as fragile as his restraint.

Growling, he flung the sheets back and sat up. Can't stay in this tomb of a room another second.

The bitter night slapped his cheeks as he strode into the courtyard. Gravel crunched beneath his boots, the only sound breaking the stillness. Everything slept. All but him.

His legs carried him to the fountain, of all places. A mirthless laugh misted in the cold air, unheard by anyone but himself. Dropping onto the bench, he tugged his greatcoat tighter and took a swig of whiskey, glaring at the majestic bear poised mid-

catch above the still pond. Even the water was silent. Wherever he went, he could not escape from the past.

Papa Bear stared at him, his stone cubs looking particularly sour, each one with that unmistakable look—disappointed, disgusted, disheartened. Boyd could almost hear their lifeless eyes judging him—a true Highlander would never stoop to scheming against a lass he fancies.

“I don’t fancy her,” he growled. The wind carried his words away. He groaned, raking his fingers through his hair. “Didn’t give a damn for that kiss. Didn’t make my heart thunder or stiffen me like a Lochaber caber. Her voice? Sweet as honey—grated my ears, it did. Hell, I’d burn half my vineyard to hear her purr my name now, whispering it, murmuring it, shouting and licking and purring the blasted thing. And I don’t even like my own name.”

The bear kept staring, as unimpressed as an English banker counting his profits. Entitled beast. Highland bears, he reckoned, wouldn’t be half so critical.

He pointed at its haughty snoot. “A Highlander knows the worth of revenge. It’s right up there with honor and blood. And that lass? She’s neither.”

“Quit looking at me like that. So what if she’s not to blame for her father’s deeds? High society doesn’t care about consequences, do they?” The words tasted as bitter as they sounded. “They’ll trample anyone to get what they want.”

Papa Bear didn’t budge, its eyes fathomless, judgmental, and dripping with silent disdain. Boyd swore he could see its carved brow lifting, as if it questioned his very worth.

Boyd’s hands curled into fists, his knuckles whitening. “Ye know nothin’, do ye? Standin’ there lookin’ down on me, a polished-up Lowlander beast.”

Boyd gulped the whiskey and cleaned his mouth with his hand. What the fuck was he doing? Speaking with stone.

He must be getting soft. A highlander who built this all with his bare hands, facing the opposition of people like her, the scorn, didn't want to be with them. What of his fucking future? His plan to buy wineries in France and expand to America? What a joke. He only had a past—this cursed fountain—and his silent room. The future beyond the holidays, when she would leave his life—taking with her the laughter, her soothing voice—was a hazy blotch.

He could not, would not, consider the day after. The Christmas feast where he would expose her family to financial ruin.

The bear seemed disgusted now. Hell, Boyd felt disgusted himself.

Boyd hurled a flick of dirt at the bear, watching with grim satisfaction as it splattered over the proud paws, smudging the polished stone. “There. Now ye look like the muck I clawed my way out of.”

What a blasted fool. Vandalizing his own house. The deuced house he paid a fortune for and couldn't stand to stay inside.

He dropped his head in his palms. The tiredness of the day, of a lifetime, bore into his shoulders, pressing against his chest. Why couldn't he sleep?

A melody, faint and lilting, carried on the breeze.

Every hair on his body prickled. What in hell's name could it be? A baobhan sith come to lure him to his doom? Aye, that'd be just his luck—and well deserved.

The melody rose, stronger now, drawing him forward. His boots crunched over the

gravel as he followed the sound to the right-wing—the guest rooms.

Light flickered from an open window, pooling in the flowerbed below.

The music swelled, a rumbling melody filling the air.

He edged closer until he could peer through the glass.

Beth.

She sat with a cello cradled between her legs, its polished wood gleaming in the dim light. The mysterious crate was forgotten by her side. So this was her secret. Why did she conceal it?

He shouldn't be here, peering through windows like a hungry boy with his nose pressed to the glass of a sweet shop. Yet he couldn't look away. He'd rather face a baobhan sith than relinquish his front-row seat to this serenade.

The instrument was an extension of her—its curves nestled between her thighs. He would be jealous of the cello position between her legs if it did not produce such heavenly sounds. Her red hair fell loose, a cascade of deep auburn spilling over her shoulders, a fire against the winter chill. Eyes half-closed, she parted her lips as if to taste the music. She looked like she might if he brought her to climax.

His heart ached, and he grabbed the windowsill, wanting to reach out and touch her. No. He forbade himself to interrupt her.

Her fingers coaxed tender harmonies from the strings, her movements fluid. This wasn't the prim girl he'd taunted all day. This was someone passionate, struggling, alive. How could she keep all this locked under a corset and etiquette rules?

The music swelled, her brow furrowing as the notes grew richer. The mold of the society princess shrank before his eyes, too shallow to contain her.

This was the girl he planned to hurt.

The melody softened, pouring over him in gentle waves. His breath slowed, his muscles relaxing as the sound wrapped around him. A yawn escaped his chest. He allowed his legs to fold, lowering himself into the flowerbed. The begonias sighed around him, welcoming him into their bed.

Sleep tugged at his mind, heavy and comforting. Just one minute, he told himself. He'd brave the tomb of his room after she finished.

Chapter eleven

"Though a gentleman may steal a glance, a ribbon, or even a kiss, a lady must never allow him to steal her composure." From *The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace*

Beth lowered the little leather-bound book, *The Vintner's Guide to Winemaking*. She'd read the same sentence five times: Blending is both art and science, where each varietal brings its own harmony and complexity.

Complexity indeed.

What was she to make of him? An uncouth Scot her mother abhorred? The proud laird from Sir Walter Scott's novels? A ruthless wine tycoon? A common thief? A tempting kisser?

A deep sigh escaped her. Her future husband? Could she mold him into the quiet gentleman required for a respectful marriage? Her lips curled into a reluctant smile as the memory of his kiss replayed. Boyd. How could she ever call him by his first name? Perhaps when they were alone. No, she mustn't be alone with him.

"Awake already, Lady Beth? Did a big, grouchy Scotsman invade your dreams?"

Beth set the book aside and crossed to the window, ignoring Dora's teasing tone. "I need to be prepared, Dora. I have another challenge today, and frankly, I—"

"Miss Beth, it's a cellar, not a university. You just swallow the wine and pretend you

like it.”

“This isn’t some casual tavern exercise!”

How could she pass his challenges if she lacked the knowledge? Not that it had stopped her with the kissing test. The flutter in her stomach returned as she remembered Boyd’s heat beneath her.

Dora rummaged through Beth’s belongings. “Where’s your kerchief? Don’t tell me it’s another piece of accessory gone missing. Your mother will blame me.”

Boyd’s pilfering fingers came to her mind, stealing the handkerchief from right under her chin. The same fingers that caressed her cheeks and then... Visions of him nibbling her lips passed behind her eyelids, and needing some air, she pushed the window open.

The Douro River shimmered in the distance, early morning light reflecting off its surface.

“Don’t you think this place is beautiful?”

The land’s magnetism was very much like Boyd’s rough charm. How could he be so infuriating, yet make her heart skip?

“I thought it would be too rustic for your tastes, lady Beth.”

“Rustic? Certainly not. The better word would be rugged. Untamed, perhaps.” She fingered the edge of the window frame, recalling the feel of his bristly beard beneath her fingertips. “Wild, unpolished—but not without its beauty.” Like him.

A rustling noise interrupted her thoughts.

“What in heavens is this?”

Her gaze dropped to the garden below. Mr. Sandeman sprawled among the begonias, low-pitched snores ruffling their delicate petals. Beth’s heart skipped a beat. Had he slept out there all night? The man was mad—or had skin as thick as his skull. Yet... he looked peaceful. More so than she had ever seen him.

His ambition, his restless hunger, seemed banked. He looked younger somehow, almost endearing.

Beth leaned over the sill, studying him. Surely, it wouldn’t be the worst thing to reach out and smooth that unruly hair from his brow. Her fingers twitched. She leaned forward, her breath catching—then stopped herself, heat prickling her cheeks. What are you thinking, Beth? Studying him like some knight beneath your tower! Hastily, she drew back, pressing her hand to her racing heart.

Dora leaned in. “Seems your suitor misplaced his bedchamber, Miss Beth.”

“I can see that, but why?”

“Perhaps the ground just seemed more inviting than his bed.”

How could he endure the cold? Her heart ached for him, all alone. There was something tender about how his arm curled under his cheek. Against her better judgment, she longed to jump from the window and cradle his head above her lap.

“Should I wake him?”

“That, or offer him a blanket. Though I doubt it is necessary—he seems quite comfortable.”

“Surely, he’ll be embarrassed when he realizes where he is.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on that, Miss Beth. He doesn’t strike me as the contrite type.”

Beth frowned. “Nonsense. Any proper gentleman would be mortified.” She stole another glance at Boyd’s parted lips, recalling how they had pressed against hers the day before. Tempting lips. She had known them intimately yesterday. She wanted to—know them again.

“Ah yes. I’m sure he’ll be positively ashamed.”

“He will. He has to be.”

Beth hesitated, then leaned out of the window. “Mr. Sandeman?”

The absurd man stretched his long arms over his head and yawned. Then he pulled himself up and shook the dirt from his trousers as if he had just lifted himself from the couch of a grand hostess.

“Mr. Sandeman! What on earth are you doing down there?”

He propped his elbows on the windowsill and winked. “You agreed to call me Boyd, Beth. Or have you forgotten our night interlude?”

Heat rushed to her face. “You’re trespassing!”

The early light brought out glints in his dark hair, and the corners of his eyes crinkled as he grinned. In his crumpled state, he looked like a pirate who’d just raided a maiden’s dowry.

“I was under the impression I owned the place.”

Dora moved behind her. “He is right on that account, Lady Beth.”

“Lady Beth?” He chuckled. “I like her already.”

Beth glared at her maid. “Don’t encourage him.”

“Lass, ye’ve got yerself tae blame.” He pillowed his face in his hand.

The mellow brogue was back, and only her corset prevented her from melting.

“Your serenade last night was loud enough tae wake the whole parish. Ye should be thankin’ me for shooin’ the swains away from yer door.”

The cello! How mortifying. Her mother would be positively ill if she knew a gentleman had caught her playing the indecent instrument.

“I... I wasn’t serenading anyone! A lady’s true charm lies in her grace, modesty, and quiet dignity.”

“If she wants tae put her man tae sleep, perhaps. But a winemaker’s grace?” He leaned closer, his voice dropping. “Is better felt in the bedchamber. And trust me, lass, she never needs to be quiet.”

Her face turned crimson. She stared at him, caught between outrage and a delicious thrill in parts of her anatomy she dared not name. “That is... shockingly improper.”

“Aye, lass, but proper can be borin’, wouldn’t ye say?” His gaze dipped toward her bodice.

Beth gasped, realizing she was still in her camisole. Before she could cover herself, he plucked the ribbon keeping her bodice in place. A single tug, and it floated free.

Heat prickled her cheeks as Boyd’s gaze dipped to her disheveled bodice. Gasping,

Beth crossed her arms in front of her chest. She was suddenly, inexplicably aware of her heartbeat... and his watching eyes.

“Just a wee souvenir, lass. Don’t worry—ye’ll hardly miss it.” A devilish gleam danced in his gaze as he toyed with his prize.

“Give it back this instant!”

Boyd chuckled. “I’ll take care o’ it.” With a wink, he tucked the ribbon into his pocket.

“You are a—a common thief!

“I’m no such thing, lass.”

“Do you call yourself an uncommon thief, then?” A very handsome, very charming thief who stole her breath?

“No, ye see—he who steals a cow from a poor widow, or a calf from a cotter, now that’s a thief. But lifting a thing or two from a Sassenach? That’s a gentleman’s work. And as for taking a tree from the forest, a salmon from the river, a stag from the hill, or a bauble from a bonnie lassie—well, that’s just Highland instinct, and no Highlander worth his tartan would feel the slightest shame in it.”

“Do you think I’m pretty?”

“Dinnae go gettin’ conceited, lass. A winemaker’s wife is humble as she is bonnie.” He took her chin in his rough hands, leaned in, and claimed her lips with a quick, possessive kiss.

Beth sputtered, her eyes wide. “Mr. Sandeman! That was—”

“Just a wee taste. Don’t forget your challenge today in the cellar, Beth. And close your pretty mouth, will ya? A winemaker’s wife doesn’t gawk.”

Dora cleared her throat. “He’s taken your ribbon, Miss Beth. Shall I fetch you another? Or perhaps it’s time to start locking your accessories away from sticky fingers.”

With a cheeky grin, Boyd tipped an imaginary hat and strolled off, looking far too pleased with himself. Where in all *A Lady’s Guide of Proper Behavior* did a woman find guidance to deal with such an irresistible, totally impossible suitor? “That man is insufferable.”

“Indeed, he is, and who knew—not the contrite type, after all.”

Chapter twelve

“A winemaker’s wife must be fluent in many languages, including the dialect of a husband’s stubborn silences and the unmistakable brogue of his mischief.” *The Rogue’s Guide to Refinement*

Boyd glared at his new office, its bare walls and empty corners taunting him. The architects had transported the bloody stone fountain from the Highlands—complete with the smug Lowlander bears—but had failed to furnish the estate’s most important room. Not a single desk, chair, or cabinet had arrived in time for the holidays. The most expensive architects in Europe had left him sprawled across wine crates, his ledgers stacked like forgotten parcels on the floor.

Sunlight streamed through the arched windows, casting a cold glow over the barren space. He scowled at the letter in his hands. French. Of course, it had to be in French, unreadable without his secretary. His Paris agent couldn’t bother to write in plain English, could he? Boyd traced the elegant script, catching fragments of meaning—Bordeaux, vineyard potential, varietals—all vital pieces of information slipping like sand between his fingers.

Frustrated, he slapped the letter onto a crate and tugged the ribbon from his pocket. He brushed the ribbon against his nose, inhaling sharply. Each of her belongings carried her elusive scent, but it was never enough. And her sounds? Everywhere she was not, held the silence of a tomb. If only that kiss hadn’t scrambled his thoughts...

The door creaked open, and the bane of his existence stepped inside.

She moved cautiously, her gloved hands holding the edges of her skirt to avoid brushing against the papers strewn across the floor, her gaze flicking over the scattered crates and haphazard ledgers. She looked every inch the society lady, her pristine green velvet day dress clinging to her curves.

Straightening, Boyd shoved the ribbon into his pocket, his color rising as if he were a Highland lad caught sneaking a sip of the laird's whiskey. All this wealth, and she had to see him crouched on the floor.

Beth's gaze found him, and she startled a bit, one brow arching.

"Yes, Lady Beth?" His tone was sharper than he intended.

"I'm presenting myself for my second challenge."

Of course, she'd waltz in, expecting him to drop everything to cater to her whims.

"Some of us work for a living, Miss Croft. You're free to pursue more pressing endeavors—a picnic, a bright butterfly, or perhaps weaving a tartan for a sheep. I care not which."

An unwelcome image flitted through his mind—her voice floating over a meadow as they picnicked together, and he gritted his teeth. Look at him, wanting to eschew obligations for ridiculous pursuits.

Beth's eyes narrowed, but a hint of a smile tugged at her lips. "Weaving a tartan for a sheep sounds positively riveting. Can I help with the work that's so clearly keeping you tethered to reality?"

Boyd picked up the letter again, squinting his eyes at the damned words. Anything to keep his gaze from the white fur framing her bodice. "What do you understand about

business, Lady Beth?”

“Not much.” Before he could blink, she plucked the paper from his fingers. If he allowed it, it was only because she’d startled him—not because his traitorous nose had brushed against her wrist in surrender.

“Is this French? I’m fluent in French.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Drawing room French, perhaps—”

She raised the letter to her eyes and began reading. “Monsieur Sandeman, it is with the utmost respect and admiration that I convey my gratitude for the trust you have placed in our firm to represent your esteemed interests in the renowned terroirs of Bordeaux. Allow me to assure you that the opportunities here, should you pursue them, are as grand and enduring as the very chateaux that line our venerable hillsides.” Her words rolled off her tongue with maddening ease.

So, the lass could read French. He hadn’t expected that.

The minx lowered the letter and gazed at him with triumph in her green eyes. She was smug, was she not? Boyd felt an uncontrollable urge to reach out and ruffle her hair, so he could swipe a touch of her pride, the way a child licks icing off a cake when no one’s looking.

Grinning like a rogue who’d stumbled upon an unlocked treasure chest, he tugged her down to sit beside him on the floor. Before she could protest, he shifted deliberately, resting his head on her lap with the most innocent expression he could muster.

“Proceed, Lady Beth,” he drawled, eyes fluttering shut as if this were a common afternoon pastime.

Her gasp was practically a symphony. “This is unusual, Mr. Sandeman!”

“A true winemaker’s wife reads to her husband each night. They say the words of a devoted wife soothe a man’s spirit, sharpen his mind, and keep his decorum intact.”

“You are making this up.”

A rush of warmth flooded his chest as his head sank onto her lap. His muscles loosened, the tension in his shoulders dissolving.

“Am I? You owe me this, anyway.”

“How so?”

Boyd cracked an eye open. “Because of your serenade, I hardly slept last night. I’m tired.”

Beth’s cheeks flushed a delicate pink, and she huffed, “Very well.” Yet she adjusted her posture with an air of importance, her chin lifting slightly.

Boyd bit back a grin. Who knew French correspondence could hold such intrigue?

Her lap was surprisingly soft beneath him, her skirts carrying a faint scent of lavender. Her fingers hovered briefly on his shoulder, light as a butterfly testing its perch.

She started reading again, her voice flowing like warm honey, a steady rhythm that hummed in his ear. From his angle, he admired the delicate curve of her chin and the way her lips shaped each syllable.

His pulse slowed, his body sinking further into the floor as the last traces of tension

melted away. He shifted slightly, his head nestling deeper into her lap.

“In light of your discerning reputation, Monsieur Sandeman, I recommend that you personally sample the wines from the estates currently on the market. By familiarizing yourself with each vineyard’s unique profile, you will be best equipped to determine which properties align with the quality and character you wish to bring to your portfolio. I trust that your refined palate will guide you in selecting befitting your impeccable standards.”

She lowered the letter and glanced at him. “I expect that crate to be the bottles he mentioned?”

His fingers twitched against his chest, and he let out a low hum of appreciation, reluctant to move. Was it over already? The way she made paperwork seem captivating was almost unfair.

With a groan of reluctance, he sat up, fighting the ridiculous urge to pull her into his lap and silence her smugness with a kiss. Just one. For research purposes.

Beth cleared her throat and glanced at the door. “Well, then, I’ll leave you now. You must have a lot of drinking to do, and I’d hate to be in your way.”

His heart, stubborn as a mule, kicked against his ribs in protest. Of course, he had work to do. Important, pressing work. But before he could think twice, his hand shot out and caught hers.

Her wrist was delicate under his rough palm, and he nearly released her, worried she might shatter at his touch. But no—the room would turn back into a catacomb without her, and he wasn’t quite ready for the silence to swallow him whole.

“You came here for a challenge, did ye not?” he asked, raising one brow.

“To pass my second challenge, yes.” She shot him a wary look, clearly suspicious of the grin spreading across his face.

He caressed her wrist lightly and met her gaze. “You’ve proven you can read French words. Now let’s see how you fare drinkin’ their wine.”

Her eyes widened, and she let out a breathy laugh. “Are all your challenges this demanding?”

“Aye,” he said, cursing his mind for conjuring exactly how demanding he wanted to be. “And they only get worse.”

Beth watched as Boyd shoved crates aside, his broad shoulders flexing beneath his shirt as he worked. While his back was turned, she allowed herself a small, private gloat. She would be lying if she denied the pride she felt at having helped him translate the French letter—a satisfaction amplified by the memory of his head resting against her lap.

And now, an impromptu wine tasting. Never a dull moment while courting Mr. Sandeman. Still, this time, she wanted more than to pass his test. She wanted to understand the man beneath the wine tycoon’s polished exterior. What drove him to be so ambitious? Why was he always so guarded? And why this relentless need to project a refinement that, deep down, he didn’t seem to enjoy?

“Are you excited about the Christmas banquet?” she asked. “The housekeeper said you invited all the winemakers in the village.”

His body stiffened, and he avoided her gaze. “Are you ever excited to spend time with people you hardly know, who only get closer because they want something from you?”

Beth hugged herself, the question landing heavier than she expected. Wasn't that what she was doing? "Then why invite them in the first place?"

"Did your family only have guests they cared about? Or are you implying that, because of my birth, I don't—"

"I'm implying that a man who got where you are should enjoy more freedom than the rest of us."

Boyd Sandeman had earned his place among the privileged but seemed heart-wrenchingly unable to settle in it. What would it be like to feel so... out of place?

Boyd's gaze darkened, but he didn't answer. Instead, he shrugged. "When my agent sent me this crate, I thought he was giving me a Christmas present." He pried open a wooden box and extracted several bottles.

"What do you want for Christmas?"

"You should be looking at it. But alas, it seems I'll spend Christmas empty-handed." He gestured to the surrounding room. "I commissioned state-of-the-art wine-tasting facilities. The best money can buy, Lady Beth."

Was it a gift if he had to buy it himself? Her heart ached for him. He had no family, did he? Christmas Eve was tomorrow. She should have brought him a gift. A wristwatch or a cane—something a gentleman might appreciate. But in her haste to leave Oporto, she'd forgotten.

He reached for a tapestry, shaking it out before tossing it into the center of the room. Their very own picnic blanket.

"It seems the furniture industry conspired against us, and you'll have to experience

your first tasting on the floor.”

Beth stepped closer, smiling. “I’m certain the wine will taste the same on the floor as it would on your polished table.”

He looked at her then, surprised, a boyish smile tugging at his lips. Lifting his arm, he extended it to her as though inviting her to a minuet rather than a wine tasting on a dusty floor. His warm hand steadied her as she lowered herself, arranging her velvet skirts to cover her legs. She shifted slightly, adjusting for the bustle pressing into her sides. Clearing her throat, Beth mimicked Boyd’s relaxed posture, trying to summon the camaraderie of men over port. What better way to share secrets than over a drink?

His fingers wrapped around a bottle, the curl of his wrist and the flex of his forearm exuding effortless strength. As he twisted the cork free, his gaze flickered to her.

The pop was soft but sharp, and she jumped, chiding herself for her nerves. When he opened a third bottle, then a fourth, she gulped.

“How much do you expect me to drink?” she asked. “A lady may partake in wine, but only in modest sips. Never more than a glass.”

He grinned. “Lucky for you, we’ll be drinking from the bottle. Here, let’s try this first. Chateau Montclair.”

He held the bottle close to her lips, and Beth’s heart sped up. How on earth would she pass this test?

She raised her palms. “Will you really buy a vineyard in France?” She tried to keep her tone light, but her eyes searched his, hoping to glimpse the man beyond the business.

“More like two or three. The scale of the investment must be worthy.”

“Do you need to expand so much? Won’t it mean more work?”

He lifted a brow. “Are you stalling, lass?”

No, I’m trying to get to know you. Who are you, Boyd Sandeman?

“What should I do?” she asked. “Are there any criteria I should be aware of? Wouldn’t it be best if we had a notebook to annotate our findings?”

“A fine wine isn’t meant to be tasted with the mind.”

He offered the bottle to her again, daring her with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Well, then. Gentlemen friends shared wine from the bottle... from time to time. The finish was smooth against her lips as she drank. The quantity was far more than her usual dainty sips, and she had to swallow quickly to keep from choking. A rich taste coated her tongue with layers she couldn’t quite place but sensed were important.

“Well?”

She straightened, lifting her chin, and forced a thoughtful expression. “It’s well-balanced. The aroma is compelling, with, um... notes of dark cherry and leather.”

As if aware of her pretense, he removed the bottle from her. “You must taste the wine with your nose and mouth, not your bloody corset and fichu.”

The skin beneath her corset tingled as if in agreement. “Mr. Sandeman! I hope you’re not suggesting I should drink in the nude, because some lines—”

He laughed, the sound startling and new. It rolled off him in waves, his chest shaking with it. This was going well. Gentlemen shared moments of humor, didn't they? Beth didn't mind being the cause of his mirth if it made him laugh more often.

"Not bare-assed, lass. But you'll have to wear something else."

He reached for his cravat, his rugged fingers pulling it free with practiced ease.

Beth gasped, her gaze caught on the exposed skin of his neck. So that's what a man's throat looks like... unbuttoned, vulnerable. She quickly glanced away, her cheeks warming. Her goal was to understand his thoughts, not ogle his... assets. But curiosity won out, and her eyes flicked back to him. After all, the more she knew about the man, the better. Right?

He let out a low, rumbling chuckle, as if fully aware of the effect he had on her.

"Is it necessary for you to get so familiar?"

"I swear tae ye, this is the only bit of clothing comin' off today. Unless ye find yerself curious, then I might consider indulgin' ye. But that's for later, mind. If ye caught sight o' me in all my splendor, ye wouldn't pass yer challenge."

The brogue, the wine, and indeed, the cravat made her shiver under her stays. He moved closer, inexorably so.

Beth stiffened as he leaned into her, his chest brushing her side, his warm breath ruffling her ear. If her mother saw her now, seated on a dusty floor with Mr. Sandeman, allowing him to—her thoughts scattered as silk slid over her eyes. He tightened the knot gently, and the world plunged into darkness.

Her breath quickened, her skin tingled, and her heartbeat thrummed in her ears. This

was utterly extreme! Surely, he wouldn't make his gentlemen friends wear pieces of his clothing during a wine tasting.

“Easy now. I'm here with you.”

Far from diminishing his presence, the blindfold made him even more real—the only solid thing in a world gone dark. The quietness between them felt like a fragile gift, and she wanted to tuck it away, safe with the other impressions he had left on her.

When the bottle touched her lips, the wine's aroma enveloped her senses, its acidity and bitterness sharper in the dark.

“There now, lass. What do you feel?”

“Can I have some more, please? To be sure?”

The wine unsettled her empty stomach, heat blooming between her breasts.

“There's no right or wrong with wine,” he said softly. “The only thing that matters is whether ye like it.”

“Not what is proper or expected?” A ripple of excitement ran through her, a thrill at tasting and deciding for herself, unburdened by others' expectations. “Then I don't much enjoy this one. It feels too raspy. Can I have the next one, please?”

His breath was close to her forehead now, warm and steady. “Only if you demand it from me.”

She gasped. A gentleman didn't demand things from his friends—only satisfaction. And she was not about to duel with him. Not over wine. “Boyd—”

“Just a wee joke, lass.” He brought the next bottle to her nose, but when he tipped it, the liquid spilled over her chin.

“This won’t do. Can’t have a lady leaving my office with more wine on her dress than in her belly.”

Before she could protest, his hands slid around her waist, lifting her from the floor. He guided her onto his lap, settling her securely there.

She was quite sure no gentleman tasted wine blindfolded while seated with a friend on his lap. Gasping, she grabbed his lapels for balance.

The heat of the man. Beth would have felt colder in a furnace. Shamelessly, her thoughts mulled, and she nestled closer. Well, if propriety had anything to say, it would need to shout over the liquor... and his chest. Perhaps he’d be more inclined to share his secrets in such an intimate position.

“Taste the wine, lass,” he murmured, his breath warm against her cheek.

His cool lips brushed against hers, a whispery contact that sent a shiver along her spine. His hand slipped to her nape, anchoring her as he deepened the kiss, and the wine poured into her mouth. Heat pooled low in her belly, and she touched his cheek, not sure if she had to push him away or pull him closer. Tongue brushing against hers, he coaxed her to take more, to savor the taste.

Bold and dark, rough and refined, fierce and intoxicating—the wine was as complex as the man. Her pulse quickened, and any thoughts of propriety dissolved in the heady warmth spreading through her, as if she’d sipped from his essence. The world beyond the cradle of her Scotsman’s arms ceased to exist.

She was willing to bet no friendship allowed the intimacy of sharing wine like this.

Thank goodness for that—she would rather reserve the privilege for herself.

She pulled back, breathless, and removed her blindfold.

He was staring at her lips, his breathing rasping against her forehead. “Did you like this one?”

“I think,” she whispered, her voice trembling, “I liked this one very much.”

She gazed at him openly. Beth doubted a gentleman would ever look at his friend with such rawness in his eyes, but the drink had made her bold. What was she doing? Trying to understand him, yet spilling reckless words that exposed far too much.

Frowning, Boyd glanced down. “I think I ruined your gown.” He brushed her bodice, where a drop had bloomed into a red rose. “Tell me, lass, why d’ye always wrap yourself in layers and layers? Isn’t it tirin’ to be so perfectly attired?”

“A person looks their best when dressed appropriately for their station and occasion,” Beth said, though her voice lacked conviction. The places he touched burned to life, mutinying against the fetters of fabric.

He traced the fur lining her décolletage. His lips followed, and his breath fanned across her chest, the warmth delicious and forbidden.

“I dare say you’d look best dressed in the freckles covering yer skin.”

Beth’s cheeks flushed hot, and she poked him in the chest—or had she missed and stabbed his ear? The wine had left her hazy, her propriety faltering. “I have no freckles, sir.” Her voice was soft, slurred, far too breathless for a proper lady seated on a man’s lap. “And it’s rude to point out a lady’s flaws.”

His fingers lingered, tracing slow circles along her collarbone. “And what if I want to do much more than pointin’?” His voice dropped to a husky whisper, his eyes darkening as they searched hers.

Her breath caught. She met his gaze, utterly unmoored. What sort of gentleman friend was she?

“Don’t look so alarmed, Lady Beth,” he said, a teasing smile softening his features. “I made a vow to you, did I not? A Highlander never breaks his word unless he’s ready to face the consequences. But enough about vows. Let’s taste this one from Alsace.”

He tipped the bottle, the column of his throat flexing with the motion. Beth couldn’t stop her eyes from tracing it. What a fine throat it was—such a shame to keep it covered.

When he leaned closer, Beth opened her mouth eagerly, wanting more of his lips—his wine, of course. The floral notes flooded her senses. This one, she tasted a long time, sweeping her tongue around his, sucking it a little, to be sure.

“Did you like this one?”

“I’m not convinced... yet.” Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and she closed her eyes.

“Ach, lass. You’ll be the death of me with your demanding lips.”

He drank more and then obliged her.

When she bit gently on his lower lip, he groaned low in his throat, a sound that vibrated against her chest. One of his hands threaded into her hair, pulling her closer still. Her thoughts scattered like startled birds, leaving only the feel of him—the scrape of his stubble, the warmth of his lips, the heady thud of her heart matching his.

So much for staying poised and clever. Her grand plan to extract his secrets was fast slipping through her fingers, along with any remnants of dignity. She broke away, breathless, her thoughts a swirling mess. Focus. She had learned nothing about him yet, only felt herself sinking deeper into his thrall.

“If one were to... learn a wine’s secrets,” she panted, “how would... er, one go about it?”

His thumb traced the seam of her lips, his touch feather-light, maddening. The pressure coaxed her mouth open, and before she could think, she closed her lips around his finger, sucking gently. Her eyes fluttered shut as a fierce wave of heat overtook her. How did he know she needed this?

“To learn a wine’s secrets,” he murmured, his voice low and velvety, pooling warmth deep in her belly, “one has to keep drinking—and not shy away from the bitterness.”

Bitterness. The word lingered in her mind, an ache. Secrets were often bitter—bubbles rising inside a chest, begging to burst free.

He bit her lower lip, the sharpness catching her off-guard, then soothed the sting with his tongue, leaving her weak and unmoored. “Tasting it over and over,” he whispered. His lips brushed the delicate curve of her neck, the moist warmth of his breath drawing a shiver up her spine.

His hand drifted downward, grazing her nipple with a feather-light touch that sent heat rushing through her. She arched instinctively into him, her thoughts unraveling as her heart pounded against her ribs.

“When one has learned all its nuances...”

Nuances. Yes. More. Nuances. His hand cupped her breast, his palm warm and firm,

igniting a flush that spread through her like fire.

“The wine will reveal its most precious secrets.”

“I tire of wearing the corset all the time,” she blurted, and then immediately cringed. Why had she said something so intimate? He hadn’t even asked her anything.

She glanced up at him, expecting mirth, but he only nodded, his gaze steady and understanding, as though he knew she wasn’t just talking about clothing.

“It’s a heavy thing to carry, isn’t it? The weight of what they want you to be.” His voice softened. “But I saw you playing the cello, lass. Why—”

“Why... wine?” she interrupted, her breath catching. She wasn’t ready to speak of herself, of a girl who longed to be a butterfly but lacked the wings to fly.

He blinked, his mouth quirking as though surprised by the shift. “You’re wondering why a Scotsman isn’t brewing whiskey?”

“It’s just... You seem like a man who could create anything you set your mind to. Why vineyards over any other industry?”

His gaze grew distant, as though he was weighing his words. “To make good wine, you need good soil, water, and a bit of luck from nature. No fancy degrees, no lordly titles, no judgment from men who think they’re better than you.” His voice hardened. “Wine doesn’t care where you’re from. It doesn’t need society’s stamp of approval. It’s true, even when people aren’t. Wine doesn’t judge ye.”

His words carried a surprising bitterness, roughening his tone. He turned away, reaching for another bottle, as if the motion might erase what he had revealed. “It’s like the land itself. It doesn’t care who you are or where ye come from. That’s more

than I can say for most.”

Beth watched him, the weight of his words settling heavily on her chest. “Who hurt you, Boyd?” she asked softly, her voice trembling. If she ever met the person who had mistreated him, she’d find a perfect use for her newfound shear-wielding abilities.

He looked away, his jaw tightening. “No one’s powerful enough to try.” His voice was cold now, closed. “I made sure of that.”

A sharp knock at the door shattered the fragile moment, pulling them both abruptly back to reality. Beth gasped, her eyes widening as the warmth between them dissipated, leaving her feeling cold and disoriented. Boyd’s gaze shifted, guarded once again, and he rose swiftly to his feet.

“What is it, Reggie?” His voice came out deeper than usual.

“It’s Reginald, sir. The furniture for your office has arrived.”

Beth’s pulse still thrummed, her body humming with the imprint of his touch. She reached for his hand, and he pulled her effortlessly to her feet.

The room tilted unexpectedly, and she stumbled.

Strong hands gripped her waist, steadying her. “Careful there, Lady Topsy,” he murmured, a faint smile softening the tension in his features.

Her cheeks flushed. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Reggie Reginald, assume here. I’ll escort Miss Croft to the house.”

“It’s just Reginald, sir.”

The world seemed suspended in magic. Beth’s steps faltered as they reached the veranda overlooking the Douro River, its surface shimmering like a silver ribbon under the moon’s glow. The crisp winter air nipped at her cheeks, already flushed from the wine they had shared. Boyd’s arm around her waist steadied her, a warm anchor against the chill.

She peeked at him, admiring his handsome profile. In the moonlight, he seemed less the calculating wine tycoon and more the romantic Highlander of her dreams. Though obstinate and guarded about his past wounds, there was no denying he could stir a woman’s heart. Perhaps, in time, he would reveal those scars to her.

Boyd glanced down, catching her gaze with a half-smile. “You’re quiet. Lost in the Douro?”

She laughed softly, the sound carrying on the cool breeze. “I was remembering a scene from one of Mr. Scott’s stories—Waverley, speaking with Flora by a Highland brook.”

He arched a brow, the moonlight catching the depths of his eyes. “Adventure is only there for those who take it. Lady Beth would never allow herself to do something wild.”

The challenge in his voice stirred something restless in her. The world around her felt tilted, dreamlike, as though anything could happen in this place between the vineyards and the river. She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze with a wobbly smile. “You’re wrong, sir. I can be quite adventurous when I... when I choose to be.”

His hand tightened on her waist, his voice dropping low. “Then dance with me, Lady Beth. This is not a Scottish brook but a Portuguese river, but I bet the moon is the

same here as it is in the Highlands.”

Could she allow herself such freedom? “Public displays of intoxication are unbecoming for a lady. It would mark her as wild.”

Boyd’s grin was roguish. “Only the stars are watching. A winemaker’s wife should know how tae dance by moonlight—intoxicated or no.”

“I’m not intoxicated,” she said with a huff—then promptly tripped on her hem. She would have landed in an undignified heap if Boyd’s hand hadn’t steadied her.

“Then what are ye waitin’ for, lass? If ye aren’t tipsy, you can’t be displaying nothing, can ye?”

Before she could protest or overthink, he pulled her into a slow, deliberate dance. Their movements were guided only by the faint sounds of the night and the rhythm of their shared breath. The chill in the air seemed distant, a forgotten detail, as she allowed herself to be swept away by her charming Highlander.

The silk of her gown brushed against his legs as they turned. She closed her eyes, letting herself imagine she was a heroine in one of Scott’s tales, swept into the arms of a Highlander with a soul as rugged as the hills and a heart that beat only for her.

The night spun around them in a blur of silver light and whispered breaths. She lost count of how many waltzes they shared beneath the moon, the Douro and the stars their only witnesses.

All too soon, the door to her room appeared before them, stark against the dreamlike quality of the night. It was a reminder that reality had its limits.

Boyd pushed it open with a sure hand. “I’ll tell the guests you’re indisposed and

won't be coming to dinner. Take a bath and drink plenty of water to wash away the wine."

Beth's fingers tightened on the doorframe, reluctant to let the night end. Her chest rose and fell as she tried to steady herself.

"Thank you," she murmured, hesitating. Her eyes searched his face. "See you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? Have ye forgotten your challenge tonight?"

Her eyes widened. "The challenge? But... I thought... surely you wouldn't—"

"Ye thought I'd spare ye because ye've had a wee bit too much wine?" His smile was playful, but there was an edge to it that made her pulse jump.

"Enter yer room, lass, and await me there." His voice dropped to a low, rough purr, and the sound sent heat rushing through her.

"Wait for you?"

"Aye." His grin widened, a roguish gleam lighting his eyes as he stepped back. "A gentleman might spare a tipsy lady... but lucky for ye, I'm not a gentleman."

Chapter thirteen

"An angel's wings may soar, but a wife's feet must remain firmly planted on the earth, lest she lose the strength to walk beside her husband." From *The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace*

Anne caressed Inês' soft, downy head of white-blond hair as her daughter suckled at her breast. Light from the hearth flickered over Pedro's form as he laid Pedro II into the cradle with a deliberate tenderness that always made Anne's heart squeeze. His golden skin glowed in the firelight, and his hair, loose and radiant, cascaded down the side of his face, brushing against his broad shoulder. A familiar warmth unfurled in her chest at the sight—pride, love, and that thrill she felt in the presence of her ruthless warrior.

Inês' mouth slowed, then went slack. Anne traced her rosy cheeks, smiling as Pedro took the baby from her arms. He cradled Inês with practiced ease, his brows softening and a shadow of a smile ghosting over his lips. The moment was as fragile and perfect as glass.

The room held a serene silence as Pedro placed Inês beside her brother, their tiny forms nestled together under a quilt. The soft, even breaths of their children were a balm, and Anne savored the rare closeness of having all her loves under one roof. The air smelled faintly of the rosemary oil she had dabbed onto the crib's edge, mingling with the smoky undertone of the hearth.

Anne reclined against the pillows, feeling the day's weariness melt as Pedro turned to her. She met his gaze, a thrill sparking in her as his expression shifted from fatherly

devotion to an unmistakable hunger.

Pedro settled behind her on the bed, his solid frame pressing against her back. His lips traced the slope of her neck, leaving a scorching path down to her collarbone and between her breasts. The heat of his mouth contrasted deliciously with the cool air that prickled her exposed skin. Anne arched instinctively, a deep sigh escaping her parted lips.

“It’s time to stop breastfeeding the twins,” Pedro murmured, his voice husky and warm, brushing her skin like velvet. He nuzzled the hollow of her throat. “Pedrinho is a strapping boy. And Inês is stronger now.”

He was right, but there was a comfort in this bond, an unspoken tether to the tender infancy of their children. And she sensed Pedro knew that, too. “Perhaps after New Year’s Eve.”

He tugged her until her spine was flush against his chest, and with his sword-wielding hand, he massaged her lower back with vigorous strokes that pulled an unladylike groan from her. His breath tickled her neck, stirring loose tendrils of her hair. The heat of his palm seeped through the thin fabric of her camisole, and the tension in her muscles dissolved.

“You have to stop carrying them the whole day, Anne. Pedro weighs too much for your delicate arms.”

Anne smiled, warmth blooming in her chest at the pride in his voice for their little prince. Already, she sensed in the boy all the light that shone in Pedro and vowed, with an ache deep in her heart, that he would never have to learn the same darkness.

“Why do you think Beth was absent from dinner this evening?”

She felt the pause in his touch, a moment of hesitation before his fingers resumed their slow, deliberate path. He massaged her buttocks, and heat coiled low in her belly.

“Is it relevant?” His tone was detached, but she caught the flicker of something shadowed beneath it—a guardedness that only surfaced when he spoke of politics.

“Do you think she and Mr. Sandeman will—”

“We should do all in our power to avoid such an alliance.” His voice iced over, each syllable crisp and measured.

Anne turned in his arms, meeting his gaze. The shift brought her chest close to his, the thrum of his pulse betraying his tension.

“Why?” She reached up, tracing the pleat that had formed above his nose.

“Boyd Sandeman is ambitious. He rose from nothing to one of the largest players in the wine business. I don’t trust him with such power. If he combines with Croft, he will be too big. It is not in Portugal’s best interests.”

Anne kissed the corner of his mouth. The moment his breath hitched, she felt a small victory bloom within her. “Ah, so that is why you so readily agreed to join Griffin here this Christmas. The Duke of Almoister is at play.”

His eyes softened, the glint of calculation yielding, as his thumb brushed an arc against her hip.

Anne knelt by his side, her fingers slipping under his silk robe. His scent enveloped her as she kissed his neck, the taste of his skin making her pulse quicken. She took her time, trailing her lips down slowly, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breaths,

the way his muscles tensed beneath her touch, betraying the iron control he always maintained for everyone but her.

She brushed her nose against his puckered nipple, then trailed her mouth over his warrior's chest, taking care to love his scars, accepting all that he was.

Pedro's head fell back, his eyes closing.

Anne smiled, her lips teasing his navel. "Do you think we can stop love?"

"Ana," he said, his voice dripping with a warning she loved to ignore.

Her fingers worked the buttons of his Cossack trousers, and she reveled in his lusty groan when she freed his erection. She rubbed the golden length slowly, pausing at the base.

He sucked in a breath. A golden prince, a ruthless warrior, coming undone as she placed the head over her lips.

"You know I'm terribly romantic, Pedro."

She held his kaleidoscopic eyes as she took him in her mouth.

He caressed her hair, still torn between allowing her to give him this pleasure and demanding more.

"Too romantic, Ana. You must trust me that economic considerations should — Ah." His words trailed away when she swirled her tongue, sucking softly.

Anne loved this, his sultry taste, the smooth head against her tongue, his sounds, even how naughty it made her feel when he called her angel—a fallen angel.

When she felt his abdomen tense, she released him from her mouth and found his heated gaze. “Love and business don’t have to stay separated.”

He tugged her atop him, her legs straddling him.

She accepted his erection, taking him in deep inside her sheath. Her hair fell down over her breasts like a curtain and pooled over his chest.

Moaning, she held to the headboard and rolled her hips slowly, invitingly.

“I fail to see your logic.” Pedro’s lips hovered so close to hers his breath ruffled her hair. The edge in his voice softened, though his brow stayed furrowed.

“You say that he is too ambitious. Alone, he will continue pursuing only business. If he marries Beth, then he might settle and be content with what he has. What if love changes him?”

She caressed the stubble along his jaw and then allowed her fingers to slip into his golden hair because what could be more glorious than caressing Pedro’s hair while she had him deep inside her?

She searched his eyes, those intricate shades of green and gold that always seemed to hold an unspoken storm.

Her rhythm faltered as pleasure coiled low in her tummy, and she dropped her head back, a moan escaping her lips.

Pedro held her waist, grinding her against him. “Do you believe love can change him?”

“It changed you,” she whispered on his lips.

“You are very wise, Ana.” His voice softened, carrying a note of reverence that made her heart flutter.

“Are we in agreement, husband?”

“We will see.” He captured her mouth in a kiss.

He tightened his hold on her, his arms closing around her back, bringing their chests flush together.

Anne cried out as a sweet, ravishing climax overtook her. Pedro flipped her over, his hips moving in and out of her with the force of an Atlantic tempest.

Anne laced her arms around his neck, and accepted him all—his strength, his ruthlessness, his light and his darkness—she craved all.

Their mingling breaths warmed the space between them, a fire creeping through their veins as their hair, golden and light blonde, intertwined and formed a delicate veil, shielding them from all else.

He came with a breathless cry, his essence pouring inside her.

The world faded, and they existed within their dome, where nothing could shadow their love.

Chapter fourteen

"A rogue never admits he's lost the game—even when the lady holds all the cards."
The Rogue's Guide to Refinement

Boyd paused outside Beth's door. The Italian marble beneath his boots gleamed in the dim light, but there was no warmth in it, no sound. He leaned his forehead over the door, fingers flexed around the handle. What the hell was he doing?

Tomorrow, all the Douro Winemakers would come to witness his triumph. High society would know that Croft's daughter had not been worthy of him. She, the woman who made him laugh and drank wine from his lips. The woman who had filled these last days with warmth and sound.

He should leave her alone. Let her sleep off the wine and forget that her lips had ever been tainted by this uncouth Scot.

Boyd splayed his hand over the wood. The silence mocked him. He should damn well leave. But his legs refused to carry his carcass away from the lass inside.

Thank God the lowlander bears weren't here to see him. He pushed the door open.

She awaited a challenge, didn't she? He wouldn't leave her waiting.

The warmth of the fire greeted him first. The scent of lavender wafted from the adjoining bathing room.

Beth waited by the window, framed by the glow of the firelight. Her face was clear, her cheeks still carrying the faintest flush, and her red hair tumbled around her shoulders. She looked fresh, as if the afternoon's overindulgence had left no mark on her.

She had changed into a white muslin gown, something she would wear for her husband on her wedding night. Or perhaps a muse from one of those paintings that depicted family bliss. He was unworthy of either.

Her presence spilled across the guest chamber—a shawl draped over the couch, impractical bonnets scattered on the vanity. Utterly frivolous, yet utterly alive. The only place in the house that seemed so.

His heart sped for no reason but that this being was under his roof, under his will.

Boyd's eyes found hers. He envied her youth. How could she look so untouched by life? He, who had tried so hard to keep control, felt the cracks in his restraint widening with every passing second.

“What will my challenge be tonight, Mr. Sandeman?”

Boyd swallowed, his mouth so dry not even all the lochs in Lochaber would make it moist. The words he had intended to say—something ridiculous about having her wash his feet like a dutiful winemaker's wife—died on his lips.

His eyes swept across the room and landed on the wooden crate.

“I want you to play the cello for me.”

Her breath caught as he opened the lid. He reached for the instrument, his fingers brushing against its lacquered surface. In his hands, it was nothing more than a piece

of fine craftsmanship, beautiful but lifeless. How the hell did she make it come alive?

How did she conquer silence like that? It was a power few possessed, a luxury he'd never had.

The hours it would take to master such an instrument—the patience, the dedication—he had spent wearing his hands to stubs, building his empire. There was no time for music when every day had been a battle for survival, a war to prove himself in a world that cared for power, not talent.

He ran his calloused fingers along the cello's neck. A pang of something hit him—regret, perhaps. Or envy.

Beth blinked, startled. “The cello?”

“Why didn't you mention this talent? Isn't it another asset for a wife-to-be?” Surely a society belle with such a skill would showcase it, flaunt her worth.

“I can't play in public.” A flicker of hurt crossed her face.

“Why not?”

“A woman cannot play it,” she said quietly. “The position is improper. We have to sit with our legs apart, the instrument between them. It isn't decent.”

All the blood in his veins went to his cock. “How did you learn, then?” His voice was harsh, tainted by jealousy for a young musician who might have seduced her.

“My uncle. He's a maestro in London. He taught me as a child—to amuse himself, mostly. But I fell in love with it.”

Boyd lifted the instrument, extending it to her. “I want you to play it for me... in the nude.”

Her eyes widened. “Nude? That wouldn’t be—”

“Decent?” He stepped closer, his voice dropping. “But you just said the cello isn’t decent. And a winemaker’s wife—”

“Would obey her husband’s every capricious whim?” She tilted her chin defiantly. “The answer is no.”

He reached out, his fingers tracing her lips. Her soft gasp went straight to his cock. “Weren’t you tired of your corset, Beth?”

The stone bears must have been howling outside. The gardeners would find them hiding in a bush, ashamed of his despicable behavior, but he kept on. Couldn’t back away now. “Don’t you want to be free for once and show who you are underneath all these layers?”

Her green eyes flashed as they did when she spoke about her secret. Like he knew they would.

“Very well, Mr. Sandeman. I hope you remember your vow to me.”

How could he forget? If his balls would probably fall off after their trials were over?

She turned her back to him. His breath hitched as his fingers brushed the edge of her dress.

The hook-and-eye closures at her nape gave way under his fumbling fingers. The fabric loosened, sliding from her shoulders like a whisper.

He helped her step out of the gown, careful and reverent as any lady's maid—the only difference was that he wanted to ravish his mistress.

While he unfastened the laces of her corset, his breathing was harsh. If he didn't wrestle the damn stays now, she would vanish. She shuddered under his touch as the constraint released. When it came away, her shoulder blades expanded, and she breathed. Perhaps the first full breath she took in his presence.

Kissing her neck, Boyd untied the tapes that held her petticoats in place. The white fabric slipped down, pooling around her feet like a cloud. She stepped out of them, turning slightly to glance at him over her shoulder, her eyes catching the low light and shimmering with bashfulness, but also courage.

With each piece that fell, he peeled back not just fabric but layers of defense, shedding society's expectations. By the time she stood before him in a sheer white batiste, his body was taut, perspiration slicking his skin.

Her skin, he never saw the like. White, everywhere white, with reddish freckles, as if a naughty cupid had sprinkled her body with powdered cinnamon. His mouth watered for a taste.

"Have you never enjoyed the sun?" he asked, his voice strained. "I thought society belles loved to take the waters in Vila Nova de Gaia."

She swallowed, her throat working. "I never revealed my skin to the elements. To be fair, you are the only person who has seen me bare. Not even Dora."

The thought of her untouched by any other hand filled him with a possessive heat. He'd buy her a beach if he had to—an entire coastline where she could soak in the sun like a lazy nymph, her skin kissed by light.

The batiste clung to her body, its transparency teasing him with the shadow of her nipples and the soft mound of her femininity. Boyd's throat tightened. He wanted to lick the fabric where it clung to her curves until it became damp and utterly revealing.

He had seen courtesans disrobe for him, their gazes sultry as they shed lace and leather. Yet nothing compared to Beth's quiet dignity and innocence. She made him feel base, every inch the uncouth Scot he was certain she thought him to be. And yet, uncouth Scot that he was, he craved more.

"All of it."

Her fingers moved to the hem of her camisole, hesitating only briefly before pulling it upward. The fabric glided over her thighs, her stomach, and finally, her head. She cast it aside and stood before him, bare.

The firelight caressed her, painting her lithe curves in warm gold. Her nipples puckered, two coral berries crowning her curving breasts, just the handful to fit his rough, calloused palms. His gaze traveled downward, following the line of her navel to the soft v-shaped mound of red curls between her thighs.

Boyd's throat tightened, the weight of the moment pressing on his chest like a stone. His hands curled into fists at his sides. Tension coiled through him until it threatened to splinter him apart.

His shirt, his trousers, everything that covered him felt vulgar compared to the dignity she wore, as if even the act of undressing was a reclaiming of her power. She was naked, but it was he who felt stripped to his core.

"Now tell me your secret," she whispered, her voice soft but unwavering, a plea and a command.

Boyd gazed at the floor, but the expensive rug offered no refuge. A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he swallowed hard, the ache in his throat refusing to subside. The silence suffocated him.

Beth took her robe, her face downcast, as if he had disappointed her.

Did she want his secrets? She could well damn have them.

“I cannot sleep,” he said at last, his voice hoarse and cracked. “The silence haunts me.”

The truth hung there, like the frayed bed sheet of a poor bastard hanging from a cloth line. Boyd forced himself to meet her gaze, expecting pity or discomfort. But what he found was something that hollowed him out—an understanding so deep that it made his breath hitch.

Boyd caught the instrument, silencing the question that was about to come. He was not ready to speak about the past. She would know soon enough. Would his revenge feel less bitter to her then?

He couldn't tear his eyes away as she retrieved it from him and moved to the chair, her bare skin gleaming in the firelight. His breath was shallow, heart pounding.

She opened her legs, but before he could see her sex, she nestled the cello between her thighs. Was it possible to curse an instrument's good luck for being so close to her intimacy, to scent her arousal?

But then she played, and his murderous jealousy receded. The cello was no longer a barrier, but a part of her.

Her first note trembled in the air like a whisper.

He recognized it—last night’s lullaby.

“Not this one. It will put me to sleep.”

Nodding, she adjusted her position and started again. She closed her eyes, her body moving with the rhythm, lost to the world around her. The aria’s misty melody filled the room, filled him.

Where was the society princess? Prim, proper, restrained?

Her hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders, catching in the dim light, and her face... God, her face was serene, as if she belonged to the music and nothing else.

Where did such warmth come from? Did she pull it from some hidden place inside the wood?

Without realizing it, he moved behind her. He had always been a man who needed to touch, to experience things with the rough skin of his hands.

He had to feel her, desperately, urgently—this feminine source of sound, the antidote to the silence that plagued his life. His palm hovered above her chest, feeling the music pulse. Then he pressed it against her bare skin, right over her heart. The reverberations of the cello trembled through her body, alive beneath his touch, like a current of raw emotion.

She missed a beat, her fingers faltering on the strings.

“Keep playing,” he whispered, his voice rough, almost a growl.

She obeyed, though her movements were shaky, her breath coming faster.

Boyd leaned down, his lips brushing the curve of her neck. He closed his eyes, inhaling her scent—had it changed? Did music alter the way her skin smelled? His nose traced a line along her arm, testing, needing to know if it had seeped into her very pores.

Her scent was intoxicating—warm, mixed with the heady aroma of the firelight.

She played on, but the notes grew fractured.

He needed to taste her. His mouth moved up, taking her earlobe between his teeth, biting gently before letting his tongue glide over her cheek. He licked the freckles sprinkled over her shoulder and closed his lips over one or a hundred. Her fingers stumbled on the strings again, but she kept going, her body trembling beneath his.

Boyd's hands slid lower, tracing the curve of her abdomen, feeling the slight contraction as she struggled to maintain control.

She was losing it, just like he was.

He moved his touch downward, the pads of his fingers brushing over her thighs, tracing the strain as she pressed the cello between them.

When he reached the tuft of red hair covering her mound, she froze, the music halting. But his heart kept the rhythm as if she had altered something inside him.

He pulled the cello from her. Coaxing her legs wider, he took its place, kneeling between her thighs.

A flush rose on her skin. "What are you doing, Mr. Sandeman?"

"Call me Boyd."

With trembling fingers, he opened the lips of her sex, and the folds yielded to him. Pink and honeyed flesh glistened inside. He caressed her with his thumb, first the right side, then the left, afraid to penetrate her with his finger. The need burned inside him, but he teetered too close to breaking his vow.

His cock was so hard he wondered how his trousers didn't rip under the pressure. To steal her virginity would be as easy as lifting one of her pretty ribbons. But he had sworn she would remain untouched. If he could give her nothing else, he would honor that promise.

Using both hands to keep her open, he kissed her inner thighs, licking the marks left by her garters, biting, then soothing the pain.

Murmuring endearments, he caressed her clitoris in easy circles that had her belly shuddering. He brushed his chin over her mound, then pressed his lips to her, his teeth grazing the delicate flesh before he kissed her fully. He licked her from her entrance to her little clit, his eyes rolling back on his head at her heady taste.

Her essence coated his fingers, warm and slick, as he cupped her buttocks and pulled her closer. His hunger took over, and he devoured her, his lips and tongue moving with purpose. Her soft moans and breathless purrs drove him to the edge of madness.

Her juices coated his mouth, spilling over his chin, clinging to his skin. He savored each drop, his tongue exploring her pussy's outer lips, pressing against the tiny clitoris, consuming her sweetness.

He was downright shameless now, nibbling at the edges like a starved man, determined not to let a single shudder of pleasure escape. Every lick was better than the last, and he made a low, satisfied sound in his throat as he penetrated her with his tongue, like some kind of animal discovering a hidden treasure.

“Boyd!” she cried out, her scream echoing through the room as she shattered beneath him.

He watched her climax, her body arching, her skin flushed pink. The sight of her undone stole his breath. Her chest heaved, her stomach rippled, and she glowed with a beauty that made him ache.

She wasn’t the frigid English lady he had once hoped she’d be. She was perfect. More than perfect—a treasure.

His heart pounded. A warm, aching sensation spread through his chest, as if something was trying to break free from within him. He was tainting something pure, and the guilt stung.

He kissed her leg, petting her, memorizing every detail of her face. Knelt between her thighs, he lingered, fighting the urge to hold her close.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she reached for him. Her gaze was filled with wonder and a hint of awe. She bit her lower lip, a question forming on her expression before she stopped herself, waiting.

Damn it, don’t look at me like that. I can’t be what you think I am. You have no idea what I’ve planned. What I’m capable of.

A wave of nausea twisted in his stomach.

“You will make a fine wife for a gentleman someday, Beth.”

The words felt like acid on his tongue.

He pushed to his feet, his movements abrupt, trying to distance himself from the

overwhelming need to make her his.

Her eyes lifted to meet his. The uncouth Scot who made her scream.

Her brows knitted together as she processed what he said. The silence suffocated him.
“But not you?”

The room darkened, the warmth snuffed out.

Without answering, Boyd left, not trusting himself to look at her again.

Chapter fifteen

"A rogue who sets a trap for another must tread carefully, lest he find himself ensnared." *The Rogue's Guide to Refinement*

Boyd stared at the fountain, his head on the verge of exploding. The faint taste of prim Miss Croft lingered on his lips. No amount of Highland whiskey could wash it away. Her face—flushed, hopeful—haunted him. Even if he fled to his native land, the memory would follow.

Footsteps shuffled behind him, dragging him from his thoughts. He turned his head sharply, his pulse quickening, but it wasn't her. Of course, it wasn't Beth. After last night, she'd sooner face an executioner than him.

Mrs. Abernathy approached cautiously, as if nearing a bear's den. Boyd must indeed look the part. "Mr. Sandeman, several confirmations have arrived. I wondered what time you'd like to serve dinner."

"What?"

"For the neighbors. The gentry. The Winemakers you invited for the Christmas feast."

The reminder hit like a punch. The scent of baked apples and cinnamon wafted from her. No doubt the kitchen had been working since dawn for this mockery of a celebration.

Tension coiled in his stomach, winding like a constricting vine. The revenge. Images of Croft's sneer flashed through his mind, sharp as broken glass. The wound of humiliation remained raw, throbbing with the call for retribution. Could he do it? To appease the ache he'd nursed all these years, would he expose Beth's vulnerability before a room full of winemakers? Humiliate her? Bile rose, burning the back of his throat.

Beth's eyes surfaced in his mind—bright, trusting, and filled with something that tightened his chest. She had looked at him as if he were more than an uncouth Scotsman, as if there were worth in him beyond anger and ambition.

He would sooner face a firing squad than hurt his lass.

“Cancel it.”

Mrs. Abernathy blinked, startled. “What should I tell them?”

A jagged, mirthless laugh clawed its way out of his throat. “Tell them there's a blight here. Tell them I'm Beelzebub and will eat their daughters. Tell them I've grown horns.” His voice teetered on the edge of control. “Makes no difference to me.”

Boyd tracked the arc of the clay pigeon as it sliced through the air. He lifted his rifle, exhaled, and fired. The crack of the shot echoed across the field as the pigeon exploded in a cloud of dust. The recoil jarred his shoulder, a sharp stab in his already throbbing skull. He should've canceled the damn sport along with the dinner.

At Almo's signal, the trap boy released three pigeons. The duke raised his rifle with smooth precision, firing in quick succession. Each pigeon shattered midair, his aim unerring.

“Leave some for us, will you?” Boyd clenched his gloved fists.

Almoater's gaze flicked to him, assessing. His fingers tapped lightly on the wood of his rifle. "I hear there'll be guests for the Christmas dinner."

"I invited the devil himself and his entourage," Boyd replied, his voice flat, the storm within him barely masked.

He nodded at the boy by the trap, who scurried to prepare the clay. Boyd braced himself, his muscles coiling tight, the cool metal of the rifle pressing against his cheek as he lined up the shot, willing the image of Beth's hurt eyes to dissolve. But it clung stubbornly to the edges of his thoughts. Those beautiful eyes.

"Why invite the neighbors?" Griffin asked, lowering his rifle with a frown. "People you don't know. People you don't even care about."

"Back off," Boyd snapped, his voice biting, his grip tightening as the throb behind his eyes deepened.

Almoater and Griffin exchanged a glance, heavy with unspoken words.

Griffin broke the silence, his tone cutting. "When Almoater told me about this... this despicable revenge—damn it, Boyd. I can't believe you dragged my family here for this."

Boyd crossed his arms. Of course, the cunning duke would figure it out.

Almoater's brow arched, his diplomatic facade unbroken. "If you relent, there's an alternative."

"An alternative?" Boyd's lips curled in mockery.

"The Duke of Beira's daughter," Almoater continued. "Eighteen. Aristocratic. Her

father would welcome a match with someone of your stature.”

If Boyd had been drinking, he’d have choked. “They’d allow this uncouth Scot to sully their bloodlines?”

“She has a dowry and stands to inherit a vineyard in the Alentejo region.”

“Tell the family to save their veins.” The sarcasm tasted bitter even in his mouth.

“I can’t allow you to ruin Croft.” Almoister’s gaze narrowed. “I’m prepared to offer him a deal, and Maxwell will assume his business.”

The ache in Boyd’s chest twisted. How quaint for them. How precious. Beth would be saved and restored to the marriage market, yet he couldn’t summon anger—only a dark, consuming urge to kill any man who came near her.

Boyd lifted the rifle, aimed, and fired. The clay shattered, the sound cracking through the cold air, but satisfaction was fleeting. He lowered the gun, glaring at the men beside him. “Why are you two suddenly united? I thought you hated each other.”

Griffin’s jaw flexed as he cast a sidelong glance at Almoister. “He’s my brother-in-law. I don’t hate him.”

“For hell’s sake.” Boyd’s tone was reckless, biting. “You’ve come to blows more than once. He tried to steal your bride, then took your sister right from under your roof.”

Almoister lowered his rifle, his face unreadable. “That’s in the past. Maxwell’s a man of honor. I admire him. A man’s honor defines him.”

Honor. The word struck him like a blow. He had little of that—came in short supply

while fighting street urchins for food scraps.

Boyd glanced away, shrinking under the weight of their stares. “I canceled the dinner. Croft deserves to rot in hell, but I can’t bring myself to hurt the lass.”

He dropped the gun and sank into a crouch, elbows braced on his knees. The ache in his head pulsed with every heartbeat. “I shouldn’t have ruined Christmas for your families. I had no right.”

What a farce. He’d taken something meant for joy and twisted it, mocking a tradition he barely understood. He pressed his forehead to his gloved hand, shame tightening in his chest. Let them leave. He deserved their scorn, their disdain.

He waited to hear their footsteps fading.

Instead, the men lowered themselves beside him, silent but steady. Griffin’s hand reached out, pressing a flask into Boyd’s grip. The weight of the offer was oddly comforting.

Boyd uncorked it, lifting it to his mouth. The warm, bitter liquid made him gag. He pulled back, coughing. “What’s this?”

“It’s coffee,” Griffin said, smirking.

Boyd stared at it in disgust. “Count on the stoic Englishman to carry that piss instead of liquor.” He shoved it back, reaching for his own flask and uncorking it with a shaky hand.

Griffin raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it early to start drinking?”

Boyd’s chuckle came low and empty. “Start? I never stopped.”

Griffin exhaled, his gaze steady. “That bad? I never thought Eros would bite your ass, old man. Took a long time coming, though.”

A tap on his shoulder made Boyd glance up. Almoater’s expression had softened, his voice quiet but firm. “The heart has ways the mind fails to understand.”

Boyd exhaled. “Beth Croft isn’t what I expected. She—” He swallowed, unable to finish. She’d ruined him.

“Women. Heaven has no bliss without them.” Almoater’s aristocratic tone carried a faint amusement.

Griffin shook his head. “The women were right then. You want her. That changes everything.”

“Changes what?” Boyd’s voice dropped, bitterness creeping in. “I’ve messed up the whole thing. This is nothing like the courtships you two had with your wives.”

Griffin snorted. “The courtships we had were far from perfect.” He gestured toward Almoater. “He seduced my sister while being accused of regicide.”

Almoater raised an eyebrow. “And you seduced Julia while engaged to Beth Croft.”

Griffin cleared his throat, looking slightly sheepish. “The point is, our starts were rough. But they ended all right.”

Neither of them seduced their women while planning to hurt them. Their lives were built on love and loyalty, while his was forged in hate. And now he had a silent, hollow house waiting for him.

Boyd stood. “I’m going to the hunting lodge. You two stay and enjoy Christmas with

your families.”

Chapter sixteen

"A lady values reflection, for wisdom lies in learning from the past and avoiding the repetition of the same mistakes." From *The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace*

“More, Dora. It's not tight enough.”

Beth gripped the bedpost, her knuckles whitening as her maid tugged on the corset laces. Her breaths grew shallow, her torso bending to the will of the garment.

Yesterday, without the corset, she had moved freely, exposed in ways she hadn't expected. It had been uncomfortable and glorious, but—not worth the risk.

No. She needed the corset. Once it closed around her waist, it would patch up this—this wound in her chest.

Beth welcomed the structure, the restraint—a familiar armor that concealed as much as it held together.

Her gown from last night still draped over the chair, a silent rebuke, and beside it, the cello—a witness to things left unsaid. She had allowed no one to see her play, to see her laid bare. But he had coaxed her, peeling back fabric and fears. Still, after seeing her bare, he rejected her. She gripped the post tighter, swallowing back the ache in her throat. She needed to leave before he crushed her heart into something unrecognizable.

The satin creaked as the maid pulled, sculpting her into the fashionable silhouette—a narrow waist hinting at fragility even as it demanded resilience.

She would never set it aside again.

A shadow crossed the floor, and Beth looked up to find Julia standing in the doorway, her gaze sweeping over the half-packed bags.

“As you can see, I’m—”

“Thank you, Dora,” Julia interrupted briskly. “We’ll take it from here.”

Dora hesitated, casting Beth a concerned glance before slipping out.

Beth gazed at the carpet. “I’m sorry I didn’t join you for breakfast—”

“Or dinner,” Anne added, a slight frown creasing her brow.

Beth turned away, adjusting the contents of her bag. “I have a train to catch, as you can see, and my toilette is not complete.”

Anne settled onto the edge of the bed, hands folded over her light blue gown. “You’re leaving? And Boyd—”

“Anne,” Julia cut in, moving closer. “If Beth needs to go, she needs to go.” She reached for the stays. “Here, let me help with those laces.”

“No, I think Dora will—”

“Allow me.” Julia’s hands were already on the hooks, her touch firm where Dora’s had been gentle.

“Nice corset. Parisian, I assume?” Julia’s tone was light, her fingers steady.

“It’s the Fleur de Lis model. Dependable.” The kind of armor that kept foolish impulses in check.

Julia clucked her tongue. “Can’t stomach them myself. Too hard to breathe, don’t you think?”

Beth’s grip tightened on the bedpost. “Not everyone has the luxury to go without.”

Their eyes met in the mirror. Beth’s face was pale, ringed with shadows, while Julia’s gaze held a probing intensity.

“Luxury? Or courage?” Julia’s voice was soft but unwavering.

Beth lifted her chin. “I came here, didn’t I?”

“Barely two days, and you’re already leaving?” Julia’s voice was edged with irony.

Anne stepped forward, her hand resting on Beth’s shoulder. “What Julia is trying to say, Beth, is that Boyd can be difficult, but he’s a good man. Truly.”

Beth’s gaze dropped to her packed case, the folded dresses, the satchel only half-filled. The corset squeezed tighter, memories of Boyd pressing against her—his forbidden kisses, his haunted gaze, his secrets.

“I tried, but it wasn’t enough. A lady should know when it’s time to retreat.”

Anne’s hand tightened on her shoulder. “Not everything worth having comes easily, Beth.”

“What would you know? You have the perfect family and—”

“Perfect?” Anne’s tone softened. “To accept Pedro, I had to let go of everything I thought I knew. I learned that love isn’t the stuff of fairy tales. It takes effort. And sometimes, it hurts.”

The corset pinched tighter, its familiar hold now suffocating.

“For women who can’t risk their hearts, a sturdy corset does wonders.” Julia sighed, pulling the strings. “Less chance of bruising.”

Beth’s fingers curled around the bedpost. “I gave him more than I’ve ever given anyone, and it wasn’t enough.” Her voice wavered, unused to such admissions. “A lady should know when to walk away.”

“She’s right, Anne,” Julia said, tightening the laces again. “A bride will need a tougher spirit to deal with Boyd Sandeman. Perhaps Lady Moira will suit him best.”

Beth tried to pull in a breath, but the corset held her too tightly. “I beg your pardon?”

“She’s eighteen and very pretty, I hear.”

Moira... A porcelain-faced beauty at Boyd’s side. A hot, unbidden ache rose beneath her breastbone. Could a lady commit bodily harm to another? Was that even in the book of etiquette? If it weren’t, she would add an entrance. A lady might, under exceptional circumstances, be permitted a single, well-placed shove to remove insipid rivals from her gentleman’s side.

Beth’s jaw tightened. “I trust Boyd will value substance over mere prettiness.”

Julia’s eyes sparkled. “Perhaps. But you won’t be here to see it, will you? Poor Boyd,

trapped by a pretty face. Do you think she'll enjoy his kisses?"

"Julia!" Anne gasped, horrified. "There's no need to be so harsh."

Beth's hand gripped the bedpost, the corset pressing into her ribs as though it were a size too small. She tried to steady her breath, but the restriction felt unbearable, foreign.

"Stop."

Her voice echoed in the room, quiet but firm.

Julia's hands stilled, her gaze unreadable in the mirror. "Do you love him, Beth?"

The walls seemed to close in. The confines of the corset restrained her lungs, but it was his absence that stole her breath. Her grip on the post tightened. Flashes of the night before rose to the surface—Boyd's touch, his voice, the way he'd made her feel whole and free all at once.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I love him."

Julia nodded. "Then what are you going to do about it? Will you run back to Oporto, hide under layers of lace and steel, or will you stand and fight for the man you love?"

Beth shut her eyes, her heart pounding. Run. It was safer, quieter. But part of her wanted more. To defy the corset, to defy herself, to find that place of moonlight and stars by the river once more.

"Unlace me."

Julia's hands froze. "Are you sure?"

Beth met her gaze in the mirror, a small smile playing at her lips despite her racing pulse. “Yes. A lady needs to breathe if she’s to fight for her Highlander.”

Chapter seventeen

"Christmas is not about grand gestures—it's about slipping under the mistletoe unnoticed." *The Rogue's Guide to Refinement*

Boyd kicked the mud from his boots as he stepped into the hallway, shrugging off his coat. The cold clung to him, seeping into his bones and mingling with the dull ache left by the day's hunt.

He raked a hand through his hair and scowled at the empty foyer. He would grab his correspondence, a fresh bottle of whiskey, and retreat—his presence would mar no one's Christmas Eve.

Midway up the stairs, a misplaced sound stopped him. Voices, faint but unmistakable, drifted through the stillness.

What? He had canceled the feast.

His boots struck the floor in a steady rhythm as he followed the noise, each step dragging him closer to something he wasn't sure he wanted to face. Candlelight spilled through the gap in the winter garden's double doors. Pressing his hands to the wood, he strained to listen. Laughter. The rustle of skirts. The clinking of glasses.

Before he could think better of it, he pushed the doors open.

The winter garden had been transformed.

A Christmas tree stood by the hearth, its branches aglow with tiny candles. Boyd squinted, taking in the delicate ornaments nestled between the needles—ribbons and feathers, a mix of whimsy and care. It reminded him of the frosted shop windows in Edinburgh, where families huddled over steaming cups of cocoa. He used to press his nose to the glass, certain he would never enter such a world.

Griffin and Almoister talked while their children played near the hearth. He had invited them, then abandoned them to fend for themselves. So much for Highland hospitality.

Wrapped gifts lay scattered under the tree. Boyd's gaze softened as it passed Anne and Pedro's twins, asleep in a pram draped with a warm quilt.

And then he saw Beth.

She looked different, more real—her hair loose, cascading in soft waves, a simple white cashmere blouse and plaid skirt embracing comfort over fashion. There was an effortless grace about her, a natural beauty that tugged at something deep within him, twisting it into an ache of longing.

Boyd lingered by the doorway, his shadow stretching into the room, his feet frozen, as if he were still that boy afraid to step inside the shop, certain the clerk would toss him out on his arse for daring to enter this world of warmth and fairytale.

Beth stepped away from the women and approached him, eyes twinkling.

“We were waiting for you, Mr. Sandeman. Would you join us?”

His heart thudded in his chest, though he masked it with a gruff gesture toward the tree. “Yours?”

“You didn’t have any decorations. A winemaker’s wife should be resourceful, don’t you think?”

“That and avoid setting the house on fire,” he said, though he’d let her burn the whole place down if she kept smiling at him like that.

He was staring at her like a mangy dog at a butcher’s window when Julia’s daughter tugged at her skirts.

“Princess Beth, can you play a Christmas song?”

Churlishly, Boyd watched as Beth turned her attention to the child.

“Do you like Silent Night ?”

Clara nodded, her black curls bouncing as she hugged a stuffed bear.

“Did you know it was first played many years ago on a Christmas Eve like this one? A priest wanted music for his congregation, but his church didn’t have a grand organ.”

“What did he do?” Clara whispered.

“He wrote a poem and asked his friend, a schoolteacher named Mr. Gruber, to compose a melody. Instead of using a fancy organ, they played it simply—with a guitar and two voices.”

Beth glanced at Boyd then, her gaze lingering. Was he supposed to find meaning in her words? He couldn’t tear his eyes from her lips long enough to try.

“Everyone was moved because Christmas isn’t about grand things,” she said gently.

Her hand brushed his, light as a snowflake. “It’s about love and acceptance.”

A tightness formed in his throat, his breath catching. To be accepted. The thought twisted in him, sharp and insistent. What was he, a child, moved by a Christmas story?

Beth crossed the room and sat before the tree, placing the cello between her knees. The first notes of Silent Night filled the room, weaving a thread that pulled the guests closer.

She had chosen to share this part of herself, to play openly. Pride swelled in him. He wanted to stride across the room, gather her in his arms, and kiss her in front of everyone.

As the women’s voices joined the melody, Boyd crossed his arms, grounding himself in the sensation of his calloused palms pressing against his sleeves. His throat was dry, and even if he’d wanted to sing, he didn’t know the words.

Beth played the final note, her eyes lifting to find his. What did she want from him? Whatever it was, he didn’t have it to give. He was nothing but a vindictive, uncouth Scot with no right to her warmth.

The room felt too full, too warm, too alive. The murmured voices, the crackling fire, and the scent of pine pressed in on him, making his pulse quicken.

But the way she looked at him—so open, so inviting. Did he dare step inside?

The tightness in his chest expanded, a yearning so deep it felt as if it might consume him.

No.

He had no right to her warmth.

He had grown up, but he would never belong in her fairytale world.

Boyd tipped the flask to his lips, the whiskey burning its familiar path down his throat. The ache in his chest remained, immune to the fire. He stared at the frozen fountain, its once-dancing water still under a veil of ice. The Lowlander bears stood frozen, too, their stony forms more forlorn than majestic. Alone on Christmas Eve. Out of place. Like him.

Footsteps crunched over the gravel behind him, light but sure. He didn't need to turn to know who it was.

"Whiskey, Mr. Sandman?" Her voice had that lilting quality. "What do you seek to forget?"

Forget? His jaw tightened. Forgetting wasn't the problem—it was the remembering that gutted him.

"You shouldn't have left the party, Beth. It's cold here." His voice came out rough, colder than the air biting through his coat.

"It's time to exchange gifts. Won't you come back inside?"

His fingers curled tighter around the flask. "I have nothing to give them."

The silence stretched, the faint hiss of falling snow filling the space between them. He stared at the bears, their chins high and unyielding, wishing he could be as stoic. The snow softened their features, blanketing them in stillness, but it couldn't cover their ridiculousness. Or his.

She caught his hand and turned it palm up. Her gloved fingers barely wrapped around his calloused ones, the contrast of her gentleness and his roughness leaving him unmoored.

“Merry Christmas, Boyd.” She placed a small package on his palm, her voice soft as the snow.

The box was light, almost weightless, but its significance pressed down on him like a stone. He unraveled the ribbon, tucking it into his pocket—it would join the growing collection of things—her things—he couldn’t let go of. The paper crackled as he unfolded it, revealing a yellowed sheet of music, the lines faint and uneven.

“What is this?” His voice was low, rough with an emotion he couldn’t name.

Her gloved fingers brushed the edge of the page. “It’s the sheet of music that helped you sleep.”

His chest constricted. He snapped his gaze to hers, startled by the openness in her face, the quiet sincerity that stripped him bare. “You remembered.”

“I remember everything about you.”

The air thickened, her words carving through his defenses like the keenest blade. She didn’t see the wine baron, the gruff Scot with scars of humiliation hidden beneath his success. She saw him.

He swallowed hard, the muscles in his throat tightening painfully. “I don’t know what to say.”

Her lips tilted into the faintest smile, and she shrugged, an elegant tilt of her shoulders. “A gentleman says thank you when given a gift.”

He didn't feel like a gentleman. Not when her lips, so inviting and earnest, drew his gaze with a magnetic pull. The only woman to see him—the real him—had been the one he had schemed to ruin. A wave of nausea rolled through him. He couldn't deserve her. Not after everything.

“Don't lose your heart to me, Beth.”

Her smile wobbled. “Why? Is a winemaker's wife not supposed to cherish her husband?”

“I'm not fucking worth it.”

Her head tilted slightly, her expression softening. “What if I think otherwise?”

He gritted his teeth, the truth clawing its way to the surface. “Do you know why I invited you here?”

Her gaze didn't waver, though he noticed her fingers twitch against her skirts. “Was it not to show me your bears? They look quite impressive.”

A bitter laugh escaped him, curling into the frosty air. “They look damn ridiculous, and you well know it. The architects sold them as some sort of Highland symbol.”

Her lips curved faintly. “Then tell me. Not about the bears. About your past.”

Her posture remained poised, but her chest rose and fell unevenly, her breath visible in the chill. She didn't know what she was asking for.

“When I first came to Portugal, I was fourteen. Alone. Hungry. I went to the British Factory, to the head of the community.” His voice grew taut, the words cutting through the night like shards of ice. “I asked him for a job. Do you know what your

father said?”

Her gaze flicked to the bears, her back impossibly straight. “Did he invite you for tea? A true gentleman extends the hand of kindness and courtesy to all newcomers.”

Boyd’s laugh was sharp, bitter. “Kindness? He told me I was a filthy Scot, not fit to polish his shoes.”

Her breath hitched, a faint tremor passing through her frame. When her hand rose to his face, her fingers were feather-light, her palm warm against the cold. “I’m sorry,” she said simply. No pity, just understanding.

Her genuine apology cracked something inside him. His throat burned, his jaw tightening against the swell rising in his chest.

“Don’t be sorry for me.” His voice turned sharp, almost desperate. “Not for the man who devised this farce to lure you here. I didn’t bring you for courtship or marriage. I wanted to humiliate you. I planned to tell every winemaker that Croft’s daughter wasn’t fit to be my bride.”

His hands balled into fists, every muscle coiled with self-loathing. He waited for her fury, for the slap he deserved.

But she didn’t run. She didn’t shout. She stood there, her chest rising and falling like she was holding back something far more fragile than rage.

“Why did you cancel the dinner?”

He stared at her, his eyes stinging against the cold. “Because I would rather rot in hell than harm a single strand of your hair.”

The wind whispered through the trees, snowflakes falling softly onto the bears, onto her red hair, the crystals clinging to her lashes.

Beth's voice was steady, almost defiant. "Very well." She turned to him, her green eyes gleaming in the dim light. "What will be my last challenge?"

Boyd blinked, startled. His breath caught, his pulse thrumming hard against his ribs. "You don't have to do this anymore. Almoater will settle your father's debts. You can go home, Beth. The challenges are over."

She hugged her arms to herself, her form small but unyielding. "Who won?"

Boyd shut his eyes, the answer hollowing him out.

"I lost."

Chapter eighteen

"A rogue broods best alone—because no rogue worth his name allows feelings to ruin his perfectly good misery." *The Rogue's Guide to Refinement*

Boyd sat by the window, the music sheet in his hands, the edges crinkled where his grip had tightened. The lines and notes blurred as he stared at them. He traced the faded ink with a finger as if touch alone could coax the melody from the paper. The room was silent, except for the occasional pop from the fire, the sound grating against his nerves. The quiet pressed in on him, each second stretching unbearably, the promise of sleep just out of reach.

Boyd shut his eyes, the notes on the sheet swimming behind his lids. His fingers curled, crumpling the sheet before he forced himself to smooth it out again.

The door creaked open.

His body stiffened, his heartbeat quickening. He glanced at the mirror. His usually neat appearance was disheveled, his jacket thrown over a chair, his cravat loose. She would think him even more of a savage.

"What do you want, Beth? I told you the challenges are over."

Her skirt rustled as she stepped inside, the door clicking shut behind her.

Boyd didn't trust himself to look up.

“I’m not here because of your challenges.”

His temples throbbed as he pressed his fingers to them, expecting the confrontation he deserved—accusations, demands for explanations. “If you’re here to—”

“I have a challenge of my own.”

Boyd’s gaze shot to her.

She stood just beyond the edge of the Persian carpet, her back straight, her eyes resolute.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to disrobe for me.”

His hands fisted on the arms of the chair as his mind reeled. Where had this boldness come from? Was she mocking him? But her expression held no trace of humor. She was in earnest. God help him, she was serious. His English rose had grown thorns.

The room felt warmer, the crackling fire amplifying the heat that prickled along his skin. Her eyes were steady, unflinching as she met his gaze.

Would she never give up? Couldn’t she see he was not worth her? Boyd pushed to his feet, the chair groaning under the force. He opened his arms. “Do you want me naked, Beth? Then suit yourself.”

He waited, half-expecting her to hesitate, to retreat. Instead, she stepped forward, her chin lifted, her eyes glowing. His heartbeat quickened as he counted the seconds until she arrived.

The room went silent. But not the barren silence of his nights, but a pregnant one, filled with the sound of his own pulse drumming in his ears.

She was serious. She was not leaving. She was choosing him, even now, knowing him at his worst.

Beth touched his cheek, her fingers brushing lightly against his stubble before she pressed a chaste kiss to his lips. How did one defend oneself from such a tender attack? The silk of the cravat slipped through her fingers as she unwound it, exposing his throat.

He swallowed hard. If this were her idea of torture, he was ready to confess anything she wished—and she hadn't even touched skin.

She moved to his chest, her fingers deftly unfastening the buttons of his waistcoat. He clenched his fists at his sides, resisting the urge to seize her hands and hasten the torment.

If she goes any slower, I'll break.

She attacked his shirt next, beginning at the collar and slipping the buttons free. With each snap, tension coiled tighter in his gut.

The fabric parted, and when cool air met his flushed skin, he shivered as if he were the virgin.

She eased the shirt over his shoulders. His muscles tensed beneath her fingertips, straining with the effort to remain still. This was agony—and he welcomed it.

Boyd didn't trust himself to move.

Beth went over his clothing with the same quiet grace she brought to every challenge, a dignity befitting her rank but paired with the curiosity that was uniquely hers.

Her teeth caught her lower lip as she slid his braces from his shoulders, letting them hang at his sides. The gesture was simple, but it sent a fresh wave of heat through him.

I'll be ruined before she even gets to the end.

Sweat trickled down his spine as her hands moved to his waistband, her movements unhurried. The fastening gave way, and as she slid the trousers over his hips, cold air brushed against his erection.

Confession? Hell, I'd pledge my soul if she asked.

Boyd cradled her cheek. She met his gaze, certain where he was trembling, cool where he was burning, tender where he was a storm.

"Why are you doing this, Beth?" He searched her eyes. "I proved to be the uncouth Scot your family believed me to be."

Her gaze softened, and she cupped his face, her thumbs brushing along the stubble of his jaw. "You are so much more, Boyd. And you must believe me because a lady cultivates a critical eye, honing her ability to discern character."

She took his hands in hers, pressing her lips to each palm. "These hands cradled Anne's baby with a tenderness that belies everything you pretend to be. They are strong, yes, but capable of care."

She kissed his shoulders, her breath warm against his skin. "These shoulders bear more than the weight of your business. They carry the trust of your friends. They

admire you, because they know your loyalty runs deeper than any title.”

She traced the lines of his arms. His skin hummed, goosebumps rising in the wake of her lips. “You fight for what you love with fierceness. You think it’s all for power, but it’s not—it’s because you look after what you hold dear.”

Her lips trailed down to his chest. “And this heart... It beats with a sense of honor that made you cancel the dinner that would have humiliated me. Even when it cost you your revenge, you chose to protect me.”

The lass must be a sailor because with each word, she unraveled the knots inside him, things that had been tight and hurting for too long. His hands trembled as he gripped her waist, fingers flexing to hold her closer. She was good, this Beth. Too good. And if she could see all that in him—if she could believe it—then maybe it was true.

She leaned up and brushed her lips against the side of his jaw. “You may be rough, moody, and outrageous... but you are also honorable and courageous. When you said I shouldn’t lose my heart to you—”

“Beth, I—”

She silenced him with a fingertip above his lips. “I didn’t. You stole it. Like you lifted my hats and ribbons, you took it right out of my chest, and such a rogue that you are that I didn’t realize it until it was quite too late. I love you, Mr. Sandeman.”

Boyd stared at her, his chest tightening as if the very air conspired against him. “Damn it, lass, a winemaker’s wife isn’t supposed tae bring tears tae a man’s eyes,” his voice came out rough as gravel. “Ye keep surprising me, and I hope tae hell ye’re done, because—”

“Actually, I have a tiny bit of surprise left...”

She tilted her head, a mischievous glint lighting her green gaze. With a flick of her wrist, her coat slipped to the floor, and Boyd's brain stopped working. There she stood—bare as the day she was born. Her fiery hair cascaded over her shoulders like molten temptation, and Boyd's mind stopped working.

His mouth opened, then closed. He rubbed his eyes, half expecting to wake up.

“Beth—” His voice cracked. “Did ye lose the rest of yer wardrobe on the way here, or is this another Christmas gift?”

“You never stand when I'm present, Mr. Sandeman. You must not start doing it so now.”

With surprising strength, she pushed him back into the chair.

If he fell bare-arsed on the overlarge chair, overpowered by his flimsy lass, it must have been because she had shocked him senseless.

“What, I—”

“I want to give you pleasure. The way you gave me yesterday.”

She knelt before him, her eyes widening as she came face to face with the size of his desire for her.

The lass was a virgin, yet the way she looked at his cock was enough to burn a man alive.

When her dainty fingers closed around the base, a groan was pulled out of his chest. He had only moaned as loudly when a horse stomped on his foot.

“Any etiquette rules for this that I should know of?”

“Beth,” he rasped, tracing her lips with a finger. “Just do anything ye want. Anything at all, lass.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she blinked up at him. “Anything?”

“Aye,” he said, leaning back with a sigh. “But do it fast, or just kill me. I’m not sure my heart can take the wait.”

She giggled. “Are you ready, then?”

“Any more ready, and I will poke a hole in the roof.”

The hours of temptation with no relief weighed on his balls, making his cock twitch and buck like a wild horse as her breath wafted over the sensitive skin. Eyes shining with her unique curiosity, she leaned over him. When her tongue came out to lick the head, Boyd gripped the armrests.

He died a little when she brushed her lips against his cock, and when she closed them around the smooth curve of the head, he went to heaven. And that was only the beginning. The wicked lass licked tentatively, her tongue flattening against him as if searching for sweetness in a snow cone.

Purring, her lips glided along the length, leaving a slick trail in their path, painting him in desire’s every shade. When a bead of pre-cum gathered over the head, she caught it with a quick flick of her tongue.

Boyd’s eyes rolled back in his head, his breathing shallow, as if he’d just swum a mile in a freezing loch.

Her little hands grabbed the base, and then she tilted it, pressing it against the roof of her mouth. The pleasure was too much, beyond what a rogue like him could endure.

She looked comfortable enough to last several hours with her new pastime, but he was hard enough to rival a claymore.

“Enough, Lass.”

Groaning, Boyd pulled her until she straddled him. He thanked the architect who bought such an oversized, throne-like chair.

When she settled atop him, he dried the moisture from her chin.

“Are you sure you want this?”

“Would I be here, nude in your lap, if I wasn’t sure?”

“I think—”

For the second time this night, she shushed him.

“A winemaker should learn when to be silent.”

He was lost when she threaded her hands over his hair and pulled him in for a kiss. Her tongue pushed inside his mouth, and it was all he could do not to howl to the moon.

“I like kissing you, Mr. Sandeman.”

“Even naked?”

“Especially naked,” she whispered, her smile mischievous.

He let out a breathless laugh as she pressed closer. “Oh, I’ve gone and created a monster,” he muttered, barely managing the words between her relentless kisses.

He watched their reflection in the mirror—her fair skin made golden by the firelight, her red hair cascading down her shoulders, her back flaring into delicious buttocks. He cupped her ass cheeks, his hands’ bronzed skin vivid against the whiteness of her curves, and pressed her against his erection.

Lowering his hand slowly, he penetrated her sex, testing her with a digit. She was wet and tiny. His heart sped, his breathing shallow. This was going to be hard work. But they had all night.

“Are ye aware of what goes where, Beth?”

Her hips moved against him, her lips parting sweetly. “I have a rudimentary understanding, yes.”

Boyd let out a shaky sigh. “Thank goodness, because in my current state, an anatomy lesson would be beyond my endurance.”

She pushed closer, her heat brushing against his length as he circled her little bud.

“This is it, lass, ride my cock. Take all the pleasure you want.”

She came from the friction alone, her thighs trembling, a flush spreading from her chest to her cheeks as her lips parted in a breathless cry. She clung to him as though he were the only thing anchoring her to the world.

Boyd stood. His last thread of conscience told him he must carry her to the bed, that

one didn't deflower virgins while sitting in a chair, no matter how comfortable or expensive.

He stumbled twice in his haste, and when he finally arrived at the massive four-poster, he could have released his arms from around her. His cock was so hard it could carry her by itself.

He placed her in the center of the silk sheets.

She was untried. And he was harder than a randy goat.

When it came to sex, he liked naked, messy, and hot. How did one bed a virgin lady?

He crawled to her, and because her legs were open and her sex was there, glistening, he devoured her, just because he could. When a climax made her shudder, he climbed to her side.

She was lazy now, her hair in disarray, her eyes heavy-lidded.

He knew all the Venus in Furs ' engravings positions, but better rule out any acrobatics.

Boyd turned her onto her side, guiding her as he stretched out behind her. His chest pressed against the soft curve of her back, his body enveloping hers. He smoothed his hand down her hip, his calloused fingers tracing the dimples on her lower back.

He kneaded her flanks, his palm pressing into her flesh, easing the tension that rippled beneath her skin. His breath fanned against her nape as he leaned closer.

"Love, this first time will sting a bit."

Panting, Boyd traced the curve of her spine, revering her delicate lines. Taking his cock in hand, he brushed it against her entrance, his breath hitching as he felt her warmth.

“I’m going to enter you from behind,” he murmured, his voice low and steady, “so you can control how deeply I go. If I hurt you, love, clench your buttocks, and I’ll stop.”

She huffed, her brow furrowing as she glanced back at him. “Must I do all the work? I thought this was the time when a lady simply lay back and... well, endured.”

A chuckle rumbled from him, and he kissed her shoulder, lingering before tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m a big man, and you’re little here, between your legs. We’ll take it slowly. Always slow.”

Her lips parted in a soft breath as she nodded, the blush blooming over her cheeks reaching the tips of her ears.

“I trust you,” she whispered.

Boyd positioned her leg atop his. His cock found the entrance to her sex like a divining rod bending over a hidden wellspring. His hips buckled of their own free and randy will.

She stiffened beneath him, her breath catching sharply.

What was he doing? His chest constricted. Dropping his head into the crook of her neck, he pressed a kiss there, his voice a rough whisper. “I cannot be the gentleman you expect, Beth.”

She arched her back, her hips pressing into him. “I don’t want a gentleman. I want

you just as you are.”

Her admission shattered what little restraint he had left. He laughed, the sound low and uneven, as he dragged his tongue along the curve of her neck. “Then heaven help ye, lass.”

Slowly, deliberately, he thrust his hips. The head of his cock slid past her entrance, and her heat wrapped around him like molten silk. He brushed his chin against her shoulder, savoring the contact, and pushed deeper. Her luscious slickness stole his breath, her body a tight, welcoming haven.

A moan escaped her lips, sending a bolt of pleasure through him. He turned her face toward his, capturing her mouth in a deep, open-mouthed kiss, offering his lips as comfort. Two thrusts, and he met her barrier. She was so tight. He had to go slow.

Holding her hip, he pushed forward, breaking her maidenhead.

Her cry rang out, raw and unguarded, her head lifting from the pillow as her fingers curled against his forearm. Boyd stilled, his heart pounding fiercely, his lips drawing assurances against her skin.

“Shh... it’s all right,” he whispered, his voice hoarse with reverence as he paused to let her adjust.

Boyd trailed kisses over her cheek, her jaw. “No more pain, love. Never again.”

He began to move in slow, measured strokes, her tightness and warmth consuming him, each glide stealing the breath from his lungs. The ache was almost too much, but he welcomed it, determined to hold back until her pleasure bloomed.

He felt the shift in her when she relaxed her leg, the cheeks of her buttocks going lax,

allowing him to enter her fully.

“Yes, lass, take me inside you, all of me.”

Boyd slid his hand over the curve of her hip, his fingers finding her clitoris. He circled it slowly, teasingly, coaxing her to feel the same fire that consumed him.

Beth’s eyes squeezed shut, her teeth sinking into the soft flesh of her hand.

Was he hurting her? His movements faltered.

“What is it, love?” His voice dropped. “Why are ye tense as a hare cornered by a Highland hound?” He cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing against her flushed skin.

Her lips trembled. “A lady’s passion must be softened by modesty.”

His breath came out in a sharp exhale, equal parts frustration and desire. This lass and her damnable guidebooks.

“Beth, not here,” he growled, his voice thick as he pressed deeper, filling her completely. He held still, making her feel every inch of him, his hands firm on her hips. “None of that in my bed. My Beth doesn’t hide.”

Her eyes fluttered open, the wide, green gaze locking onto his as her breath hitched. He tapped her mound, adding to his assault on her clit.

“My Beth,” he murmured, his lips brushing against her ear, “can be wild, scream to her heart’s content. Let me hear your pleasure, love.”

A tremulous moan escaped her lips, and her body arched, her hips pushing back to meet his.

“Ahhh,” she keened, her eyes rolling as Boyd pushed deeper, grinding his hips into her backside.

“Louder, Beth. Fill my life with your voice.”

He thrust, and thrust and thrust, and her answering cry broke free, her body clenching around him.

Her head fell back against the pillows, her mouth open, breaths spilling in ragged gasps. She was a vision of unguarded beauty—milky skin flushed with heat, her curves pliant under his touch, utterly and entirely his. He pressed her breast, his thumb teasing her nipple in rhythm with the slow, deliberate strokes of his hand. Her release crested like a wild, untamed wave, her belly trembling against his palm, the sound of her pleasure fierce and raw, echoing through the room like a Highland battle cry.

He needed closer to her. Boyd withdrew only to guide her onto her back, his pulse pounding with the need to claim every inch of her anew.

Legs spread apart, she opened her arms to him. He lowered his weight to her, chest to chest, and slipped inside her sex until he was seated to the hilt.

He buried his face in her neck, breathing in the intoxicating scent of her skin.

The bed creaked beneath them as he penetrated her, and he relished the sound of their lovemaking, a conquest over the silence that had plagued his life.

Boyd held her close as they pushed into each other. He didn't know who was entering who anymore, both giving and receiving, both grounded and weightless, lost and found in each other's arms. His vision blurred as she kissed his jaw, and his chest ached, his heart swelling to hold every bit of her.

“Sweet, sweet Beth,” he murmured, his voice rough and breathless as his lips traced over her eyelids, her brows, lingering over each freckle.

His climax hovered just out of reach, an unbearable tension coiling in his spine and radiating through every nerve in his body. Desperate, needing something of hers inside him, he claimed her mouth, sucking her tongue, tasting her as if he could consume her essence. The soft, yielding press of her lips undid him.

Pleasure surged through him in relentless, shattering waves, his shout tearing free. He poured himself into her, every pulse of release a surrender, his seed spilling inside her in long, delicious runs.

Boyd rolled away from her, breathless and spent, and stared at the ceiling—the same unremarkable one they’d just been shouting at together.

He would tell the architect to add a fresco up there. Something lively to inspire their whooping.

He turned his head toward her.

“Did I pass your test, Beth?”

She looked over at him, a teasing smile curving her lips. “A lady must test a second time, for only through careful attention can she be truly certain.”

He let out a deep, satisfied chuckle. “Och, what a cruel lass ye are.”

He reached over and threaded his fingers through hers, squeezing her hand. His body weighed a thousand pounds, every muscle pleasantly heavy. For the first time in as long as he could remember, his heart was light. So this was peace. Funny how he didn’t mind this new sort of silence.

Chapter nineteen

“A lady must ensure her home remains a place of comfort and propriety, gently reminding guests that conviviality should not extend to the hour that disturbs the household’s slumber.” From *The Polite Companion: A Lady’s Guide to Social Grace*

So this was lovemaking. Beth lay still, her limbs deliciously heavy, her body humming with the aftershocks of what they’d just shared. She blinked at the ceiling, stilling herself to take it in—the warmth on her skin, the ache of satisfaction deep within. Her gaze drifted to Boyd’s figure as he left the bed, his movements smooth, muscles flexing under the faint light. She found herself transfixed, her eyes lingering on the sculpted lines of his back, down to his hips. His buttocks flexed as he crossed the room. Was it... acceptable to stare at one’s lover like this? She almost laughed at herself—he was too handsome to resist, and she could always blame exhaustion, couldn’t she?

When Boyd returned with a cloth, his eyes widened at her open admiration, and a slow grin spread across his face. One thing was clear—whatever the expected boudoir etiquette, Boyd didn’t seem to mind her staring.

“See somethin’ ye like, lass?”

Beth’s cheeks flamed. “Admiring your... craftsmanship, Mr. Sandeman.”

His grin deepened as he sat, the bed creaking under his weight. “Craftsmanship, is it? Careful, lass. Compliments like that might give me ideas.”

His expression softened, and he brushed the cloth tenderly along her inner thighs, then upward to her sensitive flesh. The intimacy of the gesture made her cheeks flame, her heart pounding as he took care of her, his gaze reverent.

She stifled the impulse to move or cover herself. This went against everything she had ever learned of modesty but how good it felt.

He finished, then tossed the cloth aside and lay back, his arm slipping around her waist as he drew her close. His body was warm, solid, a fortress around her. She should have felt contented, perhaps even brave. Instead, a nervous flutter took hold. What happened now? She'd been bold enough to come to him, to share herself with him like this, but...

“Should I... return to my room?” Her voice wavered, and she couldn't bring herself to look at him.

He raised an eyebrow. “Why would ye do that, lass?”

Before she could answer, he pulled her atop his chest with ease, as if she were a rag-doll—albeit one that was utterly exhausted, utterly breathless, and utterly his. She collapsed against him, her head resting on his shoulder, feeling his heartbeat beneath her cheek, a steady, comforting rhythm.

Beth sighed. “It's late, and you need your rest, so...”

Heat flooded her face as he caressed her bare skin, fingers lingering at her breast before circling her nipple with a lazy, knowing touch. Her pulse quickened, his heat igniting a wave of longing through her.

Boyd's hand slid up her back, tracing circles at her shoulder. “Rest?” he whispered, his voice laced with mischief. “Oh no, Beth. I plan on making love to ye all night.”

Her eyes widened, her heart racing anew. “All night?” Her voice squeaked. “But... I thought a couple only—” She stopped herself, mortified.

Boyd’s laugh rumbled through her. “Ye thought? Lass, it seems I’ve got a lot to teach ye. And dinna fret—I’m a verra patient tutor.”

Her eyes widened as she felt herself melt under his gaze, his promise setting her heart racing again. “But what about the others—what will they think?” They’ve already been quite vocal as it was. How would they face them in the morning?

He grinned. “I don’t care.”

His wicked hands caressed her intimately, his fingers penetrating her slickness before guiding himself to her entrance. A shudder rippled through her as he pressed forward, his heat filling her inch by inch until she was utterly consumed.

His highlander growl sent a thrill skittering up her spine, and his lips captured hers with a desperate intensity. His kiss stole her breath, claiming her in a way that left no part of her untouched. Beth clutched him, her body trembling as the rhythm of their connection pulsed through her.

“Prepare your throat to scream plenty, love,” Boyd murmured against her ear. “Because until I’ve had my fill of ye, no one in this house sleeps.”

With that, he pulled her flush against him, leaving no space between them. His possessiveness sent a thrill through her, a pulse that traveled from her chest to her core. His heat surrounded her, his body a furnace that burned away every thought but one—him, her wicked Highlander.

Chapter twenty

"A lady departs a party with the same elegance she entered, offering warm thanks to her host and ensuring her exit is as gracious as her presence." From *The Polite Companion: A Lady's Guide to Social Grace*

Beth lay beside Boyd as dawn filtered through the curtains. Sunlight cast soft rays over his face. There were no worries or judgments in his smooth brow, only peace. She studied him, memorizing his angle and lines. According to society's rules, she had every right to expect marriage from him. A way to save her family, her father's reputation, and perhaps even her own heart, if she could dare to hope he felt anything close to what she did.

But at what cost? Her love for him was raw and visceral, pushing her to defy everything she'd once held sacred. But Boyd... his hatred for her father was as deeply rooted as his honor. Could she really demand this from him? Could she bind him to the man he despised? To her?

The sounds of the stirring household invaded the bedroom—a jarring reminder of reality. All would expect him to do the “right thing.” A life bound by duty, by rules she had willingly broken for his sake. She could hear her mother's voice, urging her to secure the grand wedding she'd always wanted. It would be easy—she could fall back to sleep beside him, let the house believe what it would, and awake to a new life as his fiancée.

But it would be a lie. Should she force him into a union he would later resent? Love didn't deserve to become a societal bargain.

He deserved the freedom to choose, and she earned more than a marriage built on duty. Locking a sob in her throat, she crept out of bed. Each step cost her dearly, the urge to turn around and stay threatening to consume her.

Back in her room, she shut the door and let the tears fall. Her hands trembled as she reached for a canvas bag, shoving her belongings inside with frantic movements.

Dora glided inside. “Merry Christmas, Lady Beth.”

Her gaze flickered over Beth’s tear-streaked face, then to her bag. “Where are we going?”

“Back to Oporto.”

“But it’s Christmas! What about your luggage? Your trousseau?”

Beth’s eyes dropped to the floor. “I’ll take only what I need for the train and my cello.” The thought of leaving the instrument behind was unbearable.

Dora’s brow furrowed. “Will you leave Mr. Sandeman? After last night, I thought you liked him.”

“I don’t like him in the least. Like is far too tame for one’s feelings about a Highlander. I love him.”

Dora tilted her head, watching her intently. “Then—”

“That’s why I can’t stay,” Beth brushed away her tears. “Not when I know what staying would cost him.”

“You rich people are ridiculous, really.”

Beth let out a hollow laugh. “Perhaps we are.” She drew in an unsteady breath. “I’ll ask the housekeeper to send everything else back to me. Now come, Dora. We have to reach the train station before he wakes.”

Chapter twenty-one

"A rogue may charm or conquer, but it's his silence that often costs him the most."
The Rogue's Guide to Refinement

Boyd yawned awake. He hadn't slept so soundly in years. As the dream's haze left him, he stretched his sore muscles. Beth was his now. He'd broken the vow to keep her at arm's length, and for once, tradition was on his side. Beth would expect a wedding, wouldn't she? Society's own rules had fallen into his lap, sparing him the bother of flowery courtships and genteel marriage proposals.

They'd have a quiet Christmas breakfast with the guests, and then, come afternoon, he'd take her to the kirk, say their vows, and put this whole thing to bed. She'd be his bride, her family's debts seen to, her future secured at his side.

With a lighter heart than he'd had in ages, he reached across the mattress to find her... only to hit empty sheets. He sat up. Surely, she hadn't left? A society lass like Beth wouldn't dare wander off after a night like theirs, would she? Likely just getting ready.

He strode down the hallway, the silence thick around him, each step too loud in his ears. Reaching her room, he pushed open the door.

The drawers were half-empty, the little tokens she favored already gone. Where was the cello? His jaw clenched as the sight hit him like a cold slap.

Chest squeezed tight, he descended the stairs to the breakfast room.

Julia clapped her hands, and Anne kissed his cheek. Griffin gave a knowing smile, and Almoater stopped bouncing little Pedro to offer an enigmatic, almost friendly nod.

“Where is the lucky bride?” Anne looked at him strangely, as if she could find Beth in his bloody pockets.

Where indeed.

“She left me.”

Maxwell spilled his coffee, Julia’s hand flew to her mouth, and Anne’s gasp cut through the air. A baby’s startled wail broke the quiet, and Almoater’s expression would frighten a lesser man.

Griffin leaned forward with a frown. “Left you? What did you do to her?”

Boyd’s glare was sharp enough to cut, but before he could reply, Clara padded near, staring at him with her wide blue eyes.

“But Mam?, you told me the princess loved the beast and would marry him.”

Julia’s cheeks flushed. “Children these days, they... well, they hear things.”

Boyd’s chest twisted. She had said she loved him. Why would she leave if she loved him?

He sank into the nearest chair, his hands gripping the armrests as his guests watched him in a silence that felt heavier than the Douro’s winter mist. Julia and Anne exchanged a glance, their earlier amusement now tinged with something closer to pity. Griffin opened his mouth as if to say something but thought better of it, his

frown deepening.

Almoester narrowed his eyes, his voice solemn. “Sometimes honor means leaving when it would be easier to stay.”

Leaving because of honor? That made no sense—unless... Boyd’s mind reeled, piecing together the moments he’d been too blind to see clearly. The knot in his stomach twisted tighter. He had given her no reassurances. He had assumed she would take his vow to marry her if he ruined her as enough. But it wasn’t.

Beth had left because she cared enough to give him a choice, to set him free of obligation.

Boyd’s breath caught in his chest. She hadn’t walked away for her pride. She had done it for him. To protect him from the weight of a promise he might not be ready to offer.

“She left me to take me off the hook.” The truth settled like an ache in his bones.

The daft, honorable lass. She’d walked away not because she didn’t love him, but because she did.

“Will the princess return?” Clara said, her gaze finding Boyd’s.

He pressed a hand to his temple, forcing down the gnawing doubt that rose in him. What if she won’t come back? He clenched his jaw, refusing to let the thought take root.

The room erupted into a buzz of suggestions, everyone speaking at once.

Julia clicked her tongue. “You have to speak to her. She is an intelligent, sensible

girl. I'm sure she will listen to reason."

Anne shook her head, lips pressed into a thoughtful line. "No, it calls for a grand, romantic gesture. Something heartfelt that will sweep her off her feet."

Almo's voice rose above the dim of their well-meaning suggestions. "I have a cavalry regiment stationed in Peso da Régua. One wire from me, and we can stop her train. You'd have your bride back in time for Christmas lunch."

Boyd shook his head. "I can't win her that way. No more schemes. I'll have to ask for her hand like a proper gentleman." He owed it to her. Even if it meant facing her father.

Griffin slapped his back. "I know Croft well enough—I can handle that man. I'll make him see reason if it comes to that."

Boyd could only watch, torn between amusement and awe, as his friends plotted and planned.

Just as he opened his mouth to protest, a small voice piped up.

"Will he have to slay another dragon to bring Princess Beth back?" Clara asked, her face flushed with excitement.

Boyd narrowed his eyes. "Another?"

Julia pulled her daughter close with a chuckle, glancing at Boyd with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Why? Weren't you and Beth slaying dragons last night? It sounded as if you had a full party of them upstairs."

Boyd's jaw tightened as laughter rippled through the group. He crouched to Clara's

height, doing his best to ignore the heat creeping up his neck and the knowing smirks surrounding him.

“It was a fierce one, lass,” he said, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Big as a house, with claws sharp enough to cut through steel.”

Clara gasped, her little hands clasping together. “Did you use a sword?”

Aye, he did. All night. Boyd’s back was sore, his thighs aching like he’d truly gone to battle. But he wasn’t about to explain that to a lass of five—or this gaggle of smug adults. The grins on their faces only deepened, and he shot them a withering glare before turning to Clara.

“No sword needed, lass. Just quick thinking and Highland grit. The dragons are gone now, and they won’t be comin’ back.”

“But what if—”

“Here.” He fished into his pocket, pulling out a silver coin and pressing it into her hand. “Buy some sweets.” Or ear plugs...

Boyd turned to the rest of the room. Their mirth faded, and they eyed him expectantly, each of whom was willing to ride out with him to bring Beth back. Their loyalty wrapped around him like a mantle, filling the spaces he hadn’t realized were empty. This was what it felt like to belong, to have people who wanted the best for him, not out of duty or debt, but out of care.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice roughened by emotion. “I couldn’t wish for a better family this Christmas. But this is something I have to do alone. Stay here, enjoy my lousy hospitality, and I promise I’ll bring Beth back.”

Cheers and clapping followed him as he turned on his heel. The crisp morning air bit his skin, but it couldn't cool the fire that burned in his chest. With renewed purpose, Boyd strode across the front drive, his boots crunching against the frostbitten gravel.

Reggie awaited him with his horse, the lad standing stiff as a church steeple, the reins clutched tightly in his gloved hands. Boyd vaulted into the saddle with practiced ease, already bracing himself for the long, cold hours—first to the station, then to Oporto.

He nudged the stallion forward but reined in sharply at the sight ahead—three workers circling the fountain like vultures around a carcass.

His eyes narrowed. “What the hell are you doing?”

The nearest worker hesitated, a crowbar in one hand and a sheepish look on his face. “We’ve orders to tear it down, sir.”

Boyd’s gaze darted to the bears. His bears. The stone creatures stood shivering in the pond. Damn it if they didn’t resemble Highlander bears in the morning light.

“You touch my bears,” he growled, his voice a low rumble, “and I’ll ensure you regret it.”

The workers exchanged confused glances, their tools lowering as Boyd’s steely glare pinned them in place. Without another word, he nudged his horse into motion, the beast kicking up a plume of dust as they cantered toward the train station.

Over his shoulder, he called out, “Find something else to break. The blasted roof, for all I care. But leave the bloody bears alone.”

Chapter twenty-two

"A rogue may be forged by spite, but only love can temper his steel." The Rogue's Guide to Refinement

Boyd stepped into Croft's entry hall, his boots echoing on the marble floors that once struck him as the height of refinement. The grand staircase curved above him, a hulking, ornamental beast, but its polish had dulled, the edges of each step slightly worn. Portraits of Croft's ancestors hung on the walls. Their once-vivid faces had faded over years of sunlight exposure.

The butler approached, his livery frayed at the cuffs, and bowed. "Mr. Sandeman, Mr. Croft awaits you in his study."

Boyd nodded, the tightness in his chest growing. The last time, he had been greeted by disdain and a razor-sharp dismissal that had cut him down before he'd had a chance to speak. He'd left then, humiliated, the mocking words echoing in his mind for years afterward.

But he was not that youth anymore. At least, he reminded himself, he shouldn't be.

He wasn't here to seek Croft's approval—he was here for Beth, and for whatever future they might build together.

The butler led him through the familiar corridors. Boyd found himself gripping his gloves tighter, nerves he thought he'd left behind clawing their way back.

The door loomed as imposing as ever. The butler opened it with a slight bow, stepping aside to let Boyd enter. He squared his shoulders, steeling himself for the encounter.

Croft sat behind a massive mahogany desk, papers spread before him, his figure gaunt, yet his eyes sharp as they flicked up to meet Boyd. The man who had once stood as an imposing symbol of wealth and prestige now appeared shriveled, his skin drawn tight over his bones, his hair a ghostly white. Even the mustaches that had once curled like the tusks of some noble beast, had withered to greasy wisps clinging to his upper lip.

The object of Boyd's hatred had become a relic of his former self.

"Boyd Sandeman," Croft said. There was no warmth, no welcome, just a vague acknowledgment, as if Boyd were a necessary inconvenience.

Boyd inclined his head, determined to keep his composure. "Mr. Croft."

Croft cleared his throat, a cough raking through his chest and sending a shiver through his shoulders. "When the girl returned this morning with red-rimmed eyes, I assumed the worst. But here you are." His tone held that familiar edge of contempt, as if he were watching Boyd through a fogged lens, unable or unwilling to see the man he had become.

Boyd took a steadying breath. "I came to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

Croft let out a mocking laugh. "Ha. I knew it." He leaned back, his gaze narrowing as he surveyed Boyd with an air of satisfaction, as though Boyd were a pawn finally moving as expected. "You're a businessman, just like myself, Mr. Sandeman. You don't let family grievances get in the way of ambition. I choose my son-in-law well." He gave a thin, self-satisfied smile. "I know you'd accept my proposal to unite Croft

& Associates. with Sandeman's."

Boyd's jaw tightened, his pulse thrumming in his ears. How many times had he rehearsed this moment—when Croft would acknowledge his worth so Boyd could voice his rejection? Still, the words would not come. Boyd didn't want to humiliate the man in front of him. All he wanted was to end this so he could find Beth.

"I don't want to marry Beth because of your company. If it were up to me, I'd sooner leave it to rot. You may rest assured that Beth and I will rebuild Croft & Associates. But it won't be mine. I'll make it clear in the marriage contract that the company belongs to her—and, one day, to our children."

Croft's face contorted, as if he were trying to choke down a live frog. Boyd could almost see the struggle in his mind—the incomprehension at a man turning down a chance to expand his power. They were not the same—not in the slightest. Croft would never understand what it meant to want something—or someone—for their own sake, untouched by ambition.

Boyd straightened, letting his gaze settle on Croft with a quiet finality. "If you'll excuse me. I'll see my bride now."

Chapter twenty-three

"Even the fiercest of rogues learns that love doesn't follow rules—it writes its own, often at his expense." *The Rogue's Guide to Refinement*

Beth entered the morning room, her heart racing as she rehearsed her speech. Stay focused. She'd tell him he didn't need to feel honor-bound, that she could handle the consequences of her choices herself.

He sat in the armchair. She took a steadying breath, her pulse quickening as she drank in his handsome profile—sunlight poured over him like molten gold, catching in the tousled waves of his dark hair and tracing the bold lines of his cheekbones.

Her rugged Scot didn't stand when he saw her, merely lifted his eyes to her—those blue eyes that held a light of their own, drawing the room's warmth toward him.

"You don't have to do this," she began, her voice firmer than she felt. "I know you vowed that if you ruined me, you would marry me. But I was the one who came to your room, and I won't allow you to pay—"

Boyd lifted his hand, and the commanding gesture held her mid-sentence. Beth's throat tightened, and she gripped her skirts, caught off-guard.

His lips curved—firm, sculpted, and maddeningly unreadable. "Before ye dismiss me outright, I've one more challenge for ye, Miss Croft."

She blinked, her mind scrambling to keep up. "A challenge?" She tried to laugh it off.

“I really don’t think—”

“Humor me, love. Consider it... a test of yer judgment.”

His lopsided grin sent a thrill through her. She braced herself, drawing her shoulders back.

“If you deem it necessary...”

Boyd’s eyes gleamed, and he crossed his legs, as if savoring her reply, his expression turning as serious as it was infuriating. “Right then. Tell me, Beth—what’s strong as a mountain, stubborn as a mule, and fierce as a wolf when it comes tae protectin’ what he holds dear?”

She blinked. What on earth is he—then it dawned on her. The answer was absurdly obvious. “A Highlander?”

“Aye,” he replied, his tone gentling, his eyes losing the mischievous spark as they held hers. “Why would such a Highlander travel halfway across the land, freezing his arse, braving a house full of well-meaning guests and one inquisitive little girl, and grace your doorstep on this fine Christmas day?”

Beth’s gaze flew to his, and she swallowed, willing her voice not to shake. “Why?”

Boyd reached out, catching her hand. His voice softened to a murmur. “Because he’s in love, Beth. Helplessly, hopelessly in love with a daft English lass who gave him back his heart and his hope.”

Her own heart pounded, a giddy ache flooding her chest. She struggled to keep her composure, but her chin quivered, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Boyd traced small circles over her knuckles, his gaze unguarded. “So what do ye say, lass?”

Laughter bubbled up through her tears, her chest tightening with an aching joy that was almost unbearable. “Really, Mr. Sandeman? Will you never learn that you should stand in the presence of a lady?”

The corners of his mouth softened into a tender grin, his eyes brimming with warmth. “Och, lass. I’ll do ye one better.”

Her Highlander sank to one knee, his hand never leaving hers, his expression open, as if this moment meant everything. Her breath caught as she looked down at him, her heart soaring.

“Will ye marry me?”

Beth dropped to her knees before him. She nodded, her lips trembling. “Yes, Boyd. Yes, a thousand times.”

Beth cupped his stubbled jaw, her thumb tracing the contours of his face. A life with him was now so close she could taste it.

Their eyes met, and in that shared gaze, she felt a pull stronger than anything she’d known, a draw as fierce and consuming as the wild Highland winds. She leaned in, her lips meeting his, soft at first, as if savoring each moment, each breath. But his hand slid to her waist, tugging her close, and her restraint dissolved, her kiss deepening with all the yearning she’d held back, all the dreams she’d barely dared to imagine.

As their mouths moved together, her fingers tangled in his hair, her body humming with the electricity of his touch, the heat of his skin. Every brush of his lips, every

tender tug of his hand against her waist, promised a future brimming with adventures, with wine tastings and vineyard escapades. She wanted it all— the storms, the wild, uncharted moments, and the peace she felt here, with him.

“Does this mean the challenges are over?”

He smiled, pressing his forehead against hers, his thumb brushing her cheek. “Never, lass. You just wait for what I planned for the harvest.”

With that, he rose, pulling her to her feet. “Come along, then.”

“Where are we going?” She blinked, caught between laughter and disbelief.

“To get married, of course.”

“These things take time. Banns must be posted for at least three weeks, and this is hardly enough to arrange a proper breakfast. My mother dreams of a grand reception, and the poor dear—”

Before she could finish, Dora walked in, her eyebrows raised. “So, the Scotsman finally showed his face. And what will you be snatching today, Mr. Sandeman?”

Boyd’s grin turned downright wicked, a glint in his eyes that sent a shiver down Beth’s spine. “Ah, Dora, ye’ve just inspired me.”

His arm snaked around Beth's waist, and the world tilted—one moment, her feet were on the carpet, the next, she was draped unceremoniously over his broad shoulder.

“Boyd Sandeman, have you lost your wits?” She thumped against his back, though not with any real conviction.

The bounce of his stride made her feel as if she were caught in some wild, ridiculously gorgeous dream.

“Careful, lass,” Boyd said, his voice thick with amusement as he secured her legs with one arm, his other hand resting possessively on her thigh. “Wouldn’t want ye tumbling down before I’ve stolen ye proper. I’m lifting my bride, as a proud Highlander should.”

“I told you, Lady Beth,” Dora said. “Those Highlanders don’t rest until they’ve carried their women off to their caves.”

“Dora!” Beth sputtered, her face flaming. “Don’t encourage him.”

His gaze landed on the cello. With a quick nod, he grabbed it by the neck with his free hand.

“And me, Mr. Sandeman? Am I invited?”

He shot Dora a wink. “Come along if you must, but don’t expect me to carry you off, too. My back will be achin’ enough on the morrow.”

Beth’s mother burst into the room. “What in heaven’s name are you doing, Mr. Sandeman?”

He barely paused, grinning. “Exactly what it looks like, Mrs. Croft. The uncouth Scot is stealing his bride.”

Her mother gasped, clutching her pearls. “But... what about the wedding? The banns?”

“You can send for us when all is ready. No expense should be spared. Plan it fit for a

princess.”

Her mother’s eyes lit up with the sparkle of all the extravagance she’d ever dreamed of. She sank into a chair, a hand pressed to her heart, practically swooning. “Oh...oh, indeed, yes. Fit for a princess.”

With Beth laughing over his shoulder, cello in one hand, and a determined stride, Boyd marched off, a Highlander on a mission to make his bride—and her entire entourage—his own.

As their carriage rattled to a stop outside Boyd’s estate, Beth glimpsed the grand entrance and, just to the side, the fountain, its waters shimmering in the afternoon light. She could feel Boyd’s pulse quicken where his hand rested on hers. This was it—their future.

When the postilion boy opened the door, Beth moved to step out, but Boyd hopped out first, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

“Stay put, lass,” he commanded, his brogue thick with excitement.

He ducked back inside and gathered her up like she weighed nothing at all.

“Boyd!” she yelped, but her protest dissolved into a laugh.

His grin was wicked as he strode toward the estate, his bride cradled possessively in his arms.

“It’s tradition, lass,” he said, his voice a rumble in her ear. “A Highlander carries his wife over the threshold. A matter of pride.”

The house sparkled ahead, its golden windows glowing in the twilight. Boyd

stiffened, his attention shifting. Beth followed his gaze to Reginald, the poor footman emerging from the stables in his ludicrously ornate livery, its bright buttons gleaming even in the dim light. He spotted them and, with a determined set to his jaw, began his march toward the front door.

“Oh, no.” Beth groaned.

Boyd adjusted her on his chest. His grip tightened, and he leaned forward like a Highlander storming the battlefield. His boots crunched against the gravel as he angled toward the door with all the stubbornness of a man who refused to lose.

Her ribs shook with suppressed laughter as she bounced in his arms. “Boyd, you can’t possibly—”

“Watch me,” he growled, his eyes locked on the prize.

The door loomed, but Reggie was closing in fast from the opposite direction.

“He’s just doing his job.”

“Not tonight, lass.”

Beth sighed, feigning defeat—then laced her arms around his neck and tugged him down for a kiss, tracing his lips with her tongue. His steps faltered, and she felt the moment his determination crumbled.

“Lass,” he murmured against her lips, his voice rough with surprise and need.

She deepened the kiss, one hand threading through his hair as his arms tightened around her. The heat of him, the solid strength beneath her, made her forget her own ploy—until she heard the door creaking open.

Reggie stood there, proud and triumphant, his hand on the knob and a satisfied grin on his face.

“Welcome home, sir. Madam,” he said with a bow.

Boyd broke the kiss with a muttered curse, his lips still tantalizingly close to hers. His narrowed gaze flicked toward Reggie, who shifted aside to allow them entry.

Beth smiled innocently up at her husband. “Well, darling? Shall we?”

With a growl, Boyd carried her across the threshold. As they entered the grand house, Beth caught the way Reggie’s chest puffed with pride, and she couldn’t suppress a giggle.

“Keep laughin’, lass,” Boyd whispered in her ear, his tone full of promise. “We’ll see who has the last word tonight.”

Her breath hitched, his words sending a pleasant shiver down her spine.

And as the door closed behind them, Beth decided she wouldn’t mind losing that particular contest.

The End

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:20 am

"Love, like the finest wine, is born of chaos, crushed underfoot, and left to age in the dark—only to emerge bold, rich, and utterly intoxicating." *The Polite Rogue's Guide to a Blissful Marriage*

Douro Valley, September, 1877

"Mr. Sandeman, the grapes won't tread themselves, you know?" Beth called out to her bashful husband.

The summer night air hung warm and sweet with the scent of ripening grapes, and Beth waited by the winery's tanks, a delicious anticipation buzzing through her. The moon cast a silvery glow over the vineyard, and somewhere nearby, an owl hooted—a lone witness to their little midnight escapade.

She heard his low grumble first. And then, from the half-open door of the winery, emerged her husband. Beth's breath caught, gripping the tank's edge.

Oh, my.

He looked every inch the Highland rogue of her most scandalous imaginings. The kilt—red and green plaid, and utterly improper—hugged his lean hips, the hem brushing against his powerful thighs, leaving them bare in a way that robbed her breath. His bronzed chest gleamed, muscles shifting as he strode forward, his broad shoulders carrying the confidence of a man entirely too aware of his appeal.

And then he walked towards her. His legs—dear heavens, his legs—were long and robust, honed from years of hard labor. The dusting of hair caught the light, and

Beth's pulse quickened at the sight. She had to grip the edge of the tank harder, lest her knees betray her.

"Ye wanted a kilt? Here's your damned kilt." He stopped a few paces away, eyebrow raised. "Only a madwoman would make a Scot wear this in the Douro."

Beth's smile was mischievous. "You look very handsome in it, if I might say so, Mr. Sandeman."

He actually blushed when he saw her admiring gaze.

Boyd groaned, then stepped into the tank. "Aye, well, if I end up with grapes in places they shouldn't be, just remember you're the one responsible for cleaning up the mess."

She raised a brow, kicking off her shoes. "I wouldn't dream of anything less."

A startled laugh burst from Beth's lips as her feet met the cool, squishy grapes. The skins burst under her soles with tiny pops, releasing their sweet, heady aroma. It tickled her toes most unexpectedly, making her giggle as she took another tentative step.

The grapes were slippery, sticky, and oddly soothing. She shuffled cautiously, testing the sensation, her balance wavering like a fledgling bird.

Boyd strode through the tank like he was leading a battalion to battle. His steps were sure, his kilt swaying with every movement. He planted his hands on his hips and cast her a long-suffering look, his voice dripping with mockery.

"Lass, if ye keep prancin' about like that, we'll have wine just in time for the next century. Ye look more like a ballet dancer than a winemaker's wife."

Beth narrowed her eyes. “A ballet dancer? Look who’s talking! You’re the one stomping around in a kilt inside a grape tank.”

“And whose fault is that?” His gaze turned devilish as he crouched slightly, knees bending.

She recognized the mischief too late. “Boyd—don’t you—”

With a gleam in his eye, he sprang.

Beth squealed and scrambled backward, but the tank’s slippery footing conspired against her. Her feet shot out from under her, and before she could blink, Boyd caught her.

Unfortunately for him, his own footing wasn’t any better.

With a startled yell, they went down together, landing in a spectacularly messy heap of crushed grapes, tartan, and tangled limbs.

The squelch was loud enough to echo through the vineyard.

Beth braced herself against his chest, her hands sticky with grape juice, her face mere inches from his. Their laughter mixed with the earthy scent of the grapes and the cool night air.

“Ye know, lass,” Boyd said, his voice a teasing rumble as his hand slid up her thigh, “Ye’re goin’ tae ruin me.”

She drew a sharp breath at the wicked spark in his eyes.

“And I plan to.” Beth slid her fingers into his hair, smearing grape juice through the

dark strands.

He grinned, pulling her close, his lips finding hers in a slow, lingering, and utterly intoxicating kiss. The world fell away—the tank, the vines, the night—leaving only the press of his body against hers, the warmth of his touch, and the heady scent of summer.

“I don’t think anyone will want to drink this wine after I have my way with you, Mrs. Sandeman.” Boyd held her waist, his eyes twinkling.

“Why? I thought the yeasts took care of everything.”

He chuckled, dark and wicked. “I’ll show ye why. But only if ye’re a good lass and scream loud enough to scandalize every winemaker in the Douro Valley.”

Beth caressed his hard stomach, her cheeks flushing. The kilt, it seemed, had more advantages than just showcasing her husband’s brawny legs—it offered easy access to certain rugged parts of him as well.

Feeling bold, she straddled him, her sigh turning into a giggle as she tossed up his kilt with a dramatic flourish. “Seems I’m about to have my way with you.”

Boyd arched an eyebrow, his lips curving into a grin. “Any way ye want, lass, as long as ye do it quick.”

Beth tilted her head, feigning innocence. “That lusty, are you? I thought I left you properly sated this afternoon.”

He grimaced “It’s no’ that. The bloody grapes are ticklin’ my arse.”

She dissolved into laughter, collapsing against him, her body shaking with mirth.

“Oh, Mr. Sandeman,” she gasped between breaths, “I think this might be the finest vintage you’ve ever made.”

“Aye,” he said with mock gravity, pulling her close and brushing her juice-stained cheek with a kiss. “The special reserve. Only for the most scandalous occasions.”

Beth’s laugh turned into a gasp, the sound catching in her throat as he entered her in one swift, searing push. The fullness stole her thoughts, leaving her breathless. Grapes and wine faded from her mind, replaced by the intoxicating rhythm of his body beneath hers.

She rocked atop him, slowly at first, savoring his heat, the way he filled her so completely it felt as though he were branding her from the inside out. Her hands braced against his chest, her palms absorbing the powerful beat of his heart as she moved with languid, teasing control.

Boyd’s groan vibrated through her, spurring her on, her hips rolling with increasing abandon. Her pace quickened, the friction building to a crescendo, and her nails curled into his skin as she climbed higher, her head falling back.

When pleasure burst from her core to her soul, her scream shook the winery’s rafters, and no doubt woke even the sleepy bears guarding the fountain. Beth collapsed forward, her forehead resting against his.

Boyd lifted her effortlessly, pressing her to his chest, and carried her to the edge of the tank. The metal bit into her back, but she was beyond caring. The scent of fermenting grapes wrapped around them. She laced her arms around his neck and crossed her ankles over his taut buttocks. Draped over him, she held on for dear life as her uncouth Scot delivered a ride that would put the Highlander of any romance novel to shame.

Relentlessly, he thrust into her, his movements deep and demanding, retreating almost entirely before plunging back in with raw, deliberate force. The rhythm was intoxicating, each stroke claiming her, filling her, leaving her gasping and trembling. Her fingers curled into his damp hair, pulling him closer as the heat between them coiled tighter, the edges of the world dissolving into the relentless tide of his passion.

Boyd's lips found hers, devouring her moans as he sucked her tongue into his mouth, his kiss as wild and consuming as the movements of his hips. Then he shuddered against hers, an unrepentant shout escaping him as he spilled into her. The sheer force of his climax sent aftershocks through her, her body trembling in his arms, and she clung to him like a lifeline, lost in the raw, unbridled pleasure that had unraveled them both.

Afterward, Beth rested her cheek against Boyd's chest, her fingers tracing his skin's rough contours. "You know, Mr. Sandeman, this was highly improper. A lady should never—"

"Never what, lass? Tumble into a winemaker's tank? I think ye'll find it's written somewhere that a winemaker's wife must learn to enjoy her... harvest."

Beth raised her head, her hair spilling across his arm. "Harvest? Is that what we're calling it now?"

"Aye," he said, smirking down at her. "And by my count, ye've reaped quite the crop tonight."

She laughed, swatting his shoulder. "Well, if that's the case, I hope you don't expect me to pick grapes with you tomorrow. A lady needs rest after such... strenuous labor."

"Rest, is it? Then I must warn ye, lass—this winemaker isn't done with his harvest

yet.”

Her laughter turned to a soft sigh as he kissed her again. “Mr. Sandeman,” she murmured against his lips, “you’re incorrigible.”

“And you, Mrs. Sandeman,” he whispered, his tone tender and teasing all at once, “are my perfect vintage.”

"A blissful marriage requires two things: the patience to tread lightly and the passion to crush convention—preferably underfoot in a tank of wine. For what is love, if not the perfect vintage of chaos and devotion, aged with just enough scandal to keep it thrilling?"

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:20 am

"A lady may attempt to master the chaos of a Highland gathering, but true wisdom lies in knowing when to surrender to the rogue who commands her heart." The Polite Companion's Guide to Love and Other Havocs.

The dining room brimmed with Highland voices, their brogue as thick as the whiskey circulating the table. The scent of roasted pheasant, warm bread, and something distinctly smoky—a reminder of the Scottish distillers taking over her once-peaceful home, perfumed the air. Beth perched at the head of the table, trying to find her husband's gaze on the opposite side of the rectangular highway, but his cousins and brother filled every chair and, in some cases, a bit of the floor.

If Dora had not married Reggie and pleaded a suspicious migraine, she would have said be careful what you wish for, Mrs. Sandeman.

For a girl who'd never seen a Highlander a year ago, she now had enough to last a lifetime—and quite an eyeful, at that.

The room was cheerful, as in one of the taverns in Sir Walter Scott's novels. Plates clattered, glasses clinked, and accents rolled in a thunderous wave. Boyd's laughter echoed over the din. Beth's heart swelled. This was why she'd done it—reuniting him with his family, bringing their American kin across the ocean to honor Thanksgiving, even if they wanted to wrestle to discover who brewed the best liquor (never mind Boyd's argument that port was not brewed like their New World Bourbon, but blended).

"It's nae grouse, Boyd." Cousin Fergus MacGregor pointed his fork at the golden pheasant, his blond Viking hair catching the hearth's glow. "I'll tell you that, but

damn if it isn't fine."

Duncan MacGregor leaned forward with his trademark rakish grin, twirling his knife between his fingers. "Aye, Fergus, nae grouse—but if Boyd's wife cooks like this, maybe I'll need tae find myself a clever lass who kens her way around a kitchen. What say ye, Beth? Got a sister?"

Fergus's massive hand came down on his back with a thundering slap that made the plates rattle. Beth wondered how Boyd's cousin didn't crumble. No doubt a young oak would have been felled by such a blow. "Leave the lass be, Duncan, afore Boyd feeds ye tae the fowl!"

Alistair Sandeman, with his russet hair catching the firelight, raised his glass in a toast, a warm smile softening the mischievous glint in his eyes. "Whatever this plate is, it's delicious, and I'm grateful for it." He glanced at Beth, his smile growing softer. "But most of all, I'm pleased to be here, meeting the lass who's finally conquered my brother. No small feat, that."

Beth felt her cheeks warm. Alistair's tone was playful, but genuine, and the weight of his words struck something deep. A sweet lad would surely make some lucky girl very happy one day.

"It's not grouse, and it's no turkey. What is it then?" Fergus asked.

"It's pheasant, sir," Reggie called from the doorway, looking both annoyed and slightly alarmed as he carried another tray of food.

The voices lowered as her new kin attacked the plates with gusto. This was her cue. Either she pronounced her lines now, or she would have to wait for Christmas, and even though she thoroughly enjoyed Boyd's family, she would need a vacation after this holiday with them.

Beth rose gracefully, lifting her glass, and called out with as much poise as she could muster over the Highland ruckus. “Gentlemen! If I may steal your attention—for a toast!”

No one noticed. Not a single head turned.

She blinked, then cleared her throat. “Pardon, I would like...”

A laugh drowned her voice, and someone slapped the table hard enough to rattle the silverware.

Very well. A lady didn’t cower in the face of minor setbacks.

Beth clinked her knife against her glass—three sharp chimes that cut through the noise. The room fell silent, and every Highlander turned to her.

Beth inspected the expanse of her new cousins and brother-in-law, all handsome in their own infuriating and roguish way, to finally land on her husband’s loch of a gaze, all self-satisfaction and impossible charm. A lady should not indulge in petty competitions, for her wisdom is based on choosing battles worthy of her dignity. But...

“Since it seems I cannot hope to rival the brilliance of your conversation, Boyd Sandeman, I propose a challenge.”

That got the highlanders’ full attention.

Boyd straightened, his eyes glinting with interest. “Oh, do ye now?”

“I do. I challenge you for the privilege of being the most grateful person in this room.”

Beth took a deep breath. A lady should temper her own competitiveness with humility and reflection, striving to excel without diminishing others. But that did not include handling a room full of boisterous highlanders, did it?

Boyd smirked, crossing his arms with that infuriating air of challenge. “Let’s hear it, then.”

Beth straightened her shoulders, her fingers tightening around the stem of her glass.

She forced herself to meet Boyd’s gaze, her voice steady despite the butterflies in her chest. “Very well. I’m grateful for this life we’re building. For the family we’ve brought together tonight.”

“Hear, hear.”

Boyd raised a bottle. “Let’s toast tae my good fortune this evenin’—nae havin’ tae carry my wife out of here like a sack of barley.”

The room erupted into laughter, forks clinking against plates as his cousins and brother joined in, slapping the table and roaring their approval.

“Haul me? Honestly, Mr. Sandeman, a gentleman would simply offer his arm. But I suppose Highlanders have... different customs.” And stronger shoulders. Heat unfurled in her chest as her mind conjured all the times her husband had carried her. She never knew what could prompt his bouts of a sudden wife-carrying spree, but she always knew where they ended—atop the bed, without clothes, and with their limbs more entangled than a vine in a sultry and thoroughly exhausting summer storm.

Boyd’s eyes narrowed playfully. “I’m grateful for a wife who’s brave enough to host a horde of Highlanders and foolish enough to think she can out-toast me.”

Duncan MacGregor, ever the rake, leaned closer to Beth with a grin that could charm

the devil himself. “The lasses never complain of our wee horde, cousin. Quite the opposite.”

Fergus MacGregor, his towering frame dominating the chair, feigned mock offense, his deep voice rolling through the room. “Speak for yourself, Sandeman. I’m the civilized one here. How much did you bribe such a fine lass to make her agree to marry you?”

Boyd snorted. “Bribery, Fergus? Ye’ve a strange way of describing the power of my irresistible charm.”

Alistair chuckled. “Careful, brother. She’s the clever one in this marriage. We’ve all seen how the lass handles ye—like a fiddler stringing a bow. I’m grateful for my new sister.”

Boyd leaned back in his chair, his smirk growing wider, a glimmer of mischief sparking in his eyes. “Clever, is she? Aye, clever enough tae wed a man who makes the finest wine in the valley. But let’s see if her cleverness is enough tae keep her composure tonight.” He raised his glass, his gaze locked on hers, daring her to take the bait. “I’m grateful for a wife who matches wits with me—and is brave enough tae lose.”

Beth arched a brow, her gaze glinting with challenge as it met Boyd’s. “Is that so, Mr. Sandeman?” She lifted her glass with an elegant flourish, her lips quirking into a sly smile. “I’m grateful for the wine in the cellar—heaven knows it’s the only thing preserving my sanity in a room full of Highlanders.”

Boyd chuckled, his grin devilish. “I’m grateful for whiskey—because nae wine could handle the likes of Mrs. Sandeman.”

The cousins, clearly enjoying the show, kept shifting their glances from Beth to Boyd like spectators at a Highland caber toss, leaning in as though waiting to see who’d

land the next throw—and who'd end up flat on their backside.

"I'm grateful for Reggie, who's worked tirelessly tonight," Beth added, toasting the flustered footman.

"I'm grateful Reggie's not had tae wrestle a Highlander yet," Boyd countered, raising his glass to the now thoroughly blushing Reggie.

Beth found her husband's eyes. "For your courage and honor."

Boyd's lips quirked into a soft smile, his eyes gleaming. "For the fire in yer hair and the stubbornness in yer heart."

How could she topple that? Her Highlander had a way with words that—really. Beth looked at her glass, her lips trembling. "For how you look at me, and see who I am."

"For the way ye look at me like I'm more than I am," he replied, his voice dipping lower.

Beth's throat tightened. "For the delicious wine you make."

Boyd's smile was for her alone. "For the taste of wine on yer lips. It's much sweeter than in the glass."

Her cheeks flushed. The words she had planned to say? Where were they? "For our mornings... and all our nights."

His grin turned tender as he leaned toward her. "For yer blasted challenges—every one of them."

Beth opened her mouth to retort, but Boyd raised a hand to silence her.

“For giving me sound...” He smiled that soft smile he reserved for their evenings by the fire. “Sometimes more than I bargained for. For a lady, ye are awfully loud.”

Laughter rippled through the table.

Boyd waited for the amusement to dim, now serious.

He lifted his glass higher. “And for teaching me what it means tae love.”

Beth’s chest swelled, and as he gazed at her, she feared she would burst, her feelings impossible to be contained under the soft layer of a health corset. A lady should cherish a deep affection for her husband, tempered by reason. How glad she was that she was not a proper lady, for she loved her Highlander to distraction, and there was no demureness to what she felt for her rogue.

Her smile softened, and she glanced away from his naked blue eyes. Sighing, she placed a hand over her stomach. “Most of all, I’m grateful for you because you gave me a child.”

The boisterous Highlanders and their loud cheer suddenly hushed.

Boyd’s jaw slackened, his glass lowering. His gaze locked on hers, eyes brimming with the tears he would forever deny having shed.

Slowly, he set the glass on the table, and his chair scraped back loudly as he stood. The flickering light of the dining room danced across his impossibly rugged and handsome face, now softened with a raw emotion that made Beth’s heart stutter.

With purposeful strides, Boyd closed the space between them.

He cradled her cheeks and kissed her thoroughly and unrepentantly as if they were the only two people in the world. Beth flushed as the room erupted into cheers and

whistles.

But Boyd paid them no mind. His attention was wholly on her.

His lips brushed against her temple. When he pulled back, his voice was hoarse but filled with warmth.

“Is this true?”

“A lady never lies.”

“Then Ye win, lass. Ye always win.”

And as the room exploded with applause and laughter, Boyd leaned in to whisper, “But just ye wait till next year.”

Jaw clamped tight, he swept her into his arms, not like a sack of barley, but as though she were something fragile, precious, and wholly his.

As he turned and began carrying her toward the door, Beth tilted her head, a teasing glint returning to her eyes despite the lump in her throat. “You said you were grateful you didn’t have to carry me like a barley sack this fine eve.”

“Aye. but this isn’t carrying. This is honorin’ ye properly, Mrs. Sandeman.”

“We are hosts to your family. We can’t simply abandon our guests.”

Boyd paused mid-stride, glancing back over his shoulder. “Eat and drink tae yer heart’s content, lads. I’m takin’ my wife tae bed—she’s carryin’ my bairn!”

The room erupted into cheers and wolf whistles, tankards banging against the wooden table. Fergus raised his glass high, shouting, “A toast tae the bairn!”

Duncan smirked. “Beth, ye’ve conquered the fiercest Highlander among us. A fine achievement, lass!”

Amid the uproar, Alistair raised his voice, his tone warm and teasing. “And here’s tae the wee one, who’ll be as clever as their mother and as stubborn as their father.”

Beth buried her face against Boyd’s chest, her cheeks blazing, as he carried her toward the staircase.

She looped her arms around his neck, her fingers toying with the ends of his hair. “You’re impossible.”

“Aye. But I’m yer impossible. And you vowed to endure me. Now hush, or I’ll scandalize ye even more.”

Beth’s lips twitched with amusement as they reached the landing. She leaned in, brushing her lips against his cheek. “I love you, Boyd.”

His stride faltered for a split second, his hold on her tightening. “And I love ye, lass. To distraction from all else.”

They reached their bedchamber door, and Boyd paused, looking down at her as if she were the most precious thing in the world. “Now,” he kicked the door open. “Let’s see if we can make ye as loud as a room full of Highlanders.”