



# To My Scot, With Love (The Jennings Family #1)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Shes two-and-thirty, a mother of three—and has never been kissed. Lydia Jennings, Lady Bentley, has spent over a decade in a contractual marriage, fulfilling her duties as a countess and mother. But with her obligations behind her and her children growing up, shes ready to follow her heart. One man has always tempted her—a big, broad Scotsman with a brogue that sets her blood aflame.

Hes a groom in the stables—and a pathetic, pining Scotsman. From the moment Malcolm Campbell laid eyes on the bonnie Lady Bentley, he was lost. Every exchange, every fleeting glance, has only granted her greater claim over his heart— despite knowing he has no business yearning for a countess. Until she arrives at his door in the middle of the night, turning him from a hopeless romantic into a hopeful one.

Love letters and sizzling passion unfold. They thought their class differences and her marriage would be their greatest challenge but as Lydia and Malcolm finally give in to what theyve both craved, new dangers arise, threatening to rip their love away before its had a chance to take root.

**Total Pages (Source):** 32

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

The main male character in this story is from Scotland. Raised on a Scottish Laird's estate, he grew up exposed to both Scots and Gaelic. Below are some terms he uses throughout the story that I thought would be helpful to have listed out for you: Scots Terms

Blether : To talk nonsense or chat aimlessly. Can also refer to a long-winded conversation.

Bairn : A child or young one.

Blethering bampot: An insulting term for someone who talks nonsense or is being foolish.

Bonnie: Pretty, beautiful, lovely.

Braw : Beautiful, fine, or impressive; often used to describe something or someone attractive.

Fash : To trouble, bother. "Dinnae fash" means "don't worry."

Greet : To cry or weep.

Haud yer wheesht: A phrase used to tell someone to be quiet or stop talking.

Keeking : To peep, spy, or look sneakily.

Gaelic Terms

Mo chridhe : My heart.

Mo leannan : My Sweetheart or beloved.

Other Term

Cranachan : A traditional Scottish dessert made with whipped cream, honey, whisky, raspberries, and toasted oats.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Lydia

Thornfield Hall,

Jennings Family Country Seat

Kent, England

Summer 1784

OH, HEAVEN HELP HER, that was a naked man.

Lydia Jennings, the newly made Countess of Bentley, hastily stepped backward and darted behind a large tree.

She leaned against the coarse trunk, each heavy breath pushing her into the sharp bark, her thin summer muslin dress doing little to protect her skin.

Lydia closed her eyes, squeezed them achingly tight, her pulse pattering against her throat. Because of the captivating scene she'd just witnessed. The forbidden one.

You will not look again .

A warm breeze flitted over her skin, and her eyes fell shut, the soothing sensation nearly like the caress of fingertips. She drew in a deep breath and with it the scent of sunshine and loamy earth. The scent of summer.

You will not look again .

She slowly shifted to the side, turning and peeking around the large oak. And looked.

Her blood sparked and sizzled. Only the man's bare torso was visible, lean muscles in his back rippling as his hands scrubbed soap quickly and efficiently through his hair. He drifted backward, submerging himself in the water.

And then burst back through the surface of the pond. He shook his head wildly, water droplets spraying from his locks, scattering away from him like they were desperate to flee. Foolish drops. They should cling to a specimen such as that.

He smoothed back his hair, a small stream of water dripping tantalizingly down his lightly tanned skin.

Her eyes devoured the scandalously nude man before her.

He must go without a shirt often to have developed that golden tan.

She winced. And how scandalous that Lydia was spying on him.

And she was a married woman. Her eyes flew wide.

Egads. She darted back behind the tree and thumped her head against the trunk.

She was a married woman! She shouldn't be ogling another man.

Why not?

She furrowed her brows. Because it wasn't proper. It was...It was an insult to her husband.

Is it, though?

She sank heavily against the tree, but not even the sturdy oak could support her. She slid until her bottom hit the dirt and sparse grass beneath the tree. Was it an insult to her husband when their marriage was entirely contractual?

Lord Bentley—no, Freddy, as he'd insisted—had been disarmingly candid.

He needed an heir. The woman he loved, his mistress of well over a decade, was barren.

And he could not—would not—allow the earldom to fall into the hands of his drunkard wastrel of a cousin.

The Bentley name was one of the most prestigious and wealthy families in society.

Between their tenants and the workers employed by the estate, thousands of lives depended on them, and he refused to allow that to be jeopardized.

So here Lydia was. His...womb for hire, she supposed.

That wasn't quite fair. Freddy had been quite kind.

And he was surprisingly fun and jovial, a bit boyish, especially for a man of five-and-thirty.

And refreshingly honest. He'd also saved her from what would have most definitely been a terrible fate.

Their marriage was a common enough arrangement, each providing a purpose for the other. Safety and security for heirs.

It would, except for the rare occasion—and Freddy had been clear it would be rare—be a marriage in name only.

And last night was proof of that. It was to be their first night together...

in that way. They'd been married a week now, a quiet affair at the Bentley London residence.

Freddy had said they'd wait until they traveled to the Bentley estate in Kent to have relations.

Lydia'd had the distinct impression Freddy was delaying.

And last night was confirmation and eye-opening as to why.

He couldn't bed her. Couldn't touch a woman who was not the one he loved.

A band tightened around Lydia's chest. Seeing the strain tightening his face, his fists balled, the bloodless color of his skin.

She had ached for him, for what he was going through.

And even through his torment, he had been nothing but kind. Assuring her that his inability to move forward with the deed had nothing to do with Lydia. That she was a beautiful woman and would tempt any man. Just not him.

Which was quite all right, of course. Lydia understood their arrangement.

She didn't take offense. She actually thought it quite...

admirable? Touching? How deeply he loved his mistress, yet how unwaveringly he

honored the duty that came with his title.

He was in an impossible situation. Having to choose between being with the woman he loved and destroying the lives of thousands of people—families, children. He was utterly selfless.

And fair. Because he'd said as soon as Lydia provided him with an heir and a spare, he held no qualms with her finding her own lover.

Even before then was permissible, he just asked she refrained from being intimate in the way that would produce a child.

Apparently, there were other things she could do with a man.

Lydia had never blushed so thoroughly before in her entire life than during that conversation with her husband.

She had sworn her cheeks had caught fire.

Which is why ogling the man bathing in the pond behind her wasn't truly an act of disloyalty.

She bit her lip and rocked it back and forth under her teeth.

Just one more glance and then she'd go. Enjoy the dreamlike sanctuary she'd stepped foot into while exploring her new home.

One that came equipped with fallen angels like the man in the pond.

Her palms landed on the soft, damp earth, and she quietly crawled around the tree. Lord, she was going to be a mess when she returned to the manor. But she couldn't



stop. Something pulled at her, pulling her toward the mysterious man. Curiosity. Yearning.

Or perhaps she was just a ninny.

The man was just finishing buttoning up his trousers, his torso still bare.

He was tall, very tall. His shoulders were broad but lanky with youth.

Perhaps only a few years older than Lydia's own twenty years.

His face was covered in stubble, but even so, his jawline looked sharp enough to cut glass.

Her breath hitched. And whatever his occupation, it was a physical one.

Her fingers dug into the cool soil. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the man.

The muscles on his body were sharply delineated, a prominent V that disappeared into the band of his trousers.

They rippled in the soft sunlight, quivering like the flesh of a high-strung stallion.

She wanted to trace those grooves with her fingers.

She inched forward, her gaze locked on where he dabbed his towel over his throat.

Snap.

A broken edge of a stick stabbed into her palm.

His gaze shot to the wood in her direction.

She froze. In fear of making any more noise that would give herself away. But more than anything, it was the paralyzing shock at the sight of a piercing set of steely-blue irises.

He scanned the area, dark brows drawn together.

Fortunately, his stare remained well above where Lydia crouched, blessedly concealed by the forest's bramble and vegetation.

Because truly, what kind of fool would be crawling on hands and knees, spying on a man bathing?

Dear Lord, there was something wrong with her.

The man shrugged into a shirt, gathered up his bathing supplies, and threw his towel over his shoulder.

Lydia sat back on her heels, a hollow disappointment carving its way through her chest. And it grew with each step he took as he left the clearing and disappeared from view.

How was it that a man she'd never met had managed to unsettle her in a way no one else ever had?

Perhaps one day—when she was ready to take a lover—she would seek one like that man. One with dark hair and chilling blue eyes.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mal

“That’s a good lass,” Malcolm Campbell crooned whisper-soft to the ebony mare at his side, his words nearly drowned out by the rhythmic clop of the horse’s hooves against the cobblestone floor of the stables.

Her ears twitched toward his praise, and she let out a contented rumbling snort.

She dipped her head, her whiskered nose nuzzling into his chest. A huff of laughter burst from him.

Cheeky wee thing . Jasmine was by far the sweetest horse on the estate.

Which was why Malcolm was currently leading the lovely mare out for the new Countess of Bentley’s morning ride with her husband.

Malcolm’s pulse ticked rapidly against his throat. He couldnae deny he was excited to set eyes on the new countess. Word had spread swiftly across the estate: the countess was a bonnie lass, the most stunning woman to set foot upon this earth. Heavy praise, that.

Mr. Porter, Thornfield Hall’s stable master, passed Malcolm and Jasmine, leading a large chestnut gelding with white socks. They disappeared out of the stable entry with a flick of the chestnut’s dark auburn tail.

The stable master’s deep baritone carried back into the stables. “Good morning, my lord. My lady.”

Malcolm's heart echoed the clop of hooves.

Time to see what all the blether was about.

He and Jasmine exited the stable and turned the corner.

And Malcolm's feet stopped working. Everything stopped working.

His lungs. His heart. His brain. He just stood there, stock-still, blinking dumbly.

Because the woman standing next to the Earl, wearing a simple sage riding habit, was more than stunning.

She was otherworldly.

Her rose-gold hair, tucked beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat, shimmered like spun sunlight. He'd never seen hair that color before. Browns and blacks, reds and auburns, wheat blonde or golden, aye. But that rosy hue? It was as if a blacksmith had melded gold and copper together.

She laughed at something the Earl said, a melodic sound that tickled his senses.

Her cheeks bunched over her smile, her dainty nose wrinkling.

It was a true smile. One that took over a person's entire face.

No artifice. Sparkling eyes crinkling at the corners, plum-pink lips parting to reveal even white teeth.

Bonnie was too tame a word for the sheer beauty of this woman.

She was an unfettered dawn over an endless field of heather in the misty glens of Scotland.

Malcolm's arm jerked, and he had to forcefully tear his gaze away from the woman. He glanced at Jasmine—a very impatient Jasmine who was tossing her head with restless energy.

“Sorry, lass,” he murmured and somehow managed to get his feet to lift and drop, propelling them forward again. He paused in front of the countess, and she turned from her husband, directing the full force of that smile on Malcolm.

His throat went dry, his tongue deserted him, and his heart tumbled out of his chest. Oh God.

Her eyes . Malcolm was sure there was something he was supposed to be doing.

Or words he was supposed to be saying. Or air he was supposed to be breathing.

But he was too busy drowning in the sea that was her blue-green gaze.

Her gloved fingers fluttered at her breast, and her cheeks turned the most fetching shade of pink as he stared at her. Stared at her like he was a daft man. And right now, he certainly was daft. Because he swore he heard her breath catch when their gazes clashed.

Leather pulled over the rough callouses of his palms, the skin catching on the material of his gloves, pulling him back to the present.

Someone took Jasmine from him and led her up to the countess.

And then the rare beauty was turning away from him, and Mr. Porter was assisting

her into the saddle.

Malcolm's gaze and body followed her, pulled in her direction without any conscious thought, tracking her form as she and the Earl rode off toward the riding path that traveled through the estate.

A hand whacked down hard on Malcolm's head. He ducked away and winced. "Och!" He rubbed at his smarting head. "What was that for?" He glanced over at a glaring Mr. Porter.

"Gather your wits, lad," the man said firmly.

"I was just—" Malcolm paused, floundering, his mind a hopelessly tangled mess.

"What you were doing was not much of anything. Just gaped at her like buffoon. Couldn't even lead her mare up to her. Fortunate for you, the Earl knows of your competence with horses, otherwise he'd sack you for being a complete paper skull just now."

Malcolm's stare inadvertently found its way back to the countess, a mere speck in the distance. "I was no' prepared," he murmured.

For her.

"Well, now you've seen her. Be ready next time. You can't be panting after the master's pretty wife. You'll find yourself dismissed...or worse."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mal

Present Day — Twelve Years Later

Thornfield Hall,

Jennings Family Country Seat

Kent, England

February 1796

MALCOLM SET DOWN the bridle he was polishing on the table before him and rolled his shoulders. He tilted his head to the side until that delightful pull stretched across the tight muscles of his neck.

“We’re off to the tavern. You joining us, Campbell?”

Malcolm glanced up, already shaking his head. He caught Wright’s gaze from where the groom leaned against the tack room doorway, tapping his tricorn hat against his thigh. “Nae, next time.”

“You said that the last time,” Wright pointed out. Accurately. Damn the cove.

Malcolm lifted the bridle in one hand and gestured to the saddle slung over a rack. “Still more to prepare for the morrow.”

“That can wait until mornin’. The wenches can’t.” He threw Malcolm a wink.

Malcolm’s lips twitched. The lad was still a young buck, eager to find a willing lass agreeable to a quick tumble. But he was a good lad. Loyal. Clever. Had a genuine heart.

“Best I dinnae go, or else none of the wenches will take ye to bed, aye?”

Wright snorted and started backing away. “I’d call you an arrogant bastard for that statement. But you’ve proved that to be true one too many times.” His face split into a teasing grin. “No idea what they see in your ugly old arse.”

A chuckle rumbled from deep in Malcolm’s chest. “They’re not looking at my arse, lad.”

Wright threw back his head and laughed. “That’s God’s own truth.” And then, with a salute, the man disappeared, his footfalls slowly fading away.

Wenching didn’t hold the same appeal it once had for Malcolm.

When he’d first come to work at Thornfield Hall as a lad of eighteen, he’d frequented the village in search for a bonnie lass.

Then he’d had a brief stint where he’d been a wee bit wild, falling into bed with a wench or drowning himself in the bottom of a tankard more oft than he cared to admit.

But he’d been desperate back then. Desperate to smother feelings he didn’t know what to do with, ones he knew he shouldn’t be having.

About a woman who wasn’t for the likes of him.



He dipped his cloth in the beeswax and began working it over the reins.

But it'd been near twelve years living with those feelings.

He had a handle on them now. He scoffed quietly, the lie ricocheting around the tack room.

The work he was doing right now was a glaring example of the falsehood he fed himself.

“Wright told me you declined. Again.”

Malcolm drew in a deep breath and let his frame sag as he released it. Porter.

“The polishing willnae do itself,” he said without looking up.

Footsteps echoed and then paused next to Malcolm.

His boss—the aging stable master. The man Malcolm would take over for in a year's time.

The one who had taught Malcolm everything he knew—about working the stables, about being a man.

He'd been, in many ways, the only father Malcolm had ever known.

And he'd been the one who had dunked Malcolm's drunk arse in a bucket of frigid water after an especially raucous night out in the village.

Porter had hauled Malcolm back to his own home that night, thrust a hunk of bread in his hand, and let him sleep off the drink.

Come morning, he'd delivered a tongue-lashing so sharp, Malcolm still had the scars—figuratively speaking.

Porter had laid it bare: the path Malcolm was treading would cost him everything.

A position as groom, and eventually head groom, at the Bentley stables was a prestigious, highly sought after position.

A rare opportunity, and Malcolm was in line for securing it.

It was not something to be squandered pining over a woman Malcolm could never have.

The lecture had been effective. Malcolm's reckless carousing was a relic of a younger, more foolish man.

Porter dropped down next to him, the bench creaking under their combined weight.

"You're five-and-thirty, Malcolm."

Och. Porter Malcolm-ing him? Another lecture was coming. And like any cheeky son would do, Malcolm responded, "You're eight-and-fifty, Porter."

The man's soft snort echoed around them.

"Don't be smart with me, boy." But affection softened his words.

"You need to find yourself a nice woman.

Settle down. Have children, bairns, what have you.

Wright might jest about the ladies always preferring you, but we all know 'tis the truth. You could have your pick of any of them."

Porter fell quiet and drummed his fingers over the worktable.

At Malcolm's prolonged silence, he let out a huff.

"You're not getting any younger, Malcolm.

You're making a respectable living, on your way to a stable master position in due time.

Which comes with a cozy cottage, I might add.

You should be moving on to having a family. "

Not doing what Malcolm was currently doing. Delaying. Postponing. They both heard it, even though Porter didn't say it.

"I'll think on it, Port."

The man let out a strangled groan. "You could be living, Mallie."

And as it always did, Malcolm's heart pinged at the father-son nicknames they'd developed for each other over the nearly twenty years they'd known one another. It was a sign, a reminder, of the seriousness with which Porter meant his words.

"You could be building a life of your own. I see how you are with those children. You're meant to be a father. Stop looking through the window. Go live the life you want."

But Malcolm couldnae. Wouldnae ever be able to. Not truly. And it wouldnae be fair to the lass he married. Not until he was ready to let go.

“You need purpose in your life,” Porter said, jerking his chin toward the rag in Malcolm’s hand. “More than just work.”

“I have purpose.” He glanced up and met Porter’s gaze. “You know I do.”

“And you know how I feel about that .” And the way the man’s mouth tightened, his dark eyes turning steely, only confirmed it.

“Those horses can’t save themselves, Porter.”

“And neither can you when you’re swinging by the end of a rope.”

No, but at least he’d have saved some. Thieving horses might be illegal, but what those masters were doing to their cattle? That was what truly should be a crime.

They sat there in silence, just Porter’s rhythmic finger drumming and the light scuffing sound of cloth over leather. He massaged the beeswax into the stiff leather of the reins until the material softened beneath his touch. They needed to be butter soft for her hands.

“‘Tis been unseasonably warm this week,” Porter finally murmured, his knowing gaze tracking over the tack Malcolm was preparing. “The Countess going for a ride in the morning?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“You know, any groom could do this. One of the younger lads. So you could head to the village with the others.”

They could. But Malcolm wouldn't let them. He had to be sure everything was in perfect condition. Shined, smoothed, safe.

He wanted everything to be perfect.

For her.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Lydia

“Did you have an enjoyable morning ride?”

Mr. Campbell’s deep, rich murmur, tinted with Scottish brogue, surrounded Lydia.

She shivered beneath her wool coat, but it wasn’t from the weather, the unseasonably warm weather.

There was something about the way Mr. Campbell spoke to her sometimes, when he dropped his voice to a near whisper, like he was sharing a secret just with her.

It did things to her, caused a fizzy sensation to build in her belly, her heart to flop frantically in her breast like a trout on dry land.

She wrinkled her nose. That was not a very flattering visual.

But it was the truth. The man made her heart a floppy fish.

But worst of all—when he spoke to her like that—it gave her hope. That just maybe he did want to share a secret with her. Share more than secrets with her.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye as they followed after her rambunctious brood.

His comforting scent, leather and beeswax, drifted to her on a small gust of wind.

She loved the way he smelled. Knew it was a product of him working in the stables.

But every time she rode, it was like she had a piece of him with her.

She was embarrassed to admit, sometimes she held the reins to her nose, breathing in that familiar scent of beeswax and leather...

wishing, hoping, it'd been his hands preparing them for her.

"Quite," she replied. "I am glorying in the warm days we've been having of late. You know well how much I enjoy my morning rides."

He always ensured her favorite horses were ready when requested. Personally. Never another groom. Always bid her farewell, a pleasant ride. Those small moments, what most would consider insignificant, were the ones she stored away, the ones she cherished.

"Aye." He flashed her a smile, quicker than a blink, but full of mischief and charm.

And she snatched it up, another memory to hold on to.

As she was wont to do. He had a disarming smile, lopsided and a bit cheeky, like he was teasing the person, but they had no idea why.

It was in stark contrast to his sharp jawline.

Her fingers twitched with want. To touch.

An excited squeal shot back to them and her attention flew to her brood, a grin splitting her face.

Felicity, Lydia's four-year-old daughter, bounded toward the three-rail fence surrounding the pen that housed the estate's sheep.

She clambered up onto the fence, and Felix, Lydia's eldest son, came to stand next to her.

Lydia bit her lip. At eleven, Felix was trying so hard to be a man.

But he nearly vibrated with excitement next to his sister.

"Look, look!" Felicity pointed violently inside the pen. "There are the twins!"

Fitzwilliam, only a year older than Felicity, clumsily climbed up next to sister to see as well, his riotous curls peeking out from beneath his cap. Lydia had never had any luck taming them. And according to Freddy, who had the same unruly curls, it was a fruitless endeavor to even attempt.

"Where?" Fitzwilliam asked, leaning over the top rail, eyes nearly squinted shut as he peered into the pen.

Lydia and Mr. Campbell stopped behind the children. And sure enough, in the far corner of the herd, underneath the small lean-to shelter, were the lambs Mr. Campbell had informed them were born yesterday eve. He had known the children would be excited to see them.

"Look closer, Lady Felicity," Mr. Campbell said, a faint chuckle rumbling through his words.

Felicity leaned closer and gasped.

"Not twins!" Felix bounced next to his sister, no longer able to contain himself.



“Triplets! Look, Flick, Fitzzy, there’s the third one.”

Fitzwilliam leaned even farther forward. “I see two of them. Where’s the thir—”

He shrieked, and Mr. Campbell lunged forward, grabbing him by the back of his coat.

Lydia inhaled sharply, rushing forward, hand pressing to her throat.

But Mr. Campbell had her son, held firm, dangling about a foot from the ground.

In a swift motion, Mr. Campbell hauled him back up, settling him safely back onto the fence.

“Easy there, lad.” Mr. Campbell glanced back at Lydia, his steel-blue eyes dancing.

Hand still at her throat, she let out a relieved breath and shook her head. That wasn’t the first time the Scotsman had rescued Fitzwilliam from one such incident or another. The poor boy was terribly accident-prone.

Felicity jumped from the fence with a thwump and turned to Mr. Campbell. She planted her little fists on her hips and scowled—quite ferociously—at the man. “You had said the ewe had twins, Mr. Campbell.”

He arched a single dark brow at her, not cowed in the least by Lydia’s little spitfire of a daughter. “Did I now, Lady Felicity? Or did you assume, lass? Sometimes assumptions lead us astray, aye?”

“He said an ewe gave birth to lambs yesterday, Flick,” Felix informed his sister smartly. “He never elaborated on the number of lambs.”

She cocked her head, her brow puckering. “Perhaps...”

Lydia covered her smile with a gloved hand.

Quite a good lesson to learn, the subtle one the Scotsman was imparting.

Her heartbeat fluttered in her throat. He was terribly good with children.

Patient. Gentle. Always teaching. Which only made the dratted man that much more attractive.

Something she'd kept suppressed for a long time. But lately...

"You assumed, Flick," Felix chimed in, superiority coating his words. He turned to Mr. Campbell. "Because twins are so common. But triplets aren't. Isn't that right, sir?"

"Right you are, Master Felix. We don't oft see triplets. Because of that, we'll need to step in to make sure all the lambs grow strong. Their mam's milk might not stretch far enough for all three." He turned and looked at each child in turn. "Do ye want to help feed the wee beasties?"

A chorus of yeses echoed around them, and Lydia's cheeks ached from the force of her smile. Mr. Campbell ushered them off to one of their young grooms, who had arrived at the paddock with a set of glass bottles with leather teats affixed at the necks and a bucket of milk.

"One at a time, mind you," Lydia called after them. "And be gentle."

Lydia stepped up to Mr. Campbell's side as Fitzwilliam and Felicity scampered off, Felix trailing after his younger siblings.

She'd noticed him doing so more often lately.

Separating himself a bit from his younger siblings, trying to act more mature, gaze always tracking back to his father, emulating him.

No longer her little boy. Her heart squeezed.

“Thank you for sharing this with them.”

“O’ course, my lady.” He leaned against the fence, his piercing blue gaze sliding right through to her lungs and stealing her breath.

As it never failed to do. “The unseasonably mild weather made lambing easier this year; the triplets were a rare and joyful surprise. And I know how your brood love when we have new life born on the estate.”

“You’re good with them, you know that?”

He tilted his head, giving his head a slight shake.

“The children,” she clarified. “Imparting that little lesson on assumptions with Felicity. Saving Fitzwilliam. Again .”

He chuckled and glanced over at the children. “They’re a fun lot. And I’ve always loved bairns.”

But as far as she was aware, he had none of his own. She’d heard through servants’ gossip a tale or two about his...prowess. But nothing in the recent years. She assumed that meant he’d finally settled down. But as he had said, assumptions can lead people astray.

“Do you plan to have some of your own?”

“Bairns?” His eyebrows rose, and he shook his head in the negative, a half-smile quirking his lips. “No bairns. Need a missus for that.” He threw her a wink, and she ducked her chin sheepishly.

“A strapping gentleman such as yourself? No missus?” She shot him a skeptical glance from beneath her lashes, her eyebrows creeping up her forehead. “I am shocked.”

The tops of his cheekbones tinted a deep scarlet against his pale skin. He lacked the typical tan he had during the warmer months. And lacked quite a few freckles. She missed them. Which was a completely nonsensical thought.

“Havnae found the right lass yet,” he said gruffly, gaze dropping to where he was kicking a loose stone with the toe of his boot.

She studied him, and he shifted under her scrutiny, like he could feel it even though he wasn’t looking at her. A smile pulled at her lips. Well, I never.

“Why, Mr. Campbell, waiting to marry for love? I’d never have taken you for a romantic.”

The big, burly Scotsman was nothing more than a hard, handsome exterior hiding a center as soft and sweet as a honey cake.

His gaze slowly lifted until it locked with hers. Her pulse stuttered to a stop in her veins. Steel-blue irises turned stormy and glowed with something unreadable. Something tangible.

“Hopeless,” he murmured, his gaze never leaving hers. “A hopeless romantic.”

Her fingers fisted the fabric of her coat, desperate to hold on to something, ground

herself with something.

Because the force of that stare was burning through her, incinerating.

And the way he spoke, low and soft and just for her—like his words were a confession, had embers sparking to life in her chest.

“It’s admirable,” she whispered. “If you have the opportunity.”

He winged a brow, a silent entreaty to elaborate.

“To wish to marry for love. I think that’s admirable. And enviable.”

His dark brows furrowed nearly imperceptibly, and his lips silently curved around her last word. Envable .

The heady glimmer that had consumed his blue eyes clouded over, and his gaze flitted back and forth between her eyes.

Searching. He wouldn’t know. No one did.

Freddy and she were particular about that fact.

They were as discreet as possible about their arrangement.

Presented a united front. For the children.

But...eventually, she would have to tell someone.

When she finally built up the courage to take a lover. Her lover would have to know.

And Lydia thought, just maybe, she was ready to take that step.

She had thrown herself—not just head-first, but every piece of herself—into being a mother, raising her children.

And she hadn't even entertained the thought of taking a lover before she had fulfilled her obligation to Freddy.

But he had his heir and spare, her lovely boys.

And he'd also granted her a daughter. A sacrifice she didn't take lightly because she knew how hard it was for him to be with her in that way.

She glanced at her children, soft giggles and bleats drifting over to them.

Felicity cradled a lamb in her lap, holding a bottle as it suckled greedily.

Felix sat next to her, a second lamb nestled in his lap, the dashing young groom demonstrating how to feed the small white ball of fluff.

The groom smiled at Felix, and her son's cheeks bloomed crimson, and he ducked his chin.

Lydia wrinkled her nose. She'd never seen Felix blush so thoroughly before. Her attention snapped to Fitzwilliam—who had just toppled over, his overly exuberant lamb having just bounded into him. Fitzwilliam scrambled to his feet and took off after his charge.

She bit back a smile. The children were growing up. Becoming less dependent. Her heart warmed and ached at the same time.

And Lydia...was starting to realize how much she had lost herself while being a mother. As her children grew more independent, she realized she didn't truly know who she was without them. Who Lydia Jennings was. Perhaps she was ready to find that woman now. The woman hidden inside herself.

She flicked her gaze back to Mr. Campbell.

And that woman had always been utterly enraptured by the man before her.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mal

Och. Hopeless was right. Admitting he was a hopeless romantic?

It'd taken every ounce of self-restraint not to say hopelessly in love with ye .

And she thought it was admirable? Envable?

That he was pining after a woman he could never have, putting his life on hold for no other reason than every other woman wasn't her . That wasn't enviable.

What it was, was addle-pated.

"I don't love him," Lady Bentley blurted.

Malcolm blinked. Repeatedly. "Pardon?"

She delicately cleared her throat, her gaze dropping to where she twisted her hands together in front of her, and her cheeks bloomed with a soft blush.

She inhaled deeply, her entire slight frame lifting, bracing.

And then she squeezed her eyes shut tight and said in a rush, "I meant, I am envious of your dreams to marry for love."

Her eyes fluttered open, but she stared off into the distance, not meeting his gaze.

"I... Freddy and I did not marry for love. Our marriage was contractual. As many ton



marriages are.”

His stomach tightened at her use of her husband’s Christian name.

Even as her words had the opposite effect.

Did not marry for love. Contractual . But clearly, they had developed an affection for each other.

One would have to be blind to miss it. The laughter.

The time spent together as family. It was bloody torture.

But it was also a small comfort, knowing she was happy.

Because even if he couldnae have her, all he wished for was her happiness.

“So, I find it admirable and enviable that you wish for love.” Her words drifted to him, pulling him back to her, and her soulful sea-blue eyes finally met his. “As it is something I would have liked,” she said softly. Longingly...

Then her eyes flew wide, and she stepped forward, reaching out to him.

“Oh, that was horrible! No, no!” Her hand landed on his chest. “I am beyond happy with my current situation. I wouldn’t change a thing.

I love my children, and without the arrangement, I wouldn’t have them.

I wouldn’t trade them for love.” Her eyes darted wildly between his, her fingertips digging into him.

She might as well have been reaching straight through him into his heart. “I wouldn’t trade them for anything.”

He let a smile curve his lips, despite the erratic beat of the pathetic muscle beneath her hand.

Where she was touching him. Bloody hell, it was heaven to have her touch him.

And her words. God, what did they mean? His mind was a riot of thoughts.

None of them healthy for him to be having. But he tamped them down.

“Aye, my lady. I think I understand. Ye wish ye had both, is all.”

She deflated on a breath, her lips splitting into a smile. And she blessedly didn’t pull away. Was it pathetic that he’d like to be trapped in this moment for the rest of eternity? Simply with her hand pressed to his chest, with her leaning into the touch like she was drawn to him.

She peeked at him through a frill of blonde lashes. They were bonnie lashes, they were. He’d love to dust kisses over them. Snap out of it, ye dobber.

“Yes. Exactly, Mr. Campbell. I would have preferred to find love in my marriage.”

But she hadnae. Didnae. Which meant...

She pursed her lips into an adorable little bow. “Well, I do love Freddy.”

His heart sank.

“Just not in that way.”

It floated back up.

“I care deeply for him. But it’s not a...a...” Her brows crashed together, and her two top teeth sank into her bottom lip, her gaze turning inward. “It’s not an intimate love?”

His head snapped back, thoughts reeling.

This conversation, already treading the edge of propriety, had now tossed all caution aside.

They were entering the bull paddock. Wearing red.

Because she was touching him. Speaking of intimacy.

While touching him. Saying she didn’t love her husband.

And his head and his heart were quickly getting as tangled as a sheep in a bramble thicket.

She took a hurried step back, severing their connection. And he felt the loss of her touch keenly. He barely prevented himself from reaching for her, snatching her hand, and placing it back on his chest. Because that small touch. It was everything.

“My apologies. That was much too forward.” Her gaze dropped to the flattened, sparse winter grass that would fill in once spring was upon them.

She looked back up at him, her cheeks dotted cinnamon red, and even that blotchy blush looked lovely on her.

“I suppose I got carried away. But I have always felt at ease speaking with you. You

have this presence about you..." She trailed off, her gaze softening.

And someone, bash him over the head with a spade. Because bloody hell, that looked a hell of a lot like affection.

"A comfort," she murmured. "I suppose it loosened my tongue."

Och. Cannae think about her tongue, Mal.

"I'm glad to be of service, Lady Bentley," he said gruffly. "Act as a source of support for you and your bairns and the Bentley estate."

She started meandering toward the other side of the pen where her children were, and he followed like a puppet on a string. Like a pathetic, pining Scotsman.

"Yes, you are an integral part of the Bentley estate. In many, many ways, Mr. Campbell. You've worked here for quite some time. We've known each other for what...over a decade now?"

Eleven years, five months.

He didn't say that, though. He wasn't that beetle headed. He dipped his chin in a nod instead.

She paused at a bush of hellbores that bordered the pen, her fingers tracing over the deep burgundy petals.

"I've always loved these," she murmured softly, taking a petal between her fingertips and rubbing it gently. "A splash of color in an otherwise colorless season."

Like her.

“A decade is a long time. Perhaps...it is time you call me Lydia,” she added.

What? His eyes stretched wide. “‘Tis—‘tisn’t proper, my lady.”

He swallowed hard. He’d love to say her name. He knew how sweet it would taste, curling that ‘L’ on his tongue. And to hear her say his name? He stomped out that thought, doused it like cold water on the hearth. Because just the thought brought a sharp, painful joy bursting through his chest.

“You are more than an employee, more than a servant, to this estate, Mr. Campbell. To me. To those children.” She gestured to her bairns, snuggling with the lambs.

“So, in private company...like right now. I would give you leave to call me Lydia,” she said hesitantly.

“And if you would grant me the privilege of calling you—”

“Aye.” Damn it. Ye bloody dobber. But he wanted to hear his name coming from her lips.

And she was the superior here. She, a countess, and he, a mere groom.

She could call him blethering bampot, and he’d never deny her.

“Ye can call me Malcolm, my lady, if you so wish it. But I’m not so sure it is right for me to reciprocate the liberty. ”

Her seafoam irises dimmed slightly, the curve of her lips holding a tinge of sadness. “I suppose I will make do with that.” She held his gaze, her eyes darkening to a stormy sea. “Malcolm.”

His heart rammed against his ribcage. Shite. Now that he'd heard it once, he never wanted to stop hearing it. He wanted to ask her to say it again. He opened his mouth—

“Mama! Come here, come here! You must cuddle these lambs. So sweet!”

Their heads snapped in the direction of Lady Felicity's voice.

Lady Bentley lifted her hand in a wave. “I'll be right over, darlings!” Her gaze darted back to his, and she gifted him a half-smile, a small, bashful one. One that had him feeling things he really shouldn't.

Who are ye kidding, Mal. Every single one of yer feelings about her are ones ye shouldnae be having.

“As always, it has been a pleasure. Malcolm.”

And she walked off to join her children.

And he stood there, no longer a hopeless romantic.

But a hopeful one.

He truly was a blethering bampot. Because she was still married. Still a countess.

Still unattainable.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Lydia

Lydia fanned the pages of the novel in her lap from where she sat on her favorite worn chaise in the manor's library.

Her eyes blurred watching the pages of the book.

The one she had blindly picked up. She had needed something for her hands to do as her thoughts scattered like leaves in a gust of wind.

And just like those leaves, she couldn't grab hold of a single one.

But she did know one thing. Every thought was about him .

Not that that was new. She bit her cheek.

He wouldn't call her Lydia. Probably feared the potential consequences.

His position—livelihood. She hated the power imbalance her position created.

Lord, she hated everything that the situation created.

She was a married woman. She knew some men had no compunction cuckolding another man.

But Lydia had absolutely zero doubts in her mind that Mr. Campbell—Malcolm—wasn't one of those men.

She must find a way to explain her situation and get him to understand.

If he was even interested in her. Which she thought he was.

No one had ever looked at her the way he did.

That had to mean something. Her lids fell shut.

But the only way to know for sure was to put it all on the line.

Offer herself up, body and soul, for the taking.

For the rejection. She flopped back on the chaise and threw an arm over her eyes. And that was terrifying.

“Is something amiss, Lyddie?”

Her eyes popped open, and her gaze immediately went to the library doorway. Where her husband and best friend stood.

“Hullo, Freddy,” she said, sending him a quick small smile.

He made his way around the settees in the middle of the library and stopped before her. “I wanted to let you know I am planning another trip to London. I plan to leave in the next day or so and stay for a fortnight. I’d like to spend Valentine’s Day with Hannah.”

Lydia’s chest grew heavy. Freddy’s love for Hannah was...

beautiful. And Lydia wanted a piece of that.



Badly. She tried to swallow the lump forming in her throat.

The thick envy and choking emptiness. She had done so well without it.

Without that kind of love. She had her babies, her lovely children.

And Freddy was a joyous partner, supportive, quick with a jest, keeping the family on their toes with new fun competitions and games.

But she kept having moments more and more often now where she felt... adrift. Lonely.

The cushion she sat on sank and then Freddy's finger gently tilted her chin up until their stares met. "Why so glum, Lyddie?"

She flipped the book over in her hands absently. "I'm feeling a bit lonely is all." Her words came out tight, rough with the emotion sneaking up on her.

He pushed a tendril of her hair away from her face, his amber brows knitting.

"I know you've denied my assistance in the past...

But perhaps it is time to start looking for someone who can keep you company.

The last thing I want for you is to be lonely, Lydia.

The children...they're getting older. I know they've kept you busy—and happy—but they won't be living with us forever.

You deserve to find someone to make you happy.

I want more than anything for you to find something like what I have with Hannah. ”

Piercing slate-blue eyes flashed in her mind, and something swooped low in her belly. A feeling not unlike the one she experienced when perched atop a great height.

“I think I’d like that, too.” She cleared her throat, infusing strength into her voice. “I’m ready for that now.”

“Would you like me to discreetly ask around in London? Perhaps I could invite some gentlemen here—a house party of sorts—and if you get along with any of them, we can see if they would be amenable to an arrangement.”

She picked at the blanket in her lap, pulling the fabric over the book and off it again. “I actually had someone in mind,” she ventured.

Lydia met Freddy’s gaze, his eyebrows disappearing into his riotous amber curls. His lips split into a disarming grin, dimples popping. “Why, you sly minx. Who, Lyddie?”

She let out a soft snort and rolled her eyes.

His smile softened and turned fond. He ran a finger down her nose.

“I love that Felicity acquired that trait from you.” Then his amber eyes sparked with devilry again.

“But I must know who.” He bounced slightly.

Excitable as a child even at seven-and-forty.

She hoped he never lost that exuberance.

And she hoped it was a trait the children inherited.

“Mr. Campbell,” she said nearly inaudibly. Heat splashed across her cheeks. And intensified when Freddy burst into laughter. She glared at him. “Why are you laughing at me?”

“Apologies, Lyddie,” he said between chuckles. “He’s a dashing man, if I’m allowed to admit that. And a kind one, too, not something easily found in this world. But goodness. He’s brawny and burly and a big ol’ Scot. And you’re...you’re a little slip of a thing.”

She frowned harder at him. “Does that matter? Why should our size difference matter?”

He squeezed her hand. “I’m sure it won’t. If you two are...compatible. It shan’t matter. I just am surprised, is all. Would have thought you’d have been interested in a more soft-handed gentlemen.”

She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at him. She was feeling woefully uneducated at the moment. “Freddy. Are you telling me...size matters in relations?”

And her husband lost it. Snorted and guffawed and choked on his laughter.

She blew out a frustrated breath. “I would appreciate some seriousness,” she gritted out. “I have only ever been with you, Freddy. And we both know those instances were not what a typical coupling is like.”

He sobered instantly, the sparkle in his eyes dimming. “I’m so sorry, Lyddie. I hope I haven’t marred your view of intimacy.”

She waved him off. “Don’t apologize, Freddy.

I just meant to say I have very little experience.

I'm a married woman with three children, and I feel about as knowledgeable as a maiden.

"She pursed her lips. "Goodness, do you think I'll be a disappointment to him?

I have no idea how to please a man. He'll probably have expectations. "

Freddy's brows slammed together, and the Earl of Bentley materialized before her.

"If he ever even gives the slightest indication he feels that way, he'll find him out of a position before he can blink.

If the man is worthy of you, Lyddie, he'll not give one bloody damn about your past experience—whether it exists or it doesn't.

All that should matter to him is you . Your pleasure. "

He leaned forward, his lips flattening, his forehead a map of serious lines. "You will accept nothing less, Lyddie. You deserve nothing less. You have made a monumental sacrifice for me. I do not take that lightly."

"You speak like it is not common amongst our class."

"Just because it is common does not make it acceptable."

Her heart softened. "You are a good man, Frederick Jennings. And I am blessed to have you as a husband and best friend."

"I'm not too bad, am I?" He shot her a lopsided smile. The one that made him look

like a mischievous puppy. The one her sons had inherited, and she knew would be the cause of all sorts of trouble as they got older. “Now, let’s discuss your Scot. Do you have a plan?”

“He’s not my Scot, Freddy,” she said with a huff of laughter.

He winked. “Not yet.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mal

Thump.

Thump, thump, thump.

Malcolm jolted up in bed. He scrubbed his palm over his face and tried to blink away the sleep.

Thump, thump. Pause. Thump .

He peered blearily at the door. What in the blazes? He slipped from bed and hurried to don a pair of trousers.

More erratic thumping.

His heart skipped, stalled, then took flight.

Whoever was in the hall was panicked. He sniffed the air as he buttoned his falls while swiftly making his way to the door.

He didn't smell fire. But the stables were large.

The servant's quarters were above a portion of it but didn't cover the entire building.

He threw open the door and froze.

Definitely no' a fire.

But a crisis just the same.

“Hullo, Malcolm.” Pink lips pulled into a shy smile, rose-gold curls slowly revealed as the woman outside his door pulled back the hood of her cloak.

“My lady?” he croaked.

Her hand landed on his chest. His bare chest. And gave a shove. He stumbled backward, and she followed him inside his room, hips swaying. He frowned. Nae, entire body swaying.

He stared dumbly at her. Was he dreaming? The searing heat on his chest from where her gloveless hand had landed suggested otherwise. But he couldn't fathom any other reason for why she would be here in his rooms.

A small hiccup squeaked from her, and her hand flew to her mouth, eyes widening.

He tilted his head. “My lady...”

“I have something I'd like to discuss with you. A preposition.”

Her words contained a subtle slur. Combined with the hiccup and the swaying... His mind latched onto her words, and he frowned. “A preposition?”

Lady Bentley's lips pursed, and her forehead wrinkled. “Propetition.”

His lips twitched. Despite the fact that she being here in his room, a wee bit drouthy, and him half-naked, was nothing to laugh about.

“Have ye maybe had a touch too much to drink, my lady? Why don’t I escort you back to the manor?”

“No, I’m exactly where I wanted to end up. Though I might have been a bit too generous with my brandy. I was trying to work up the courage. To propose to you.”

Malcolm’s eyebrows flew to his hairline.

And she broke out in a fit of giggles. “Oh dear. Proposition you. Not propose.”

She snorted. An adorable, unladylike snort.

“I think, Lady Bentley, I should get ye back safely home. Aye?”

“Nae.” Her blue-green eyes glittered at him. Teasing. Was she being saucy with him? Throwing a bit of his brogue back at him? “I like when your brogue thickens,” she said breathlessly.

Och. Fook. Shite. It wasnae just his brogue that was thickening.

“It seems to do that when you are excited or angry or worried.” Her lips pursed and, egads, he wanted to kiss them. “Whenever you seem to be feeling strong emotions, it seems. It’s more prevalent right now.” Her gaze whisked up to his.

Aye, it was. Because he was feeling strong fooking emotions.

She stepped up to him, one finger tracing between the muscles of his chest. A horrible reminder that he wasn’t wearing much for clothes.

“I should don a shirt. I forwent one in my haste to see what the ruckus was about.”



“No, thank you.”

“Pardon?”

Her finger trailed lower, outlining the muscles in his abdomen. His skin quivered. As did another part of him. His hands fisted at his sides. Shite .

“You’re much larger than the last time.”

She glanced up at him, her neck craning back to meet his gaze. She was so much shorter than his six-foot-four frame. A wee bonnie thing.

“So much has changed about you since that first time,” she continued, more to herself than him. Her fingertips skimmed up his chest, over the muscles in his neck, until the soft pads found his jawline. She slowly traced it back and forth. Back and forth.

He swallowed, every muscle in his body taut as a tightly coiled stallion. “The f-first time?” he somehow managed, his words as coarse as the rocky crags of Scotland. He was rapidly losing the ability to form coherent thoughts.

“It was my first day here,” she whispered, gaze locked on the torturous glide of her fingers. “I was exploring the estate. I stumbled upon a man bathing. I’d never seen a naked man before. Not even my husband.” Her stare flicked up to meet his. “I’ve still never, really.”

He opened and closed his mouth. He had nae idea what that meant.

Her gaze fell again, her fingers now traveling down the column of his neck to his collarbone.

“Anyhow. There was this dark-haired man. Tall, lanky, all lean muscles. And then he

turned, and I caught sight of his eyes. He couldn't see me.

But those steely blue eyes—they burned themselves into my memory.

Did you know something as simple as a stare can have such a strong effect it causes you to stop breathing? ”

Aye. Aye, he did.

“The next day, imagine my surprise when the groom leading my horse to me was none other than the man I had spotted bathing the day before.”

His eyes shot wide. Was she speaking of him? She had seen him bathing? He didn't know why she was telling this to him, or what meaning lay beneath her words. Why she was here. Touching him. But he knew what he desperately wanted it all to mean.

“I have been enamored with you for so long, Malcolm.” Her fingers stilled, and she inhaled a shaky breath.

“But I had responsibilities to fulfill. As a wife. As a mother.” Her voice faltered, and she closed her eyes, her frame rising and falling on a large breath.

And when she locked eyes with him again, determination swirled, dark and dire.

“I'm ready now.” She pushed up and pressed a barely there kiss to his jaw.

Malcolm froze, his body turned to marble.

An indescribable feeling bloomed deep in his chest, like ice freezing over his insides.

Her lips were on his skin. Her words weren't anything he could misinterpret now.

The woman he'd been madly and pathetically in love with for the last eleven years and five months. Wanted him.

A hiccup filled the room, sending her tumbling into his chest. A timely reminder: she was well in her cups and, quite possibly, not thinking clearly. And his insides grew heavy and twisted at that thought.

He took her arms gently in his hands, setting her a safe distance from him. "Lady Bentley. I think it's best I get ye back to the manor."

Her face fell. "Oh."

She took another step backward, shrinking into herself as a mottled blush reddened her nose and spanned over her cheeks.

He forced himself not to go to her. Even though he desperately wanted to reassure her. "Ye're under the influence, my lady. Not thinking clearly."

Her blonde brows crashed together. "I'm thinking quite clearly. The clearest."

She swayed where she stood and stumbled to the side. He hurried to her that time and led her to an armchair, where he gently nudged her to sit. Och, she was more worse for wear than he'd originally thought.

"I meant what I said. I just needed a few snifters to work up the courage to discuss this with you. This proposition."

"I'm not sure exactly what your proposition is, my lady, though I have a few guesses."

"He went to his wardrobe and procured a shirt."

“And, though I’m flattered, I will save us both a bushel of embarrassment tomorrow by escorting ye home.

I dinnae involve myself with married women.

” He threw the shirt over his head and then grabbed his cloak, which was hanging on a hook on the wall by the door.

He walked back up to her and offered his hand. “Let me take ye home, lass.”

“Freddy won’t care,” she said.

He barely held off his snort. A husband no’ caring if his wife was visiting another man in the middle of the night? Inconceivable. And Malcolm couldn’t risk his position. Though for one night with her... Bloody hell. It’d be worth it—

Nae! Gather your wits, Mal.

He needed to see her safely home. Now.

Lady Bentley— Lydia he whispered in his mind.

Just for himself—stared up at him, eyes wide, beseeching.

She looked so bloody young and vulnerable.

Even in her thirties, she had an innocence about her.

Obviously. She’d gotten toss-pot drunk and showed up at his room saying—in not so many words—she wanted to shag him.

If he was a man of lesser morals, he would have taken advantage of such an invitation.

Good Lord, that thought chilled the blood in his veins.

She could have been harmed by a lesser man .

It was too easy for the world to be cruel.

He saw it all too often with the horses he rescued, beaten and broken by hands that were supposed to care for them.

At the tavern, when larger men sought out those smaller, weaker.

A bloodthirst for power, for domination.

He couldnae bear the thought of that happening to her.

She put her hand in his, and he led her to the door.

“‘Tis not safe to do what you did tonight, my lady,” he said quietly.

He caught her gaze from the corner of his eye as he ushered her through his door.

“Not all men are gentlemen.” He reached behind her and lifted the hood of her cloak over her head, concealing the majority of her from view.

“But you are,” she murmured. “A gentlemen. Safe. I’m always safe with you.”

His heart squeezed. Aye, she was.

“Let’s get you home, lass. I have a feeling yer head will be screaming at you come morning.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Lydia

Lydia pulled a pillow over her face and let out a groan into the fluffy mass, shrinking into her mattress and away from the offending morning light. And it wasn't just because her head felt like the screeching stable cat had taken up residence.

No, it was because she had worked up the courage to approach Mr. Campbell.

No, Lydia, you drank up the courage . Hence the aching megrim.

But she hadn't drank enough. Because she remembered the entire embarrassing ordeal. The one where she'd stumbled and hiccupped and-and-and fondled him. And he'd gallantly refused her advances and escorted her home, ever the gentleman.

"Ooof, that was some groan."

Lydia rolled to her side and peeked over her pillow at her husband, who stood in the doorway of their adjoining chambers. He absently slapped his gloves against his thigh, head cocked at a curious angle. He was dressed for travel, only missing his great coat.

"Care to speak of it?" he asked, stepping into her room.

She sat up, holding the coverlet to her chest. "I kissed Mr. Campbell," she blurted.

Freddy blinked twice. "Oh. Well, that's great news, is it not? You have landed yourself your Scot."

“He...urm...was not interested.”

Her husband’s chin jerked back, amber eyes going owl-wide. “Wasn’t interested? What fool wouldn’t be interested in you? I can’t think of a man in England who would refuse you.”

She stared at him pointedly. He rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s different. I was already in love when I met you. No one can hold a candle to my Hannah. But no other man in the world has a Hannah, so they would obviously be interested in you.”

Her lips twitched. “You know I’m not offended in the least. I was just teasing Freddy.

No explanation necessary. The way you love Hannah...

” Her heart pinched, and she let out a wistful sigh.

One that was thick with longing. “You are so sickeningly, adorably in love, Freddy. And it hurts because I want that, too.”

She dropped her gaze to her lap and said in a small voice, “I wish the world was a different place and you could have married her. I cannot imagine what it must be like for her. For the both of you.”

The soft tread of footsteps filled her chambers and then Freddy’s warm hand was squeezing her own, then again harder until she met his gaze.

“Lyd, listen to me. I love Hannah more than anything in this world—aside from Felix, Fitzwilliam, and Felicity, of course. And no, it is not easy on her. But we have made do the best we can with the situation life offered us.”

His voice dropped, the most serious she’d ever heard him.



“I do not regret you in any way. You are my dearest friend, Lyddie. You have given me the most precious gifts in our three children. You blessed me with a family, and I love you and those children dearly. I would not change a thing, because then I wouldn’t have them.

And I want you to be happy, too. Permit me to make some discreet inquiries in London? Let us find you love, Lyddie.”

“I just really wanted to see if I could have that with him,” she said, and winced at the petulance in her tone. “I cannot explain it exactly, but my heart has always wanted him, I think.”

“And you are certain he isn’t interested?”

“When I tried to kiss him, it was as though he turned to ice. And quite quickly pulled away. And insisted I was too drunk to be thinking clearly.”

Freddy held up a hand. “Wait a moment. You were drunk?”

She frowned. “Well, yes, Freddy. How brazen do you think I am? I needed something to bolster my confidence before I propositioned a man. When I have almost no experience with men. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Well, my respect for Mr. Campbell just went up in spades.”

Lydia glared at him. That wasn’t a very nice thing to say. “You are reveling in my rejection?”

“He didn’t want to take advantage of you in a situation where you didn’t completely have control over your person. Not to mention, he’s probably terrified of losing his position. He’s an honorable man, Lyddie.”

“So how do I convince him this is acceptable? That I may be married, but...” Good Lord, what a convoluted situation. How did one go about telling a man, I’m married, but my husband has no qualms if I get in your bed. Encourages it, in fact!

“Perhaps try to have the discussion without the influence of drink.” He patted her thigh. “Now I best be off. My carriage is being readied. I’m for London.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“Safe travels, Freddy. Give Hannah my best. And have a lovely fortnight celebrating your love and Valentine’s Day.”

That last bit might have come out a bit grumbly.

Freddy laughed and chuckled her under the chin. “Good luck, Lyddie. I hope you catch yourself your own valentine.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mal

Malcolm ran his hand down the bay's foreleg, squeezing lightly at the fetlock, and the horse obediently lifted for him.

He did a quick scan of the horse's shoe and then gently lowered the beast's hoof to the ground.

He crossed over to the other side, inspecting the bridle, harness, and straps.

Then repeated his examination on the other leg.

It was his habit to perform a final pass over before the carriages departed. He knew the grooms under his supervision did a thorough job, but one could never be too careful. A mistake could have serious consequences—a lame horse, a damaged carriage, injured passengers. Or worse.

He gave the gelding a pat on the rump and turned toward the tack room.

“Mr. Campbell, a word?”

Malcolm's gaze flew to Lord Bentley, who was striding toward him. With purpose. His heart plummeted. Oh God. Had the man learned of the Countess visiting him last night?

The Earl passed him and made for the tack room. “In here, if you please.”

The man's tone brooked no argument, and unease slid over Malcolm as he followed the Earl. Lord Bentley shut the door behind him, then doffed his topper and patted it against his leg. His gaze traversed the ceiling. The walls. Did the man find something interesting there?

"Is there something I can assist ye with, my lord?"

"I will be traveling to London and gone for a fortnight." Lord Bentley paused, his lips rolling in. Finally, his gaze landed on Malcolm's, serious and sharp. "It has come to my attention that my wife is lonely."

Malcolm went perfectly still. He had no idea what to say to that. So he remained silent. Completely at odds with the cacophony currently taking place in his chest.

A pained expression crossed Lord Bentley's face. "Perhaps you could assist in that area, if you would be amenable."

If he would be a-fucking-what-now? He stared, blinking dumbly at his employer. Because if his mind hadn't, in fact, deserted him, then he thought Lord Bentley might be hinting that Malcolm should keep Lady Bentley company. In the biblical sense.

"Mr. Campbell?"

"I apologize, my lord. But I am not sure I follow what you are asking of me." Because no husband asked another man to...take care of his wife for him. Did they?

Nae. They don't. Stop being hopeful.

Lord Bentley blew out a breath. "If you are not interested, then please forget we had this conversation. It is just... I want you to know if you are interested... I will not stand in your way. Does that make things clearer?"

Nae. It really didnae. “Lord Bentley, I am going to have to ask you to state outright what you mean. My mind...it is going places that I am sure you are no’ intending. I—” He floundered, couldn’t form a coherent thought. He wouldn’t believe it unless he heard the words.

Lord Bentley rocked on his feet and nodded. His chest rose and fell on a heavy breath. “I have gotten the impression my wife has developed an...interest...in you. I am stating here and now: I will not stand in either of your ways if that is something you both want to pursue.”

Malcolm’s mouth dropped to the dusty tack room floor.

“But”—Lord Bentley lifted a finger and settled a glare on him—“that is only if it is something she does truly want. If she decides she is not interested, or at any point changes her mind, you are to leave her alone. My wife is my dearest friend. If you hurt her, it won’t just be your position you’ll be worrying over.

Do you understand what I am saying now?”

Malcolm would never, ever do anything to harm Lydia. He’d tear his heart out of his chest and offer it up in her stead before he did anything that would cause her the slightest pain.

“Yes, my lord. I believe I do.”

Dear Lord. Was this truly happening? The woman of his dreams wanted him. And apparently, her husband wasn’t standing in their way.

He almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. Almost asked if Port was around to dunk him in a bucket of ice water again. Because he must be soused. Fate didn’t hand out chances like this, not to men like him.

Yet here it was, within reach.

And he'd be damned if he let it slip through his fingers.

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Lydia

Lydia strolled along the dirt path skirting the stables, keeping a watchful eye on her unruly brood as they scampered ahead of her.

Thank the heavens above for the unseasonably warm weather they'd been having of late.

Much like their father, these children had a seemingly endless supply of energy.

Confinement did not a happy Jennings make.

Her gaze caught on a tall, broad figure walking a black mare. An aching wave of yearning floated over her, settling heavily in her belly.

"Oh, it's Mr. Campbell with Jasmine!" Felicity exclaimed. "Can we go say hullo, Mama?"

"Of course, dearest."

"Her belly is getting quite large," Felix said, studying the mare. "I wonder if we'll be able to feel the foal moving yet."

"Race you!" And Felicity took off, amber plait flying behind her, skirts whipping, little booted feet a mere blur.

"No fair!" Fitzwilliam cried, launching after her. And promptly tripped, tumbling

headlong to the ground.

“She always does that,” Felix grumbled as he jogged to Fitzwilliam, quickly hoisted his brother up, and took off after his sister.

Felix nearly caught up with her before she reached Mr. Campbell, an advantage of being eleven to her four and already showing signs of inheriting his father’s height.

Fitzwilliam was growing quite tall as well, though he was only five, and with his affinity for clumsiness...

it was honestly fortunate he made it to the group without falling again.

Lydia reached the small group gathered around the mare. Mr. Campbell stood with his large hand on Jasmine’s lower belly and indicated to Felicity to place her hand next to his.

Her eyes popped wide. “Oh! It kicked!”

“I want to feel!” Fitzwilliam squeezed his way next to Felicity, and Lydia bit back a smile.

“Easy there, lad,” Mr. Campbell said with a rumbling laugh. “There’s plenty of belly here for ye both.”

Felix lingered at the mare’s head, gently stroking her nose. Lydia stepped up next to him.

“Wow,” Fitzwilliam’s small voice rang out, brimming in awe. “I swear I just felt a hoof.”



“Aye, Jasmine’s been through this a few times afore,” Mr. Campbell explained. “The muscles of her belly are stretched looser than a younger mare’s. At this stage, it’s no’ surprising we can feel the foal so clearly.”

Lydia loved how he was always imparting education and wisdom to the children. She wanted them well-rounded, to learn about all parts of life. There were many valuable lessons one could learn in taking care of animals. Empathy. Responsibility. Patience.

She leaned closer to her eldest son. “It is gallant of you to allow your younger siblings the first turn at feeling the foal’s movements,” she murmured.

His high cheekbones, nearly identical to her own, flushed a faint shade of pink. “I am their big brother. It is my responsibility to ensure they are happy. I’ve had more years to enjoy things like this than they have.”

She playfully nudged his shoulder—goodness, it was nearly the same height as hers now—and shot him a smile. “You’re going to make a wonderful Earl one day, Felix. Much like your father, you’ve a gift for looking after those around you. Always wanting the best for them.”

The pink dotting his cheeks deepened, but there was pride shining in his warm amber eyes when he met her gaze.

“My lady.” A deep baritone came from her side.

Lydia startled, and it was her turn to have a blush heat her cheeks. Not the usual faint blush the man before her inspired in her. But coal-hot and what she was sure was strawberry-red. Because of her embarrassing expedition last night.

She forced her lips into a smile. “Good afternoon, Mr. Campbell. Jasmine is doing well, I trust?”

His gaze tracked over her face before meeting her eyes. “Aye, fit as a fiddle. No need to worry over your precious mare. I’m just walking her out, allowing her to stretch her legs a bit. Take advantage of the warm weather. As are your bairns, I see.”

She glanced up. Felicity and Fitzwilliam were off a ways in the distance, appearing to be participating in some sort of jumping contest.

“Let us hope we don’t have a repeat of the mud incident of 1794.” Mr. Campbell’s rumbling chuckle floated around her, like joy landing on her skin.

“Dear heavens, I hope not.” Laughter shook her words slightly, and she peeked at him. “Goodness, I don’t think she was even yet three? Already wanting to best her brothers.”

“Climbed right atop that three-rail fence over yonder.” He jerked his chin over to the paddock in the distance.

Lydia let out a sigh. “And jumped...straight into the mud puddle.”

She caught Mr. Campbell’s eye, those piercing blues glimmering. His frame shook, and he covered his face, clearly trying to regain composure. Lydia bit her lip, trying to hold back her smile. But it was impossible. He was endearing. Handsome. Jovial. Perfect.

He finally emerged from behind his hands. “Covered head to toe, couldn’t even see her wee face. Just blinking owl eyes, stunned speechless.”

“Probably the first time that had ever happened,” Lydia murmured between soft laughs. “She’s a wild one.”

“Aye, she has spirit. Determination. Qualities important for a lass in this world. It’ll

serve her well. Even if it might make your pulse take flight.”

She cocked her head and studied him. Not many men would align with that way of thinking. “That is not...the typical way of thinking of my set.”

“Och. ‘Tis because your set can’t handle a strong woman.” His pupils flared and his gaze lingered, caressing every inch of her face. The way he looked at her just now, the deep resonance of his tone...it was like he thought her strong.

“May I walk her, Mr. Campbell?” Felix asked, interrupting the charged moment.

“O’ course, Master Felix.”

Felix clucked at the mare. “Come now, Jasmine. Let us stroll.” He gently led the mare away, lowering his voice and murmuring softly to her.

“That boy has a gentle hand. A natural affinity with animals.”

Lydia hummed in agreement. “I love seeing them with the animals. I like to think it’s a good indication of the sort of man he will grow to be. If one is kind to animals. To children.”

“Aye, you have that right. It says a lot about a person, man or woman. If they’re cruel to those who have very little ability to protect themselves, those who depend on us”—his voice hardened—“it tells one all ye need to know about their character.”

They fell into silence. But Lydia’s skin prickled, buzzed. She was mortified about last night. And as the uncomfortable silence drew out, she greatly feared she may have ruined the friendship she’d formed with the man standing beside her. One that she valued much more than he’d ever know.

“I must beg your pardon—”

“Abou’ last night—”

They both cut off and shared a small smile. And with that, some of the uneasy tension that had settled between them seemed to drift off.

“After you, my lady.”

She blew out her cheeks and stared unseeing into the pasture.

Here went nothing. “Mr. Campbell, I must apologize for my forwardness last night. It was not my intention to give offense or cause you discomfort. I would appreciate if you could...perhaps forget the entire matter? And we could return to how things were beforehand? It would weigh heavily on me if my actions have jeopardized our friendship.”

“Nae.”

Her gaze snapped to his. Steel blue, sharp, and glinting with something potent, overpowering.

“I cannae forget, and I have no wish to, my lady.”

“Oh?” Her lips formed the word, but she barely made a sound.

He lifted his cap and scrubbed a hand through his dark locks. “To be frank, my mind’s more muddled than a nest of bridle reins left in a hurry. Lord Bentley spoke with me this morning. He mentioned some things...that he wouldn’t stand in the way. Sounded an awful lot like he was giving his blessing.”

He opened and closed his mouth, and for the longest time didn't manage to form words. Finally, he burst out, "I dinnae understand your marriage, or your arrangement, my lady. But I wanted you to know, I didnae refuse you because of you. The last thing I would ever do is refuse a gift like that."

"Oh," she parroted, her hand fluttering at her breast. "So, then. You...are amenable?"

His lips tugged up into a half-smile. "That depends. On what it is you want. Because if ye're looking for a quick tumble with a braw Scotsman, while flattered, I dinnae think I'm yer man."

"And if I said I'd like a-a tumble, but also more?"

Her skin went up in flames. Good heavens. She wanted a tumble with the man—even if she didn't fully grasp what that truly meant. But that wasn't all she wanted. The way her heart twisted and tightened in her chest was proof of that.

"I would ask what more means to ye, my lady."

"Lydia."

His voice lowered, deepened. "Lydia."

Her pulse trembled, dancing in her veins.

Her name from his lips, rich and heated—she could feel it seeping into her, lighting a fire low in her belly.

"I'd like to get to know you, Malcolm. On a more intimate level, not just in the physical sense.

And see what comes from it.” She glanced at her children in the distance.

“Discreetly, of course. I would not dare tarnish my children’s view of our family as a loving one by revealing that their parents are not a love match.

This family’s foundation is love—just not in the way most would expect. ”

His features softened, and his blue irises glowed.

“I think I’d be amenable to that. And would never want to do anything to hurt yer bairns.

” He winged a dark brow, teeth flashing in a quick smile.

“But I have questions. This isnae a normal situation, ye have to admit.” He lifted a hand to the back of his neck and squeezed, his head bowing bashfully.

“It’s nae one I’d ever dreamed I’d be lucky enough to find myself in. ”

“You’ve dreamed of it, then?” she whispered.

And the look he sent her wrapped around her like a warm blanket.

“Aye, Lydia. I’ve dreamed of it.”

Mal

A chill stole over Malcolm, his skin icing over, every hair lifting. An animal wasnae supposed to be able to scream like that. But the rest of the estate he had snuck onto seemed oblivious to the torture currently being carried out in the small building before Malcolm and his fellow groom, Wright.

“If gossip is true”—Wright whispered from their cover in the thick wood that bordered the stables and its various outbuildings—“the stallion threw the Baron during his morning ride.”

Malcolm’s mouth tightened. So the beast was paying for it now. And there was no doubt in Malcolm’s mind it hadn’t been the poor lad’s fault.

“Did ye gather anything else?” Malcolm had seen a likened spirit in Wright when it came to the welfare of horses early on. Wright had served as his indispensable right-hand man on these expeditions ever since.

“He rides him with a curb bit. With a twisted metal mouthpiece, Campbell.”

“Och.” Malcolm cursed.

No horse should be forced to endure such torment. Those bits weren’t allowed anywhere near the Bentley estate. But many a master believed forcing a horse into submission—using pain and fear—was a way of training. It wasnae training. It was cruelty.

At that moment, the stallion was led out of the small barn, and all the breath fled Malcolm's lungs.

Head reared back, foam surrounding the horse's soft pink and grey muzzle, eyes white and bulging and darting in every direction.

It was akin to looking at a scream of agony.

His spun-gold coat was dark with sweat. Malcolm's eyes fell shut.

Dark with blood. Blood-spurring stains were evident low on the horse's coat.

Ridden with a harsh bit and spurs. When all one needed to do was glance at the horse to see he needed a soft hand.

The Baron let his whip fall on the horse's hindquarters, and a squeal fled the stallion as he shifted in place, white mane flying with a toss of his head.

The poor beast had nae idea what his master even wanted of him.

Not that he would be able to discern anything in his frightened state.

A horse cannae work in a state such as that.

Wright shifted closer to Malcolm and spoke hushed by his side.

“There are two others, ones he clearly plans to use for phaeton racing. Bloody hell, Campbell. He's going to work them to death.

He pushed them so hard they could barely breathe.



It was—" Wright's voice broke, and Malcolm's gaze flew to the companion, the man's face twisted, like he was trying to erase his memory.

"You could hear them choking, Campbell. Their bodies failing them. Could barely walk back to the stables. Have you seen a horse stumble from exhaustion? I thought one would collapse."

Malcolm's stare found its way back to the stallion, now in the round pen being pushed in ever faster circles, the whip crashing down on his flanks. The bonnie boy was skeletal. The Baron would send him to an early grave. And the other two as well.

"They're not going to make it, Malcolm." Wright's voice held all the gravity Malcolm held heavy in his chest.

"Aye, they will, Wright. Because we'll save them."

"I've got wind of a place..."

Malcolm's attention shot to Wright.

"A contact I have in Sussex said the new Duke of Devonford rehabilitates horses. I can post a letter. Because these horses need more than a new home."

"Aye, Wright. Send the letter. And then we'll arrange a raid."

Lydia

Lydia sat on a pile of blankets on the floor of Malcolm's room, unpacking the basket of provisions—fruits, cheeses, cold meats, and bread—she'd brought for them, while he poured them each a glass of wine from the bottle she'd already set out.

The children were asleep, the nursemaid plenty capable of handling them if they awoke. She hoped.

An anxious band weaved through her chest. She didn't like not being there if they called for her.

She tried to remind herself that she was more than a mother, that carving out space for her own happiness didn't make her selfish.

You're not a bad mother , she repeated in her mind.

Yet the guilt was an ever-present stubborn companion.

The woes of being a mother. And because of that, she needed to take advantage of every moment with this man.

“Will you tell me a little bit about yourself?” she rushed out. “I know we know quite a bit already, having known each other a decade. But why'd you come to England from Scotland? Do you have any siblings? Family close by? Back in Scotland? What do you do in your spare time?”

Malcolm chuckled. “Easy, lass, one question at a time.”

She smiled, sufficiently chagrined. “Apologies. I can’t help but want to know everything about you.”

His blue eyes softened to a warm slate. “I like the interest. And I’m curious just the same about you.” His chest lifted with a heavy breath. “‘Tis not the nicest of stories, just to warn you.”

She gave him an encouraging nod to keep going.

“When I was a lad of sixteen, my parents went out to the market, and a thief marked them as a target. My da fought back, and the thief ended up killing them both.”

Lydia’s hand flew to her mouth, her gasp slicing through the small room.

A sad smile twisted Malcolm’s lips, and his eyes grew liquid, melted steel.

“Aye,” he said roughly. “My da was a trainer at a laird’s estate.

The laird offered me a position in the stables, knowing I’d learned much from my da about working with horses.

But I couldnae stay. To be reminded every day of what I’d lost...

I couldnae even bear hearing other people speak.

Certain phrases would remind me of Mam—”

He blew out a breath and closed his eyes for a few beats. When he opened them, they were the lightest blue-grey Lydia had ever seen, as though the sadness had washed

away the color.

“I packed up and left for England. With the hope I could secure a position working with horses.”

“And is that how you ended up here?”

“Not quite. I found myself a stable boy position at a baron’s estate. He was a kind elderly gentleman. Think he took pity on me. Which was fortunate for me. No’ an easy journey, nor the safest, for a lad as young as I was. But I had my height in my favor, though I was lanky as a beanpole.”

“Mmm,” she hummed. “Even the first time I saw you—you must have been early twenties? You were quite lean.”

He grinned at her, a tiny bit of color bleeding back into those piercing eyes. “It gives me much satisfaction to know ye were keekin’ at me.”

“Keeking?”

He bounced his eyebrows. “Peepin’. Spying.”

She gently slapped the back of her hand across his shoulder. “It was by accident! Though I’ll admit, once I saw you, I couldn’t stop looking. I should have left, but—well, you were captivating.”

A light pink dusted his high cheekbones.

“More so now,” she murmured. “All big and... braw .” She bit back her smile and rolled her lips in.

His gaze dipped to her mouth. “You like my size, Lydia? I’m no dainty soft-handed Englishman. These hands?” He held them up, ungloved, rough. “They’re calloused. A working man’s hands. And about the size o’ a dinner plate.”

A soft snort escaped her, and she pressed her lips tight against her mirth.

“Honestly, Malcolm? Whatever you were, short, tall, broad, or slim. Dinner plate or tea-saucer plate hands. It’s what I would want.

I was drawn to the way you looked when I first came here, but as we’ve grown to know each other over the years? ”

She tilted her head, studying him. “I have developed an attachment for you,” she said softly. “You the man, who you are at your core. The handsome exterior is just a boon on top of the amazing man you are beneath.”

He ducked a bashful smile behind a dinner plate- sized hand, his blush deepening to a charming crimson.

She put the poor, adorable man out of his misery. “So, you then ended up here? Sometime after the position at the baron’s estate?”

“Aye.” He nodded. “The baron recognized my talent. Thought I had potential. When he heard of an opening for a groom position here, he pulled a favor for me. Said he thought there was an opportunity here for me to achieve the stable master position one day. And that’s no’ something of light at an estate such as this one. ”

“And you’ll be stable master soon. Once Mr. Porter retires.”

Malcolm’s smile turned fond, curving up higher on one side. “Yes, I’ll take over for Port. He’s been an exceptional mentor. In more than just working the stables.”

“I’m glad you had him as a friend to rely on here.”

“Me too, lass. Now tell me a bit about yourself.” He lifted his dark brows. “How’d ye find yourself in this... arrangement .”

She lifted a shoulder and let it drop. “Marriages of the ton are often some sort of arrangement or another. Whether it is the trading of wealth, title, lands, a womb...”

“But I dinnae imagine it’s common for a husband to willingly look the other way while his wife takes a lover? Or maybe ‘tis. I’m not familiar with your lot, I’ll admit. But I am familiar with men. And they tend to be possessive over what they believe is theirs.”

She swirled the wine in her glass, stretching her neck from side to side, contemplating her answer.

“I suppose that part isn’t common. Freddy is...not common. He’s genuine and kind and deeply in love with his mistress. A truer love I’ve never witnessed. But he’s also honorable and beholden to duty.” She glanced down and whispered, “He saved me from a very unfortunate fate.”

Malcolm leaned forward, his forehead lining. She glanced at where his fists had just tightened. Like he was ready to fight for her.

“What do ye mean, lass?”

“Before Freddy offered for me,” she started slowly, her gaze turning unseeing.

“I was in the Duke of Ironcrest’s sights.

” Malcolm’s harsh intake of breath snapped her gaze back up to his.

“I see you’ve heard of his reputation.” A reputation that spoke to him being just as cruel as his father before him.

Lydia had heard horror stories of what the dowager Duchess of Ironcrest had experienced.

Malcolm’s eyes were wide, and he jerked his chin in a stiff nod. “Aye,” he bit out. “Servants talk, my lady. Cruelty such as his does not go unheard.”

She nodded sadly. “And now some other poor woman is subjected to his cruelty.” Her throat tightened. “And I’ve heard his son isn’t safe from it either,” she added quietly. “Sometimes I feel guilty...that I put someone else—”

“Nae,” Malcolm interrupted, firm, steady.

“Absolutely not, Lydia. Ye cannae shoulder the blame for that man’s evil.

His sins are his to bear, no’ yers.” His voice deepened, his brogue thickening.

“They would exist nae matter what. From whispers, it is no’ just his wife and son who suffer his wrath.

Ye were fortunate to escape, aye, but that doesnae make ye responsible for those who didnae.

Their suffering is on his head, no’ yers.

” His tone softened. “Ye have a big heart, lass.

‘Tis why ye feel so deeply for the welfare of others.”

She swallowed thickly and wrinkled her nose against the subtle sting building there. She tried to say thank you, but nothing came out, her throat still too tight.

“Och, dinnae let your heart be heavy, lass. Will ye tell me more about how ye and the Earl came to be?”

She gave a small bob of her head and cleared her throat.

“Freddy had just made it known he was looking for a wife. I honestly don’t think he had any idea who to choose.

He didn’t want to choose anyone. But he saw me at a ball, cornered by the Duke.

He’s always had a protective streak. Always taking care of others. ”

She stared down into her wineglass absently. “The next day he called on me. Explained the situation. What would be required of me. And asked if I would be receptive to such an offer.”

“Did you no’ want love? Even if it isn’t common amongst your class?”

Her lips curved. “At the time, yes. But I was terrified. If I didn’t receive another offer... What Freddy was offering me was safe. I chose that over the unknown. And most definitely over the possibility of the Duke.

“But I can honestly say, after being married to Freddy all these years? I know I made the right decision. Love would have been a dream. But I ended up with a best friend instead. And three precious children.” She glanced at him from beneath her lashes.

“And it is not as though I don’t still have a chance at love. Some day.”



“I’ll be forever grateful to the Earl for saving ye. And for allowing me this.” He gestured between the two of them.

“Speaking of this...” Lydia worried her lip. “It is important I do not get with child.”

He dipped his chin slowly in understanding. “There are precautions we can take. I have sheaths. Sitting unopened and probably collecting dust,” he added hesitantly. “‘Tis been a while...”

“Since you’ve been with a woman,” she murmured, not a question, and studied him.

“Aye. I’ve been a wee bit stuck on one bonnie lass in particular. One I thought I had nae chance with.”

“I shouldn’t like that as much as I do,” she said, shooting him an apologetic smile. And the grin he flashed her in return started up a fluttering in her belly. “Urm.” She paused, wringing her hands. “Is that something you’d have ready for...? If things were to...?”

Malcolm stood, his blue eyes dancing. “Aye, my eager lass,” he teased as he made his way over to his desk.

She patted her blessedly cool hands over her cheeks. She feared she was destined to be permanently red-faced around this man.

“There are other precautions we can take as well. There are certain times I am more or less likely to become with child.” She paused.

“I’m actually much more familiar with practices trying to encourage pregnancy,” she said ruefully.

“Freddy wanted to limit our intimate moments as much as possible. We brought in many midwives to educate us on various methods.”

Malcolm paused in his rifling through drawers and peered at her over his shoulder. “Boggles my mind that a man would want to limit bedding ye, lass.”

He turned back to his desk. He was doing something on the surface of his desk that she couldn't see, then he strode back over to her and settled back next to her. She glanced at the desk and opened her mouth, but he must have seen the question on her face.

“A sheath. Best to soak it in oil before use.” His voice roughened. “Will ensure it willane take away from ye're pleasure.”

Oh. Goodness, she was woefully uneducated. And slightly overwhelmed. “There's also a t-tea I can drink,” she stuttered, flailing. “I'm not overly familiar with—”

“Nae,” he said, lifting a hand. “I dinnae like the idea of you putting yourself at risk. With these mystical teas and herbs. Yer safety, well-being, is much too important to me.”

Everything in her, from her heart to her bones, softened. What a man he was. Tender, thoughtful, trustworthy.

“There's one last thing, Malcolm.” She gnawed on the inside of her cheek. Time to admit how truly uneducated she was in all of this. She knew the kind of man Malcolm was. Knew he wouldn't care. But for some reason, it still got stuck in her throat.

His brow wrinkled. “Aye, lass?”

“I mentioned how devoted Freddy is to his mistress.” She drew in a deep breath. “Bedding me was not...easy for him. It happened infrequently and was...perfunctory, procedural, a necessary obligation.”

“I see...” Though his tone gave away, he most definitely did not.

“What I am trying to say is...” She wrinkled her nose and squeezed her eyes shut. “It is probably best you treat me as though I’m a maiden.”

She popped one eye open to see his blue eyes scanning her face.

“Ye’re saying ye’re inexperienced, lass?”

She licked over her lips. His gaze tracked the movement. “I’m two-and-thirty, Malcolm.”

“Aye,” he said, his tone lilting up in a question.

“I’ve never even been kissed,” she whispered.

And even though his intake of breath was soft, it sliced through the quiet room.

“Would you...perhaps...remedy that? For me?”

His large hand cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing her bottom lip. “It would be my pleasure, love.”

Lydia

Malcolm leaned forward, his breath hovering over her lips. Lydia's skin prickled, anticipation swirling through her chest. His gaze was locked on hers, steady, secure...but unnerving. Because of the strength of it, of how forceful the unnamed emotion was that lurked there.

Her palm landed on his chest, freezing him.

Her heart stuttered. He was so large, towering over her even as they sat on the floor of his rooms, his massive hand cupping her cheek infinitely gentle.

And she knew, even though his size and strength gave him an advantage—power—over her, he'd never use it.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered finally.

He studied her silently, eyes darkening like the sky before a storm.

And she could feel the heat of it, the intensity, straight to the core of her.

She hadn't realized something so small, so simple, could set her aflame.

She was a woman of two-and-thirty. She'd had plenty of time with her own body.

With want. Heavens, she was far too familiar with painful, aching want.

And now she knew this man could provide it.

Fulfill it. Her heart rapped erratically in her chest.

“Just follow my lead, lass,” he finally murmured. “I’ll show you anything you want to know.”

He leaned forward, his lips almost, almost touching hers, the comforting scent of leather and Malcolm enveloping her.

“Everything,” she whispered.

“Aye. I’ll show you everything, mo chride.”

Her lungs faltered at the endearment. She wasn’t overly familiar with Gaelic, but she knew that one. My heart .

And then his lips touched down on hers. Soft, warm, and heart-stopping.

They passed slowly over hers, pressing the sweetest kisses over her bottom lip, her top lip, the corner of her mouth.

She leaned into it, her chest buzzing, afraid it was near to bursting.

She didn’t understand the feeling, but the gentle press of his mouth against hers... was enrapturing.

Lydia mimicked his movements, and his thick fingers curled, pressing into her scalp where he cradled her head.

Her own fingers dug into his thin linen shirt, pulling him even closer as she pushed

into him.

He remained careful, intentional, with his feather-light presses, but with each pass, their mouths parted the tiniest bit more, lips trailing over lips, until the kiss was open-mouthed and searing.

And demand pulsed heavily in Lydia's heart and between her thighs.

"More, Malcolm," she said against his lips, yanking on his shirt in her grip. "Closer. Show me what's next."

His nose brushed against the side of hers, his breath skimming over her lips and cheek. "Lie back, love."

Still cradling her head, he slowly lowered her to the blankets they sat upon. He rested on his hip next to her, his hand leaving her head to find her thigh, down to her calf. His blue eyes bore straight to her soul as, inch by inch, he pulled up her skirts.

"How far do ye want this to go, Lydia? Whatever it is ye want is what I'll give."

"Everything," she said again, his thickening brogue rolling over her like waves of warmth from a blazing hearth. "I want everything with you."

His lips pressed down against hers again, wider, wetter, hotter. "Then 'tis what I'll give ye, lass. But if that ever changes, all ye have to say is nae, and I'll stop. Understood?"

She nodded, lifting herself to kiss him again. And then his tongue flicked out and trailed over her bottom lip. Lydia gasped into his mouth, back arching off the floor. Because that small caress? Heavens, she felt it between her thighs.

He did it again, skimming over the seam of her lips, dipping inside, slow and shallow. She didn't need to be told twice. She reciprocated, desperate for more of that feeling. Feeling alive.

She met the next pass of his tongue with her own and a low rumble came from deep within him, shaking his chest where it rested against hers. She matched him stroke for stroke, pushing harder than he did, more demanding, showing him without words what she wanted, what she was ready for.

His hand was on her bare thigh now, and as she drove their kiss harder, faster, wilder, his fingers dug into her skin, like if he didn't latch onto her, he'd lose control.

But she very much wanted him to lose control.

If a simple kiss was this exhilarating? What would his hands be like? At the heart of her.

Malcolm took that moment to pull away and trail kisses down her jaw until he reached her neck.

And did the most delicious things with his lips and tongue beneath the hollow of her ear.

She shivered, legs twitching, fingers trembling.

He tugged gently on the shell of her ear with his teeth, and she felt an answering pull between her legs.

How? How was that possible? It made her want things.

Scandalous things. Forbidden things. Like his mouth where all these feelings he was

provoking pooled.

She squirmed next to him, hot and needy. Strong, sure fingers skimmed over the top of her thigh and traced the groove where her leg met her hip. His lips left her, his harsh breaths bursting against the sensitive skin of her neck.

“I’ve dreamed for so long of being blessed with the chance to touch ye in this way,” he said with broken breaths. His fingers skimmed over the curls between her legs, teasing, just the light trace of his fingertips. “To be the one to bring ye pleasure.”

Lydia widened her legs, gently nudging up into his hand. She wanted him to show it to her. What it was to reach that blissful peak. With someone else. By someone else. By him.

Malcolm.

She sifted her hand through his dark locks, gently pulling him until his gaze locked on hers. “Do you want to know a secret?”

He nodded, his nose bumping into her with how close they were together.

“I’ve dreamed of the same. With you. Of what it would be like if it wasn’t my fingers, but yours.”

His gaze never left hers, and his fingers slowly trailed between her legs, coasting up and down. Leisurely. But the feelings that it inspired inside of her were anything but.

“Like this, mo chride?”

She leaned up into him, so their lips brushed as she nodded. He nipped at her mouth, his fingers dipping to part her, and she sucked in a sharp breath. Her core was on fire,



her skin nothing but a throbbing ache, desperation sizzling beneath the surface.

His fingers slid over her, and a tortured groan fled his lips.

And she devoured it, her mouth, her hips, her hands, every part of her greedy for every part of him.

Her hands pulled at his shirt, and he rose to his knees and hastily shucked it over his head.

Then her hands landed on searing hot skin, blessedly bare burning skin.

The muscles of his abdomen quivered beneath her palms, and blue eyes blown black stared down at her. Hungry.

He towered over her, his face shadowed from where his large form blocked out the candlelight behind him. And for once, he didn't look safe. He looked dangerous. In the best way.

“What comes next?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

He lowered over her, caging her in between his forearms. He dragged wet lips across the bottom of her jaw, teeth grazing, then trailed down her throat to where her neck curved into her shoulder.

“I'm going to make ye come, lass,” he murmured into her skin. “And then I'm going to strip ye bare.” That sinfully wicked tongue trailed over the ridge of her collarbone. “And make ye do it again. And again.”

His hand found her core again, this time with surety, no teasing.

He parted her, fingers skimming, swirling, and then sinking deep inside her.

A broken cry fled her lips. One Malcolm was quick to steal with his own lips.

His thumb glided up over her, a gentle barely there movement that wasn't enough but was everything at the same time.

He groaned, deep and rough. "Och, leannan. You squeezed me so tight, just then." He did another barely there pass with his thumbs, his fingers thrusting inside her in a torturous rhythm.

Her knees slid up, thighs clenching on his hips; her blood thrummed, turning molten in her veins, swirling to center between her thighs.

She didn't know what way was up, what way was down.

Her body was frantic, incoherent. She could never have imagined it'd be like this.

It was nothing like when she was by herself.

A simple relieving of an ache was what she'd experienced.

A short moment of pleasure, and then it was over.

But this? She wanted to crawl out of her skin with how badly she wanted him, needed him. Crawl into him.

She met him thrust for thrust, and each thrust had him moaning into her neck, nipping at her skin, sucking on her flesh. Like he wanted to consume her the same way she did him.

“That’s a good lass. So eager for me. Wild. Ye’re going to unman me.”

Lydia didn’t know what that meant. But his husky praise, his thickening brogue, it did something to her. Something she couldn’t fully grasp, couldn’t put her finger on. All she knew was she needed. Needed harder. Deeper. Closer.

“More,” she whimpered.

He shifted her, pulling her back into him, her bottom nestling against where he was hot, hard, and demanding.

And then the heel of his palm replaced his thumb, and his fingers picked up in a punishing rhythm, driving deep, curling inside her, pressing, pulsing, pulling her pleasure from her. And she was helpless to stop it.

Malcolm’s hips ground into her, just as she ground into his hand, riding the heel of his palm.

The rush of bliss was right before her, about to crash down.

His thrusts grew unrestrained and fervent—both his hand and his hips—and something about the hard length of him pressing against her was too much for her to take.

A tantalizing hint of what else they would share.

The tide came crashing down. Her hips jerked, legs shaking, as white-hot pleasure tore through her, engulfing her in ecstasy.

She reached blindly for him, up behind her head until her fingers found the soft locks of his hair.

And she grabbed a fistful and held on tight, because she was lost, untethered, her body shuddering, heart racing as overwhelming feeling continued to sweep over her, ripping sobs from her chest. Because the pleasure was so profound, the only possible reaction was to cry.

He pulled her tight against him, his hips bucking wildly against her. And then a hoarse roar tore from him, muffled into the crook of her shoulder, his body trembling and spasming behind her before falling limp, the same way she had just done.

His hand slipped from her, and he tugged her back flat against his chest, his rough exhalations dancing over her skin in between the endless kisses he was painting over her shoulder. And she leaned back and let herself melt into him. Pure, relaxed, lethargic, contentment. Unbounded happiness.

“Ye unmanned me, mo chride,” he said between breaths.

She filled her lungs with air, trying to regain control of her own breathing.

“What does that mean, exactly?” she asked.

“I... It appears you came to completion, too. If you are not inside me when it happens...is that what that means?” Her blush burned up her cheeks, and she lifted her hands to cover her scalding face.

She hated how little she knew. At her age, she should understand what these things meant.

Malcolm lifted to his elbow next to her, gently pulling her hands away, his blue-grey eyes soft and kind, and pray, she thought, perhaps even adoring.

“No’ exactly, love. It’s more that I wanted to hold out for longer.

But simply touching ye was more than I could bear.

Just the feel of ye, how it was sweeter than cranachan, more intoxicating than the warmest amber whisky.

I spent with nothing more than yer heaven on my fingers and the friction of yer body against mine. ”

“So, it’s not a bad thing then?”

“Nae, no’ bad. I wanted ye too much.” His voice lowered. “Starved for ye, Lydia. I was starved for ye.”

She rolled the back of her head against the floor, gaze tracing over his flushed cheekbones. The deep red cresting over them from what they just shared made the blue of his eyes more prominent somehow. She lifted a finger and traced his jawline.

“You’re beautiful, did you know that?”

A boyish smile tugged at his lips, and he dipped his chin, giving a little shake of dissent. Bashful thing.

“You are,” she insisted. “A beautiful person.” She slid her hand to his chest so that her palm rested over his heart, over where it still thumped vigorously beneath his heated skin. “Everywhere.”

“Och, lass. I’m supposed to be saying these things to ye. No’ the other way around. Ye’re stealing the words right from me.”

She grinned at him, her heart swelling in her chest. “You’re saying you feel the same way, then?”

Malcolm leaned forward and pecked her on the lips. “Aye. I feel those things. And then some.” He pulled away and helped her lift to sitting. “Now, off with those clothes, lass. I had said I wanted ye naked.”

Her brows pinched. “Are we not done?”

His lips curved, slow and sinister, and full of promise. “Nae, lass. No’ even close.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mal

Malcolm kissed his way up Lydia's body, teeth grazing over her hipbones, tongue dipping into the hollow of her belly button, reveling in the small squirm it elicited.

Her chest rose and fell heavily, skin warm under his lips, flushed a dusty rose.

She was magnificent in the aftermath of her pleasure.

And fooking delicious. He could have feasted on her for days.

But they didn't have much time left tonight.

And the need to be inside her, to have her surround him, was compulsory in its force.

He quickly gathered the sheath at his bedside, slid it on, and secured it.

His lips twitched. He didn't think she had any idea what he was doing.

Her head languidly tossed from side to side, her gaze as hazy as the misty moors, still lost in the wake of her orgasm.

He had made her a promise before, though.

He would make her come. Again. And again.

It was time for again .

Malcolm settled between her thighs, and she let out a contented purr. He coasted over her once, twice, and then notched himself at her entrance.

“Are ye ready for me, mo chridhe?”

Her gaze, clearer now, met his. “Yes. Please.”

He pushed inside, just barely. And stilled. Let her stretch around him. His muscles hardened. Mary, Joseph, and the Holy Trinity— fook she was tight, her sweet muscles clenching around him.

“Oh.” She blinked at him with saucer-round blue eyes. “You’re...big everywhere.”

He chuckled. “Aye, lass. Dinnae fash. I’ll go as slow as you need.” He brushed his lips against hers and rolled his cock into her. She was wet, and the oil on the sheath aided his way, but he could feel her intermittently tense. Like he was more intruder than welcomed presence. He’d fix that.

Malcolm gripped her thigh, lifting her leg higher over his hip, opening her more for him. Then he let his mouth wander down her neck, over her collarbone, over the silky soft skin of her chest. Until he reached those pretty pink nipples. The ones he’d been dying to taste.

He dragged his lips over the pebbled peak, and her gasp surrounded them.

She was sensitive here. He liked that. Very much.

He coasted his tongue over her, slow, sinful, savoring her.

And then he took her in his mouth and got the reaction he was hoping for.



The one that sent pleasure shooting down the base of his spine.

Her back arched, her hands flying to his head, and her hips rocked into him, sending him deeper. Deeper into bliss. He groaned against her delicious skin, and her hips canted into him harder, urgent.

Malcolm skimmed his mouth over her skin to her other breast, leisurely thrusting, sinking deeper each time. “Ye’re taking me so well, love,” he crooned. “Like ye’re body’s desperate for me. Meant to fit with mine.”

He resumed his attention on her other breast, learning what made her sigh with pleasure, what made her squirm with need. He flicked her nipple with his tongue, and aye, there was the frantic demand he was searching for. He wanted her unraveling, out of her mind.

He was nearly fully seated now, and her body wasn’t resisting in the slightest. He pulled almost all the way out and sank back inside. Hips met flush with hips, and a strangled groan rumbled in his throat.

“Och, Lydia.” His gaze found hers, eyelids heavy, pupils taking over those sea-blue irises he loved. “Ye’re heaven. Ye must be,” he said hoarsely. “So tight. The way ye’re clenching on me. ‘Tis the sweetest caress I’ve ever known.”

She pushed her hips up into him, forcing him deeper, and her mouth dropped open, eyes falling all the way shut as a broken moan fled her lips. She nodded, eyes still squeezed tight.

“Heaven,” she said in breathless agreement. “I had no idea it could be like this.”

And that was a bloody shame. Because this woman deserved nothing less than bliss. Every day. Every minute. Every breath. And he’d give her that. For every moment

she'd allow.

“Can you handle more of me, lass? Can you handle harder? I dinnae want to hurt you.”

Malcolm thrust into her again, harder this time, skin slapping against skin, and the breath fled her in a whoosh. Crimson streaked over her cheekbones, and her blue irises burned with midnight desire.

“Yes, Mal,” she whispered. “I want—need—everything you can give me.”

And that was all the permission he required.

He drove home, and she met his every thrust, fingernails scraping over the flesh of his back, pulling him into her.

Like she couldn't get close enough. And they couldn't.

It wouldn't ever be close enough. Not with the way he craved her. Not unless they were one.

Her soft moans grew to broken cries and sharp gasps, his grunts muffled in her neck. The room filled with the sound of sex, of pleasure. Their movements turned unsteady, unpredictable, neither in control any longer.

Then her hips locked so hard around his own, she forced him still. And fook him, she rode him, even from below. Her body writhing and rolling against him, using him to bring her to the edge of bliss. And it was the most erotic and beautiful sight to behold. Her head thrown back, eyes slammed shut.

Sweet heady pleasure settled deep at the base of his cock.

Every rock of her hips had the head of his cock rubbing inside her in a way that had his vision dotting over, searing ecstasy filling him.

And then she tipped over the edge in a scream, and he swallowed it, crushing his mouth to hers.

He pounded into her, holding nothing back as he chased that same feeling until bliss hit him harder than it ever had before, and he joined her. Tumbling over the edge.

Into the euphoria that was making love to Lydia.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

### Chapter Fifteen

A Poem for Thee, Mo Chridhe, The quiet o' my rooms is quieter now, Now they've kent the song o' your laughter and sighs.

The light o' my rooms is dimmer now, Now they've seen the light o' your bonnie eyes.

The warmth o' my bed is colder now, Now it's known the heat o' your skin's sweet caress.

But my heart. Aye, my heart is fuller now, Now it's been blessed wi' your saft kiss.

As sure as the stars, I'm yours, Malcolm

Malcolm, I wish I had a talent with words as you do, but I fear it is a skill in which I am dreadfully lacking.

But know this, my dear Malcolm: what I feel in my heart for you is anything but lacking.

I think it has resided there all along, though I never had the awareness to realize it—realize it for what it truly is.

All the small moments we have shared over the years—the quiet, innocent moments: a smile, a glance, a jest, a shared understanding—took root in my heart, ever-growing, ever-blooming.

And now, at last, it has been given the freedom to grow as wildly as it desires.

No longer contained. And what I feel for you, Malcolm, cannot be contained. Yours,  
Lydia

Lydia, I think you highly underestimate your talent, leannan.

Because if you possessed nae talent, reading that letter wouldnae bring about the sweetest ache in my breast. The one that is the purest happiness, yet the softest sadness.

Because every moment with you is my peace, my home, and every farewell leaves me undone.

I miss you even when you're lying in my arms—my heart in your hand, your heart in mine.

It tears me apart, knowing I won't get to see the morning in your eyes.

From the beginning, I have only ever been yours. Malcolm

To my Scot, My heart echoes your own. I never thought it possible to think of another as much as I think of you.

I knew it was too much before we even truly began, but now?

I am ashamed to confess that all my thoughts are consumed by you—your letters, our memories, and the promise of our next shared moment.

One day, I hope to wake in your arms. But for now, the timing is not yet ours.

My children need their mother in the quiet hours of the night and the early light of morning.

I cannot bear the thought of not being there should they call for me.

Yet, as they grow and their need for me lessens, I trust that more moments, more nights, will be ours to claim. With love, Lydia

Lyddie Love, Yet one more reason my heart beats for you.

Did you know, mo chridhe, how deeply I admire thee?

The mother you are is a wonder to behold, a love so pure, so unyielding.

It stirs memories of my own ma and the love she held for me.

I would never wish to take that away from your children.

There will be time for us, to be wrapped up in each other, lingering there until the sun bids us rise.

Until then, I will cherish each fleeting moment we have been granted.

I have waited eleven years and five months for a moment with you, and I would wait twice as long if it meant even a single glance or touch.

My heart, I confess, will always hunger for you, for more.

Yet I can wait, mo chridhe. I will wait for as long as it takes, 'Till all the seas gang dry,' love.

I will wait for you forevermore. Your Scot

Lydia

A faint smile tugged at Lydia's lips, her fingers trembling as they ever-so-softly traced over the burgundy dried hellebore flower.

A flower that had accompanied Malcolm's valentine for her.

The same petals she had admired when walking with him just shy of a fortnight ago.

She knew it took time for flowers to dry.

Which meant he'd done this before they'd even truly begun.

Thought of her always, even when he'd believed she could never be his.

Tears pricked at her vision, her throat growing tight.

An enthusiastic tug pulled at Lydia's sleeve, and she cleared the emotion from her throat, turning from where she sat on the settee in the library to face her boisterous daughter.

"My turn, Mama! Read my valentine next!"

Lydia blinked rapidly as a small letter was shaken wildly in her face by her daughter.

She gently pried it from Felicity's eager grasp and unfolded the crumpled paper.



And despite the untidy scroll of a four-year-old, the message was bold and clear: I luv yoo, Mama.

The misshapen words were surrounded by a lumpy blob that Lydia discerned was meant to be a heart.

“Thank you, darling. It is lovely. And I love you, too.”

“I tried to assist her with the spelling, my lady. But Lady Felicity insisted she do the entire thing herself.”

Lydia glanced up to meet the gaze of their nursemaid, Mrs. Evans, whose eyes were dancing from where she sat on the settee across from Lydia.

It was near impossible to make Lydia’s lively daughter do anything she didn’t want to.

The only person who ever seemed to have any ability in getting Felicity to acquiesce was Freddy.

They were each wrapped around the other’s finger.

Lydia pulled her daughter into her side, and Felicity snuggled into her like a contented kitten. Fitzwilliam stood before her, shifting from foot to foot, his gaze on his fingers fiddling with his own letter.

“Fitzwilliam, love. Do you have a letter for me as well?”

His cheeks reddened, and he hastily shoved his letter in her lap, his gaze glued to the floor.

She opened it, and her heart nearly burst.

You have the prettiest smile of all the Mamas. Love, Fitzwilliam.

“Come here, Fitzwilliam.”

He stepped forward, and she nudged his chin up with her finger, guiding his chubby-cheeked face into line with hers until his distinctive Jennings amber gaze locked on her own.

“Thank you for your sweet words. They make me unimaginably happy.” His cheeks reddened further.

She booped his nose softly. “And your penmanship is improving quite well.”

The corner of his mouth pulled up. “Thank you, Mama,” he said quietly.

At that moment, her eldest son made his way into the library, a letter in hand. “Apologies, I’m late,” he said, slightly breathless.

The settee rocked vigorously, and Felix ran forward, hands flying out to grab his sister’s ankles, which were quickly disappearing along with their owner over the back of the settee.

“Goodness, Felicity. What on earth are you doing?” Lydia said, her hand flying to cover her racing heart.

“I am tumbling,” came her daughter’s muffled voice from behind the piece of furniture. “Like an acrobat.” Her ankles kicked violently. “Let go, Fifi!”

Her brother released her abruptly, and she rolled, surprisingly gracefully, in a

somersault onto the rug. She popped up, a face-splitting grin on her face.

Felix glared at her. "I should have let you fall on your head." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Especially after you made me late."

"What delayed you, darling?" Lydia asked.

"Felicity cut holes in my trousers. In unfortunate places."

Felicity sniggered. "Arse! On the arse!"

"Lady Felicity!" Nurse Evans chided, eyes growing round.

The woman turned her wide-eyed alarm on Lydia, and Lydia waved off the nursemaid's concern. It was most definitely not Mrs. Evans's fault her daughter was wild.

"Perhaps you should take these two outside for a bit of exercise, Mrs. Evans." She leaned forward over the coffee table and whispered, "If we tire her out enough, perhaps she won't get herself into any more trouble."

"Excellent suggestion, my lady." Mrs. Evans stood and clapped her hands. "Lady Felicity, Mr. Jennings, let us make our way outside. I think a visit to those triplet lambs is in order."

Felicity sprang up and let out a whoop. "Yes!" she called, already bounding toward the door. "Come, Fitzy. We can race!"

Lydia hid her smile behind her hand as her two youngest children disappeared through the library door with their nursemaid.

When she turned back to Felix, he was standing before her, and her always confident and easy-going son was nearly as nervous as Fitzwilliam usually was.

“Is something amiss, Felix love?”

He shook his head and silently handed her his letter.

She read over it, her smile growing. She was truly blessed with the sweetest children. All with hearts as large as their father’s. Her smile faltered at the last sentence of her son’s valentine.

I hope you will always love me.

Her glance shot to his, one that was dark and guarded. “Of course, I will always love you, Felix. Nothing could ever change that.”

His gaze slid away from hers, and he nodded absently. One she knew was mere motion and not that he truly believed her words.

“What is this about?”

He opened his mouth and then closed it, his fingers pinching and twisting the sides of his brown trousers.

Lydia patted the spot next to her. “Why don’t you sit, darling? Sometimes it’s easier to say the words when you’re not forced to face someone’s gaze.”

He lowered himself stiffly next to her. Well, that wouldn’t do.

She lifted her arm and gestured to the space with her other hand.

“I know you’re eleven and much too old to snuggle with your mama, but it’s Valentine’s Day.

Indulge your mother and let me pretend you’re still my darling boy and not growing into a man much too fast.”

Her heart smiled as he curled into her side. But his hands still fidgeted in his lap.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked softly.

“I feel different,” he whispered. “And I don’t know why.”

Mal

Malcolm trailed his fingers over the bare skin of Lydia's arm and pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head, where it rested on his chest. He inhaled deeply, drawing in her flowery scent, as lovely as a meadow, as bonnie as one, too.

There was no greater feeling than her wrapped around him, his arms around her, bare skin against bare skin.

Yet, it was both everything and not nearly enough.

The way he wanted her, the way she consumed his every thought—it couldnae be healthy.

They hadn't had many moments like this. Between the constant demands of her children, his responsibilities as groom, the barriers of her title, and the need to be discreet—it was of utmost import to Lydia that the Jennings family image remain strong, especially in her children's eyes—there was precious little time left for them.

They existed in stolen moments, fleeting and rare.

Moments he feared he lived for. That now that he had...

he didnae know how he'd survive if he ever had to go without.

She played with his chest hair, fingers absently tufting through the coarse curls he had there. And even though she didn't face him, he could feel that she was far away.

“Where’d ye go, mo chridhe?”

She let out a breath that was far too weighted to be following a bout of lovemaking. His heart rate picked up, tapping against his throat. Sometimes he feared this was all too good to be true. That she’d tire of him. Or he’d wake up only to realize it had all been a dream.

She rose on her elbow, head propped in her hand, and studied him, those blue-green irises searching. “Can I trust you, Malcolm?”

His chin jutted in, and he blinked. “Of course. Always. With anything. Everything.”

Her lips softened, tilting up the slightest amount at the corners. “I’m not sure why I asked that. I knew the answer.”

Another too-heavy breath escaped her, a loose tress of hair fluttering in front of her. He tucked it behind her ear, his fingers lingering. Always lingering on her skin.

“Tell me what has your mind muddled, Lydia.”

“I had a conversation with Felix today.”

“Aye,” he said, studying her carefully.

She gnawed on her pretty pink bottom lip, eyes clouded, reflective. Her brows pinched, and her gaze cleared, coming back to him. “When did you first start”—she waved her hand back and forth—“Oh, I don’t know. Chasing skirts?”

He pursed his lips. “If you’re asking when I first took a lass to bed, it was most definitely no’ at eleven.”

A grin flashed across her face, and a soft chuckle burst from her. “Oh, dear me, no . More...when did you start having infatuations, I suppose.”

He rolled his head from side to side, stretching his neck.

“Ah, I see what ye’re getting at. Young, if what my mam always said was any indication.

She said I was charming the lasses even while in nappies.

But the first time I became smitten with a lassie?

There was a fiery red-haired lass on the estate my da worked at.

I was probably nine or ten at the time. I teased her something dreadful.

And got myself an ear-blistering from me mam when she caught me kissing her behind the pig-shed. ”

Lydia snorted and broke into a fit of mirth, her small form shaking atop him. “Be-behind the p-pig-shed?”

“Och, don’t judge me, lass! I was ten at the time! My wooing has improved quite a bit since then.”

She smiled, eyes glowing. “It has. But honestly, I’d be happy to be kissed by you behind a pig-shed.”

He returned her smile and then leaned forward to sneak a quick kiss.

“Has Master Felix been stealing kisses?”



She looked away and seemed to drift off again. When she met his gaze again, something shimmered in her eyes. Concern? Fear?

“No, he hasn’t. But call it a mother’s intuition. I have a feeling that my son may never steal kisses.” She paused, and he barely caught her hushed words. “From women.”

“Oh,” Malcolm said dumbly.

“I had a similar reaction. Though I did my best to mask it. And it is not as though he stated such outright. But, well... He feels different from other boys. Fears he won’t ever have what Freddy and I have.” She paused, silence settling over them.

“He mentioned how the friends he runs around with talk about girls in ways he doesn’t understand,” she finally added softly. “In a way, he doesn’t think he’ll ever feel. He’s clearly confused.”

A breath escaped her lips, the air dancing over his chest, and gooseflesh rose in its wake.

“And now that he’s brought it up... I find myself looking back on instances I previously hadn’t thought twice about. Because now... I can’t help but wonder if those may mean something.” Her face pinched. “I’m nervous for him.”

“Because of the implications of that.”

She nodded. “It is considered a crime. Punishable by...”

“Aye, but that doesnae have to be his fate.” He cradled her face, thumb brushing over her chin and jaw.

“You have the privilege of title, wealth. The Bentley name is protection in itself. And

he has ye , Lydia. I am sure you can come up with a way for him to live his life without repercussions. If I know ye at all, ye're already plotting in that bonnie head of yours. A battle plan to protect yer son."

She leaned into his hand. "I'll admit, I have been. I've been scanning through my memory of every whisper and rumor I can recollect. I know there are others who live discreetly and have no trouble."

"And if it were ever brought to light...many have fled to the continent. No' ideal, and I'm sure not what you're hoping for. But he'd be safe there. You have the funds for something such as that."

"I won't let that happen," she said, her voice turning hard.

"I won't lose my son. I am going to speak with Freddy as soon as he returns home.

We will come up with-with..." She struggled for a moment and then burst out, "Contingencies! We won't be like that awful family.

The Trentons," she spat. "Sentencing their own son to hanging."

A growl ripped from her, and Malcolm's mouth gaped open. What a vicious wee thing she was. A bonnie wee badger.

"Easy, lass." His fingers trailed down to her neck, where her pulse beat sharp and insistent against his palm. "Remember, he escaped."

"No thanks to his family," she burst out. "They wanted him to hang. Good lord, how could a mother ever—" Her voice broke off on a dry sob.

"Because the world is sorely lacking in people like you, love." He pulled her close to

his chest, tucking her beneath his chin. “But ye can fight for that to change. Being in the position you’re in.”

“I will,” she murmured into his skin. “I’ll fight. The Jennings will. And I’ll find others of like mind.”

“Aye, lass. And ye have me. No’ that I have any sort of influence. But I’m braw, as you recall. I’ll give you strength when you’re lacking.”

She hummed softly. “I appreciate that,” she finally whispered. “More than you know, Malcolm.”

Happiness whirled through his chest, a glowing warmth. Knowing he could be that person for her.

“Tell me something about yourself,” she said. “Something not many know.”

His gaze automatically went to his small desk. To the letter that lay atop it. The glowing warmth turned cold, sinking. But he wanted to tell her. Wanted her to know he trusted her the same way she trusted him. Wanted her to know there’d never be any secrets between them.

“Sometimes...” he started slowly. “I receive word of horses being treated cruelly.”

She shuffled back and propped her chin on her arms folded over his chest, her curious blue gaze giving him her full attention. Small lines dusted her forehead as she waited for him to elaborate.

“I...rehome them.”

A small furrow built between her eyes. “You...rehome abused horses.”

He nodded. “Aye.”

“And these horses are—Where do they come from?”

“Any place with a cruel master.”

“So, you’re saying. You...” She trailed off again. But her eyes remained clear. Clear of judgment. Clear of reproof.

“I thieve them, Lydia,” he said quietly and watched her. Waited. His lungs banding tight and not allowing him air.

Her lips formed a silent oh , and she blinked slowly up at him.

“I know it’s...” He shook his head from side to side, weighing the best way to describe it. The only word he could think of being—

“Illegal, Malcolm.” Her fingertips dug into the flesh of his arm. “It’s illegal, is what it is.”

He winced. Aye, that one.

She searched his face, her brows knit in concern, a myriad of emotions flashing through those sea-blue eyes. Turbulent. Conflicted.

He glanced away. Would this be enough to lose her? Perhaps he shouldnae have told her. But it wasnae his nature to hide something from those in his life. Communication. Openness. Trust. Honesty. They were the pillars he lived by. And it was what she deserved. He just had to hope...

“Shhh,” she crooned and crawled up his body, delicious naked skin coasting over his,

until they were face to face, her forearms framing his face, hands sifting through his locks. He closed his eyes with a groan, some of his fear fading as her fingers gently drifted over his scalp.

“I...” She paused, shook her head, her fingers trembling across his skin.

He met her gaze, hated the fear and torture he saw there.

“You’re safe with me, Malcolm. But that doesn’t mean I like it.

God, I hate it.” Pain lanced across her face.

“Not because of what you’re doing, but because of what the consequences mean.

It’s the same as it is for Felix. If you’re caught—”

“Hanging. I know,” he said, voice thick. Because her pain caused him pain.

“But I understand,” she added, blue irises growing tender soft. “You’re a good, honorable man, Malcolm Campbell. Protecting those who cannot save themselves.”

Aye. And that was why he did it. The palomino stallion, emaciated and beaten, flashed in his visage. If he didn’t, no one else would.

“How often do these...expeditions occur?”

He rolled his lips in, running over the past few that had taken place. “It varies, anywhere from a few in a year, to just once a year.”

“And do you know of any happening in the near future...”

His gaze darted to his desk, and hers followed and then snapped back to his.

“Malcolm?”

“Next week. There will be another one next week.”

Her shoulders drooped, and she sank into him, burying her head in his neck. But it wasn't the kind of melting that alluded to comfort or contentment. Nae, it was sad. Like catching snowflakes on one's palm, only for them to disappear before one could truly appreciate their beauty.

“I don't know if I'll sleep a wink until it's over and I know you're safe.” Her muffled words drifted up to him.

He tightened his arms around her and buried his nose in her hair. “I'll be careful, lass. I promise. I'm well-seasoned at this by now.”

“If something were to happen to you—” Her voice broke, and everything in him rebelled. Rebelled because she was hurting. Because of him. “Malcolm, you're not just risking yourself. You're risking us .”

His pulse stalled, and his eyes sank closed. She was right. He hadnae ever had something to risk before.

She pushed up and then gripped his jaw, turning him so they were nose to nose. His eyes flew open. And through her tears, a blue fire burned. “You better be bloody careful, Malcolm Campbell. Because I love you, and I am nowhere near done with you yet.”

His heart skipped a beat. Or five. She loved him. And she was adorable. With her fierce demand. A warrior resided beneath her fragile exterior. He'd seen it in the way

she spoke about protecting her son. And he saw it now. And to have that ferocity of love aimed at him? It was the highest honor.

His lips crashed down on hers, unable to stay away a moment longer.

His hands tangled into her hair, and he put every ounce of feeling into that kiss, tongues sliding, lips brushing, teeth nipping and grazing.

It was a kiss that promised love, unbendable devotion.

Her own small hands dug into his face, holding on like she'd never let go.

Like she was bound to him, wanted to be bound to him.

He broke away, ragged breaths bursting from his laboring chest. "I love ye, Lydia. I think I always have."

She gently nudged his nose with her own.

"I am forever bound to ye," he whispered against her lips. "No' even my last breath could stop me from loving ye."

Forever her devotee.

She settled on his chest and wove their fingers together. She brought his knuckles to her lips, passing kiss after kiss over each one.

"I should return to the manor soon," she finally said, her tone faint and forlorn. "Would you recite to me? Just one poem before I go. From that Scottish poet you love." She traced her fingers over the tops of his knuckles. "You know how I love when you speak to me in your brogue."

“Of course, mo chridhe. Anything for ye.”

And he pulled her even closer, as though he could take hold of the moment and never let it go, sinking into the mattress, sinking into happiness. The words of Robert Burns rolled from his tongue, as smooth and rich as aged amber whisky.

“Oh, my Love is like a red, red rose

That’s newly sprung in June;

Oh, my Love is like the melody

That’s sweetly played in tune.

So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,

So deep in love am I;

And I will love thee still, my dear,

Till all the seas gang dry...”



Mal

Malcolm had just shut the door to his rooms behind him when a knock sounded softly against the wood. He frowned, turning and grabbing the latch. It couldnae be Lydia. He'd waited until he saw her shadowed form disappear back into the manor. He pulled the door open and—

“We need to talk, lad.” Porter pushed past him. A push that seemed a bit harder than necessary.

“Hullo, Port,” Malcolm said, following after his stable master with raised brows.

Porter pointed to the chair at Malcolm's desk. “Sit.”

Malcolm sat. Heavily, since Porter also assisted with a shove to his shoulder.

“You are going to get yourself in terrible trouble, lad,” Porter hissed. “Where's a bucket of ice water when one needs one? Because your leather-head needs a dunkin'!”

A deep chuckle rumbled from Malcolm's chest. “Be at ease, Port. I'm not in any danger.”

“You think this is funny, do you? I saw you watching her sneak back to the manor, all disguised in her cloak. Bloody calf-eyed. She came from here. I know she did. What do you think you're doing, son? Tuppung the Earl's wife !”

Malcolm grimaced. “Och. I suppose we werenae as careful as we thought we were. But trust me, Porter, there is no danger. And we’ll be more discreet going forward.”

“You’ll be more discreet going forward?”

Porter’s eyes looked ready to pop out of his skull. Malcolm debated holding out his palms to catch them—just to be safe.

“Going forward!” he whisper-yelled, and Malcolm flinched.

Not a time for jesting. Even in his head.

His mentor took up pacing. “There shouldn’t be any going forward, lad.

Or there won’t be any going forward for you .

You’ll find yourself ruined. Out of work, without any positions open to you.

Men do not take kindly to other men stealing their women.

You’ll find yourself in a cell, a knife in your back, a bullet in your brain. ”

Malcolm stood and grasped Porter by the shoulders, forcing the man still. “Porter, look at me.” He waited until the man’s gaze finally made its way up to his. “I promise ye. There is. Nae. Danger.”

The man sagged beneath Malcolm’s hands. “How can you know that, lad? It’s foolish to think something like this will end well.”

“I know I have done some...foolish things in the past. Which you have rightfully set me right on. But this is not one of them. I cannae tell you the reasons why. ‘Tis not

my place. But”—he squeezed Porter’s shoulders hard—“believe me when I say, there is nae danger of the Earl being angry.”

Confusion clouded his mentor’s dark eyes, even as all the fight left him. “I just don’t want to see you hurt, Mallie.”

“And I appreciate that. More than you know, Port. But there’s nothing that can go wrong here.”

“Oh, Mallie. Those are the sorts of words that fate delights in proving false.”

Mal

Malcolm slipped the mask over his head, gave his mount a pat, and then dropped lightly to the ground. He walked to the edge of the wood, where the rest of his men stood waiting.

“All set?”

A low chorus of “Aye” greeted him.

“One last briefing. I’ll take the stallion.

If what Wright and I witnessed on our visits is any indication, he’s going to be right panicked and near impossible to handle at first. The other two should be easier and calm with the companion horses.

” He paused, scanning the group of masked men, a sea of eyes glinting in the moonlight back at him.

“Get your horse and get out. Understood? No worrying over others. We’ll meet up at the first post where our cart is waiting.

If anything goes awry, send your whip to signal us. ”

He was met with nods.

“To it, lads,” Malcolm said, his tone measured, determined.

The group dispersed, and Wright fell into step with Malcolm. Wright was as trusty a whip as they came, acting as lookout for Malcolm for the last five years. The man might like his drink and his women, but there was nae one more loyal, nae one Malcolm would rather have watching his back.

They crept across the edge of the tree line, past the stables, where the other two horses were kept, until they reached the small enclosure where the stallion was being confined.

There were no servants in sight. Not that there would be.

Malcolm doubted anyone could get close to the poor beast. His biggest challenge wasn't other people, it was the horse's panic alerting others and the beast's unpredictable lashing out putting Malcolm's own safety at risk.

Malcolm pressed his back against the enclosure and side-stepped until he reached the door.

He slowly slid it open and was immediately greeted with the thud of pawing hooves in dirt, agitated snorting, and the soft rattle of metal.

A beam of moonlight illuminated the interior.

The stallion was chained in the center of the room by a bridle.

White-hot anger lanced through Malcolm. It was bad enough the poor thing was chained.

But he recognized the bit of that bridle.

Nothing short of a torture device. Guaranteeing if the poor beast moved an inch in the

wrong direction, he'd have his mouth pierced straight through by barbs.

Malcolm crept forward, his movements deliberately slow. The horse jerked his head back, and a pained squeal sliced into the quiet night.

"Shhhhhh, dinnae fash, laddie," Malcolm crooned.

The beast's hindquarters danced, the poor thing trying his bloody damndest to keep his front and head still. Knowing the consequences.

"I'm here to help ye, my bonnie boy." He reached the stallion's head and settled a hand gently on the horse's neck. He was drenched with sweat. Malcolm silently swore. Even in the dark of night, he could easily see the horse's protruding hip bones, the outline of ribs. Starved. Beaten. Tortured.

But instead of letting that fury fester, he released it through a slow, controlled breath. This poor laddie would only feed off that emotion. He needed calming, soothing.

Malcolm began to hum a soft, lilting melody and inspected the chains attached to the horse's bridle, slowly stroking down its neck.

The horse's agitated dancing slowed ever so slightly, and Malcolm took that as a sign.

He began to sing a soothing song, his quiet cadence filling the space as he worked to free the horse.

"By yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes,

Where the sun shines bright on Loch Lomond."

He undid a chain from one wall and quietly set it on the floor, his hushed voice low and steady.

“Where me and my true love were ever wont to gae,

On the bonnie, bonnie banks o’ Loch Lomond.”

The stallion tracked him, the whites of his eyes glowing eerily in the light of the moon. But the poor beast didn’t dare move from his place. Knowing too well the repercussions that had come in the past of such an action.

“Oh, ye’ll take the high road, and I’ll take the low road,

And I’ll be in Scotland afore ye,

For me and my true love will never meet again

On the bonnie, bonnie banks o’ Loch Lomond.”

Malcolm gathered the chains and stood before the stallion. Once they returned to the woods, he’d be able to trade the horse’s bridle out for a different one. But for now, he’d need to lead the horse with this torture device left on.

“Come now, bonnie boy. Walk with me, I won’t hurt ye.” He clucked softly, and the horse took a hesitant step forward. “That’s a good laddie.”

But he wasn’t fooled by the beast’s obedience. Once the bridle came off, he’d be dealing with an entirely different animal. They just had to make it to Sussex, and everything would be well.

Malcolm caught Wright’s eye and gave a quick nod. Wright slowly disappeared into

the shadows, knowing another presence would only risk the stallion working into a frenzy. He resumed his soft lull, and the horse blessedly followed.

“‘Twas there that we parted in yon shady glen,

On the steep, steep side o’ Ben Lomond,

Where in purple hue the Highland hills we view,

And the moon comin’ out in the gloamin’.”



## Page 21

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Lydia

The Jennings family butler stepped into the library where Lydia and her three children were having a rare quiet moment.

He cleared his throat. “His Lordship has returned.”

A split second of silence followed. And then it was shattered by thumps and squeals erupting throughout the library. Three Jennings children barreled to the library door in a flurry of energy—cheers and hoots and a pounding of feet that would rival a stampede in their wake.

Their cries echoed down the hall, then Freddy’s booming greeting drifted back to Lydia.

A grin split her face, and she hurried after her children.

Oh, how she was excited to have Freddy back.

To have her best friend to talk to about the whirlwind courtship that had come to be the past two weeks.

It had been eating her alive, not having anyone to talk to.

And a small part of her hoped—perhaps with Freddy home, she might be fortunate enough to spend an entire night with Malcolm.

She'd feel so much better with the children having their father home.

The hurried tap of her slippers echoed against the marble floor as she picked up her pace.

Freddy was twirling Felicity around in endless circles, their laughter ringing around the entry.

His gaze met hers just as he placed Felicity on the ground.

He cocked his head at the slightest angle, and she could see the question in his eyes.

She couldn't stop herself. She ran up to him and launched herself straight into his arms. He caught her with an oomph and a laugh, giving her her own spin.

"Lydia, darling. What a greeting."

She bit her lip, but it was a pitiful effort at stifling her smile, because her heart was beaming too brightly to be contained.

"I have missed you, Freddy. Much has come to pass this past fortnight."

His right dimple popped, and she swore she saw the devil dancing in his whisky irises. "Oh, this I have to hear, love." He turned to their brood. "Children, I must freshen up and get the stink of travel off my person. But as soon as I'm changed...who is up for a game of charades?"

Another chorus of whoops surrounded them, and Lydia winced, rubbing her ear. Her children were nothing if not exuberant.

"Come, Lyddie. You can fill me in on all the mischief these scamps have been up to

while I've been away on business.”

And while she knew he wanted to know about those things as well, the glittering in his eyes gave away his curiosity. He wanted to know what the cause of her smile was.

The children, Mrs. Evans in their wake, were ushered back to the library, and Lydia made her way with Freddy to his chambers. Freddy stepped into his rooms, Giles, his valet, appearing as if out of nowhere, already assisting his master out of his coat.

“Out with it, Lyddie,” Freddy said around his valet.

Lydia curled up in an armchair by the blazing hearth, tucking her feet beneath her skirts. She glanced hesitantly at Giles, currently undoing Freddy's cravat.

Freddy rolled his eyes. “Oh please, Lyddie. Giles comes with me to Hannah's. He is well aware of our arrangement. He'd never say a word.”

“Say a word about what, my lord?” Giles caught Lyddie's eye and winked.

Her smile broke free again, and some tension eased from her frame.

“Now, why are you glowing, Lyddie? Does that smile mean what I think it does?”

“Yes,” she said, heat slowly rising to her cheeks.

“You little minx! So, the man came to his senses then?”

She cocked her head and shot him a disbelieving look. “Please, Freddy. Like you didn't approach him and tell him I was...was...amenable to his attentions!”

He shrugged in response to her and ducked out of his lawn shirt. “He's a good man.

Honorable. I was afraid he'd never take the chance if I didn't give my...blessings of sorts."

"I think you're correct about that. He's the best sort of man, Freddy." Her voice had softened. And Freddy stilled, his attention completely on her.

"Lyddie...are you...?"

She nodded. "He's it, Freddy. I think he has been all along." Tears blurred her vision, and in the next moment, she was in her best friend's arms, having the breath squeezed right from her. Her watery chuckle danced around them, and he beamed at her.

"Oh, I am so happy for you,. darling. You deserve this. More than anyone I know." He stepped back, holding her hands and looking her over. "We did all right for ourselves, did we not? With this arrangement?"

"I'll say," she said, her smile filling her words.

Giles assisted Freddy into a fresh pair of trousers, shirt, and waistcoat, while Lyddie started pacing by the hearth.

A light tangle of anxiety twisted in her belly.

There was one more matter she needed to address with her husband.

She felt certain, deep in her heart, that he would understand—that he would not succumb to the prejudices that plagued society.

But what if she was wrong? The thought alone made her insides turn to ice.

It would gut her. And she would, in turn, gut him.

“Is there something else on your mind, Lyddie?” Freddy’s pinched expression greeted her.

She drew in a breath. “Giles, I will tie my husband’s cravat, if you please. You are dismissed.”

Freddy’s eyes stretched wide. Giles may be trusted with many secrets. But her son’s livelihood wasn’t one she’d ever risk. Giles politely bowed and left them alone.

She stepped up to Freddy and began tugging the fabric of his cravat into place.

“I had a discussion with Felix while you were gone.” She briskly weaved the fabric.

“And I need you to be prepared for him to come to you. To be frank, I don’t know if he will approach you.

” She glanced up at him as she pulled the length of fabric up and over.

“Hopefully, he will know that you are the kind of man he can trust with such a confidence.”

Freddy’s hand landed softly on hers, his furrow deep. “Lyddie, what on earth are you talking about?”

“I believe—and I am his mother, Freddy, so I am wont to know—that Felix may not grow to...prefer women.”

Her husband froze. And then he let out a low chuckle. “He’s eleven, Lyddie. How could you ever come to that conclusion?”

“Trust me, Freddy. He didn’t say it in so many words.

But he feels different. He's not interested in girls like the boys he runs around with are.

And goodness, since he came to me? I've seen the way he looks at that Harrington boy.

I never would have thought twice of it before.

But he looks smitten at the boy. Besotted. ”

Freddy took an abrupt step backward, shaking his head.

“No, Lyddie. He is too young to know of such a thing. He is merely confusing friendship. It is common amongst boys. To develop a close friendship that they confuse. At that age, affection doesn't matter by gender.

As he grows into manhood, it will clear itself up. I am sure of it.”

“That sounds very much like denial,” she said quietly. Sadness, as though fed by a slow steam, filled her.

“It's not denial. I just—No father wants a son who...”

“Frederick,” she warned.

“God, Lydia. You are hurling quite a declaration at me!” He pulled at his wild amber curls. “Saying our son, my heir, prefers men? It's unacceptable—”

“Unacceptable?” Anger turned her body to stone. “Unacceptable,” she bit out, planting her fists on her hips. Fists clenched so tight her nails dug into her palms. But she relished the bite.

“In our society, Lyddie,” Freddy hurried to add. “Come now, you cannot be so naïve as to think that something like this will be accepted?”

“No, I know it won’t be. But I did expect you to.”

“Of course, I will accept it, if it must be. But it is criminal. Can you blame me for being disappointed—”

She slashed her hand through the air. “I am going to halt you right there.” She stepped up to her husband, nose inches from his.

And even though he towered over her, he shrank back.

Her finger dug into his chest. “You will never mention the word disappointed when you speak with Felix about this—whenever that day comes. And it will, Freddy. I know as only a mother can. And so help me God, Frederick Octavius Jennings, if you make that boy feel anything less than completely accepted and loved and secure in the knowledge that this family will stand behind him and protect him.” She shoved her finger deeper into his chest. “So help me God. I. Will. Dismember. You.”

He blinked, owl-eyed at her, his mouth slack.

“What a lioness you are, Lyddie,” he murmured. He drew in a shaky breath. “I had always thought Felicity got her fire from me. But I see now I had it completely wrong.”

She lifted her chin, setting her jaw. “The most foolish thing a man can ever do is underestimate a woman. And a mother at that.”

“I see that.” He studied her quietly for a beat. “I couldn’t have picked a better mother for my children. I know fate threw us into a less-than-ideal situation. But I believe

fate knew exactly what it was doing.”

She lifted her brows expectantly, and a rumbling laugh escaped him.

“You have nothing to fear, Lyddie. I love Felix. Nothing will change that. Yes, this changes the...trajectory of things. But I am aligned with you. We will pave a path for him, one where he is protected. If what you believe does come to pass. It won’t be easy for him, and he will always have to hide this part of him outside these walls. But here, he will always be safe.”

She nodded succinctly. “Excellent. I expected nothing less.”

He chuckled, his lips twitching. “Lioness.” He clawed the air and winked at her. And she rolled her eyes, but finally, a smile broke free again.

She treaded to the armchair and sank into it, the tension from their argument and the sweet relief of resolution draining the strength from her limbs.

Freddy walked over to her and squeezed her shoulder. “My sincerest apologies, Lyddie. I am not proud of my reaction. But you cannot deny it was the most common one.”

“Just because it is common,” she replied softly, throwing his words from a few weeks ago back at him. “Doesn’t make it acceptable.”

“Indeed. Those are wise words. A wise man must have said them.” He waggled his brows, and she rolled her eyes.

A knock sounded on the door.

“Enter,” Freddy called out.



The Jennings butler stepped into the chamber. “An urgent missive has arrived for you, my lord.”

Freddy’s brows drew together, and he swiftly retrieved the missive, opening it and scanning the contents. His chin jerked in, forehead lining the further he read.

Lydia stood and padded over to Freddy. “What is it?” She tilted her head questioningly at him.

His gaze met hers. “This is from the Duke of Devonford. He says he has one of our servants. A groom. Unconscious.” He glanced down at the note again and then back at her. “He has his doctor tending to him for now. But thought we would want to know.”

The blood leeches from Lydia’s face, acid turning over in her stomach.

“Lyddie?”

“Malcolm,” she said faintly. “It has to be Malcolm.”

Freddy shook his head, his amber eyes clouding. “Why would Malcolm Campbell be at Devonford Castle?”

“There is something else I need to tell you, Freddy.”

Lydia

Freddy hurried down the stairs, and Lydia rushed after him. “We’ll have the carriage readied immediately.” He paused at the bottom of the stairwell. “Mrs. Smith!” he bellowed.

Their housekeeper came bustling into the entry a moment later, puffing and holding her chest. “Yes, my lord?”

“Have a trunk packed for Lady Bentley. A sennights’ worth. I need it done an hour ago. Just the essentials.”

“It’ll be done,” Mrs Smith said, determination etched on her face as she headed up the stairs.

“Are we leaving for Devonford Castle?” Lydia asked, hurrying after her again striding husband. “You are. And Mr. Porter. I have a feeling he’s going to want to see the boy nearly as badly as you.”

Lydia’s heart swayed in her chest like a pendulum. She couldn’t put into words how badly she wanted to see Malcolm. The fear that had dug its dirt-filled talons into her chest and latched on. Unconscious. No other information. God, why had she let him go through with it?

Because, when it came down it, it had been a vital part of him, who he was as a man at his core. And she could never ask him to abandon who he was.

She yanked on Freddy's sleeve, halting him. "Freddy, I cannot just march into Devonford Castle and collect Malcolm. A lady would never do such a thing. It'll raise all sorts of questions."

"Yes, of course," he said gruffly. "You're quite right." He sucked in a breath. "Mrs. Smith!"

Lydia winced and turned toward the stairwell that her husband was already bounding up. Mrs. Smith appeared at the top of the stairs. Freddy murmured something to her. She gave a firm nod and disappeared again.

In the next moment, Freddy was at Lydia's side, and she blinked. Goodness, the man was spry for seven-and-forty.

"Excellent." Freddy tucked her arm in his and dragged her out the front door. They entered the stables, and Freddy immediately began barking instructions. Grooms and stable boys instantly jumped to attention, scrambling to complete their orders.

Mr. Porter came hurrying out of the tack room. "How can I be of service, my lord, my lady."

"You will be escorting Her Ladyship to Devonford Castle. Leaving at once."

Mr. Porter's eyes widened briefly before he schooled his expression. But not quick enough.

"Bloody hell, Porter! You knew?"

Mr. Porter grimaced.

Freddy cursed. "I would have expected you to put a stop to something like that. The

foolish boy.”

Lydia settled a palm on her husband’s arm. “Freddy, be at ease. Mr. Campbell is his own man. Mr. Porter has no control over what he does.”

Freddy glared at her. “Well, I sure as hell do. And this is the last time Mr. Campbell participates in one of these raids. I am going to give the lad an ear blistering so fierce he’ll wish he was unconscious again.

His very neck was on the line. And if it came back that it was one of our servants?

Our name could be dragged through the mud.

This type of behavior does not happen under my purview. ”

Mr. Porter glanced between Lydia and her husband. Wrinkling his cap in his hands. “Unconscious? What exactly is going on? Why am I escorting her ladyship there?”

“Mr. Campbell has been in an accident.” Freddy’s voice softened. “He is unconscious. The Duke has a doctor attending to him, which is incredibly generous. That is the extent of what we know.”

The color disappeared from Mr. Porter’s face in a wave. His gaze shot to hers, the same fear she felt reflected at her.

“Gather what you’ll need for the journey. And make haste. If the team is driven hard and changed frequently, you can make it to Devonford Castle tonight.”

With a sharp nod, Mr. Porter left.

“Freddy,” Lydia said in a low voice, stepping up to him.

“Are you sure it is all right if I go? Possibly for a sennight? Leaving the children for that long...” She hated this.

How she felt torn in two. She couldn't not go to Malcolm.

Lord, she had to be there. If the worst—her throat thickened to the point of choking.

Freddy gripped her shoulders, fingers biting into her.

Grounding her. “The children will be well, Lyddie. I am here for anything they need. If Fitzwilliam has his nightmares, I'll set up on the floor in the nursery.

We will be well. Your groom needs you. And I suggest you give him a stern talking to about his clandestine activities when he wakes up. His raiding days are over, Lyddie.”

She nodded. When Malcolm woke up. Lydia needed to hold on to that. The confidence her husband held. She couldn't deign to think about the alternative.

A shuddering breath shook her chest, and Freddy pulled her into his arms. “Life couldn't possibly be so cruel, could it, Freddy?” His arms tightened around her, and she sniffled. “To finally grant me the love of my life, only to immediately take him away.”

Freddy planted a kiss on the top of her head. “No, Lyddie, I refuse to believe it. Now go bring your groom home.”

Lydia

Devonford Castle

“He is down this way. I had him set up in the servant’s quarters in the Castle instead of the stables. It’s quieter, calmer. I thought it’d be better for his condition.”

Lydia and Mr. Porter followed silently behind the Duke of Devonford as he led them down a massive hall of the castle. Lydia kept her chin down, staying slightly behind Mr. Porter. She’d changed into a maid’s clothing, and they’d agreed it made sense for Mr. Porter to handle all interactions.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I cannot adequately express our gratitude, nor that of the Bentleys, for your hospitality and benevolence in caring for one of our own,” Mr. Porter said.

“Speak nothing of it, Mr. Porter. Any man who rescues abused horses is a man deserving of saving in my eyes. Regardless of station.”

Lydia peeked at the young handsome Duke from the corner of her eye.

Such seriousness at the young age of two-and-twenty.

But he’d inherited young, and she supposed sometimes life required one to grow up fast. And she thought it spoke greatly to the kind of man he was, that he himself led them personally to an ailing servant.

They traveled down a stairwell and then turned down a hall, until finally, the Duke paused before a closed door.

“He’s in this room here. As it’s nearing midnight now, the doctor won’t be back until morning. The two rooms next to this gentleman are available for you to occupy.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Mr. Porter said and hurried to drop his and Lydia’s valises on the hall floor near their rooms.

The Duke quietly pushed open the door and stepped inside the small room. “I can give you a brief summarization of what the doctor has determined of his situation,” he murmured softly.

But Lydia’s mind stopped working. It stopped processing the gentleman’s words.

Because right there in the center of the room, on a bed too small for a man his size, lay Malcolm.

She was distantly aware of Mr. Porter at her side.

At the Duke’s words drifting in and out.

Things like “broken ribs” and “nasty bruise” and “laceration”.

Her hand shot out, blindly, needing something, anything to steady herself.

Her fingers encircled a wrist, and she held on for dear life.

Because Malcolm was so terrifyingly still. Deathly still.

A throat cleared. “I will allow you some privacy. If there is anything you need, my

butler, Baldwin, is the last room down the hall.”

Mr. Porter gently guided her into the room, and she was vaguely aware of the Duke leaving, but her eyes never left the too-still man before her. Her Scot, her big braw Scot. Somehow appeared small. Vulnerable.

“My lady,” Mr. Porter said softly. “Why don’t you sit? I’ll pull up a chair by his side.”

She nodded absently and allowed her stable master to settle her in the chair by the bedside. Her gaze tracked over Malcolm’s face. Soft in sleep. Not overly pale. A large red mark started at the side of his forehead, disappearing into his hairline. It was raised, but neatly stitched and clean.

Her hand fluttered over him, not sure where to land. She finally settled on carefully pushing his dark locks back off his brow. Her eyes slid shut, ice-cold fear shooting through her. No response at her touch.

Nothing.

She turned to Mr. Porter, his gaze taking stock of the man before them as well. She hated the worry she saw tightening the old stable master’s brow. The pinch to his mouth.

His dark stare clashed with hers. “He’ll be all right, my lady.”

“How do you know that, Mr. Porter?” She glanced back at Malcolm. “He’s so still,” she said faintly.

“Everything the Duke said was positive. His injuries are minor, apart from the one to his head. And I know Mallie, Lady Bentley. The boy has been utterly devoted to you



since the moment he laid eyes on you.” Lydia’s gaze flew to Porter’s.

“Now that he finally has your love in return? There’s no force on earth that could keep him from you. Sheer will alone will see him through.”

She swallowed thickly and turned back to Malcolm. She gathered his large hand between her two small ones. Warm. Blessedly warm. And that small sign of life. It gave her hope.

“I am assuming you will be wanting to stay by his side. I’ll leave your things in here.”

She nodded, lifting Malcolm’s hand to her lips.

“I’ll be in the room next door if you need anything, my lady.”

“Thank you,” she said, her voice barely audible as her lips brushed over the back of Malcolm’s hand.

Footsteps retreated behind her, and then the soft snick of the door greeted her. And then silence.

Her eyes tracked the slight lift and fall of his chest. Her hands tightened around his in a grip she was sure would be painful if he were conscious.

A strangled sob shook her chest. She pressed a kiss to each of his knuckles and then let her eyes fall shut, her nose buried against his skin, shakily breathing in the faint, familiar smell of him.

It was barely there, but the hint of leather greeted her.

“Come back to me, love.”

She cleared her throat and began softly reciting one of his favorite poems—the one he often whispered to her as she dozed in his arms. Arms she wasn’t sure would ever hold her again.

“F-flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes,

Flow gently, I’ll sing thee a song in thy praise.”

Her voice broke, as did a small fragment of her heart.

“My Mary’s asleep by thy murmuring stream,

Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream.”

Lydia

Lydia dazedly blinked the sleep away from her eyes. Her heart swelled, hope lifting the organ high in her chest. As it had the past two days. She lifted her head from the mattress, pushing up in her chair. And the organ plummeted back down.

Still. Silent. No change.

His cheeks seemed paler now. Though she wasn't sure if they truly were or if it was the anxiety bleeding into every corner of her person, taking root and causing more worrisome signs to torment her with.

She squeezed her eyes shut, willing back the burn. They ached, and a pulsing pain weaved itself deep in her skull. Too many tears, too much tension. Her bones felt brittle, her body sore, and a sharp twinge radiated in her side.

Three days. No change.

“I brought you some broth, my lady.”

Her gaze drifted to Porter. She didn't bother moving her head. It was too great an effort. Sitting here in the chair by the bedside, whispering prayers and pleas to Malcolm, was all she was able to muster.

A warm mug found her hand, and two solid hands helped her cup it.

“You must eat something, Lady Bentley. You'll wither away to nothing if you don't.”

How could she eat? When the man lying before her wasn't able to? Her stomach rebelled, but she lifted the broth to her lips, the ceramic clattering against her teeth from her trembling hands. Porter helped steady her.

Lydia sighed, squared her shoulders, and took a small sip.

The hot liquid burned and sloshed in her belly.

But she forced another sip. She was of no use to anyone if she fainted from hunger.

She had responsibilities, children, Freddy, who all depended on her.

And as much as her heart screamed at her, demanding she suffer the same as the man lying before her. She knew she had to be strong.

"There you go, my lady. You know Mallie would have my head when he wakes up if he knew I'd let you go on without sustenance."

Her gaze lifted to Porter's dark one. He still held so much optimism. Every time he spoke of Malcolm, he was sure the man would wake. She wanted to believe it, too. But as each day passed, a small sliver of that hope drifted away.

Porter took the mug from her. "I'll leave this on the table here for you. But I want you to finish it, my lady. And I'm going to come back later with solid food. And you'll eat that, too. He wouldn't want you to be doing this to yourself."

She nodded but couldn't manage any words. Porter's features softened, his eyes welling slightly. "He'll be with us again soon." And then he slipped from the room.

The silence surrounded her, settled over her, haunting. Because even with all other sound absent, she could barely hear his shallow breaths. Shallow breaths that were

the sole proof that the man she loved lying before her remained alive.

What she wouldn't give to hear that soft rumbling brogue. To see those lips curling around her name. Her eyes misted, his unmoving form growing blurry. To have her heart melt at another affectionate "lass".

To tell him how much she loved him.

She'd said the words, but she'd never explained how much.

Love was too paltry a word. It didn't encompass all the emotions he'd stirred inside her.

How her heart beat stronger now because of him.

How every time she saw a hellbores flower, her chest lit up.

How the smell of leather was now just as comforting as the familiar scent of her children, a reminder of home and warmth.

Emotion rose in her throat and caught there. Closing it off. Constricting.

She forced it down. Forced a breath from her lungs. Forced herself to hold on to hope.

Mal

A piercing ache throbbed in Malcolm's temple. Egads, it felt as though he'd been run over by a draft horse. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, trying to sort through the fog thicker than any Scotland mist that had settled over his mind. He lifted a hand to his forehead and rubbed.

Och. Fook .

Pain sliced through his temple, stealing the breath from his lungs. He slowly prodded the tender skin, clearly swollen, very raw. What the bloody hell happened? He shifted slightly, wherever he was lying creaking under his weight. And where was he?

Recollection hit him, and his eyes flew open. He blinked against the harsh light of day. Bloody hell, the transport. They'd just arrived at Devonford. Without incident. Until...

His eyes fell closed again. The stallion had done well with Malcolm.

They'd realized immediately that it would have to be Malcolm, and Malcolm alone, who handled the horse.

The minute Wright had stepped in the horse's direction, panic had seized the beast. But he seemed to calm with Malcolm's lulling song.

Malcolm had been able to get him inside their cart, the one with a makeshift stall built on it.

And he'd sang the entire journey to Sussex.

But when they'd gotten to the castle, there'd been too many people, too many who didn't understand how to handle an animal as terrified and tortured as the stallion.

A blur of flying hooves flashed through his mind.

A blow to the chest. Not being able to get air in his lungs. And that was all he remembered.

A light snore sounded from his side. His brows crashed together, and he turned.

To where a rose-gold-haired woman lay sleeping next to him.

Lydia . His heart melted in his chest, warm and sweet as drinking chocolate.

He reached for her, his fingers pushing back the few strands of hair that had fallen loose from her simple chignon.

He traced a pad of his finger over her cheekbone, gently coasting over the dark circles under her eyes. His heart stuttered. Tired lass .

"Mallie boy."

The soft, familiar baritone filled the chamber, and his gaze shot to the door of his small room.

"Port," he croaked out.

Porter hurried to him, retrieving a glass of water from the side table on his way.

"Here, wet your mouth with this. Just a mite, mind you. Once we have you sitting up,

you can have more.”

Porter held the glass to Malcolm’s mouth and tilted it carefully. Blessed water slipped over his dry lips, and glorious moisture flowed over his leaden tongue. His gaze stayed locked on Porter’s, hoping his mentor understood the question running through his mind.

“The Duke sent word of a Bentley servant injured. Your Countess knew it was you. We were on the road nigh an hour later. The Earl insisted I accompany her. Knew we both would want to get to you as quickly as possible.” Porter dragged a weathered hand down his face.

“I hadn’t realized when you said I had nothing to worry about with you and the Countess, Mallie, that it was because the Earl himself approved of the relationship. Deuced odd, if you ask me.”

Malcolm turned to the sleeping woman next to him. She must be extremely uncomfortable. She was in a chair beside his bed, cheek resting on her crossed arms on his bedside. She hadn’t moved an inch, even with his light caress and his and Porter’s conversation.

“She’s right exhausted, son. Sick with worry over you. When she first saw you lying here, still as the dead, broke my heart clean in two. That woman loves you something fierce.”

“Aye, Port. I love her something fierce, too.”

Her eyelids twitched subtly, then her lashes fluttered lightly. She blinked, dazed, shoulders rolling and stretching. Her gaze lifted and locked onto his, still murky with sleep. And then they flashed clear, and she snapped straight.



“Malcolm!”

Her hands flapped wildly around him. Like she didn’t know...

“I’m afraid to touch you in fear of hurting you,” she said despairingly.

He gently took her hands and brought them to his mouth. He pressed a soft kiss first to the right and then repeated the same on the left.

Her lips tightened, her face twisting into a pretty grimace. A tear, then another, then another, leaked free from the inner corner of her eye, trailing down her nose.

“Och. Dinnae greet, lass. All is well,” he managed hoarsely.

She nodded, and her lips turned up the slightest amount at the corners, but a few more tears broke free. She turned to Porter. “Let us get him sitting up. Get him drinking some water.”

They assisted Malcolm to a seated position, which made it very clear that he’d suffered a nasty injury to his chest and ribs.

Egads, sharp, blinding pain. But through it, he studied his lass.

Absorbed every detail. Her pale skin was mottled red, eyes marred by dark circles, puffy and swollen, hair a frazzled mess, an imprint of the coverlet still lining her cheek.

She was the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen.

And that was when he noticed her garb. A serviceable dress...a maid’s uniform.

“Are you... Are you dressed as a maid?” He accepted a glass of water from Port and sipped slowly.

“Yes,” she said, her voice weak. “To hide my identity. I couldn’t come retrieve you without raising questions. And the minute I saw you... There’d be no doubt of my feelings for you. I needed to disappear into the background.”

The side of his mouth tugged up, and a chuckle rumbled from him. A needle-like pain lanced through his side, and he winced. Broken rib was right. He dusted the backs of his knuckles down her cheek and let out a low purr at how lovely her petal soft skin felt.

“You disappear? That’s no’ possible, mo chridhe. You could disappear as easily as a bonfire in the night. You burn far too brightly.”

Her blue-green irises melted before him, like the calm waters of the sea.

“Besotted fools. The both of you,” Porter grumbled.

Lydia lifted a hand to cover her grin, a watery laugh escaping her. And Malcolm couldn’t prevent himself from chasing that smile with his thumb, running the pad over those silken lips. Lips he was dying to kiss.

Lips that had just gone ominously flat.

“Speaking of fools. Malcolm Campbell, your horse-thieving days are over.” Her brow set in a hard line, eyes sparking. “I should have spoken up the first time. I won’t let you put any of us through this again. You are much too valuable. I know it is important to you, but it is not worth your life .”

“You best listen to the lady, Mallie. I know this gives you purpose. But you do no

one, horses or people alike, any good if you're dead."

"And I spoke with Freddy. He is extremely displeased—"

"Och, aye!" He lifted his hands in surrender. He glanced between the two, still glaring daggers at him. "Aye, Lydia. Aye, Port. My raiding days are over." He turned to Lydia, his words turning as soft as his heart. "My life has purpose in a different way now. 'Tis too great a treasure to risk."

A throat cleared in the doorway. "If I may be so bold..." The Duke's low baritone filled the room, and Malcolm's gaze snapped to his.

"If you ever hear of such instances in the future—ones that would have led to these raids—perhaps you could inform me. There may be things I can do with my influence. And it would allow for you to continue helping those horses." His gaze flitted to Lydia and back. "Without risking so much."

"Aye, Your Grace. I would gladly send word your way."

"Excellent. The doctor just arrived and will be down momentarily. I am glad to see you're awake and well, Mr. Campbell." With a clipped nod, he turned to leave.

"Your Grace?" Malcolm called after him. The Duke paused, glancing over his shoulder.

"The stallion... How does he fair?"

The Duke's stern expression eased, his lips curving faintly. "Well. Safe now. He has a long road ahead of him, but he's in good hands here." His gaze lingered for a moment. "I respect a man who protects those unable to protect themselves, Mr. Campbell."

And with that, he left.

The man may be young—och, over a decade younger than Malcolm—but he was every inch a duke.

“All right, let’s have this doctor look you over, Mallie,” Porter said. “I think it’s about time we get you and your Countess home.”

“Aye,” he murmured, catching Lydia’s tired gaze. “Home.”

Mal

“Are you sure this is all right, lass?”

Lydia tugged on his hand, guiding him into her bedchamber.

His eyes roamed the towering ceilings, easily twice his height, with intricate white wood molding adorning the walls.

Then his gaze landed on the massive bed, shrouded in pale moss green curtains, dominating the space between two large arched windows.

A bed that could fit an entire clan of Scotsmen—perhaps a slight exaggeration, but it was enormous .

Malcolm was out of place here. He was terrified he’d break something more valuable than his annual wage. And he felt almost...clumsy, unrefined, surrounded by such elegance and luxury.

“I didn’t hear you complaining when you were in the bath.” Lydia winged a thin, blonde brow.

A groan vibrated in his chest like a happy cat.

That bath had been glorious. He’d never washed in a tub he could actually fit in.

If he wanted to fit in a bath...he bathed in the pond on the estate.

And that water, even during the warmest months, was never steaming hot.

His eyes slid shut. He hadn't wanted to get out.

That was until Lydia started touching him.

Then it wasn't just the water that was scalding.

"Come. Let's get you in bed, love. You need to rest. To heal," Lydia murmured, leading him to what was sure to be the softest bed he'd ever lain in.

A smile pulled at his lips. She was determined in her care of him—just as she had been during his bath.

Washing his hair, especially gentle around his head wound, delicately washing over his bruised ribs—which had a lovely hoof print adorning the right side.

She'd blushed profusely and handed him a cloth to wash the other areas.

She was bloody adorable. But to be cared for so tenderly?

It turned his insides lighter than air, his heart floating around like a happy cloud in his chest.

She'd insisted he needed a proper bath, his wounds cleaned thoroughly, that the soak in heated water would ease his aches. And, aye, they had, though they'd started up another ache that now needed tending to.

Malcolm couldn't believe the Earl had granted such an allowance.

Had insisted upon it. And that was even in the face of the man's ire.

Lydia hadn't been lying at Devonford Castle—Lord Bentley had been highly displeased about Malcolm's activities .

The Earldom of Bentley's reputation was everything to the Earl, and that extended down to his servants.

And now that Malcolm would be family, an essential piece of Lydia's happiness, it was evermore important.

Family.

That statement had stunned Malcolm so thoroughly his vocal cords had refused to cooperate, and the flood of feelings had been too much.

He'd completely fallen apart and wept in front of the man in the most mortifying of fashions.

What could he say? Scotsmen were built so big and broad because their bodies needed to house their large hearts.

And then Lord Bentley demanded Malcolm use the master chamber's bathing room and stay the night in Lydia's suite of rooms. He had set up forts of blankets in the library and arranged for games and treats for the children, ensuring Lydia and Malcolm would be safe from prying eyes.

It was clear that Lydia's happiness was as important to the Earl as it was to Malcolm. And Malcolm made Lydia happy, so the Earl would do everything he could to ease their way.

What was this life? Near twelve years of loving her from afar, resigned in his fate that he'd only be allowed small innocent moments, a laugh, a conversation, a glance—and

that would have been enough.

To feed the need he had for her deep in his soul.

He'd never imagined he would've ever ended up here.

And he was determined to show her just how grateful he was, just how much this meant to him. She snuggled up next to him in bed, she in just a silk nightdress and he in just a pair of coarse wool trousers. That wouldn't do.

"I believe they say skin-to-skin contact aids in healing," he said, tilting her chin up so he could press a kiss to her nose and then her mouth.

Her lips curved against his. "Do they now? And since when did you obtain such extensive medical knowledge?"

He kissed her again. "'Tis an old Scottish remedy."

"Mmmm. I'm sure." But her lips were twitching with mirth, her eyes glowing. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Malcolm." Her fingers fluffed his chest hair, and a shiver stole over his skin at the tickling sensation.

"I think what you meant to say, lass, is it's a most excellent idea."

She let out a soft snort, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "We both know where it'll lead if we're both naked." Her smile faded, her expression turning serious. "You'll hurt yourself, injure yourself further. I'm sure the doctor would not approve."

"I'm sure most people wouldnae approve of the things I want to do to ye," he said, his words falling rough and heated. Then he rolled on top of her, kissing down her neck to the soft skin of her shoulder.



A sharp pain rattled through his ribs from the effort of holding himself above her, and when he tried to lower himself and rest some of his weight on her, a burning throb flew through the bruise on his side. He fell back to his side with an ooof .

“See! I told you so,” she chided, but her words were slightly breathless.

“It’ll take a lot more than a wee scratch to stop me from loving you, mo chridhe.” He began pulling up the fabric of her dress, nudging at her hips to lift. The look she shot him was pure chastisement, but she complied, shimmying out of the thin garment.

He grinned at her, and her lips flattened. She was trying so endearingly hard to be cross with him. “There is one thing I can’t do myself. At least not without hurting myself...”

She blinked at him. A saucy, you are insufferable blink. He loved it.

“By chance, love, would ye help me remove my trousers?”

She snorted, loud and inelegant, ending with a scoff. “Oh, of course. Woe is me. I am so grievously wounded that I cannot possibly disrobe myself. Pray, fair maiden, ease my suffering and assist me in this dreadful plight.”

A rumbling laugh burst from him, quickly turning into a wheeze as he tried to contain the laughter, causing pain to ripple through his frame. This woman. He darted forward and pressed a hard kiss to her lips.

Her brows pinched, and she hesitated, stilled. “Malcolm, I think this is a horrible idea. You cannot even laugh without causing yourself pain.”

He smoothed the small furrow between her light brows. “Trust me, mo chridhe. Take off my bloody trousers and let me love you.”

Her mouth twisted, and she shot him a last skeptical glance before she divested him of his trousers.

“Aye, that’s a good lass. Now get that sweet bottom of yers nestled up against me.”

Pink dotted her high cheekbones, and she tucked her chin in. Bloody hell, he’d never tire of her blushes.

He chuckled—as softly as he was able—and pulled her into him, back flush against his chest, bottom tucked against his hips, legs tangling with his. He let out a soft moan and buried his head in her rose-gold tresses. She smelled as sweet as a field of heather. Her skin as soft as wildflower petals.

Malcolm nuzzled her neck, encouraging her to stretch away from him, and painted open-mouthed kisses up and down her neck.

He flattened his hand over her stomach, spreading his fingers, reveling in how he nearly spanned her hip to hip.

His tongue flicked out to trail over the column of her neck, and her breath caught.

He moved to cup her breast, his thumb coasting over the gentle slope.

He leisurely rolled her nipple in his palm—knowing how the roughness of his callouses would affect her.

Her breath hitched, and he continued his torturous assault on her skin with his lips and tongue.

He’d feast on her forever if she’d allow it.

He didn't need anything but her skin for sustenance, her pleasure for survival.

She began squirming under his touch, grinding her bottom back into him. His teeth grazed over her and nipped at the shell of her ear.

"Ye like that, lass?" he whispered. "Can ye feel it? Deep in your core. When I do this?" He pinched her nipples lightly, and a whimpered cry burst from her, her entire body shuddering against him.

"Mmmm," he hummed. "Such sweet sounds ye make for me. Those soft whimpers of want."

He ran his nose down her neck, inhaling deep, drawing in the delicious scent of heated skin and soft florals and something that was uniquely her.

All the while, his fingers played her, rolling and pinching and teasing.

Faint cries pulled from her throat, more frequent now, her hips more frenzied.

Lord, if she kept rocking against him like that, he'd be in danger of coming all over that perfect arse.

His hips bucked of their own accord. Because by God, was that an image. One he'd be making happen tonight.

Och, he couldn't tease any longer. The desire was building too fast, too dangerous. He gripped her thigh and pulled it up and over his leg, opening her to him.

Malcolm peered down her body over her shoulder, laid out like a banquet for him. Him nearly on his back, her back pressed against his, the gentle mounds of her breasts topped with pebbled peaked pink nipples looking so very edible. And so very

out of his reach.

And farther down, legs spread wide. Open for him. He slid his hand over the inside of her thigh, her muscles trembling beneath his touch. In this position, he could feel everything. Every catch of her breath, the vibration of every moan, every delicious shiver.

He lightly brushed his fingers through her curls, teasing for a moment, before dipping between her legs. Her entire body went whipcord tight, and a moan that was music to his ears fled her lips.

“Mo chridhe,” he groaned. “Ye’re so wet for me.” He glided through where she was drenched, slipping easily over her. Och, he needed to taste her. Or else he’d expire here and now. He couldn’t lie between her legs. Not with his ribs so tender. But...

He pulled away from her and rolled onto his back. “On your knees, lass. Up here.” He patted the mattress between them by his chest.

Blue irises unfocused, she knelt before him, her gaze coasting over every inch of him, settling at his cock. Her breath hitched.

Fook me.

“Straddle my face, love.”

She blinked at him, gaze clearing. Her mouth opened and closed dumbly. “I beg your pardon.”

He grinned and pulled at her thigh. “Straddle me, Lydia. I promise ye’ll like it.”

Her cheeks blazed crimson. “Oh gosh, I couldn’t.” Her eyes looked close to popping

off her bonnie face, and she shook her head. She glanced down her body. “I-I’d be so exposed. So—”

“Mo chridhe,” he interrupted gently. “We don’t have to do anything ye’re not comfortable with. But believe me when I say this, I love every part of ye, and that part in particular is especially delicious.”

She wavered. He could tell she wanted it. He saw the curiosity flare in her eyes, her hips cant nearly imperceptibly toward him.

“Ye’d be bringing a fantasy to life,” he said huskily. “If ye’d sit on my face.”

Lydia drew in a deep breath. “I can’t believe I’m doing this. I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

She straddled his head.

And Malcom was inches from heaven. “Hold on to the headboard, lass. Because I’m going to make ye go boneless.” And then he gripped her hips, pulled her to him, and finally got a taste of what he was starving for.

Lydia

Lydia's hands tightened on the headboard, and her body went weak.

Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god.

All embarrassment, all nervousness, all hesitation fled, chased away by Malcolm's wicked, sinful tongue. His large hands dug into her hips, holding her prisoner exactly where he wanted her, his tongue trailing over her.

He teased, laving over her, not dipping between her folds where she feared she'd burst from the aching need that had grown there. Because he'd already done plenty of torturous teasing on her breasts earlier. A pathetic noise pulled from her throat. She was dying with want of him.

He flattened his tongue against her, pressing in a long, slow glide, and she squirmed. The way her body needed more... She whimpered. The pleasure was nearly unbearable.

Then his tongue dipped into her folds, and she cried out, her back bowing.

He delved into her and groaned, deep and long, with pure satisfaction.

He thrust, shallow and not nearly enough for what her body craved.

And as though he knew, he gave her what she wanted—or close to, because nothing compared to the exquisite feeling of being filled by him.

One hand slid around her bottom, and he thrust his fingers inside her while his tongue danced over her clitoris in a maddening rhythm.

Lydia ground against him, rocked back against his fingers, needing more, harder, deeper.

And then pressed forward again, the pulsing need at the top of her thighs demanding more attention.

Her hands bit into the headboard. Her arms straining to keep herself upright as she shamelessly rode his face.

But she was beyond caring. Cries fell from her lips, and his moans vibrated against her.

Her heartbeat flew like fire finally granted oxygen, bliss coursing through her veins.

She bucked against him, no longer in control of her own body.

Ecstasy crashed over her, and her body went up in flames.

Blood thrummed in her ears, drowning out her scream.

Malcom's hands dug painfully into the flesh of her hips as his tongue continued to wrest every last bit of pleasure from her.

Until it became too much, and she squirmed away, rising, her entire body heaving from the force of her breaths.

She glanced down at him, and even though she'd just found bliss, her core throbbed, clenched, demanded more.

His eyes, all but black, glittered with lust, the evidence of her release glistening on his lips and chin.

He looked wild. Like an animal. And he was an animal, was he not? And she, his meal. She trembled.

More , her body whispered.

He helped her shakily untangle herself from him and lie by his side. And then he drew her into a fevered kiss, and she ground into him, the taste of herself on his lips doing something unspeakable to her core. And her core was angry at having been denied what it truly wanted.

More .

“I’m going to need ye to back up into me, mo chridhe,” he said hoarsely, pulling her against him so they both lay on their sides. “Because I cannae wait even a heartbeat longer. I need to fook you. Now.”

Thank God.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mal

Lydian whimpered, her sweet bottom pushing back against Malcom's cock.

Fook, he was painfully hard. Her sitting on his face?

Her taste on his tongue? The way she rode him with reckless abandon.

He'd been so close to coming. Thank all that was holy he hadn't.

Because he needed to be inside her, connected with her, as close as physically possible to her.

The most beautiful mewl purred from her throat.

And Malcolm was near crying himself at hearing those sounds.

How was it possible that her pleasure had emotion tumbling volatile through his chest?

Had love burning behind his eyes. Because being with her?

It was having a little piece of heaven in his arms. She was ecstasy.

And he needed to feel that ecstasy. Needed to be even closer to heaven than he was right now. He slid his cock between her legs and notched himself at her core.

“Is that what ye need?” he said between ragged breaths. “Me sinking deep inside, so ye’re so full of me ye can hardly bear it?”

“ Please .”

As though he’d deny her anything. He slid home.

Her thighs spread wider, her back arching, her mouth dropping open on a silent moan.

And he watched the entire thing. Because his gaze was greedy for her, for the flush running down her neck and chest, for the view of her head tipping back, for the gooseflesh pebbling over where he’d just pressed a wet kiss and blew softly over it.

“Move against me, love. Use me to take your pleasure.”

She hesitantly began moving, learning the angles she liked, rolling her hips as he gently thrust into her. It was slow. Slick. Sensual.

Soulful.

He strummed his fingers over her, light and unhurried, knowing she was still sensitive from her prior release. He waited for the signs she was ready for more: the needy cants of her hips, the quivering of her thighs, the quickening of her breaths.

And then she gave them to him. He increased his speed, increased his pressure. She pushed into his hand yet also attempted to push back down on him. Wanting everything he could give her.

“Och, ye ride me so well, lass. Like you were made for it.” Like they were made for each other.

The tight heat of her hugged him deliciously with each slide.

And then, on one drive up into her, he hit a spot that had pleasure streaking through him.

Fook . He needed that again. His hips grew frenzied while hers grew frantic, her pants turning to cries, as he repeated his shallow thrusts over and over, hitting that blissful spot inside her again and again.

“Mal-Malcolm.” She broke off on a sob. “Oh, God.”

“Aye, lass,” he said, his own voice hoarse. He understood all too well. How the pleasure was near painful, sorrowful. Beautiful.

Her intimate muscles lightly fluttered over him.

Fook, fook . She was almost there, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to last once she clenched down on him in bliss.

His fingers flew over her, flattening them and massaging her in small, quick circles.

Her arm shot up over her shoulder and landed in his hair, gripping a fistful, and the most glorious shock of pain shot through his scalp.

He groaned, strumming her faster. He fooking loved when she did that.

And then her muscles went taut, her body arching as a choked cry ripped from her throat.

His thrusts turned desperate, stuttered.

The sounds of her pleasure, the feel of her squeezing his cock.

He bit down on her neck, every muscle turning to iron as he fought to hold off, until he worked every last ounce of pleasure from her.

And as soon as she fell limp, he pulled out and thrust against the crease of her arse.

Once, twice, and then groaned into her neck, pleasure spilling from him, coating her lower back and bottom.

He sank into the mattress, chest heaving, not caring in the least about the pain radiating with each ragged breath.

Malcolm fumbled about with his hand, searching for her nightdress, and then used it to wipe his release from her. He tucked her back into him, banding his arms around her like he could fuse her to himself.

She snuggled back into him, a contented purr leaving her.

“That was...incredible, Malcolm,” she whispered.

“Aye, mo chridhe.”

Her fingers trailed over his forearm, lingering like a whisper of comfort, and then a delicate sniffle broke the quiet of the chamber.

He tilted her chin up to him, a frown pulling at his brows. His gaze snagged on a tear trailing down the curve of her dainty nose.

“Lyddie love?” he murmured, concern coating his low words. “Leannan, what’s wrong?”

She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut tight. She drew in a shuddering breath and then her crystalline blue gaze found his.

“Nothing is wrong, Malcolm,” she said, her voice barely audible. “I am overcome. Because of how right everything is.”

His chest seized, a storm of emotions crawling up his throat. Och, he knew exactly what she meant—because he felt it, too.

“I love ye, Lydia,” he said hoarsely. “More than ye could ever know.”

Two years later

Bentley Estate

Kent

LYDIA HURRIED up to the front door of Malcolm's cottage, a bundle of nerves and excitement.

Porter had retired a year ago, and Malcolm had moved into the stable master's cottage.

Though he still visited often, having settled close by.

Lydia couldn't deny it had been lovely, Malcolm having his own place now.

She sucked in a deep breath. Oh goodness, she was just a jumbled, bundled mess of emotions, both eager and uncertain.

There was only one way she would be able to do this.

And that was charging forward. She burst through the door.

And came to a stop at the sight of Mal and Freddy sharing a dram of whisky in the cottage's cozy living area before the wood-burning hearth.

She paused, her heart drifting happily into place in her chest.

“Oh, excellent. You’re here, too, Freddy. I wanted to speak with you both together.”

She loved how close Freddy and Malcolm had grown over the past two years. After the thorough lecture Freddy had delivered to Malcolm when they’d returned from Devonford Castle that fateful day two years past, Malcolm properly chagrined, they’d fallen into a fast friendship.

Heaven help her, Freddy was a special kind of man. Because her best friend? He’d accepted Malcolm— a servant— as an equal. Because he was Lydia’s man. Her lover. So, to Freddy, Malcolm was family. And her heart could barely contain the happiness that gave her.

Malcolm sent one of his soul-stirring smiles her way, his piercing slate-blue eyes stealing her breath as they always did. “Mo chridhe, well, aren’t you a bonnie sight for sore eyes?”

She tucked in her chin and glanced at him through her lashes. “Thank you, love.”

Even after two years, he had her as bashful as a maiden caught in her first fancy. But she wasn’t a maiden. The topic she needed to discuss came barreling back. She twisted her fingers in her skirts and rolled her lips in.

“Lyddie... Is something amiss?” She could hear the frown in Freddy’s voice. He knew her well.

Malcolm, on the other hand, was already out of his chair and pulling her into his arms. “Something is wrong, lass?” He glanced between Freddy and her. “What’s wrong? Are ye hurt? Is it the children? Are you ill?”

Freddy snorted from behind them. “What is it they say in Scots, Malcolm? Haud yer wheesht. Let the woman speak.”

Malcolm smiled sheepishly down at her. “Apologies,” he mouthed.

She patted his chest. There really was no tactful way to say this. So, she just blurted it out. “I’m with child.”

Silence greeted her.

“I’m in the family way...” she tried again.

She prodded Malcolm’s chest. But he appeared to have turned to stone. She glanced around him and met Freddy’s warm amber gaze, one that was sharp and considering. Considering how they would handle this situation, if she knew him at all.

But then his gaze softened. “That is lovely news, Lyddie.” Freddy made his way over to them.

“Obviously, it was something we were trying to avoid. But now that the child is here, it is a thing to celebrate.” He turned to Malcolm.

“We will find a way to make it work so you can have a presence in the child’s life.

” Freddy clapped the still-frozen Malcolm on the shoulder.

“You hear that, Malcolm? You’re about to become a father. ”

The air burst from Malcolm, and he came back to life before her, his large hands coming to frame her face. “Is it true, mo chridhe?” he said hoarsely. “Ye have my bairn in your belly.”

Her face split into a foolish grin. “Aye,” she said saucily.



Malcolm whooped and swept her up into his arms, spinning them both in a whirl of joy. Laughter filled the small cottage, echoing off the walls as Malcolm finally settled her back on the ground.

She turned to Freddy. “But there is something else. I know the solution in a situation like this...is well, the child would be yours for all intents and purposes. But I want the child to be raised by Malcolm, Freddy. I want the child to live with and be raised by his father.”

Her best friend’s brows came together. “Lyddie, it’s not possible. We can’t hide you away for a year. We won’t be able to hide your condition. And you know we cannot allow it to be known you’re having someone else’s child.”

She reached out and squeezed Freddy’s hand.

“Of course not, Frederick. I would never want that either. Our family’s image must remain untarnished.

And I don’t want our children to think we’re anything but the loving family that we are.

We must always present a united front. Now, more than ever, it is imperative to solidify the Bentley name’s power and influence—to ensure no one can harm us, or Felix, in the future. ”

It had become apparent over the past two years that Lydia’s inkling about Felix was very likely, though her son hadn’t spoken more on the matter.

Yet. But she and Freddy both made sure they made it abundantly clear that they loved him.

Unconditionally. No matter what. And that he could come to them with anything.

Malcolm's gaze bounced between the two. "Then how would it ever be possible, love? Regardless of if the bairn is mine. If you bear a child while married to Freddy, the world will see it as his. Even if you said otherwise, legally the law recognizes the child as his."

"I have a plan," she said, and her gaze locked on Malcolm. She lifted her chin, determination buzzing through her. "And it will allow our son to reside with you, Mal. No one will be the wiser."

"All right, Lyddie," Freddy said. "Let's hear this plan of yours."

Thank you for reading Lydia and Malcolm's story! I hope you fell head-over-heels for my big teddy-bear Scotsman. Sighhh . If you're new here, welcome, and thank you for joining me in my world of Koz!

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Thornfield Hall,

Jennings Family Country Seat

Kent, England

Christmastide Ball

December 1816

THE HONORABLE FITZWILLIAM JENNINGS, younger brother to the Earl of Bentley and next in line for the earldom, nearly always had his nose buried in a book. Which was why, when he entered his drawing room at his family's country estate, he failed to notice something was different in his domain.

Breasts.

Naked breasts.

Glorious breasts.

Dear Lord. This was the correct drawing room, was it not? The one he had repurposed as his study for working on his Italian translations? Yes, there was his desk. And there was his settee. With breasts on it.

His eyes stretched wide, so wide the room grew blurry. He attempted to rub his vision clear and was immediately met with glass and metal. Right. Spectacles—which he

wore for reading, not distance.

He hastily removed them. But the breasts were still there.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” the breasts said in a low, husky voice.

Wait. No. That couldn’t be correct. Those words, and now a curse, came from the woman the breasts belonged to.

Oh my God, there is a bare-bosomed woman in your study, Fitz.

And what did a man do when presented with a bare bosom? He fled, of course.

Fitz dropped his spectacles and book, slapped a hand over his eyes, and spun toward the exit of his study. “My a-apologies, my lady. Miss. Ma’am.” He rushed to the door, or at least what he was fairly certain was the—

Crack!

Bloody fuck.

His skull rang and throbbed like a gong. He sucked in a sharp breath and clutched his aching head, stumbling backwards. Holy buggering ballocks, that bloody hurt. His heel connected with something and—

Fitz’s back collided with the floor. Oomph. The air shot from his lungs, and his eyes slammed shut as pain ricocheted through his head. Now the back of his skull screamed in pain, too. Along with his back. And his arse.

“Oh my God!” a feminine voice squealed. “Are you hurt?” The rustle of skirts interrupted the incessant throbbing in his head, and then small hands prodded his

chest, then patted his cheeks. “My lord? Are you well? Can you speak?”

He hesitantly opened his eyes. And the answer was, in fact, no. No, he wasn’t well. And no, he couldn’t speak. Because breasts. There were so many breasts. Well. Not so many. There were only two, he supposed. But dear God. Breasts. In his face. Breasts. Did he say breasts?

He went to speak, but all he managed was a groan. The woman’s slim blonde eyebrows pinched, her gaze darting over him as though looking for the source of his pain. Too bad the pain was everywhere. From his pride to his posterior.

Heat seared his cheeks, and his all-too-familiar embarrassment caught up with him. As did his nervous sweating. Someone shouldn’t be able to sweat this much when it was as frigid as tits outside.

Urghh. Why did you think of tits, Fitz?

It wasn’t enough he had just run into a pair of breasts—which was nerve-inducing all in itself—but the bosom belonged to the loveliest flaxen-haired, rosy-cheeked woman he’d ever seen.

Fitz was tongue-tied and tactless by default, but when he was around a beautiful woman? Let’s just say there was a reason he rarely attended balls or soirées or supper parties or places where there were people. Hence why he was about to hide in his study while a ball went on at his country estate.

“My lord?” the woman said again, concern coating her words.

And then she slapped him.

His gaze shot to hers, and his mouth popped open. “Did you just slap me?”

Well, would you look at that, Fitzzy. You found some words!

A breath exploded from her, and her body slumped. Egads, now her breasts dangled tantalizingly close to his face. He gulped. Audibly. Which only had him inhaling her cinnamon-sweet scent. Sodding hell. She would smell like the very essence of Christmas.

His gaze darted between her all-too pouty pink lips and her all-too perky pink nipples. Did she taste like Christmas, too...

“Oh, thank goodness,” she was saying, blessedly interrupting that train of thought. “I feared you had done irreparable damage or some such when you seemed unable to speak.”

He frowned. Was the woman unaware that her bosom was exposed? She was leaning over him, chattering away about—well, he wasn’t actually certain. The combination of diddies in his face and knocks to the dome had made him deaf and dumb.

“Would you cover yourself?” he finally managed tersely. Before he did something outrageous. Like lick a stranger’s nipples.

She tensed, and he winced. That had come out a touch boorish. But damnation, the woman seemed to have no compunction about wagging her wobblers in his face.

“I beg your pardon, my lord,” she said stiffly. “How terribly thoughtless of me to come rushing to your aid and not cover myself beforehand. I hope I have not offended your delicate sensibilities.”

Sweat trickled down the nape of his neck. He was botching this. If that was even possible. If something started out botched, was there even room for further botching?

Fitz botched it even further.

“Urrrgung...”

Lovely, Fitz. What in the bloody hell was that supposed to be?

She cocked her head. “Pardon?” She blinked down at him through thick, blonde lashes. Blonde lashes that framed vibrant green irises currently clouded in confusion. “Maybe I should ring for help.” She drew out the words. “I fear you did damage your brain.”

No, he really hadn’t. This was actually quite normal for Fitz.

Unfortunately.

This wasn't normal.

Miss Georgiana Hartley peered down at the amber-haired, red-faced, perspiring man beneath her.

He wasn't even forming words. It wasn't typical for men to sweat that much, was it?

Or turn the exact shade of cooked lobster.

Come to think of it, with the sweating...he did somewhat resemble a buttered lobster.

"Maybe I should ring for help," she said slowly. "I fear you did damage your brain."

He shook his head vigorously, her body shaking atop him. The adamant gesture would have reassured her if the man hadn't immediately frozen, his wide-eyed gaze falling to her chest. A choked noise left him before his gaze began playing a rigorous game of shuttlecock around the room.

She blew out a sigh and glanced around the chamber that would have been just right for her attempted assignation: cozy and intimate, with its dark-wood walls and earth-toned furnishings. It felt seductive. Perfect. Or so she had thought.

She had been so excited to find an empty room; the first few she'd tested out had been occupied.

One of which had been Lord Wessex with a woman who was very much not his fiancé.



His fiancé...whose family was currently hosting this ball.

Goodness, the nerve of the man, sleeping with other women in Lady Felicity's own home.

She grimaced—both at that thought and the wheeze that just came from the man beneath her.

Perhaps if she gave the startled clam a moment, he'd collect himself.

Georgiana soothingly rubbed his chest—his surprisingly hard chest. And not because of bones, which one would expect from the tall, thin, bespectacled stranger who had been buried in a book when he'd entered the room.

No, that smooth, solid feeling beneath her fingertips was flesh, muscle .

Who could he be? She definitely hadn't seen him in the ballroom.

But her soothing strokes, which had possibly, potentially—fine, definitely—turned exploratory, had the opposite effect she was hoping for.

More wheezing. Disappointment settled heavily in her belly.

Her fingers twitched with desire to discover.

But this was undoubtedly not the man to do that with.

If she tried to fondle him, he would probably have an apoplexy. What a waste.

Goodness, this had gone completely arse-backwards. Tits-sideways. She had been fishing for a savage shark and ended up with a crimson crustacean.

Georgiana had been positioning herself for optimal seduction as she awaited the Duke of Ironcrest. To be honest, she hadn't been certain the Duke would accept the invitation she'd murmured to him, but he rarely attended these events, and she wasn't going to give up on a chance to experience .

Unfortunately, Georgiana's mother had a horrible habit of throwing Georgiana—quite literally—into the path of unmarried gentlemen.

So the Duke had probably thought this a scheme to trap him into marriage. It wasn't, though.

What it was...

...was curiosity.

Georgiana had realized fairly young that she possessed...

urm...particular proclivities. It may have been influenced by the fact that she had gotten her hands on Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure when she had been just fourteen.

Or when she had stumbled upon a secret stash of lewd publications beneath her older brother's bed after he'd left for America.

Pamphlets that were full of illustrations of naughty, naughty things.

Naughty things like women having their bottoms spanked, their hands bound, being watched, and watching as these naughty things were performed.

She fingered the man's cravat and then frowned.

He was distressingly still besides an odd, gurgling noise emanating from him.

This awkward man under her—who might have since expired—definitely did not partake in such things.

But the Duke of Ironcrest supposedly did. Hence her attempt at an assignation.

She let out a sigh. Failed attempt.

Said bumbling man fumbled beneath her—he was alive!

—and procured a handkerchief from his trousers.

He lifted it to his head, the back of his hand skimming her nipple.

She sucked in a breath. He froze. Again.

His eyes went comically wide, and his face went even more crimson.

Tingles. That had given her tingles. Why couldn't she have successfully rendezvoused with the Duke?

She wanted tingles, blast it. She wanted to feel something .

Something would be better than the empty, invisible existence she currently lived. Or the future that loomed—

“Gurrg,” the man said, interrupting her maudlin thoughts.

Goodness, she was always getting lost in her thoughts. That's what happened when one's only company was oneself and one's dog. An anvil landed on her heart. Just

oneself now. Now that her beloved Bernie had passed.

She shook her head, shoving away her heartache before she turned into a blubbering, bare-breasted mess. Her gaze tracked a bead of sweat slipping into the man's curls. Whatever could gurr mean?

He cleared his throat and dabbed his forehead, looking everywhere but at her. "I meant to say, my apologies," he said hoarsely.

Ah, yes. Gurr clearly meant apologies. How could she have misinterpreted that?

The poor thing sounded like he hadn't had a drink of water in days, a man stranded in a desert.

She should probably show him some mercy, get off him, and cover herself.

But she felt oddly content here, making this flustered man even more flustered.

Was it unusual that she felt more comfortable leaning on a stranger, bubbies on full display, than she did anywhere else?

"It is quite all right," she said with a smile, giving his chest a little pat.

But nothing was all right. Which was how Georgiana found herself here in the first place.

She was tired of being the tempting carrot dangled before a ton of braying donkeys.

That wasn't the kindest comparison, she knew.

But it was oddly fitting, given the last man she danced with back in the ballroom.

The one it seemed frighteningly possible she could end up marrying.

Georgiana didn't exist for any other purpose.

She was useless as a woman to her father, and in her mother's eyes, the only way to fix that was to use Georgiana's beauty and their family's wealth to snatch a titled lord.

Georgiana didn't give a fig about titles.

She did give a fig about titillation. So, her rebellious self had thought, why not seek out said titillation with the depraved lords her mother wanted so desperately to marry her to?

Well, the scandalous, handsome ones. She could do without the donkeys.

But instead, she had ended up with the one man—who now appeared to be struggling for air—in all of Christendom, who apparently couldn't partake in such activities.

Perhaps he was a virgin. He had run from her instead of to her when he had accidentally stumbled upon her half-naked.

That was typical of virgins, wasn't it? She snorted at the irony, considering she was a virgin.

Enough, Georgiana. You've tortured the poor lobster long enough. She pressed her hands on his chest and pushed herself up.

"Meep," he squeaked. A look of horror promptly washed over his face.

She tried her damndest to hide her smile, but his horrified gaping—and yes, even

more gurgling—was too much for her.

Georgiana ran a finger down the bridge of his sharp, straight nose, a giggle slipping free.

He was such an adorable little freckled lobster.

She leaned down, letting her finger trail over his freckled, rosy cheek, pausing at his prominent cheekbone. Her heart did a little flip.

Their gazes clashed, and the flipping started up in her stomach.

Lord, the lobster's eyes. They were a smoky, deep whisky—amber with dark mahogany striations.

And just like the amber liquid, they were intoxicating.

Her gaze fell to his lips, and her tongue slipped out, coasting over her own.

Little girls were told of stories of enchanted frogs that transformed into princes with a kiss.

She hovered lower, one hand resting on the floor beside his head.

What would happen if one kissed a lobster?

His gaze flicked to her mouth and back to her eyes.

His pupils flared. Oh, God. What was happening?

Her body buzzed. Her skin hummed. His lips parted, and he didn't just draw in air on

that small breath, he drew her in as well.

Her fingernails dug into the carpet as she tried desperately to ground herself.

But she was helpless against the mystical pull of those amber irises.

The scent of ink and parchment and leather drifted to her. He smelled as inviting as the pages of a beloved book. Perhaps it wasn't so unfortunate he'd stumbled into the room instead of the Duke. What was contained in this intriguing man's pages—

The door to the drawing room swung open, and reality hit her like a slap in the face with said intriguing book.

Oh, my bloody God. No, no, no. No!

She scrambled off the gentleman and yanked her bodice up.

Why had she dithered so thoughtlessly? Why was she always so careless and reckless?

Because really, who cares if you are? Fortunately, that depressing thought didn't last long.

The crustacean beneath her flew up to sitting, and his head collided with hers .

Or maybe unfortunately. She fell backward on her bottom, clutching her forehead.

Ouch, ouch , ouch. Of course, the clumsy crawfish would crash into her.

“Fitz?” a deep, alarmed voice boomed through the room.

“...Georgina?” And that low voice was oh-so-much worse.

Because she recognized that voice. Her eyes slammed shut.

That voice was her father's: Mr. Thomas Hartley of Hartley Textiles.

A man in trade, but richer than the majority of the ton.

Hence why the Hartleys were invited to a country ball at an earl's estate.

A man who was trying to get in the Jennings family's good graces.

Georgiana grimaced, a grimace so deep she was sure it would be permanently etched on her face.

She slowly lifted her gaze to her father, whose mouth was opening and closing in what would have been a hilarious fashion if it had been happening during literally any other moment but this one.

And that was when she recognized the second man.

The owner of said estate, the head of the Jennings family—the Earl of Bentley.

“Fitz, I demand you explain yourself at once,” Lord Bentley said.

A shiver traveled down Georgiana's spine. She discreetly studied the Earl. Broad, solid—his muscles straining against the protesting seams of his tailcoat—and incredibly handsome. No. Handsome wasn't quite right. Pretty was more apt. His features were beautiful. Now that was a man. One in charge.

But...who was Fitz? Her brows scrunched and then immediately shot to her hairline.



Mr. Fitzwilliam Jennings, the Earl's younger brother.

She glanced at the man next to her, who currently looked like he was trying to disappear inside his cravat like a turtle.

He was Mr. Fitzwilliam Jennings? She looked back at the Earl.

The Earl's younger brother? This confident, commanding, composed man's younger brother?

If she looked beyond the flushed, sweaty complexion and the disheveled amber curls, she supposed she did see the resemblance.

Matching amber eyes, matching amber shade of locks.

"I. Urm. Ope. You see. Muromph."

She frowned. Truly? They were related?

Lord Bentley crossed his arms over his chest and waited for his brother to start forming actual words.

Apparently, Mr. Jennings's odd behavior was normal.

At least she no longer needed to fear for his brain.

Just his future. Her future. Which was going to become their future without some quick thinking.

"I don't think an explanation is required, my lord," Georgiana's father said, his voice rising. Clearly Father had gotten over his shock. "It is obvious your brother has taken

advantage of my daughter! He has defiled her!”

If only. She deflated with a sigh. If she was going to be caught in a compromising position, was it too much to ask that she had actually experienced a thorough defiling?

Also, since when did her father care? Oh, right.

Male pride. How dare his daughter be defiled...

The daughter in question didn't matter so much, just that she belonged to him.

The lobster could have defiled her father's boot, and he would have been just as offended.

“Father,” she said soothingly. “There has been no defiling. It was all an accident.”  
Yes, an accident.

That was perfect. She could work her way out of this.

“Mr. Jennings had been reading his book and walking”—she pointed to said book on the floor.

Ha! Evidence!— “And we collided and tumbled to the ground. His foot got tangled in my skirts, which tore down my bodice.” She spread her arms wide and smiled encouragingly at her father.

“You see, it was all a most unfortunate accident.” And a most perfect lie. “No one need ever know.”

“Whose bodice was torn down?” a loud, female voice asked.

Her smile fled. Fled fast and far away. Because that was a familiar female voice.

Georgiana's shoulders slumped, and she wished she could turtle like the man next to her and disappear.

Because Georgiana's grasping mama glided into the room, Lady Billingsworth—known for her wagging tongue—at her side.

Getting out of this had been slim before, but now?

Now that a calculating glint flared in Mother's eyes, and a look of pure glee lit up Lady Billingsworth's wine-flushed face?

Now Georgiana Hartley was most definitely fucked .

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Fitzwilliam Jennings was fucked.

He didn't often wander from the safety of his London town house, but even he had heard of Mrs. Thomas Hartley's wild attempts at securing her daughter a husband.

Just last year, she had accidentally shoved her daughter directly into the Serpentine.

Her aim had been throwing the young woman into the Marquess of Dunmore.

And if rumors were true, she had nearly succeeded, but the Marquess had given Miss Georgiana a discreet nudge to avoid her.

Miss Georgiana, meet Serpentine.

Fitz followed his brother, Felix, to his brother's study, the Hartleys in tow.

There was no way out of this one. Not when Lady Billingsworth was a witness.

Besides pistols at dawn, of course. And as much as marriage frightened the wits out of Fitz, it was preferable to a duel.

Barely. But at six-and-twenty he'd like to keep living.

He swallowed repeatedly, trying to gain some sort of moisture in his dry-as-sand mouth.

The problem was, Fitz struggled with social interactions until he got to know

someone.

And then he was less awkward. When it came to women, he very rarely got to that less-awkward point, like to the point where he could breathe properly.

And the more attractive he found a woman, the longer it took for his awkwardness to abate.

So where Miss Georgiana Hartley was concerned? There was zero chance of abating, zero chance of breathing. Because she was stupidly beautiful. Annoyingly beautiful. Why did she have to be beautiful? Better yet—why did she have to attack him with her breasts?

He ground his teeth, hot frustration building in his chest. He was quite happy with his current life. His blissful solitude. He had his translations, and he had his mistress—a woman he finally had gotten comfortable with. Safe. His current life was safe.

And now he was going to lose all of that peace. He wasn't sure who he was angrier with: the young woman who had launched the bosom assault, or himself for not having the wherewithal to extricate himself from the situation before it turned calamitous.

Calamity, meet Fitz.

They settled themselves in Felix's study, and Fitz did his best to avoid eye contact with everyone. He curled his toes in his shoes and willed his lungs to continue to breathe air, in and out. In and out.

Thankfully, Felix's study was full of interesting—and more importantly, distracting—bric-a-brac.

His brother had this fascinating clock that had come from Germany.

Every hour on the hour, a small door opened at the top from which a bird appeared and made a “cuckoo” noise.

Fitz was most definitely not avoiding the conversation at hand and focusing on the neat little clock.

“They must be married without delay,” Mrs. Hartley said. “A week’s time, no later.”

That distracted Fitz from the clock. His gaze shot to the woman.

She was blonde like her daughter, but much more generous of figure.

A figure that was wrapped in luxurious fabrics covered in an overabundance of gold embellishments and glittering speckles.

Goodness, had she had her seamstress throw an entire jewelry shop onto her dress?

Fitz fidgeted in his seat. Everyone was looking at him. Was he meant to respond? Oh God. Words, Fitz .

But whatever it was in his throat that was supposed to form words was currently being strangled by the cloying air in the room and the shrewd stare the woman was sending his way.

She was a hunter who had found her mark.

Her eyes may have been light in color, but there was a darkness to them that had nothing to do with their hue.

Fortunately, Fitz’s brother spoke up. Unfortunately, Fitz had no idea what Felix was saying because a loud buzzing had drowned out all sound. But the vulture had turned her gaze onto Felix, and Fitz could take in an almost-normal breath.

Her daughter, on the other hand, didn't seem to possess any vulture-like qualities.

Maybe it was the large, green eyes that had blinked down so innocently at him.

There was a puzzling comfort in those irises, like lying in the lush grass beneath a tree's verdant leafy canopy, surrounded by every shade of green nature could conjure.

When their gazes had met—clashed—egad, for a moment there, he had forgotten to be anxious.

That and when Miss Georgiana had been atop him, she had appeared nothing but worried for his welfare. Perhaps slightly amused by him, given the twinkling those enchanting eyes had been doing. But oddly, it hadn't seemed malicious. More like she found his inability to people properly...endearing?

But even with that slight positive note, if the way her fingers were currently trying to tear a hole in her ivory dress was any indication, she didn't want to marry him, either.

Of course, she doesn't want to marry you, you bloody dolt. Who would want to marry the bumbling, fumbling Mr. Fitzwilliam Jennings? He had found out the harsh truth of that statement at eighteen.

Then his head jerked back as he realized something.

Something that should not have taken this long to figure out.

She had clearly been in his study for an assignation.

Which meant she not only didn't want to wed Fitz, but she wanted to wed someone else .

An overflowing stream of relief flooded his veins.

Perhaps there was someone else who could marry the young woman.

“Is there no alternative?” he blurted, hope taking over his tongue. How did one ask nicely if he could substitute himself with the man the maiden had been trying to ruin herself with?

“Alternative?” Mr. Hartley frowned at Fitz, and Fitz tugged at his cravat.

“Urm. Ah. Alternative person? For marriage p-purposes.”

Oh dear. Mr. Hartley didn’t like that. Fitz found it surprising steam wasn’t emitting from the man’s reddening ears. Goodness, that overflowing stream appeared to be turning into a rampant river.

“Are you trying to pawn my daughter off on another gentleman? Do you have no honor?”

“No, no, no.” Fitz gulped. Dear Lord, could he just drown in this river of his own making? “I just thought... Perhaps there was someone Miss Georgiana had set her sights on.” He looked at Miss Georgiana and gestured to his chest. “This was truly a misunderstanding.”

Her brows pinched, little charming lines creasing her forehead. He huffed out a breath. How did he make her understand?

He flapped both hands in front of his chest in circular motions. Her eyes widened, clearly now comprehending he was referring to finding her in his study, breasts exposed—waiting for someone else . She shook her head violently, her delicate nostrils flaring.

Oh dear. Now he had her panicking. Why was she panicking? He was panicking. Again.



Breaths go in and out.

“Am I misunderstanding that my daughter was found atop you with her bosom in your face, sir?” Mrs. Hartley looked down her nose at him.

Yes, that was true. But that had been all Miss Georgiana’s doing. Fitz couldn’t be blamed for that. He inhaled on a count of three and then exhaled on the same count, trying to calm his overactive heart and create some sort of moisture in his chalky mouth.

He had asked the young miss to cover herself. He chewed his lip. Fitz was fairly certain he shouldn’t mention that. He opened his mouth to say it anyway—

“My brother will, of course, do right by her,” Felix said calmly.

Probably best his brother had stopped him. Felix’s cool, authoritative tone seemed to placate the Hartleys. Well, all but one Hartley.

Miss Georgiana’s features were drawn, lips turned down, eyes flat. Somber. Defeated. Resigned to her fate. Or...his brows furrowed. Not so much resigned as reverted—to somewhere else. He cocked his head. Where had she disappeared to? He was very familiar with disappearing inside one’s head.

“And I don’t see any reason for the rush,” his brother said, throwing a sideways glance at Fitz.

There was so much in that glance. Brotherly concern and exasperation all tied together neatly in a bow. Fitz knew his brother—his family—loved him. But no one could deny that Fitz was different. The rest of the Jennings were free-spirited, confident, easy-going. Everything Fitz was not.

He didn’t know why he was the way that he was. He had a great upbringing with a

supportive family and wanted for nothing. The doctors always spoke of humors needing to be in balance for the body to function properly. Apparently, Fitz's humors were wonky.

He turned to his brother and gave a small shake of his head.

He appreciated his brother's attempt at slowing down this carriage that was careening out of control.

But the only way out of this mess was marriage.

And if there was anything that made Fitz more nervous, it was anticipation.

Weeks or months with an impending marriage hanging over his head?

He wheezed as his lungs decided they wanted to stop working again. No, definitely not.

"Cuckoo!"

Fitz jolted at the sound of the clock. His time was up. No point in delaying.

"It is fine, Felix. I'll secure a license, and we will be married in a sennight." He was proud of how little his voice wavered. "The Hartleys can stay on after the ball is over, and we can have a quiet ceremony at the local chapel."

Miss Georgiana's gaze shot to his. He wasn't sure if her shock was because of his words or because he'd said so many of them. But either way, her wide eyes and parted lips spoke volumes. She didn't want this any more than he did. But it didn't matter what either of them wanted.

There was no hope.