



RETURN  
TO  
WILDSYDE

EMMA V. JEECH

WICKED SONS ~ BOOK 3

# Return to Wildsyde

*Wicked Sons Book 3*

By Emma V. Leech

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## About Me!



I started this incredible journey way back in 2010 with *The Key to Erebus* but didn't summon the courage to hit publish until October 2012. For anyone who's done it, you'll know publishing your first title is a terribly scary thing! I still get butterflies on the morning a new title releases, but the terror has subsided at least. Now I just live in dread of the day my daughters are old enough to read them.

*The horror!* (On both sides I suspect.)

2017 marked the year that I made my first foray into Historical Romance and the world of the Regency Romance, and my word what a year! I was delighted by the response to this series and can't wait to add more titles. Paranormal Romance readers need not despair, however, as there is much more to come there too. Writing has become an addiction and as soon as one book is over I'm hugely excited to start the next so you can expect plenty more in the future.

As many of my works reflect, I am greatly influenced by the beautiful French countryside in which I live. I've been here in the Southwest since 1998, though I was born and raised in England. My three gorgeous girls are all bilingual and my husband Pat, myself, and our four cats consider ourselves very fortunate to have made such a lovely place our home.

**KEEP READING TO DISCOVER MY OTHER BOOKS!**

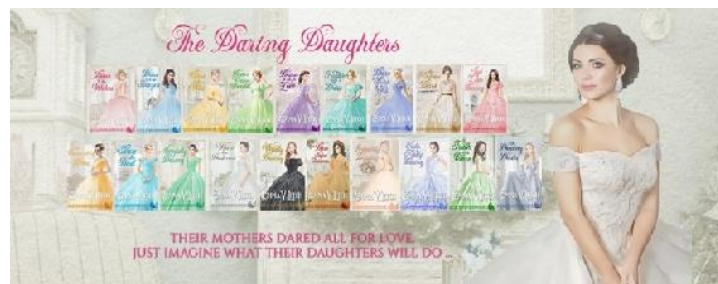
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## Wicked Sons Series

## Daring Daughters



## Daring Daughters Series

## Girls Who Dare



## Girls Who Dare Series

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# *chirp*



# Acknowledgements

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To Victoria Cooper for all your hard work, amazing artwork and above all your unending patience!!! Thank you so much. You are amazing!

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A huge thank you to all of my beta readers and cheering section! You guys are the best!

I'm always so happy to hear from you so do email or message me :)

[emmavleech@orange.fr](mailto:emmavleech@orange.fr)

To my husband Pat and my family ... For always being proud of me.



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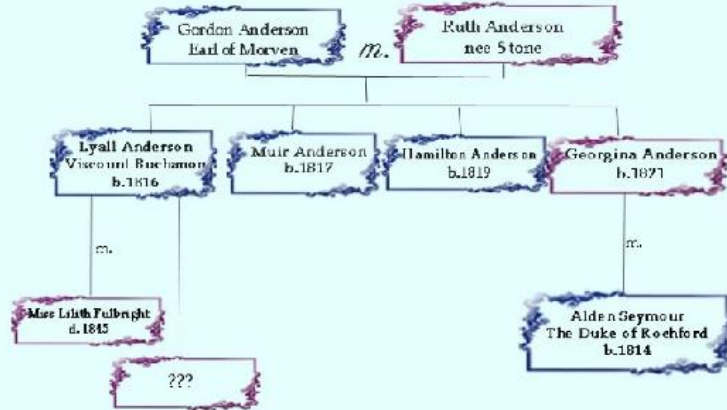
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# Family Trees

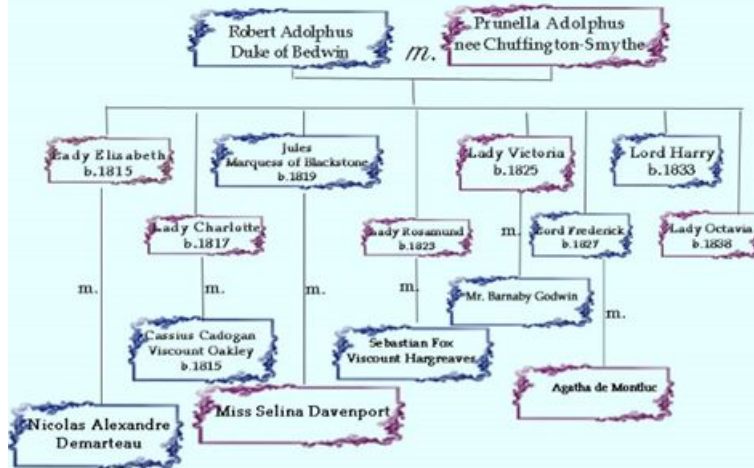
## HOUSE OF MORVEN

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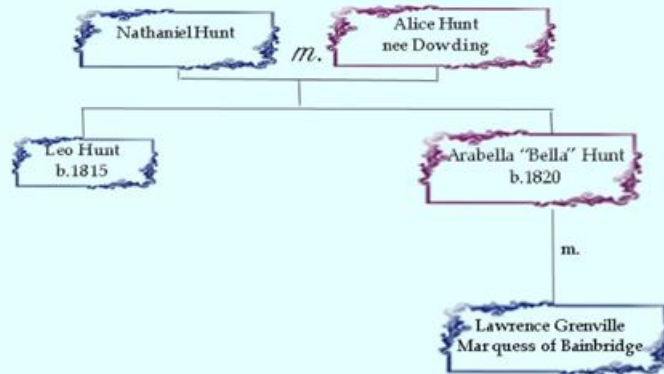
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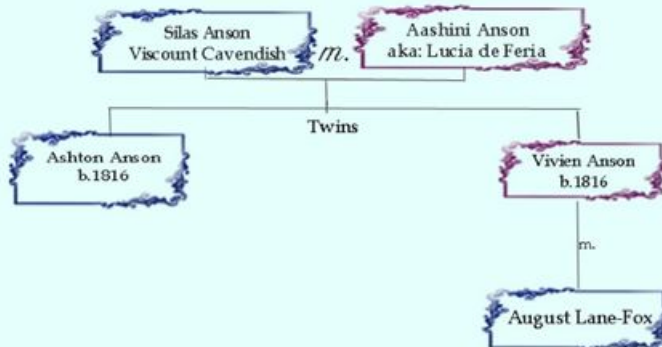
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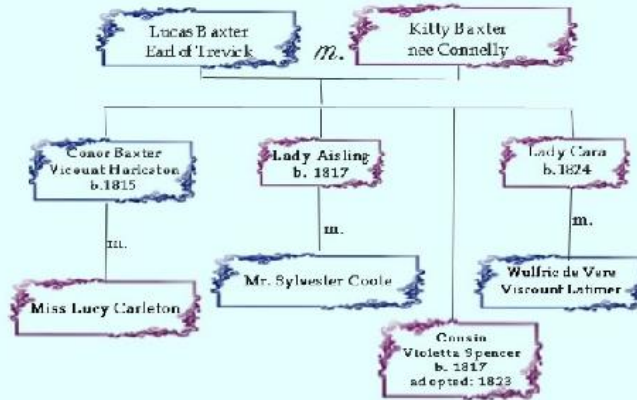
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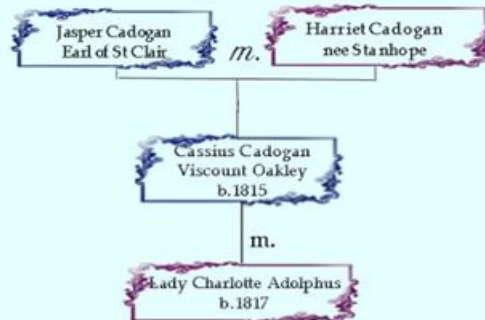
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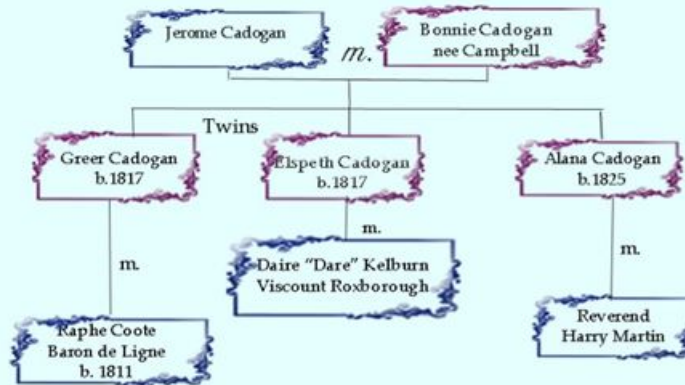
# HOUSE OF ST CLAIR

*To Wager with Love*



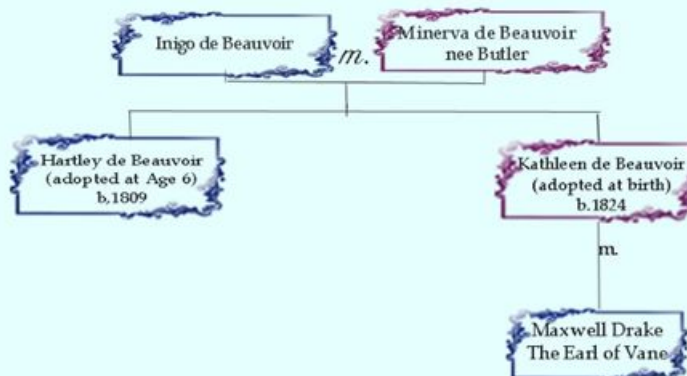
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*To Dance with a Devil*



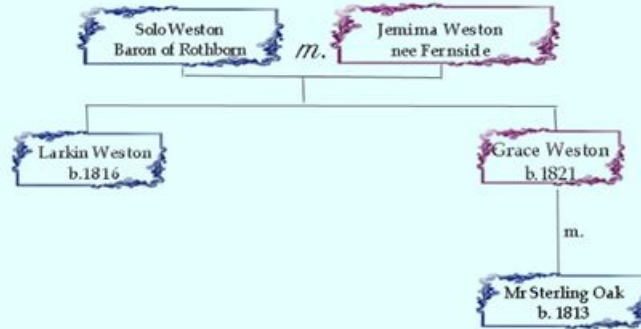
# HOUSE OF DE BEAUVOIR

*To Experiment with Desire*



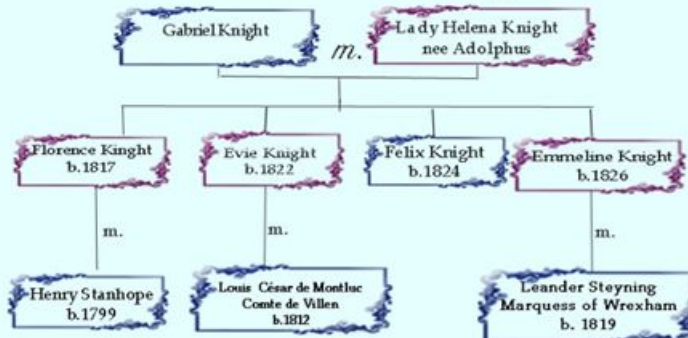
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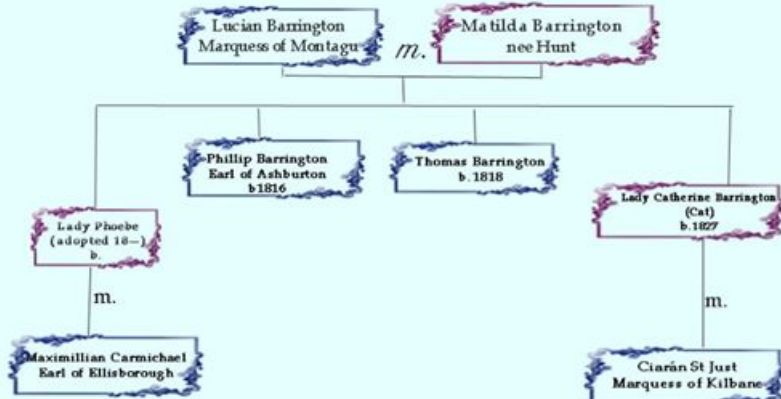
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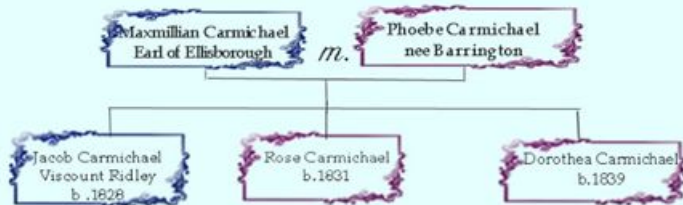
# HOUSE OF MONTAGU

*To Hunt the Hunter*



# HOUSE OF ELLISBOROUGH

*To Dance until Dawn*



# Prologue



*My Lord Buchanan,*

*It is with deep regret that I write to inform you that the bodies of your wife and an unidentified male were this morning found off the coast of Rattray. We believe they ran into difficulties and the boat broke up on the rocks there. The necessary arrangements are in hand to restore your wife's body to you for burial.*

*With my sincere condolences,*

**—Excerpt of a letter from Mr Hamish McDonald, Justice of the Peace, to The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan, (son of The Right Hon'ble Ruth and Gordon Anderson, The Countess and Earl of Morven).**

**6<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Blythe Tenement, Tottenham Court Road, Camden, London.**

“Come now, my precious darling. We're not going to get anywhere if you don't cooperate with me, now, are we? That's the way, lovely boy,” Luella crooned, her tone one that generations of Fulbrights had used to wheedle their own way. “If you'd just come a little closer, we could... *Drat you!*”

The cat edged farther back along the ledge, out of grabbing distance, and Luella groaned.

“Have you got him?” Mrs Wilkinson asked eagerly.

“No, the dam—dear creature is being a little stubborn.”



“Oh, my goodness.”

Luella pulled her head in from the window to see the spare, bent figure of Mrs Wilkinson wringing her handkerchief, her watery blue eyes heavy with reproach. “But you promised, Lulu.”

“I did,” Luella said brightly, cursing herself for having done so. “Just... give me a moment.”

She darted out of the door, ran down the stairs of the dingy tenement building and out into the bustle of the street beyond. She hurried past the pawnbrokers—where she had spent far too much time of late—and Barney’s Coffee Shop, then avoided a drunk intent on dancing with her outside the rag and bottle shop, and made it to the butcher, who gave her a baleful glance and folded his arms.

“No,” he said.

Luella shot him her most winning smile and said brightly, “It’s all right, Mr Tucker. I’m not here to ask for more on tick.”

“No, and you ain’t here to pay, neither,” he said, his mouth set in a determined line.

Luella sighed, unable to deny it, but sent him her most melting look of pleading. Her wide, grey eyes were her best feature, everyone said so, and Papa had made her practice this appealing look in the mirror until it was perfect. None of the Fulbright line except for her cousin Lilith could lay claim to beauty. Though they were all well enough to look at—and Luella was a pretty girl, it was true—this was not their strength. Papa said fate had blessed her with charm and charisma and not much else. Pa had told her that everyone wanted something and, as an attractive woman, men would fall over themselves to do what she wanted in the hopes of pleasing her. She wasn’t so naive that she believed pleasing her was all they’d want, though.

Luella knew she could do it too, as she was doing now, but much to her father’s fury, she rarely practised it. He found her disgust at the way of life he and many of their close kin

favoured, utterly unaccountable. He father thought the idea that she wished to make a respectable living quite laughable. Still, now and then there was no other option than to bat her eyelashes, and it wasn't as though she was trying to con the butcher.

“Please, Mr Tucker. Mrs Wilkinson’s cat is stuck out on the ledge outside her window and she’s on the third floor. It won’t come in, and she’s beside herself. Don’t you have just a little bit of fat, or even gristle, that I could take to tempt him back inside?”

Mr Tucker sighed and shook his head. “Pull the other one, it’s got bells on.”

“No, it’s true, I swear it,” Luella pleaded, noting the softening in his expression. She had him now. If her father had seen her, he would have told her to go in for the kill and at least get a couple of sausages off the fellow. Her stomach growled at the idea, but she ignored it with determination. “Look, that little scrap of fat you just cut off there, that’s all I need. Oh, please, Mr Tucker. She’s just a lonely old lady, and the cat is her only company. She’s so worried she’ll probably have an apoplexy and turn up her toes if I don’t—”

“Oh, bleedin’ hell, go on, take it,” Mr Tucker protested, wrapping the sliver of fat in a bit of newspaper and handing it over the counter to her. “Go on now and take your violins with you.”

“Thank you!” Luella grabbed the thin parcel and blew him a kiss before running out of the door again.

She ran back to the apartment block: a tall, neglected building with soot-coloured brickwork and hardly a window without a broken pane of glass. Mrs Heeley, a woman who might have been anywhere between forty and sixty, sat on the steps, watching the world go by and taking desultory swigs from a gin bottle.

“Good afternoon,” Luella said as she sidestepped something disgusting. She gave a little squeak as a rat ran over her foot and behind the step Mrs Heeley was sitting on. The woman didn’t so much as blink.

With a shudder, Luella hurried into the building and on up the stairs, avoiding the rotten tread which had fallen through and stepping over the one which would go any day now.

“Where have you been?” Mrs Wilkinson cried, still wringing her handkerchief.

“You’ll see,” Luella said breathlessly as she unwrapped the newspaper and hung out of the window again to see the big ginger tom glaring at her. “Now, my fine fellow, look what I have.”

Luella held the thin piece of fat out, and the cat sniffed the air.

“Ah, now I have your attention, you stubborn fool. As if you want to spend the entire day out here. Come on, now,” she coaxed.

The cat craned its neck towards the fat, licking his lips, but did not move. Luella drew the fat back towards her, farther out of reach. The cat inched closer, and closer still.

“Got you!” she exclaimed, grabbing hold of the cat, who was heavier than she had expected. He yowled and swiped at her, catching her hand. Luella yelped and dropped him to the floor where he sat, contentedly chewing on the fat while she inspected a livid red scratch on the back of her hand. “There’s gratitude,” she muttered with a sigh.

“Oh, there you are, my wicked boy,” the old lady crooned, bending to stroke the cat’s head. “Thank you, Lulu, you’re a good girl.”

“You’re welcome,” Luella replied with a smile.

She left Mrs Wilkinson to the company of her cat and climbed two more sets of stairs to her father’s apartment. Happily, the old man was out, no doubt spending coin they didn’t have in much the same way as Mrs Heeley on the front step. Luella’s little brother Jack was here, though, and he looked up at her with a grin, setting aside the book he’d been reading.

“Did you rescue him?”

“Of course I did, though I was wounded in battle,” she replied, holding her scratched hand up for inspection.

“Ouch,” Jack replied in sympathy. “I was going to make tea, so the water is hot if you want to wash it.”

Luella nodded and ruffled his hair. “But *is* there any tea?” she asked with a rueful smile.

“A bit. We’ll have to use the leaves three times soon, though, if Pa doesn’t come up with something.”

Luella’s stomach twisted. She wondered just what her father might have in mind if he couldn’t pay the ever-increasing bills that were piling up on the kitchen table. When her cousin Lilith had married Lord Buchanan, Papa had been in alt. He’d said it was the sort of triumph Luella could achieve if she only bestirred herself a little. The idea of trapping a man into marriage made Luella’s blood run cold with disgust, more so the idea of living with the poor fellow for the rest of her days. But Lord Buchanan had been a disappointment to his wife and their whole family when it turned out he was no fat pigeon for plucking. Indeed, Lilith’s new husband had been a far cannier man than she’d bargained for. He didn’t give a hoot for scandal, and whilst he had done the honourable thing and married her—fool that he was—that was as far as he was willing to take it. He’d not have her live in his house, nor give her free range to spend as she pleased. Lilith was furious, and Luella could only pity the poor fellow. She did not doubt her cousin’s revenge would be diabolical. She might have a face that could make an angel cry, but her heart was black as pitch.

Luella tended to her scratch and made a pot of weak tea to go with the bread and cheese they were having for supper. She tried to remember the last time she’d eaten a piece of meat and her stomach growled so audibly she decided it was better not to think of it at all.

Afterwards, Jack took himself off to bed to read his book and Luella sat quietly at the table in the corner of the tiny room they shared, writing in her diary as she did every night. The candle flickered, sending odd shapes dancing around the

room and she paused. In her mind's eyes she tried to imagine a castle in the wilds of Scotland, a big draughty place with vast fireplaces and views that looked out upon miles of wilderness, instead of no farther than the next brick wall.

She wondered why Lilith hadn't simply made friends with the man she had trapped, had made him *want* to marry her, for no doubt she could have done so easily enough. Everything had always come easy to Lilith, and she was spoiled because of it. Her father was cleverer than Luella's pa, though. He had made his fortune on a fraudulent railway scheme, embezzling a frightening sum of money. Luella was uncertain if she wished her father was that clever or not. At least she wouldn't have dresses that were in such a sorry state and only bread and cheese for supper.

She jumped at the sound of the front door slamming. Papa was home early. Not a good sign. If he caught sight of her, she would be in the line of fire for all the ills Papa felt had befallen them. Everything would be her fault and he would work himself up to a pitch. She tried to remember the father of her childhood when her mother still lived. Then she'd had no notion that their way of life was immoral and saw only her fun-loving parents, who drifted through life intending to wring every ounce of joy from it with as little effort as possible. That man had died with his wife, for he had loved her dearly, and Luella suspected her mother had been the brains behind all their schemes. Certainly, nothing had worked out since.

Her father had written to Lilith over a month ago, asking her to send for them, to demand of her husband that she needed a lady's maid and requesting Luella, but no reply had come. He had made himself so furious he'd collapsed, hardly able to breathe and clutching at his chest. Luella had been forced to send for the doctor who had warned him his heart was not strong. Another such temper fit could be the end of him. Of course, seeing the doctor's bill arrive had threatened to provoke just that and had forced Luella to pawn her one remaining treasure, a silver locket, to pay for it before Father killed himself with his spite and fury.

Not wanting another such scene, she decided retreat was the better part of valour.

Luella closed her diary, padded to the bed and lay down, tugging the covers over her head and feigning sleep.

# Chapter 1



*Dear diary,*

*Lilith is dead.*

*We received the news this morning. I have tried my best to feel pity for her, but it is hard to muster any tender emotion for a woman who was always hateful to me and to Jack. My father is furious, for with her goes his golden goose, though her husband seemed to have her measure and was not the kind to be bled dry. A cold sort of man, from what I can gather, though one can hardly blame him when Lilith trapped him in such a vile manner.*

*How I wish Jack and I did not belong to such a family of thieves and con artists. For Papa may claim an earl as his uncle but it does not change the truth. We are no better than the confidence tricksters on street corners and Papa is a regular Captain Sharp. I wish, too, that it was not so tempting to follow in their footsteps, but we shan't. Jack and I will find a different way to live, a decent way. I only wish I knew how.*

*I just heard breaking china downstairs, which means we will now have even less of a tea set than we currently do. If Papa does not stop ranting and raging, he will have an apoplexy as the doctor warned him, and so I've told him, but he does not listen to*

*either of us. I suppose I had better try to calm him before he wrecks the house or turns up his toes.*

**—Excerpt of a diary entry from Luella Fulbright, cousin to the late Lady Buchanan.**

**7<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall heard the knock at the door but didn't answer. The fire he was gazing at had died some hours ago, but that didn't register, either. He was numb. Shock and too many other terrible emotions had overwhelmed his senses until he'd felt the need to shut down. He was angry at Lilith still. No, not angry. He'd left anger behind the day he'd married her and tumbled headfirst into cold hard fury, yet how could he remain so damned furious when she was dead and gone? The truth was, he was *glad* she was dead, and he feared what that said about him, that he could rejoice in the demise of a vibrant, beautiful young woman, no matter how wicked she'd been. So, he'd prescribed himself enough whisky to sink a man'o'war, which had done the job of numbing this confusing jumble of emotions effectively enough, but now he was paying the price for that too.

There were always consequences to actions, some more painful than others.

“Lyall?”

His mother's soft voice reached him through the fog of pain and confusion, and he turned his head, feeling as though he'd been asleep for a thousand years as he blinked at her.

“Ma?”

“Oh, Lyall, look at the state of you, love. Mrs Baillie is bringing you coffee and some breakfast.”

“Ach, Ma, stop fretting,” he said, rubbing a weary hand over his face and discovering he'd not shaved for some time. How long? He could not quite recall.



“Don’t say such utterly idiotic things,” his mother replied with a tut of impatience. “I am your mother, it is my job to worry about you. Did this make you feel better?”

She picked up the empty bottle that had rolled over the floor and now rested before the dying fire. She quirked an eyebrow at him, and he grunted.

“Aye, for an hour or two.”

“And now you have a headache and a sick stomach for several more,” she said with a sigh.

“Ma, don’t nag, I beg ye,” he pleaded, massaging his aching temples.

She sighed but said nothing more. He felt a gentle hand stroke his hair. The tender touch made his throat tight, and he swallowed hard, determined not to make more of a fool of himself than he’d been made of late.

“Is Da here yet?” he asked, uncertain if he was dreading the answer or not.

“Not yet. I expect he’ll arrive soon though, and don’t look so wretched. He’s on your side, Lyall, surely you know that?”

“Aye, but that does nae mean he’s proud of the mess I’m in.”

“That woman...” his mother began, and then took a breath for whenever she spoke of his wife—his *late* wife—she got a bit het up. “Lilith made this mess, Lyall, and a woman like that could turn any man inside out. When I think of the things she might have achieved if she had not been so shallow and spiteful, it makes me furious. I suppose I ought to pity her, for her parents created her in their own image and she stood little chance of being anything but what she was. I admit I am struggling to do so, though now she has met such a sorry end it is rather easier, I suppose,” she added with her usual blunt honesty.

She turned then and looked at him directly, and he knew she was going to ask him how he felt, what was going on in his head, but he did not know how to answer her questions. Would she be shocked that overjoyed relief was the largest

part of it, or should he tell her he was beyond mortified that he'd been trapped so easily, led by his balls by a pretty face and manipulated to the altar? Lilith had intended to keep manipulating him too, but he was not so big a fool as she'd hoped. When she had failed to get her hands on his money or been allowed to establish a place in his life, her parents had tried as well, constantly haranguing him for cruelty to their daughter. How could she hold her head up when the entire world knew her husband couldn't stand the sight of her? If he meant to ignore her, at least send her to London so they might live their own lives.

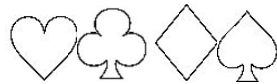
Apparently, giving her a beautiful home and a generous allowance was not enough. She ought to have a place in Mayfair and a carriage of her own, and money enough to entertain, and... the list was endless. As if they believed Lyall was fool enough to allow her to run wild among the *ton* bearing his name, taking lovers as she pleased and making him a laughingstock. Not in this lifetime.

He supposed his mother was right. Lilith had been as much a victim of her parents' ambitions as he had. It was they who had chosen him as her mark—as she had bitterly informed him when she realised she had met an immovable object who could not be twisted about her finger. The whole family were an ignominious band of confidence tricksters, liars, and adventuresses. He could only thank God he was done with them now, though he did not doubt her parents would try to make this his fault and demand compensation. It made him sick to his stomach, but Lyall knew he would pay them a sum, just to make them go away and keep them out of his life. Blood money. The phrase sounded in his ears with an unpleasant ring of truth, but he'd pay it to silence them. He just wanted to be quiet for a while. There was no going back to the life he'd lived before Lilith had ruined everything with her wiles. But no, that wasn't entirely fair. He'd been no more innocent than Lilith, only she had been calculating while he'd been guilty of nothing but honest lust.

Lord, but it had been only five months since she and her parents had staged the little scene which had caught him so neatly, and yet he felt he had aged fifty years in the interim.

“Lyall,” his mother began, and he knew she was going to do it, to make him speak of his feelings, of what had happened, of the future that ought to stretch out brightly before him when all he could see was a fog of confusion. He sprang to his feet, instantly regretting the action as his head spun and his stomach twisted.

“Ma, if you’ll excuse me...” he managed, and fled the room before he boked in front of her. Ah well, at least he had a valid excuse for avoiding her questions. Every cloud...



By the time his father had arrived, the devil had stopped using Lyall’s head as an anvil and the pain had subsided to a dull thud. At his mother and Mrs Baillie’s insistence, he had eaten a plate of sausages, eggs, and fried potatoes and, rather to his astonishment, it had stayed put. So, he had washed and shaved and put on clean clothes and done his best to look like a man in charge of his own destiny instead of the wreck he was feeling before he faced the Earl of Morven.

Making his way down the worn stone treads of the staircase, Lyall was unsurprised to find his mother waiting for him. She was a tall woman of generous proportions, handsome rather than beautiful, with strong features, her dark hair threaded with silver. The Countess of Morven was also the fiercest and most capable woman he’d ever known, and he was proud of her. His father adored her and, though the two of them were more than capable of arguing loud enough to rattle the rafters, there had never been a moment when Lyall had not been certain of their devotion to one another. Strange, really, when one considered the circumstances of their marriage.

His mother, the daughter of a wealthy Cit, had despaired of finding the titled husband her father had wished her to marry. His father had been desperate for money. So, his mother had proposed to his father, offering her hefty dowry as the incentive. She said it was his knees that gave her courage, an attribute she found unaccountably alluring. An unlikely beginning to a love story that had seen them through the intervening years, four children, and the pressures of inheriting

an earldom. But they were as strong and committed to each other now as they had always been, and Lyall wondered at the amount of luck involved in such a union, or perhaps it was fate. Either way, luck or fate had deserted him, and he was damned if he'd get caught in such a trap again. From now on, he'd have his eyes wide open, and no pretty face or sweet words would ever tempt him again.

"He's waiting in your study," she said, her smile warm and encouraging.

Lyall nodded, bracing himself.

"Oh, and... Hamilton is here too," she added in a rush.

Lyall groaned. "Ma! I told ye I dinnae want the eejit here, blethering at me from dawn until dusk. Why did ye no stop him like I asked?"

His mother's usually placid face darkened. "Your brother has come all this way because he was worried for you, because he wanted to be with you in your time of trouble. You damn well be grateful for that or you'll have me to answer to."

"Aye," he said uneasily, knowing better than to take that threat with anything less than seriousness. "I beg your pardon."

"I should think so, though it is Hamilton you had better be civil to. I suppose you threatened Muir with dire consequences, should he show his face?"

"Aye, reckon I might have done," he admitted. He'd written to Hamilton too. Sadly, Hamilton was stubborn as a mule when the mood took him and did not recognise danger when presented with it. "I'd better go in, then," he said, gesturing to his study door, which never felt like his study when his father was in it, seeing as how it had been his for most of Lyall's childhood.

He almost knocked, only stopping himself at the last moment as he reminded himself that Wildsyde was his now and his father was a guest in his home.

Lyall walked in to discover his father staring up at a stag's head with a fine rack of antlers. Tied to the antlers were half a

dozen faded pink ribbons.

“I never had the heart to take them off,” he said as his father turned to look at him.

“I’m glad,” the man said, smiling. “They always served as a reminder to me that yer ma was nae only the love of my life, but a terrifying adversary should I be fool enough to put a foot out of line.”

Lyall laughed and crossed the room to shake his father’s hand. “‘Tis good to see ye, Da.”

His father held his hand in his firm grip and gave a snort before pulling him into an embrace. “Haud yer wheesht,” the man said, when Lyall protested and made to pull away. “Ye may be as big and ugly as I am, but ye are still my boy, and ye are hurting. It does nae make ye less of a man or less worthy of my respect because things went awry.”

Lyall’s chest hurt, with both gratitude and shame, for his da was being kind when he had every right to call him a fool. His father relaxed his hold and put his hand to his face, looking him in the eye. “Ye are nae the first to be fooled by a pretty face, as I told ye at the time, but God has delivered ye. Now ye have a second chance, and that poor wicked child has paid a high price for her shenanigans, but ye are free, son. Don’t squander the chance ye have been given, aye?”

“Aye,” Lyall said, nodding. His father smiled and patted his cheek affectionately.

“Are ye nae gonna offer me a drink? Where’s yer manners?”

Laughing now, Lyall turned and made his way to the whisky decanter, pouring them both a generous measure.

“That’s more like it,” his father said, sprawling comfortably in a chair before the fire and taking an appreciative sip. “Now then, tell me how things are going at Wildsyde, I miss the auld place. Yer ma does too. ‘Tis all well and good being an earl, but life was good here. Simpler, aye? I must be getting on in years for I feel nostalgic for the days when ye and yer siblings were children and yer scrapes nae

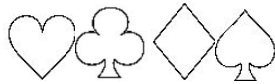
more serious than a skinned knee. Well, except for Muir, that laddie could get himself in tae trouble in an empty room.”

Lyall smiled wryly, for he too had been feeling the loss of those years, which seemed so long ago now.

“Drink up, Lyall. Yer looking a tad peely-wally. Hair of the dog that bit ye, aye?” his father said, his tawny eyes twinkling.

Lyall looked down at his glass of whisky apprehensively.

“Aye,” he said, and took a large mouthful, praying it didn’t bite him again.



Lyall closed the study door behind him, leaving his father dozing contentedly in the chair by the fire. He’d had a rather arduous journey to get here and deserved a nap before dinner, so Lyall had left him in peace.

“Ye survived with yer skin, then?”

Looking around, Lyall observed his youngest brother, Hamilton, sitting on the cold stone steps of the castle stairs.

“Ye will get piles, sitting yer arse on that cold stone,” he said by way of reply, as it was a refrain their mother told them often, though she put it more politely.

“Nah, just a cold arse,” Hamilton said with a grin, getting to his feet and coming over to embrace Lyall. Lyall endured it stoically, never having been a hugger. Why everyone felt the need to do so now, he could not fathom. Lilith was dead, not him. “I dinnae know quite what to say, truth be told,” his brother said seriously.

“There’s nothing that needs saying,” Lyall said, his voice firm as he strode to the front door.

“Ach, Lyall, don’t do that,” Hamilton protested, hurrying after him.

“Do what?” he demanded, for his temper was fraying now. He’d had about as much sympathy as a man could stomach.

“Act like there’s no a problem and ye have nae a care in the world.”

“Well, I don’t, do I?” Lyall said, turning to face his brother. “She’s dead. I’m free and I had a lucky escape. There’s an end to it, Hamilton. I dinnae need a shoulder to cry on. ’Twas good of ye to come and I appreciate it, but there’s nae need to stay.”

And with that, he went out and closed the door.

## Chapter 2



*My Lord,*

*I write to you this day to inform you of the details of a will which I made out some weeks ago for a Mr Francis Fulbright, your late wife's uncle. In this document, Mr Fulbright gives you full guardianship of his two children. Miss Luella and Master Jack Fulbright, until such time as they turn four and twenty and come into their inheritance. For your information, Miss Luella is one and twenty and her brother, twelve years of age.*

*Having no funds with which to continue their stay at their father's temporary lodgings, and being now your responsibility, I am sending them with their belongings to you at Wildsyde Castle. Please be so good as to expect them on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of this month.*

*—Excerpt of a letter to **The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan from Burke, Scaly and Privet, Solicitors.***

**9<sup>th</sup> May 1845, The offices of Burke, Scaly and Privet, Solicitors, Camden, London.**

“I beg your pardon?” Luella said numbly, staring at Mr Burke.

She had awoken that morning with a sense of deep foreboding and no amount of looking on the bright side had



shaken it off. Of course, that their father was dead and had more than likely left them without a feather to fly with was bad enough. She thought she had been prepared for that. It seemed, however, that things were worse than she could have imagined.

“It is all here, in black and white,” the man said, sliding several daunting looking sheets of paper with a good deal of spidery black writing in her direction.

Luella read, the sense of impending doom growing with each word that penetrated her reeling brain. “B-But he can’t do that,” she said, looking up at the man.

He was a thin fellow with grey hair that badly needed a trim, as did the quantity that protruded from his ears and nose. Luella found it hard to look at him. He seemed to feel the same way, for his manner had been cold and indifferent from the moment she had entered his office. She did not doubt her father had somehow conned the man into drawing up his will for free or for a bargain price, which probably explained his manner.

“He could, and he did. As your father and legal guardian, it is his right to name your next guardian on the event of his death. As your father had recently had an apoplexy that I understand the doctor told him he was lucky to survive, it is only natural he thought to make provision for his dependents.”

“But I am one and twenty and therefore of age,” Luella protested. “Surely I cannot be subject to the requirements of a guardianship?”

“Yes, but the money he has put in trust for you is not to be yours before you are four and twenty, and your brother, of course, is only twelve.”

“M-Money?” Luella said numbly. “There’s money? But Papa didn’t have a penny to his name.”

The look Mr Burke sent her confirmed her suspicion that he had either not been paid or had been swindled.

“It is not a large sum, but there is an amount put aside.”

“How much?” Luella demanded.

“Under the terms of the will, I am not at liberty to tell you that.”

“Oh!” Luella fumed. How like her father, still controlling her life even from beyond the grave. “Well, it does not matter. We shall not go haring off to the wilds of Scotland to live with a man who must despise us.”

“I am afraid you have little choice in the matter,” the man said, not without some satisfaction if Luella was any judge. “Your rent is in arrears, and your brother is a minor and therefore *must* live with Lord Buchanon until he is of age. You are, of course, at liberty to go your own way, but... *do* you have any funds, Miss Fulbright?”

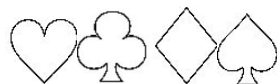
Luella glared at the old devil, resentment and fury burning in her gut like acid. “No,” she bit out. Not that she, for any amount, would leave Jack to the tender care of a man who must hate him on principle.

Mr Burke returned a smile devoid of warmth or any human feeling. “Then,” he said with satisfaction. “It looks like you will go to live at Wildsyde Castle.”

Luella stared at him, fear prickling down her back as she considered what that might mean for her, to put herself into the hands of a man who had every reason to revile her. “W-Wildsyde?” she repeated, the fear resolving itself into a knot of terror that sat in her belly like lead. “Where is that?”

“Oh, about as far north as one can get, a stone’s throw from John O’Groats,” Mr Burke said, looking almost cheerful now. “A wild and windswept place. Remote,” he added with relish.

“Oh, Papa,” Luella said faintly. “What have you done?”



**10<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

The bellow of fury was such that it rattled the windows in their frames and Hamilton’s mother set down her teacup with a clatter and an exclamation.

“What on earth...” she began, but Hamilton was on his feet already, hurrying from the breakfast parlour to the study whence the sound had erupted.

Though Lyall’s greeting had been less than enthusiastic, Hamilton was not about to be sent away by a few short words. His older brother had always kept himself to himself and had never been one to share his thoughts easily with his brothers. Hamilton and Muir were much closer in temperament and, whilst they had fought like cat and dog when they were boys, they were thick as thieves. Lyall was something of a conundrum to them both. Hamilton was not a fool, however, and his brother’s demeanour had been less than reassuring. So, he meant to stay until he was satisfied Lyall was really back to himself, whatever that was.

It wasn’t this, he thought with a sigh, on bursting into the study to discover Lyall, white-faced with rage, a letter crumpled in his fist as though he could strangle the sender by proxy.

“Lyall, whatever is the matter?” his mother demanded, hurrying up to him.

Lyall thrust the crumpled mess into her hands and stalked to the door. “Read it,” he said, as his mother tried to smooth out the mess and follow him at the same time.

“But where are you going?” she demanded.

“To see that useless solicitor of ours and make him get me out of this damned mess,” he thundered, slamming the front door behind him.

Hamilton turned to his mother, who was reading the mangled letter and growing paler by the second. She put a hand to her breast, her swift intake of breath confirming Hamilton’s suspicion that this was bad.

“Oh, my word,” she said faintly, looking so much as if she might faint that Hamilton reached for her and put an arm about her waist, guiding her to a chair.

It must be bad indeed for his indomitable mother to be so affected.

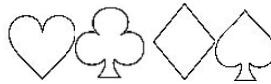
“Ma!” he said once she was sitting down. “Tell me before I run mad.”

His mother only shook her head and handed him the letter. Hamilton read it with growing astonishment.

“Holy God!” He turned and stared at her, aghast. “But the old devil can’t, it can nae be legal. Surely?”

His mother looked up at him, her face pale but once more composed.

“We shall see,” she said calmly, and with that, he had to be satisfied.



### **10<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyll paced the room as his parents and Hamilton waited for him to explain what the solicitor had said. He felt trapped, caught all over again by Lilith, but this time by her wretched uncle and cousins. The brass face of the man, to make Lyll responsible for his children when he had left them nigh on penniless, was beyond anything he could imagine.

“The Court of Chancery could overturn the decision, but the old windbag thought it unlikely they would, and that it would nae do me any favours after the death of my young wife, to be seen to cast the two of them out when they have nae sixpence between them. I *could* turn the girl off anyway, as she’s of age, but the boy I’m stuck with. I can nae just send a girl out alone into the world, though, can I? So, I’m stuck with her too.”

“But what of the inheritance?” his mother asked.

Lyll strode to the fire, staring down at the flames. Though it had been a fine day, fires were lit in the castle most months of the year, for the walls were too thick to notice any change in the temperature outside.

“Inheritance,” Lyll said in disgust. “If ye call two pounds sixteen shillings and a scrubby bit of worthless land an

inheritance.”

“Two pounds!” Hamilton exclaimed. “They could nae live on that.”

Lyall shook his head. “No, which begs the question of what the devil I am to do with them. I don’t doubt they will come here intent on wheedling every penny they can from me, but they’ll nae get it. If I must keep them, I will, but under my terms, and if they dinnae like it, they can take themselves off to swindle some other poor devil with my blessing. How am I ever to get them off my hands, though? That’s the question.”

He stopped pacing, arrested by his mother’s face. She seemed lost in thought, but she was gazing at him with a speculative look in her eyes.

“They might not be like Lilith,” she ventured.

“Ma!” Lyall said, his disgust with this sentiment too forceful to say more without shocking her.

“Ach, Ruth, be sensible,” his father said, shaking his head. “Since that wicked girl came into our lives, we’ve all heard the talk. Lilith’s father swindled thousands from those that invested in that sham railway scheme, and everyone knows it. We know the brother was a conniving devil, too, though a deal less successful. Lilith was made in her parents’ image. Do ye really think these two won’t have been trained as she was?”

His mother nodded, giving a sigh. “When you put it like that, but the boy is only twelve, Gordy, a child. There’s a chance we could make something of him.”

“We?” his father said with the lift of one eyebrow.

Lyall snorted and returned a wry smile. “Dinnae fash yerself, Da. I would nae foist them upon ye. ’Tis my problem and I shall deal with it.”

“As if we would leave you to—”

“Ruth,” his father said, his tone mild, but firm. “Lyall will do as he sees fit, aye?”

His mother said nothing, but returned a look that promised his father that he had not heard the last of the subject. Lyall

shot the man a grateful smile. Whatever these two *orphans* were expecting of him, if they were imagining a bleeding heart or an open wallet to greet them, they were to be sorely disappointed.

## Chapter 3



*Dear diary,*

*I had the strangest dream last night. I was in a huge, crumbling castle and the land outside wreathed in mist. It was dark, so dark that the candle I held barely illuminated a foot in front of me, as though the night ate up all the light. I was running, running away from something that pursued me and I was afraid. My bare feet were cold, the stone beneath them freezing, but I kept on running for fear it would catch me. I could feel it getting closer, but still I kept on running.*

*No doubt it is the result of eating cheese before bedtime, but we have no more money left. We will reach Wildsyde tomorrow and for the next three years be at the mercy of Lord Buchanan. The moment I can get my hands on that inheritance, we will be gone from his clutches, no matter if Jack is still his ward. We will escape and make our own way. Good heavens, but it sounds like some romantic gothic tale. All we need is a mad monk and an ancient prophecy or buried treasure, and we should have everything required.*

*I can only imagine that he is as dismayed by our arrival in his life as we are, so perhaps I could persuade him to give up the inheritance early so we might go our*

*separate ways. For we certainly would tell  
no one.*

*It is worth a try.*

*—Excerpt of a diary entry by Miss Luella  
Fulbright.*

**13<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of  
Scotland.**

“Luella!”

Luella jolted from another peculiar dream as her brother shook her roughly.

“What! What’s wrong?” she demanded, blinking and forcing herself awake in alarm.

“Look,” he said, his hand still grasping her arm.

Luella followed his gaze out of the grimy carriage window, blinking against the glare of spring sunshine, and could say nothing at all.

There stood Wildsyde. It was as harsh and rugged and wild as the mist-wreathed castle in her peculiar dreams, and utterly breathtaking. An uncompromising landscape stretched out for miles in all directions, with no other signs of civilization. On the horizon, low hills rose like the backs of some giant, ancient creatures burrowed into the ground. It was every bit as remote and windswept as Mr Burke had warned her, but he had not told her how beautiful it was. Luella gazed in awe, feeling as though this journey had taken her to another planet, or back in time, for it could not be the same world she had inhabited for all her life.

Swathes of yellow swept the landscape and overhead birds cried and shrieked, buffeted by the wind that rocked the carriage and bent the wildflowers and grasses low around them.

“How enchanting,” Luella said, her voice faint. She tore her gaze from the scenery to look at Jack, who was white-faced and anxious.



“We’re to live in that castle... with not another soul around?” he asked, his voice none too steady. “There are no shops, no neighbours, no *people*.”

“Of course there will be people. Do you think an enormous place like that runs itself?” she said bracingly. “And I told you it would be different, but different is good. It will be a grand adventure, you’ll see.”

Jack gave her a sceptical look. “I’m not a baby, Lulu. I know you’re as scared as I am. Lilith made this fellow look a right fool, and he’s not going to be giving us a warm welcome.”

“I never made a secret of that,” Luella protested. “And I know you’re not a baby, as if I ever treat you as one! But we have no choice, Jack.”

“For now, perhaps, but we need to get out of here, back to London. We can look after ourselves, you and I. Pa taught us how, and—”

“And we are not living the life Pa did,” Luella said firmly. “So you can just put that out of your head right now. There will be no tricks, no stealing and conniving. We are going to be honest, decent people and not spend the rest of our days looking over our shoulders. Is that clear?”

Jack’s chin jutted as he returned a mutinous scowl, but he gave a taut nod.

Luella sighed, knowing how hard this was for him. Their Pa might not have been much of a parent but, after Ma had gone, he’d done his best in his own haphazard way. It was hard on Jack to have lost both parents so young.

“Just look, though, Jack. Look at how beautiful it is. Have you ever seen anything so lovely in all your days?”

“I suppose not,” Jack said grudgingly. “But it’s not like I can go out on the street and play with the lads, is it?”

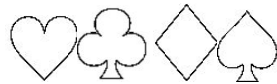
“Well, considering the lads you were hanging around with, I should say that was a good thing,” Luella retorted. “I mean what I say. No tricks, no lies, and certainly no *pickpocketing*.”

“I never did!” he exclaimed, getting red in the face.

“No, but the others did, and they were teaching you, I know.”

Jack’s chin jutted once more, but he did not deny it. At least that danger was behind them, Luella thought with a sigh. If this turn of events could see Jack learn an honest trade, then she would consider it worth any trial, for he was tempted to follow in his father’s footsteps, and she needed to do all in her power to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Luella returned her attention to the castle before her and prayed, for she could only speculate on the new dangers that littered their paths now.



“Lyall, don’t be too hard on them,” his mother pleaded.

Lyall stared out of the window at the little black dot on the horizon moving steadily towards the castle. As it drew nearer, it resolved itself into a carriage and horses, bringing Lilith’s cousins to his door.

“Am I a monster?” he asked mildly.

“No, of course not, but you are hard-headed, just like your father, and believe me, he was dreadful when I first arrived here. He made my life a misery for some time, and I don’t want you to—”

“Ma!” Lyall exclaimed, impatient now. “I’m nae going to beat them and feed them on bread and water, aye?”

“And neither did your father do anything of the sort, but there are other forms of cruelty that are just as awful,” his mother said stubbornly.

Lyall sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I hear ye. But I will nae have these two in any doubt of the fact that I have their measure. If they behave themselves and keep out of my way, we’ll go on well enough, I don’t doubt.”

“Hmmm,” was his mother’s only response. She fidgeted by the window a little longer before heading for the door.

“Come along, we must greet them.”

“I will nae,” he said, shaking his head. “They can come to my study later.”

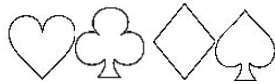
“When they’ve had time to freshen up, you mean?” his mother said, eyes narrowed.

“Aye, if ye like,” Lyall said, having meant no such thing. He was damned if he was going to present part of a welcoming party for the cuckoos fate had saddled him with, though.

His mother gave him a long look that he met with a steady one of his own before she hurried off to the front door.

Lyall sighed, turned his back upon the window, and settled himself at his desk. He had no interest whatsoever in the new arrivals past ensuring they did not interfere with his life.

The sooner they learned that, the better off they’d be.



Luella stepped down from the carriage on legs that felt stiff and achy. How people had made this dreadful journey before the advent of the train she did not wish to consider. It had been quite long and arduous enough as it was. Jack’s hand snuck into hers and held tight and she felt her heart clench. It had been some time since he had done such a thing, for he considered himself a young man, not a child, and such a display must gall him. But they were both scared to death and there was little point in denying it.

They stood gazing up at the forbidding castle, bracing themselves for their first glimpse of a furious highlander who would rage at them and send them to the stables with a plate of stale bread and mouldy cheese. They were unprepared, however, for the arrival of a tall, elegant woman simply if richly dressed in a gown of dark burgundy.

“Miss Fulbright, Master Fulbright, welcome to Wildsyde,” she said, smiling at them.

It was not precisely a welcoming smile, as it held a deal of reserve, but the woman’s gaze was candid, and her face one

Luella thought held no trace of malice.

“Thank you, Mrs...?” Luella faltered, uncertain whom she was addressing.

“I beg your pardon. I am Lord Buchanan’s mother, Lady Morven.”

Luella gaped, never having seen a real-life countess before. Her great-uncle might have been an earl, but she had never been near an aristocrat in her life.

“Lady Morven,” she said, dipping an awkward curtsy. She elbowed Jack, who bowed even more awkwardly, blushing as he did so.

The countess made no comment on their social skills, however, which was a relief, and instead busied herself instructing the servants what to do with their few items of luggage.

“I’m certain you must be worn out after such a long journey, so I will show you to your rooms and send up some tea for you. Lord Buchanan will see you once you have had time to rest a bit.”

“That’s very thoughtful of him,” Luella said cautiously, wondering if they were not to be treated as pariahs after all.

“Isn’t it,” the countess agreed, with a smile that seemed a touch too wide to Luella’s observant eye.

Her father had taught her to notice such slight differences, or *tells*, as he had called them. People gave themselves away all the time with little gestures that, once learned, could tell you what they really meant, instead of just what they said.

The countess led them inside the house and Luella found herself surprised to discover the interior of the castle was welcoming and cosy. She glimpsed what looked like a family parlour as they passed, with comfortable chairs, and lots of cushions and throws, many of them in what she suspected was the Anderson tartan. A fire blazed in an immense stone fireplace, and the desire to curl up in one of those overstuffed chairs with a cup of tea hit her with some force.

“It’s lovely,” she admitted out loud, gaining herself a smile of appreciation from the countess.

“Thank you. It is,” she agreed. “It was not half so welcoming when I arrived here many years ago as a young bride, but we worked hard to make it a home for our children, and now Lyall—Lord Buchanan—has continued that work and made it his own.”

“You do not live here?” Luella asked, rather disappointed.

“No. My husband’s estate is some distance away, sadly, but I am staying until... well, until I believe I am no longer needed.”

“To stop his lordship from throwing us into the nearest loch?” Luella said, before she could think better of the rather unguarded comment.

The countess paused and gave Luella a hard look. “Miss Fulbright, I will not insult you by pretending we are not all aware of the trick your cousin served my son, nor of her subsequent behaviour. I am prepared to give you a chance, just one mind, but my son was ill-used by both Lilith and her parents, and you must forgive him for suspecting you and your motives.”

“Motives?” Luella replied with a laugh. “What motives? We had no choice but to come. Do you believe we wished to?”

Luella felt stripped bare under the countess’s scrutiny. This was a woman to be reckoned with, and no fool.

“No. I do not believe that, but even that is only my opinion, not certainty. However, I will tell you my son is a good man, not prone to cruelty or mistreating anyone, and however hard and unyielding he may seem at first, he will not be unfair if you do as he asks of you.”

“What is he likely to ask?” Luella demanded, her stomach tightening into a swift and painful knot.

“To stay out of his way, most likely,” the countess replied dryly, and carried on walking.

The corridors were dim now as the light faded outside, but there were thick rugs underfoot, and the scent of furniture polish and the faint hint of wood smoke lingered on the air.

Luella stared at the bedroom the countess showed her into with undisguised astonishment.

“This... This is *my* room?” she asked, her voice trembling. “All mine? But Jack—”

“Your brother is next door. I assumed you would wish to be next to each other,” the countess said, watching her with interest.

Luella knew she was being observed but could not hide her reaction, a fact that would have galled her father. To have control over one’s emotions was a principal talent if you were inclined to swindle those around you. It would not do for people to know you were pleased or disheartened when the stakes were high. But Luella did not wish to dissemble ever again, and she could not veil her pleasure at the thought of staying in this beautiful room.

Luella glanced at her brother, whose eyes were almost out on stalks, and found to her dismay that her vision was blurring with tears. The room was bright, with whitewashed walls and a large oak framed bed with a pattern of thistles carved into the headboard. There were pristine white linen sheets on the bed and thick tartan blankets. A handsome chest of drawers and matching wardrobe were more than ample for her meagre belongings and there were several paintings on the walls that looked to be local scenes. One was of a romantic-looking ruined castle with the sea glimmering behind it.

Overwhelmed, Luella walked to the window and looked out, gasping as she saw the vista beyond. The sun would soon begin its slow descent, and already gilded the world around them in shades of copper and bronze and gold. Compared to everything she had known before, it looked like a fairyland, like something described in the pages of a book. Her heart clenched, wondering if there was any way she could stop Lord Buchanan from hating her, for the idea of leaving such a place

and returning to the soot and filth of London was not appealing in this moment.

“At home I could see a brick wall from my bedroom,” she murmured.

“Where did you live?” the countess asked.

“Tottenham Court Road. We had rooms there, on the fifth floor. It was... very different,” she finished helplessly, unable to think of words to describe just how different, how she was all adrift and nothing was as she expected it to be. What *had* she expected, though? A dreary haunted castle and to be locked in a room and fed on bread and water? She hardly knew.

Her brother’s room was the twin of hers, both with fires crackling merrily in the hearth. The very idea of a fire in her bedroom in the dead of winter would have been extravagant to Luella these past years, but in May it would have been unheard of.

“I’m afraid the castle is rather cold, so we often need fires lit in the bedrooms, at least in the evening, right through until the end of June. The downstairs rooms require it almost year-round,” she added with a laugh. “Unless the weather is particularly hot. Now, I shall have some tea sent to your room, Luella, for you and your brother, and I will send for you in about half an hour to meet Lord Buchanan. Does that suit?”

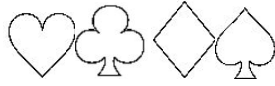
“Yes, my lady. Thank you.”

The countess nodded, giving Jack a quick smile, for the boy looked pale and anxious.

“Don’t worry,” she said kindly. “We did not beat his lordship as a child, for neither myself nor my husband believes in such retribution, and neither does Lord Buchanan. You’ll not be ill-treated.”

Some of the tension left Jack’s stiff shoulders, and the countess patted his arm before she carried on to the door. She looked back at them before she left.

“Though that does not mean he’ll brook any nonsense or unacceptable behaviour, so I suggest you don’t try it.”



“Well?” Lyall demanded as his mother returned to his study.

She said nothing, taking her time to sit herself down and smooth out her skirts. Lyall gritted his teeth, knowing she was doing it on purpose. Her eyes twinkled as she met his gaze.

“Well, if you were so eager to learn what they were like, I would think you might have bestirred yourself to greet them,” she said tartly.

“Fine, dinnae tell me,” he said, folding his arms.

Sighing, she sent him an exasperated look. “She’s not a beauty like Lilith, for one thing,” she said.

“Few are,” Lyall retorted bitterly.

“No, but she’s a pretty child. Well-spoken, too, despite her upbringing. I think she must have had some kind of education, no matter how haphazard. The few belongings they have are pitiful, however, and that dress she is wearing has certainly seen better days. Did you know they’d been living in rented rooms on Tottenham Court Road? I get the impression they were living hand to mouth, though she did not say so. She shared a room with her brother that looked out onto a brick wall.”

“Ah, she’s given ye the sob story already, has she, aye?”

“No,” his mother retorted, narrowing her eyes at him. “Do you think me a fool to be taken in with such ease? No, this was just the truth. You should have seen her face when I showed her to her room, and she realised it was for her alone. She looked like she might cry.”

“Aye, I don’t doubt we’re giving her a taste of the life she wishes to become accustomed to.”

“Lyall, please. I cannot stand to hear you sound so cynical. It’s not like you.”

“It is now,” he returned harshly. “I dinnae give a tinker’s cuss for the lives they lived. I’ll do my duty by them like I did



by Lilith, but I will nae give them an inch of my life, nor my friendship, nor anything else. They are strangers living under my roof until I can figure a way to get them out without landing them in the streets. That's all."

"I think your life will be a good deal more pleasant if you allowed them some part in it, no matter how small."

"Damned if I will," Lyall retorted, and that was the end of the subject.

## Chapter 4



*The environs of Portman Square were disturbed last night by a fight that broke out in the early hours of the morning. Mr LH, the hon'ble Mr AA and the hon'ble Mr LW were all fined by the local Justice for breach of the peace.*

*The aforementioned gents are all members of the notorious Sons of Hades, the gentlemen's club outside of which the event occurred. Though onlookers agreed they did not incite the scuffle, which quickly turned nasty, they indeed finished it. When the constables arrived upon the scene, those that provoked the incident were nowhere to be found. This reporter can verify that the gentlemen went along quietly and with very good grace.*

*Neighbours of the club were not so pleased as they assert that events such as these are becoming more commonplace in recent months.*

*—Excerpt of a newspaper article in **The London Morning Post.***

**13<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Luella did her best to look presentable, no easy task when her best dress was horribly faded and rather too tight across the bust. She had tried tightening her corset, but the strings of

that item were worn too, and she feared putting too much strain on them. Still, she brushed her dark hair until it shone and pinned it up in a neat coil at the back of her neck. Jack had to be nagged into a clean shirt and nagged harder to at least wash his face and hands, but finally they were ready.

“Are you going to eat that?” Jack asked, casting a longing look at the tea tray.

Luella shook her head and Jack helped himself to the last piece of shortbread, devouring it in one bite.

The tea that had been sent up to them had been welcome indeed. It had been a long time since tea tasted of anything but dishwater or looked like it either, and they had drunk every drop. There had been warm biscuits made of oats, too, as well as fresh bread, with cheese, or butter and jam. The plate of shortbread had been a treat that made them both sigh with pleasure. Compared to how they had eaten in recent months, it had been a feast and had gone a long way to bolstering their spirits. With the prospect of meeting Lilith’s widowed husband before them, however, those spirits were already flagging.

“Wipe the sugar from your mouth,” Luella said, sighing as Jack did so using his sleeve. “Well, we shall have to do.”

Jack grunted. “If he don’t like it—”

“If he *doesn’t* like it,” Luella corrected. “We shall be in the basket. So, mind your manners, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Luella,” he replied grimly.

“Good lad. Now, don’t look so glum. Everything will be all right, I promise. We’ll make it work somehow.”

Jack returned a sceptical look but there was a knock at the door that made them both jump. Time to go.

Jack opened the door to see the countess had come for them.

“Are you ready?”

“As we ever will be,” Luella said, trying for humour.

“Come along, then,” Lady Morven said, smiling at them.

Jack gestured for her to go through ahead of him.

“Why, thank you, Jack,” she said, and waited for him on the landing where he offered her his arm.

“Nicely done, Master Fulbright,” the countess said approvingly, and led them down the stairs.

When they arrived at the door to the study, the countess knocked.

“Come in,” barked a deep voice.

Luella’s heart leapt to her throat and, despite her previous promise that everything would be all right, a terrible sense of foreboding hit her square in the chest. Thoughts of wishing to stay in that lovely room in this beautiful place faded, and she wanted nothing more than to run all the way back to London.

“He doesn’t bite,” the countess said, turning the handle and pushing the door open. She gestured for them to enter.

“You’re not coming?” Luella asked, wanting to cling to the woman who had been kind to them, despite what their family had done to her son.

“No. He wishes to speak to you alone,” she replied, something in her voice that made Luella suspect this went against her wishes. It did not make her feel better. Still, she was no coward, so she stiffened her spine, put her head up and, holding tightly to Jack’s hand, entered the room.

Lord Buchanan was standing by the window, his back turned to them, and for a moment Luella blinked, for in the dimly lit room he seemed almost a part of the landscape beyond, not simply that he belonged there but as if he was integral to it. His hair was tawny, in shades that ranged from gold to amber and everything in between. He wore the tartan she had seen much of in the castle, including in her room. It was dark green and blue and, set against the landscape beyond, with the earthy shades of the hills visible behind his head, he seemed to have emerged from the landscape itself like some ancient myth.

He turned and her breath caught as she discovered a living, breathing highlander stood before her, just as she had

imagined. His large and forceful presence seemed to overwhelm the entire room. His shoulders blocked a good deal of the weak daylight filtering past the windows, and he looked strong enough to have carried the massive beam over the fireplace all by himself. Picking Luella up and removing her from the castle certainly would not be a problem.

At least he wasn't raging at them as she had feared he might, but the uncompromising look in his eyes was not welcoming. Neither was the rigid line of a hard, square jaw. Here was a man with a will of iron, as stubborn and uncompromising as the surrounding land, and just as unforgiving if they put a foot wrong. *Magnificent*. The errant thought entered her brain, and she was too shocked to even deny it. He really was quite... magnificent. It was a moment before she realised she was staring, and only then because Jack jabbed her with his elbow. Galvanised, she dipped into a curtsey.

"Good evening, Lord Buchanan. I am pleased to make your acquaintance. This is my brother, Jack."

He said nothing, just watched them. His eyes were the same shade as his hair, or shades, for there must be a dozen colours at least in that yellowish-brown and amber mixture. She had a sudden recollection of a visit to a menagerie in London, and the sight of a lion behind the bars of a cage. His eyes had looked like that, as if he was biding his time, just waiting for the opportunity to strike out in anger.

Movement from the corner of the room caught her attention and Luella dragged her unwilling eyes from him to three huge, shaggy grey dogs. One got to its feet and approached her warily. Luella gasped and grasped Jack's hand tighter, pushing him behind her, for her only experience of dogs had been the one in the pawnshop next door that would savage you as soon as look at you, and the numerous starving strays that wandered the city in search of food. Glancing back at Lord Buchanan, she saw his lip curl with distaste.

"He will nae eat ye," he said impatiently, and the low rumble of sound startled her, especially as he so closely echoed his mother's words about himself. "Murdoch, here."

The dog immediately returned to him, sitting down at his master's feet and gazing up at him adoringly. The look his lordship cast on Luella was devoid of any such kindness.

Nervous, Luella swallowed and hurried on.

"I know we must be the last people on earth you wish to share your home with," she said, unsettled to discover how breathless she sounded. "I assure you, the arrangement was as much of a shock to us as it must have been to you. We have no desire to... to disrupt your life. I understand I have a small inheritance left to me, so if you prefer we go our own way and not inconvenience you any further, you need only hand it over to me and—"

"Aye, breaking the law comes easy to yer family. Well, it does nae in mine. You'll nae touch a penny until ye have attained the lawful age stated in the will."

Luella stiffened. She supposed they deserved that but still, his tone had been so filled with disgust that her temper flared. "I only meant to save you the embarrassment and inconvenience of having us under your roof," she said coldly.

"Embarrassment?" he repeated with a bark of laughter. "Ye wished to save me embarrassment? Aye, that's a good one. Dinnae fash yerself, lassie. Lilith did ye proud. I care little enough for what people think but I will nae have them say I put my dead wife's orphan kin out on the streets to fend for themselves."

"Then what do you suggest?" Luella asked, aware of Jack clinging to her hand and gazing at Lord Buchanan with wide eyes.

The man strode closer to them, staring down at Luella. "I suggest ye do as yer told and keep out of my way. Mrs Baillie is my housekeeper and cook. She has instructions to feed and clothe ye as ye require. I am no miser and I'll provide what ye need, but dinnae think ye can bleed me as Lilith tried to do. She failed, and so shall ye if ye try it. I'm nae a green laddie to have the wool pulled over his eyes by a pretty face."

“I never supposed you were and, if Lilith failed, I cannot imagine why you think I should make the attempt,” she shot back, annoyed now, for he must be able to see she was not the beauty her cousin had been. “I did not ask for this, I have no desire to be in your way, and we will leave as soon as we have the means to do so,” Luella said, relieved that her voice was steady.

He stared at her for a long moment and then grunted. It seemed to be an acceptance of her words, but she could not be certain. His gaze turned to Jack, and she thought perhaps that austere gaze softened a little.

“Master Jack. Do ye ride, lad?”

Jack shook his head.

“We lived on Tottenham Court Road,” Luella said defensively. “We neither had the means nor the opportunity for \_\_\_”

“Aye, I get the picture. I’ll have one of the lads teach ye, aye? Ye cannae live out here and not ride.”

“What about me?” Luella demanded.

“I’ve nae a side saddle here,” he said, looking her up and down. Whatever he saw did not seem to please him, for he muttered under his breath and turned away, returning to his desk.

“I’ll give the lad a week to settle in and then he’ll go to school with the local boys, aye?”

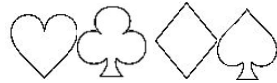
Luella nodded, relieved to hear he had made some provision for her brother’s education. She had done the best she could, for Jack had not been to school since he was eight, when things had become so very bad financially. He was a bright boy, but not so keen to learn what his sister had to teach him. School and friends of his own age was just what he needed.

“That’s perfect, thank you so much,” she said sincerely.

Lord Buchanan grunted and picked up his pen, giving them a last glance before he began writing. “Ye may go,” he

said, before carrying on as if they already had.

Biting her lip to not make a sarcastic remark, Luella towed Jack from the room and closed the door behind her.



### **14<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Luella slept badly despite her exhaustion. Strange dreams plagued her: remembered images of the night her father died mixing with the fatiguing journey to Scotland and ending with the castle itself and Luella running out of it into the night. She was alone in the darkness, the wilderness a living presence around her as she searched desperately for something she needed. Awakening with a start, her heart pounding, she could not remember what she had been looking for, only that losing it had broken her heart.

Sitting up in bed, bleary-eyed and with a dull headache, she started as there was a peremptory knock and a woman barged in carrying a tray.

“Morning, lassie. Aye, Lady Morven had the right of it, ye are done in. Well, this will set ye to rights soon enough. Make room for me now.”

Startled, Luella did as she was told and hurried to pile her pillows up behind her and sit up so the woman could set the tray upon her lap.

“Breakfast in bed?” she said in astonishment, staring at the enormous plate of sausages, eggs, and black pudding.

“Aye, but dinnae get used to it. Tomorrow ye will come downstairs at eight o’ clock.”

“And eat with Lord Buchanan?” she asked, suddenly not feeling quite so hungry.

The woman snorted. “Nae. He’ll be long finished by that hour of the morning.”

Luella let out a breath, and the woman stood back and folded her arms, giving her an appraising stare. She was a



handsome woman and must once have been lovely. Her figure was still good, though a little on the stout side, and her auburn hair was streaked with white. This must be the housekeeper, Mrs Baillie.

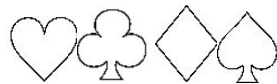
“Are ye a conniving little she devil like yer cousin, then?” she asked, the question put so baldly that Luella gave an involuntary laugh.

“No!” she shot back.

The woman smiled and regarded her for a long moment in silence.

“We’ll see,” she said musingly, and went away again without another word.

Luella watched her go and turned her attention back to the plate before her. The scent of the sausages made her stomach clamour with impatience, and so she lost no time in tucking in.



“Did you have sausages for breakfast?”

Luella turned on the stool before the dressing table to see a wide-eyed Jack had come in. He looked like he had dressed all by guess, his buttons done up wrong, but at least he appeared to be clean.

“I did,” she said, amused by his reverent tone. “But you ought to knock before you come in. I might have been naked.”

Jack pulled a horrified face at this idea and promised he would do so in the future.

“Did Mrs Baillie bring it to you?”

“Yes,” he said, looking a little abashed. “And she said a footman would bring me hot water and, if I didn’t use it to wash with, she would dunk me under the pump in the yard herself. I think she meant it,” he said anxiously.

Luella’s eyebrows went up. She suspected Mrs Baillie had a good deal of experience with boys and their dislike of washing but felt rather aggrieved that she had spoken so to

Jack. It was not her place to give the boy such threats and instructions.

“Well, she won’t be doing any such thing,” Luella said firmly. “But I might, so you may as well do as she says.”

Jack grinned at her, knowing she would never do it.

“You look very nice,” she added, getting to her feet and re-buttoning the buttons on his waistcoat.

“Lord Buchanan said you could have new clothes,” Jack said, looking up at her. “You would look like a proper lady in pretty dresses, Lulu.”

Luella scowled. “We are having nothing from Lord Buchanan that we cannot afford to repay. I will not have him thinking that we are like Lilith and mean to get what we can from him. We must stay here and so we must eat, but we shall make ourselves useful, Jack. Do you hear me? I will not be considered a parasite. He already looks at us as though we mean to smother him in his sleep and steal the silver. I shall not give him reason for thinking he is correct.”

“Useful how?” Jack asked dubiously.

Luella shrugged. “That is what I mean to find out. Come along, let us find Mrs Baillie.”

Jack followed her down the stairs. The kitchen was easy to discover, they simply followed their noses. The scent of baking and the rich, meaty aroma of stew got stronger as they approached a thick oak door. Pushing it open, they walked down another set of worn stone steps into the vast kitchen. A massive fireplace with a lintel that looked like an entire oak tree had been used to construct it dominated the space. It was hot down here and Mrs Baillie was pink-cheeked and perspiring a little as she kneaded dough at the vast table in the centre of the room. She paused, looking up and wiping her forehead on her arm, leaving a faint trace of flour as she did so.

“Aye? And what might ye be wanting?”

“Er... to help,” Luella said awkwardly.

“Eh?” Mrs Baillie gave her a blank look, as did a young woman who sat at the far end of the table, peeling potatoes.

“Well, surely there’s something we can do?” Luella asked, blushing. “We are not accustomed to sitting around idle all day, and—”

“Ye are his lordship’s ward, miss. I can nae set ye to work in the kitchens,” Mrs Baillie objected.

“But you aren’t, I’m asking to. Please, surely there is something...?”

“Are ye supposing Lord Buchanan overworks us? Or that we have nae the will to do our jobs as we ought?” Mrs Baillie asked, folding her arms.

She was a rather daunting prospect, but Luella held her ground.

“Certainly not, as you know very well.” Luella sighed and threw up her hands. “Look, I don’t want to be painted in the same colours as Lilith. I’ve been foisted on Lord Buchanan through no fault of my own, but if I must be here, I’d just as soon be useful.”

“Or perhaps it’s a clever ruse to make us think ye are nae like yer cousin,” Mrs Baillie shot back, eyes narrowed.

“Perhaps,” Luella agreed. “That is for you to decide, I suppose.”

Mrs Baillie stood watching her for a long moment and Luella was about to turn and walk away again when she spoke.

“Can ye make bread?”

Luella shook her head. “No. I’m a dreadful cook, to be honest.”

“She is,” Jack piped up with a fervent nod.

Luella shot him an indignant look. “Well, you’ve not starved, have you?”

“No, but I’ve eaten plenty of burnt offerings,” he replied, with rather more honesty than Luella would have liked.

Mrs Baillie snorted. “Wash yer hands, the pair of ye, and I’ll see if I can teach ye a thing or two. How’s that?”

Luella beamed at her, delighted by the prospect. “That’s very kind. Thank you.”

“Through there,” she said, jerking her head towards a door on the opposite side of the kitchen.

“We’ll be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail,” Luella said cheerfully and tugged Jack along behind her.

## Chapter 5



*It was an unprovoked attack and could have been nasty if there had not been three of us. I think we must all consider if we have any enemies who are angry enough to take such retribution, but the obvious culprit is another club, surely? Someone wants to put us out of business.*

*—Excerpt of a letter from **The Hon'ble Mr Larkin Weston (son of The Right Hon'ble Solomon and Jemima Weston, Baron and Baroness Rothborn) to The Right Hon'ble Conor Baxter, Viscount Harleston (son of The Right Hon'ble Luke and Kitty Baxter, Earl and Countess of Trevick).***

**14<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall stood in the chilly dawn light, watching as over two dozen fishing boats unloaded their catches, the coastline a hub of activity. Herring rose at night to feed, so this was the best time to catch them. Simple undecked craft sailed close to the coast, watching for signs of fish, usually with the gulls leading the way. The herring lasses lined the docks, waiting to process the catch. It was a harsh life, exposed to the worst of the weather, but you would not know that from the lively banter and singing that could be heard much of the time while the women worked. On seeing him, many of them waved and called out saucy remarks, which was a relief, as he had not been here since Lilith's death. He had feared they might look

at him askance and ask why his wife had been so determined to run from him that she'd died trying.

As they waited for the catch, they wrapped bandages around their hands, which offered some protection from the stinging brine. Cuts and blisters were inevitable, though, working with knives and slippery fish. They worked in teams of three, two of them processing the fish, gutting and removing the gills, heart, and bloodline. The third girl, the tallest of the three, would then pack them into barrels.

Lyall nodded a greeting to one of the coopers, whose job was to make the barrels the so-called 'silver darlings' were packed into.

"A fine catch," the fellow called cheerfully before catching sight of the black armband Lyall wore and rearranging his face. "Er... my condolences."

Lyall resisted the urge to laugh bitterly, for everyone hereabouts knew the circumstances of his marriage and would know too that there was no love lost between him and Lilith. The man no doubt thought he should congratulate him instead. Lyall did not feel like celebrating any more than grieving. His temper rose and fell in a ferment of contradictory emotions as he lurched from fury to relief, from humiliation to frustration, but mostly he felt like a failure. All his life he had seen the relationship his father and mother had, one of trust and respect and an enduring love that no number of challenges could diminish or change. He had assumed he would find that, too. Not yet awhile, but one day. Perhaps he'd been arrogant to think that his due, for he knew many marriages which were far from happy. He ought not to have believed it was his right to find a woman who would suit him as his parents suited.

He had been unprepared for Lilith.

She had been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life, with jet black hair and piercing blue eyes and a way about her that had driven him to act like a bloody fool just to snatch a moment alone with her. He had not known then, during a *chance* meeting at Wick, that he had been singled out, chosen as a gullible fool, ripe to fall into her lap. He had

known what she wanted him for... or thought he had. She was ripe for a tumble, and he had been only too willing to oblige. Lyall had assumed she was a courtesan seeking a new protector, and she'd given him no reason to believe otherwise. When her father and mother had burst in on them in the best room of the busy hotel in Wick, they'd made a God almighty scene about him deflowering their precious daughter. Bollocks to that. She'd been no innocent, but she'd apparently played the part well enough for everyone else in town to believe he'd seduced the beautiful young woman into wickedness.

The scandal sheets had made much of his wild behaviour with his friends over the past years, and so there were enough people ready to believe the lies Lilith and her parents told their gleeful audience. He'd been caught like a bloody herring and packed off to the nearest kirk, his fate sealed.

Lilith hadn't even tried to make amends or to pretend affection. It had been nothing but business to her, and as soon as she'd considered herself secure, she began making demands of him. He had wondered if there was something wrong with her then, some part of her missing or incomplete, for she had seemed entirely amoral, solely concerned with her own pleasure and uncaring for the feelings of others. She was almost childish in her desire for the things she wanted, and not beyond tantrums when she did not get her own way.

Lyall shook himself and returned his attention to the bustling scene on the shore. His father had begun this business, providing five fishing boats to the tenants on his land. Lyall's tenants now. There were over fifty boats in all today, and Lyall had commissioned ten more, providing a good, steady income for so many families that had struggled to survive for so long. That, at least, was something to take a pride in.

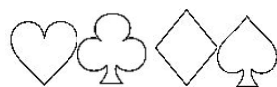
He turned away, striding back to his horse, though he was in no hurry to return to Wildsyde, knowing his dead wife's cousins were there. The knowledge irked him. The castle had been his home and his refuge, the place where his heart resided. It was for that reason he would never let Lilith set foot in it. She might have got his name and a call on his purse, but

by God, he'd let her have no more of him than that. But look where that had got him. She had spent her time flirting with poor stupid Rory Stewart until the besotted devil was so caught in her toils, he would have died for her. He had, too, in the end. Lyall grieved for him more than he did his wife, though they had never been close. Rory was a part of this land and this community, though, and his father had lost his only son. Lilith had done that, come in and ripped apart a family. Lyall had been fool enough for her, but at least he had survived, and he intended to survive the rest of her bloody family too.

He'd already had her father here, blaming him for being cruel to his darling girl, playing the grieving parent and demanding money at the same time. In a way it had helped, knowing that Lilith had come from this, that she had not had a chance to be anything but what she had become. Perhaps in time his anger would fade, and he could pity her. For now, though, he would keep her cousin close so he could keep his eye on her. He would have no one falling under the woman's spell and he did not doubt she could do it if she tried.

No, she was not the beauty Lilith had been, but he had seen at once that there was something about her that Lilith had not had. His late wife had been beautiful and unprincipled, but not terribly bright. A cleverer woman would have made Lyall love her, but she'd had wit enough to know she could not do that, could not keep his attention if he got to know her well.

But Luella Fulbright had a spark in her eyes, intelligence glittering there, and pride in the way she held herself. If Lyall knew anything, he knew she was every bit as dangerous as his wife had been, and he did not intend to give her an inch.



“Oh, Jack! Would you just look at that!” Luella exclaimed, setting the loaf reverently down on the table. The delicious scent of freshly baked bread permeated the kitchen and Luella was so pleased with herself she could almost burst.

“Good, Lord, child, it's a loaf of bread. Ye have nae reinvented the wheel, ye ken?” Mrs Baillie said impatiently,



though there was amusement lurking in her eyes.

“Perhaps it does not seem like much to you, but for me, this is a triumph,” Luella said indignantly.

“If you’d eaten as much burnt toast as I have, you would understand,” Jack added, grinning at Luella, who rolled her eyes.

“Can we cut it?” she asked hopefully.

“Not yet,” the housekeeper said with a click of her tongue. “Bide awhile and wait for it to cool down a wee bit.”

“Oh, very well,” Luella said, a little crestfallen. There was a cabbage on the table and a knife set beside it, so she went over and began chopping.

“I did nae ask ye—”

“I know, but Morag isn’t back from the market yet, and I can do it just as well. Jack, that silver looks very fine,” she added, for the boy was not looking pleased with his lot, polishing a fine array of silver cutlery.

“Hmph,” he said.

Luella watched him anxiously. She hoped Lord Buchanan was sincere in teaching him to ride or it would be a long week. Luella was content to learn what she could from Mrs Baillie, but Jack needed an education. She sent up a silent prayer that he would meet some decent lads at the school he would go to and settle down quickly. She glanced again at the silver laid out on the table and the considering way Jack was looking at it. Her stomach tightened as she watched him, for she knew what he was doing, calculating how much money they could pawn such fine silver for. Enough to get them away from here and keep them for a good little while.

And then they would have the law after them and never a moment’s peace. *No*. They would never live that life. Luella would learn everything she could from Mrs Baillie so she could cook and run her own household. Though she could not fathom how her father had money enough to leave her an inheritance, she wondered if perhaps it would be enough for them to buy a little place somewhere, with an extra bedroom

where she could offer room and board, even if she had to keep sharing a room with Jack for a while. She indulged in a pleasant little daydream while she chopped, imagining a sweet little cottage with a pretty garden and the mouthwatering scent of freshly baked bread emanating from inside that would have people clamouring to stay there.

A bell rang and Mrs Baillie looked up to see the bell next to the board named ‘study’ was still jangling.

“Ah, Himself is home and wanting to be fed,” she said with a nod. “Now, where is that girl? Morag!” she shouted towards the scullery.

“She’s still not back. Can I help?”

Mrs Baillie tutted. “Aye, warm some of that soup, and ye can cut that loaf of yours to go with it. That should keep him going until the main.”

Luella set the pot on the stove. It was a thick lentil soup she had tasted herself and knew to be excellent. She had watched Mrs Baillie make it, with stock from a ham hock with leeks and onion and carrots and neeps—which turned out to be swede—added to the red lentils. She had added the shredded ham last, and Luella was looking forward to her own serving.

“Should I butter the bread?”

“Aye, good and thick mind, don’t scrimp. Ye want to see yer teeth in it when ye take a bite.”

Luella nodded and cut into her first ever loaf of bread. “Oh, would you look at that,” she said, proudly holding up a fluffy white slice for inspection.

Mrs Baillie rolled her eyes. “Very good, lass, and what will ye do if I teach ye to make Dundee cake? Take out a notice in the local paper, aye?”

“Aye, perhaps I will,” Luella said with a smirk, imitating the woman’s accent to perfection.

“Ye are a saucy wench,” Mrs Baillie said, wagging a wooden spoon at her, but there was a smile playing around her lips, so Luella did not take it to heart.

By the time the tray was ready, Morag still wasn't back from the market.

"Flirting with Robbie MacDonald, ye mark my words," the irritated housekeeper grumbled. "And him wi nae prospects but a pretty face. The girl is an eejit. I suppose I had best take it myself."

She set aside the knife she was wielding to chop what looked like half a cow into bite-sized chunks for tomorrow's dinner.

"I can do it," Luella said, wondering if she had taken leave of her senses. The idea of voluntarily facing Lord Buchanan again was not one that appealed, but perhaps if he could see she was trying to be useful, he would not hate her so much. Doubtful, but worth a try.

Mrs Baillie gave her a hard look. "Why on earth would ye do that? If yer thinkin' he's gonna come around because ye spent the day in the kitchen, ye will be disappointed."

"I didn't think any such thing," Luella lied, well, admittedly it would take more than one day to win his approval. "But I want him to know I shall not be in his debt any more than I must be."

"Oh, aye?" Mrs Baillie gave her a sceptical look up and down.

"Yes," Luella said firmly, hefting the tray and carrying it up the stairs to the door. Mrs Baillie watched her go.

"He eats in his study at this time of day, ye know where that is, aye?"

"I do."

"A word of warning, lass. Dinnae speak to him unless he speaks to ye. Asking questions might get ye more than ye bargained for."

"Very well. Thank you for the advice," Luella said, and pushed her way out the door.

She made her way to the room where she had stood before Lord Buchanan the day before, wondering why on earth she

was doing this to herself. Had he not told her to stay out of his way?

For a moment, she wondered how she was supposed to knock when she had both hands on the tray. Solving the problem, she kicked the door with her toe and waited.

“Come.”

Well, that was easier said than done. She looked at the doorknob and wondered what to do next. Shifting the tray so it rested along her left arm, she reached to turn the knob. Before she could do so, the door opened, startling her so much she almost dropped the tray. Righting it just in time, she stood straight and met his glare with a bland expression.

“Your soup, my lord.”

“What the devil are ye doing bringing it to me?” he demanded, his eyes flashing with annoyance.

Luella swallowed but determined she would not let him intimidate her. “Well, Mrs Baillie is busy dissecting a cow and Morag isn’t back from the market. I have two hands, so I offered to bring it.”

“Did ye, indeed,” he replied, his expression grim. Watching her as though he thought she might stick a knife in his back if he dared to turn it for a moment, he sat back down at his desk, clearing away his papers to make room for the tray. “Set it down if ye must, then,” he grumbled irritably.

Luella did as he asked, leaning over the desk to do so rather than walk close beside him, which she considered a bad idea. Keeping the desk between them seemed prudent. She could not help glancing at him, though, terribly aware of the sheer size of the man as she stood back, wondering if he would take a bite of the bread before she left.

He reached for his napkin and picked up his spoon.

“There’s bread,” she offered hopefully.

He looked at her as if she were dim-witted. “Aye, ’tis often the way with soup. It comes with bread.”

“Not always, and not bread like this. Mrs Baillie wanted you to try it,” she added glibly, too eager to know what he thought of it to act with a grain of sense. “I’m to tell her what you thought.”

He set down his spoon with a huff of annoyance and glared at the bread like it had offended him. “It does nae look any different from usual,” he said suspiciously.

“But does it taste different?” she pressed, determined to get an answer from him.

Giving a long-suffering sigh, he picked up a piece of bread and took a massive bite. Luella watched, rather fascinated, as he chewed.

“Tastes the same,” he said with a shrug.

Luella grinned, despite knowing better. “Really? Just as good as usual? No difference at all?”

He gave her an odd look. “What have ye done? Is it poisoned?” he demanded, glaring at the bread and then at her.

“Of course it isn’t poisoned,” she retorted crossly. “It’s just that I made it and I’ve never made bread before. I just wondered if it was as good as Mrs Baillie’s.”

“It is *nae* as good,” he said, his expression hard.

“But you said—”

“’Tis not even close, and I’ll thank ye to leave my food in her hands. Dinnae come here again.”

Luella stiffened but held her tongue. She had asked for it. It would have been far wiser to just give him the tray and leave.

“Very good, my lord,” she said with as much ice in the words as she could muster, before dipping a curtsey and hurrying back to the door.

“I know what ye are about, Miss Fulbright, and it will nae work,” he warned her.

Luella turned at the door and glared back at him. “You know nothing at all,” she said bitterly, and went out before he

could say another word.

## Chapter 6



*Muir,*

*I don't know if you are right to stay away. I know I got my head bitten off. I have nae met the cousins yet. After getting such a warm welcome, I've spent a few days catching up with people and visiting old Mr Clugston. He's in good spirits, despite his rheumatism playing him up. He's finally given up riding, though I understand his son is teaching Master Fulbright. I'll let you know more once I've met them. I'm going back in the morning so we shall see.*

**—Excerpt of a letter from *The Hon'ble Mr Hamilton Anderston to The Hon'ble Mr Muir Anderson (younger brothers of The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan)***

**15<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

“The pony is called Adaira. She's a Highland pony, and she's black with the longest tail you ever saw. I fed her a carrot and Mr Clugston said she liked me. I rode her around and trotted, though I felt like a sack of potatoes, but I didn't fall off, and Mr Clugston said I did really well. Then I brushed her down and cleaned her hooves and I had to polish the tack too, I like the smell of the polish, it's much better than cleaning silver, and I'm going to have another lesson before breakfast tomorrow if I get up early enough, and I can do it every morning before school as well, if I want.”

Jack finally paused for breath long enough to stuff half a sausage in his mouth. Luella blinked hard, her throat growing tight, for she had not seen him this happy or excited since he was a little boy and their mother still lived.

“Well,” she said, once she could trust her voice again. “It sounds like you are a natural and I can’t wait to meet Adaira. Perhaps Mrs Baillie will let me take her an apple.”

Jack grinned at her, helping himself to two more sausages. His morning’s riding lesson had clearly given him an appetite. “I told Mr Clugston I could help in the stables today, instead of in the kitchen. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not,” Luella said, delighted that he had found something he was interested in doing. “Just make sure you do as you are told and don’t get under people’s feet, or ponies’ feet either, come to that.”

“I won’t. Have you seen him at all?” Jack asked, frowning a little.

Luella did not need him to explain who he was referring to. “No, not once since I took the soup up to him. I’ve seen Lady Morven, though. She seemed pleased that I was making myself useful, though I think she still suspects my motives.”

Jack scowled at that. “They’ve no right to—”

“They’ve every right,” Luella said, her tone soothing. “Lilith and her parents behaved very badly, Jack, can you not see that?”

“Yes,” Jack said grudgingly. “But you aren’t Lilith.”

“And they don’t know that. Our father was well known for being a crook, you know how we lived, the things he would have had us doing if I hadn’t put my foot down.”

“I suppose,” he grumbled.

“Good morning.”

They both looked round in surprise and Luella blinked, momentarily disorientated by the vision of a smiling Lord Buchanan. It only took a moment to realise it was not him, though there was a strong resemblance: the same



uncompromising jaw, height and broad shoulders, the same colouring. Though she was still reminded of lions with that tawny colouring, this one appeared friendly, at least. She doubted his lordship had ever smiled so broadly in his life. This man wore the family tartan, and his hair was a tangled mess, adding to the leonine aspect. He strode in, bringing the scent of the outdoors with him, and the room suddenly felt a good deal smaller.

“Good morning,” Luella said, setting down her knife and fork.

“Ach, don’t let me stop ye, dig in. Mrs Baillie’s breakfasts are the things dreams are made of, are they nae, laddie?” he said, grinning at Jack.

“They’re the best thing I ever ate,” Jack admitted, giving the man a considering glance.

“I’m Hamilton Anderson, by the way. The youngest and most handsome son,” he added with a wink at Luella.

Luella’s eyebrows went up at this, for she had expected no one to be so unreserved with them. He sat down at the table and piled his plate high with an improbable amount of food. Catching sight of Luella’s astonished gaze, he looked down at his plate and back at her.

“I’ve been staying with friends and they dinnae know how to feed a growing boy,” he said a little defensively.

“Boy?” she repeated with a choked laugh.

He speared a piece of black pudding with his fork and stuffed it in his mouth. “Aye,” he said, chewing with a sigh of pleasure. “I’m naught but a wee laddie.”

“How old are you?” Jack asked curiously.

“Six and twenty. How old are ye?”

“Twelve.”

“About the same, then,” he replied, deadpan.

Luella snorted, and he returned an appreciative smile.

“I’m glad to see ye are being fed well. I feared Lyall may have put ye in the cellar and kept ye on rations.”

Though he was charming and easy to talk to, Luella noted the measuring look in his eyes. This man was no fool, despite the happy-go-lucky manner he presented them with.

“Lord Buchanan has been very kind in the circumstances, Mr Anderson,” Luella said carefully.

“Has he? And it’s Hamilton, I can nae be doing with this Mr Anderson stuff. We’re practically family, aye?”

“Not really,” Luella objected. “My father had no right to saddle your brother with our upkeep. I assure you we feel it very keenly.”

“Aye, Ma told me ye have been working in the kitchens. Ye want to feel useful, I suppose. I can understand it. And Master Jack, ye had a riding lesson, I hear.”

Jack nodded.

“Who did Clugston give ye?”

“Adaira.”

“Ach, she’s a great goer. A fine choice, and Clugston is a grand fellow. My da taught me to ride when I was a bairn, but Clugston would be my next choice. ’Tis a pity Da had to leave afore ye got here.”

“Is it?” Luella asked faintly.

He considered this and then shrugged. “I cannae say. He’s fair, is Da, though he will take some convincing ye are nae here intending to get yer feet under the table.”

“My feet are under the table, are they not?” Luella replied, her tone dry.

“Aye, but we’ll nae hold that against ye. Not yet, anyway,” he added with another of those swift smiles of his as he reached for the plate of herring fried in oatmeal.

“Oh, I assure you, your brother *is* holding it against us.”

“Well, ye cannae blame him,” he said softly.

Luella shook her head. "I don't. Not in the least."

He gave her an approving glance before returning his attention to his plate. "Lyall is nae one for flapping his gums. Keeps himself close, ye ken, and now everyone for miles around knows his business and is talking about him. Stings, that, aye?"

Luella nodded. "Lilith was always cruel, even as a child."

"Did ye know her well?"

"No, happily. We were the poor relations. The only time we had contact with them was when my father was desperate. Then they enjoyed lording it over us and acting like the great benefactors. They made us pay for their beneficence dearly, I assure you. Usually by involving my father in some dreadful scheme where he took all the risk."

"Not you, though?" he asked, pausing with a forkful of herring suspended in midair.

His sharp eyes missed little, she suspected.

"They tried," she admitted. "But I wouldn't play their games. Nor my father's." Luella put up her chin, meeting his searching gaze with a frank one of her own.

"Good for ye," he replied with a nod, though she was uncertain if he was commending her for standing up to her father and family or simply for holding his gaze.

"Well, I ought to be getting down to the kitchen," Luella said, folding her napkin and putting it neatly on the table. "Mrs Baillie is making Cullen Skink today and I want to learn how."

"Ach, she's nae, is she?" Hamilton said, pulling a face.

"Surely you must enjoy fish? I understand it is a staple in these parts," she asked with amusement, regarding the oat-fried herring he was devouring.

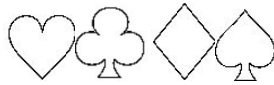
"Aye, and Lyall insists we support the locals by eating herring several times a week, and that's as it should be. Haddock is well enough too, I suppose, but I'd just as soon have a nice steak. Ye can have too much of a good thing, ye ken?"

Luella bit back a smile but nodded. “Then you had best fill up on breakfast,” she replied, before turning to Jack. “You’re going back to the stables, then?”

“Yes, Lulu.”

“Then come to the kitchens when you get hungry. Be good. A good day to you Mr And—I beg your pardon, *Hamilton*.”

“And to ye,” he replied, and she felt his gaze follow her out of the room.



Luella heard laughter as she reached the kitchens and paused outside the door, listening.

“Lyll is nae more stubborn than Morven,” Mrs Baillie replied. “Yer husband, ye may recall, was none too friendly when ye arrived here and ye were his new bride.”

“Neither were you,” Lady Morven said with a laugh.

“Ach, I know it. There’s nae need to make me feel bad.”

“Oh, as if I would,” the countess said. “You have been a dear friend to me, and well you know it. If I didn’t worry over Lyall so much, I would have taken you with me when we left.”

“Well, that’s good of ye to say so, though I wouldna go. My friends and family are here.”

“And Mr Murray?” Lady Morven asked with some emphasis upon the name.

Luella cracked the door open and saw the countess lift an enquiring eyebrow. Mrs Baillie went a little pink and turned her back, fussing over a pot on the cooker.

“I’ve not married these many years, what would I do such a fool thing for now? I’ve the respect of a married lady and addressed as ‘Mrs,’ seeing as I’m his lordship’s housekeeper, I’ve nae desire to have some fellow tell me what I may and may not do.”

Lady Morven burst out laughing, and Mrs Baillie turned with an indignant frown.

“Well, really,” the lady said, spluttering. “The idea of Willy Murray telling you what to do! He is the sweetest man, and you have had his heart on a string these past ten years. Put him out of his misery, Sheenagh, I beg you.”

“Hmph,” was all the answer the woman gave.

They both looked up as Luella walked in.

“Good morning, Lady Morven, Mrs Baillie.”

“Good morning, Luella, I’ve been waiting for you,” the countess said with a smile. “It is about time we took you into town, I think. We cannot have you living under our roof dressed like that. You must have some new clothes.”

Luella started in surprise, not having expected that. She had assumed the housekeeper would find her some casts offs or something of the sort. That the countess might take her on a shopping trip to buy new things had never entered her mind.

“I beg you will not trouble yourself,” she said stiffly. “I have determined I shall not incur any costs that I cannot repay. Though if I knew how much my father has left to us, I might be a little easier in my mind.”

Though Luella held the countess’ gaze, she thought perhaps Mrs Baillie gave her an approving nod. Lady Morven’s enigmatic countenance was harder to read.

“A noble gesture,” she replied steadily, though whether she believed it was a genuine one, Luella could not tell. “But sadly, one that will reflect badly on the family. Lyall is your guardian and therefore responsible for you. He has asked me to ensure you are properly outfitted while I am still here. There’s rain due, I suspect, but I don’t think it will be too heavy, so we ought to get to Wick and return with no trouble. It’s a fair distance, I’m afraid, an hour and a half if we have a good trip. So we had better leave at once, for I would prefer to be back before dark.”

“But my lady,” Luella objected.

The countess looked a little impatient. “We are going, Miss Fulbright. I suggest you make yourself ready. I shall go to the stables and measure Jack whilst you fetch your coat and hat. I know how boys hate shopping for clothes, so we will not subject him to that misery. If he is anything like my boys were, he’ll be growing a mile a minute and will need new things again in a few months, in any case.”

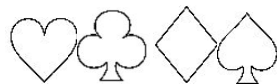
The countess left the kitchen, leaving Luella dithering and uncertain.

Mrs Baillie tsked and waved a spoon at her. “Well, go on, then! Do as her ladyship tells ye, lass.”

“But—” Luella began.

“There’s nae point in fighting her, believe me, I know. She’ll have her own way and she’s right besides. It would look bad for Lord Buchanan if ye go around dressed like that and there’s enough gossip doing the rounds as it is. Don’t make things worse for him.”

“Oh, very well,” Luella said in frustration, for she had to concede the point. When she’d lived on Tottenham Court Road, her dress had been no less shabby, but it had not stood out so much, for most people looked the same. Here, though, and especially in the presence of Lady Morven, her clothes looked old and dismal and worn beyond repair, a fact of which she was becoming increasingly aware, especially when Lord Buchanan’s critical gaze was cast her way. “But we shall just have to do it on a budget. I refuse to be beholden to anyone, least of all *him!*” she said furiously, and with that last word, she strode out.



Luella hurried out of the castle to find a carriage awaiting her. She climbed the steps inside and then froze as she came face-to-face not only with Lady Morven, but also Lord Buchanan. Glowering, whisky-coloured eyes met hers for a moment, then they both turned accusing expressions upon the countess.

“What the devil is she doing here?” he demanded before Luella could be so ungracious as to ask the same thing.

Lady Morven shrugged. “You wished me to see her properly outfitted. What did you expect me to do?”

“You did not tell me you meant to take her with you today. If you had—”

“If I had, you would have ridden into Wick when it will certainly rain, which is ridiculous. Besides which, I would like your company. You must live under the same roof for the foreseeable future. So, if you cannot endure a carriage ride, things will be hard indeed.”

“Wildsyde is a big place, but there is nae a place to hide in a carriage, Ma,” he said grimly, folding his arms and glowering out of the window.

“No, well, perhaps that is for the best. Luella, do sit down and stop wavering in the doorway like that. You’ll fall out if you’re not careful.”

Luella did as she told, sitting beside the countess, and wishing fervently she was making Cullen Skink with Mrs Baillie.

“I suppose I must also find you a suitable chaperone,” Lady Morven said with a sigh as the carriage moved forward. “I cannot think who would do best for you. I must give it serious consideration.”

“Whatever for?” Luella asked in surprise.

Lady Morven turned to her and shook her head. “You cannot remain under the same roof as an unmarried man without a chaperone. All the time I am here, it is not a problem, but I cannot stay indefinitely, so we must think of something, or rather, *someone* else.”

“Aye, someone else I dinnae want under my roof,” his lordship muttered irritably, glaring at Luella, his expression one of intense frustration. “If it isn’t bad enough that I must endure having ye living in my home, a constant reminder to all around here of what Lilith did, keeping the gossips tattling about me, but now I’ve to have a damned nursemaid, too.”

“Well, I offered to go elsewhere,” Luella snapped back, too angry and frustrated by her lack of options to hold her tongue. She was trapped by the situation as tightly as he was, and he was an idiot if he couldn’t see that. “If you think I enjoy being subject to your control, you are out of your mind. I don’t want to be here with a man that hates me, but this was none of my idea. If you dislike it so much, why not just rent us rooms somewhere? Jack and I have always looked after ourselves perfectly well, we can keep doing so I assure you.”

He stared at her coldly, folding his arms, and Luella’s attention drifted to the way the fabric of his coat strained over powerful muscle. It took a deal of effort to return her focus attention to his eyes to hold that furious gaze.

“Aye, ye would like that, I don’t doubt, so you can get up to heaven alone knows what the moment my back is turned. Nae, lass. I learned that lesson the hard way. I shall keep ye where I can see ye and tan yer damned backside if ye put a foot out of line.”

Luella gasped.

“Lyall!” the countess exclaimed. “How dare you say that to her? You know very well you would never do such a thing.”

His eyes flashed in a way that was not reassuring, that stubborn jaw set as he returned his attention to the passing scenery.

“Would I nae? If she thinks to play me like her cousin, I may disappoint ye there, Ma, but if she does nae cause any trouble, she will have nae need to find out, will she?”

Luella sat rigid with indignation and the countess reached out and patted her hand.

“He would never do it,” she whispered, but looking at the belligerent expression on the man’s face as he gazed out at the wilderness beyond, Luella remained unconvinced.

He looked angry and frustrated beyond measure, putting her in mind once more of the lion at the menagerie, biding his time in the knowledge he would eat his keeper at the first opportunity.



Yet now his lordship had decided to act as if she was not there, she could not resist scrutinising him more closely. The carriage was a large one, and far more luxurious than any Luella had ever encountered but, for Lord Buchanan, it still seemed a rather tight fit. He'd crammed himself into the corner, apparently getting as far from her as he could, but his powerful frame did not look at all comfortable. His arms were folded tightly across his impressive chest, his legs too long to fit easily in the space between the seats. Despite her intention to ignore him as studiously as he was ignoring her, Luella's gaze fell upon his bare knees and a few inches of powerful thigh where his kilt had ridden up. Much to her discomfort, she found she could not look away. It was only natural, she told herself. Luella had never seen such an amount of masculine flesh on display—her little brother certainly did not count—and certainly not bare male legs and knees. She had certainly never seen a man who looked anything like this one. He seemed barely tame, let alone civilised. Still, an uncomfortable flush of heat crept over her until her cheeks burned and she forced her reluctant gaze to settle elsewhere, only to discover the countess watching her with interest.

Luella blushed harder and turned away from them both. For the rest of the journey, she determined she would not turn around for anything.

## Chapter 7



*Muir,*

*Well, I have met the cousins, so here is my report as promised. Luella is a bonnie wee thing, raven black hair and stormy grey eyes. I reckon she has a temper, and a good deal of pride, too, not to mention a trim little figure that I admired a good deal. She's nae the beauty Lilith was, but I like her. If she really is as sly as her cousin, she's got an extraordinary talent for mendacity, for I found her genuine and very likeable. Her brother seems a friendly lad, too.*

*—Excerpt of a letter from The Hon'ble Mr Hamilton Anderston to The Hon'ble Mr Muir Anderson (younger brothers of The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan)*

**15<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wick, Caithness, The Highlands of Scotland.**

That Wick was a fishing town was indisputable. Luella had never seen so many fishing boats in one place: over a thousand, according to Lady Morven. The same silver darlings that fed the tenants of Wildsyde had brought wealth to the previously sleepy town and substantially increased the population.

“It's somewhat increased the number of public houses and breweries too,” Lady Morven told her wryly when Luella

commented upon the amount of bustle and noise around the harbour. “Two and twenty pubs in Wick and another three and twenty in Pultney Town on the south side of the river. I hear they get through five hundred gallons of whisky in a day, if you can credit it.”

“Good heavens, it’s a miracle they can find their boats,” Luella replied, wide-eyed.

Lady Morven nodded in amusement. “Still, there are also thirteen dressmakers. I admit I would not frequent most of them, but Mrs Rosie has a clever hand with a needle and is rather more up to date with the latest fashions than most of her competitors.”

“Is she cheap?” Luella asked grimly.

The countess sighed and apparently chose to ignore this question for the moment.

Rosie’s was a neat little shop just off the main high street. In the window, a dressmaker’s dummy displayed a surprising range of lovely fabrics with clever draping over and around it, and Luella’s gaze fell at once upon a soft shade of green in a heavy satin fabric that looked horribly costly. She looked away at once and turned her back on the display. There was no point in looking at things she could not afford, it would only depress her.

“Come along, then,” Lady Morven said, pushing the door open.

A little bell tinkled overhead and a small, plump woman in her thirties came bustling out from the back room. Dressed in a lovely plaid gown in shades of red and blue that fitted her to perfection, she was an excellent advert for her own skills. Upon seeing Lady Morven, she beamed with pleasure and sank into a low curtsy.

“My lady, how delighted I am to see ye, and how good of you to come to my wee shop.”

“Nonsense, Mrs Rosie,” Lady Morven said with a brisk smile. “I was very impressed by the beautiful embroidery on those mantles I ordered, and that gown you made for Mrs

Munro was exquisite. She quite put us all in the shade, I assure you.”

“Och, nae, I dinnae believe it,” Mrs Rosie said with a laugh, though she had turned pink with pleasure. “But ’tis very good of ye to say so. And who is this lovely lassie?” she asked, turning her attention to Luella, her smile dimming comically as she took in Luella’s faded dress and shawl, and her battered bonnet.

“This is Miss Luella Fulbright, my son’s ward,” Lady Morven said briskly.

Mrs Rosie’s gaze flew back to her, and it took her a second to rearrange her face to something less shocked. It had taken them an hour and a half to reach Wick, and yet the gossip had certainly reached here. Luella supposed that Lord Buchanan’s business must be of interest to everyone hereabouts. How it must gall him.

Once Mrs Rosie had composed herself, she settled a smile upon her face and asked hesitantly, “Oh. Aye, and er... ye will be wanting...?”

“Everything,” Lady Morven said firmly.

“No, we won’t,” Luella said with equal conviction.

Lady Morven gave Luella a look that dared her to contradict her again in front of Mrs Rosie, who was looking between them with avid interest. Luella held her tongue for the moment, not wanting to add to the gossip which she did not doubt would fly the moment they left the shop. She must have a quiet word with Lady Morven the moment they were alone again.

“She’ll certainly be needing new under things, petticoats, et cetera. If at all possible, I shall need something for her to wear at once, the rest can be sent on, but as quickly as you can, if you would, please. As you can see, our need is rather pressing.”

“Certainly, my lady,” Mrs Rosie said, looking thrilled by the prospect. “I think I may have something that would do

very well, with just a little alteration. If you would like to come through to the fitting room?”

Mrs Rosie led them behind a curtain and down a corridor, turning into a room which was furnished with a large looking glass and a pedestal at the centre with several comfortable chairs arranged around the perimeter.

“If you would care to sit down, I’ll be back in a trice,” she said, hurrying away.

Luella seized her chance. “Lady Morven, I cannot afford to spend such a lot of money on—”

“Oh, hush, child,” the countess said, not unkindly. “I have explained the situation to you.”

“Yes, but no one can even see my under things,” Luella exclaimed. “And if I am to have a chance of making a life for myself and Jack, I must be careful with the inheritance my father left. If the minute it is handed to me, I must give half of it over—”

“You will not need to pay Lord Buchanan back, Luella. This is all part of him being your guardian.”

“We both know he ought not to be my guardian!” Luella said furiously. “If my father hadn’t put us both in this ridiculous situation—”

“But he did, and neither of you can get out of it now, so you must both make the best of it. My son is a wealthy man, Luella, and the amount we spend here today may be large to you, but it is not to him.”

“I don’t care,” Luella said stubbornly. “I will not be beholden to a man who hates me, no matter how good his reason for doing so.” She folded her arms, glaring at Lady Morven.

The countess looked back, regarding Luella steadily. She folded her hands neatly in her lap. “Luella, would you like to know how much your father left you in his will?”

“Yes,” Luella eagerly, abandoning her defensive posture. “At least then I can make plans for the future and figure out

what can be done with—”

“Two pounds.”

Luella’s voice trailed off, her hopes crashing down around her ears.

“Two pounds,” she repeated stupidly.

Luella sat down heavily on the chair behind her, grasping the sides to keep her steady. What a fool she had been, to believe for a moment that her father had set money aside to keep them if anything happened to him. Indeed, two pounds was not to be sniffed at. She had seen nothing like that sum in years and it was a wonder he’d had that much, considering how they had been living the past months, but she was not fool enough to consider that an independence. It would keep them in board and lodging for a short while, but it would not buy them a home, it was not security.

“Well,” she said, putting her chin up. “It’s better than nothing, but it only underlines my point. I cannot afford to—”

“Luella,” Lady Morven said, and her tone was soft now, filled with sympathy. “You cannot afford much of anything, but my son can, and you will let him provide what you need whilst you are under his roof. I beg you will not fight me or him on this. I know you have no more reason to trust him than he does you, but he would never...” Lady Morven hesitated, choosing her words with care. “You know as well as I how much he resents this situation, but he would not... he would never...”

“Expect me to repay him in kind?” Luella said, quirking an enquiring eyebrow.

“Quite. Thank you,” Lady Morven said with a sigh. “He is a gentleman above all things. Like his father, he is prone to bluster and making a lot of noise when he’s angry and out of sorts, but his bark really is worse than his bite, and the idea of treating you in such a way... well, he’d be horrified we were even having this conversation.”

Luella let out a huff of laughter. She felt as though all the stuffing had been kicked out of her, more desperate even than

that day in the solicitor's office when she discovered just what her father had done to them. She was trapped with no hope of escape, for when the three years were up, and Lord Buchanan could rightfully turn her out... what then? She would be all alone, without even Jack for company.

A gentle hand covered hers and she looked up in surprise to see Lady Morven had moved to sit beside her and was regarding her with concern.

"I'm sorry about the money, Luella."

"Not your fault," Luella replied, her throat tight. "I ought to have known better. I *do* know better than to rely on my father for anything."

"Mrs Baillie tells me you are intent on learning everything she can teach you. Was that with a plan in mind?"

Luella shrugged. Her dreams of a little cottage seemed exceedingly foolish now.

"I thought if I could learn to cook and manage a household, perhaps with my inheritance I could buy a small property with a spare room and offer room and board. Ridiculous, I know, but I'd hoped... Perhaps I could still seek a position as a housekeeper, but I would need to have Jack with me. I worry that he'll follow in our father's footsteps if I don't keep a close eye on him. There are so many pitfalls for a young man. I... I just want to provide for us, and I know you won't believe this, but I want to do it honestly."

They heard footsteps approaching and Lady Morven gave her fingers a quick squeeze. "We shall talk of this again, Luella. You keep learning what you can from Mrs Baillie, and we'll see what we can figure out for your future."

Luella turned to her in surprise. "You would help me?"

"I would help anyone willing to help themselves," the lady said briskly, and turned to smile at Mrs Rosie who came back into the room, laden with bolts of fabric and with a gown slung over her shoulder.

"Well, I thought I would bring some things the young lady ought to like, and this, Lady Morven, should do very nicely for

the time being,” she said, hefting the fabric onto a side table and holding up a lovely gown in a deep shade of forest green. “I also have some very fine undergarments which I made for another customer, but sadly, she has not yet been able to pay for them. I can always make more for her if she comes by the necessary. In the meantime, my best customer ought to profit from them,” she added eagerly.

Luella gazed at the green dress with longing. She’d worn nothing so lovely since she was a small girl, before Mama died, and Papa went to pieces. Yet the idea that Lord Buchanan would foot the bill made her stomach roil.

“Well, come along then, Miss Fulbright. The changing room is just here, and we shall get ye looking as fine as fivepence in no time.”

Luella sent Lady Morven one last look of appeal, but the lady just smiled. “Go on, Luella. We’ll sort everything out, I promise.”

Luella bit her lip, fearing she might cry at the sympathetic expression on the lady’s face. This woman had no reason in the world to trust her, or to believe a word she said. She certainly had no reason to be kind to her. She did not dare reply in case she began sobbing, so she just nodded, and followed Mrs Rosie into the changing room.



## Chapter 8



*I'm sorry to hear about the damage to your greenhouses. We have clearly been targeted by some bloody madman. As for the cellars, it was only a small fire, and it appears Larkin had it quickly under control, thank heavens, but we lost several cases of burgundy and six crates of excellent brandy that I could weep for. I'm currently experiencing sensations of a more murderous nature, however. When I figure out who the bastard is who's doing this, I'm going to make him wish he'd never been born.*

*—Excerpt of a letter to Mr Hartley de Beauvoir (son of Minerva and Inigo de Beauvoir) from Lord Thomas 'Thorn' Barrington (son of the Most Hon'ble Lucian and Matilda Barrington, The Marquess and Marchioness of Montagu).*

**15<sup>th</sup> May 1845, Wick, Caithness, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall signed the papers before him, looking up as his solicitor reached for them. Mr Forbes was a middle-aged man with a paunch and always looked a deal too pleased with himself for Lyall's liking. Still, the job was done, though it had taken the devil a damned long time to draw the blasted things up.

"You think it's enough?" he asked dubiously.

“Indeed, my lord. In three years’ time, there will be a tidy sum for the young lady to support herself very nicely. Enough that she should have no reason to call upon you if she is not imprudent.”

Lyall snorted. That was the rub, was it not? What would she do with that tidy sum? Well, that would be her affair and not his. So long as he could get rid of her with a clear conscience and no one able to say he had behaved shabbily, that was all that mattered to him. He was stuck with being the boy’s guardian until he was four and twenty, but he might mould a lad of that age into a decent human being, as his mother had pointed out, and Lyall could always send him away to school if he became troublesome.

“I thank ye for yer time, Mr Forbes.”

“A pleasure as always, my lord,” the man said, hurrying to stand as Lyall rose and rushing to open the door. He bowed low, a show of obsequiousness that made Lyall feel even more ill at ease, and so he bid the man a good day and left as quickly as possible.

Lyall stopped for a glass of whisky at the first inn he came to. Though he ought to feel better having made provision to get his wife’s cousin’s out of his life as soon as possible, he was still troubled. He made his way to a seat in a quiet corner of the room.

The table to his right had apparently not marked his arrival. There was an older couple, perhaps in their sixties, talking animatedly with two younger men and Lyall—or more precisely, Lyall’s ward—was the subject up for discussion.

“Can ye credit the brass balls of the man to make Lord Buchanan ward to such a creature after what his wife did? Well, one only had to look at *her* to know she was a nasty little slut, but now the poor man has another just like her under his roof. Ach, it’s criminal is what it is. He would do well to sling her out on her behind. A woman like that will *always* find a way to earn her keep,” the woman said meaningfully.

“Aye, I’d help her fill her coffers right enough if she’s anything like his missus was. She may have been a she-devil,

but she was the bonniest lass I ever saw.”

This sally was met with a splutter of ribald laughter from the men and a disapproving sniff from the woman.

Lyall downed his whisky and set the glass on the table. He rose to his feet.

They looked up only when his shadow fell over the table and then craned their necks up.

“Oh!” the woman said, the first to react, flushing and pressing her hand to her bosom. “Lord Buchanan. Why, ye gave me a start, but ye are looking well. Such a handsome man ye have become and the image of the earl, too. How are things at Wildsyde? I hear Lady Morven is biding with ye a while. ’Tis nice to have family around ye in times of trouble.”

“Aye, Mrs...?” he replied, frowning at her.

“Oh, Mrs Coghill. Ye will nae remember me, for ye were a wee laddie the last time we met, but my Tommy worked at the castle during the renovations yer parents did. Ach, but where does the time go, it seems a lifetime ago now,” she said in a rush.

“Well, Mrs Coghill, it was pleasant to make your acquaintance once more, but may I say just one thing?”

“Why, of course, my lord,” Mrs Coghill said, looking pleased.

“Dinnae be speaking about any young woman in such terms as ye just did, when ye have nae the slightest idea what ye are talkin’ about. And if I ever hear anyone speaking about a woman living under *my* roof in such a way again, I shall be having a quiet word with them, too. Do I make myself clear?”

Mrs Coghill flushed hard and gave a jerky nod, so Lyall turned his attention to the men, particularly the one who had been so keen to help Luella earn her keep. The man turned a sickly shade and muttered something unintelligible, but the point seemed to have been made. Lyall bade them a polite goodbye and strode off.

He slammed out of the door and into the fresh air, pausing in the spring sunshine to take a breath. Why their words had riled him so much, he did not know. They had said nothing he hadn't thought himself in his less charitable moments. That Luella did not appear to have been made in the same mould as Lilith was hardly proof she was the decent young woman she purported to be. Luella could be everything she appeared to be, or she could be a deal cleverer than Lilith and was simply lulling them into believing she was proud and hardworking and determined to better her lot and that of her brother.

Mrs Baillie reported to him daily, informing him of everything that the girl said and did, and that she was quickly coming to respect the young woman spoke volumes. Sheenagh Baillie was no fool, nor was she a daft pillock being led by the balls by a pretty face. Her opinion mattered, but it still did not convince him. He was uncertain anything ever would, and the sooner Luella Fulbright was out of his life, the better off he'd be.

Lyall made his way along the street to the inn where he had agreed to meet his mother and Miss Fulbright for lunch, though the idea of having to sit through a meal with the wretched woman did not improve his mood. He was just considering the idea of going elsewhere to eat and whether it was worth facing his mother's wrath in order to do so, when he noticed that lady walking towards him.

He sighed, knowing there was no escape now, and then his gaze turned to his ward.

The sight of her did not make him any happier at the prospect of her company. Their shopping expedition had clearly been a grand success. The gown of deep forest green suited Luella to perfection, highlighting her fair complexion and that jetty dark hair, which was now crowned with a fashionable little bonnet. He suspected her previous corset had been too big or too worn to do the intended job, for now he could see a waist far trimmer than he had realised, and a figure that was garnering a deal of interest from three fellows walking on the other side of the street. Lyall glared at them, and they turned and hurried on their way.

“You accomplished what you set out to do then,” he said dryly.

“We did. The rest will be sent on, but Mrs Rosie is a very competent lady and I think Luella looks very well indeed,” his mother said, giving her protégée an approving once over.

“Aye, she’s got the local lads’ eyes on stalks at any rate,” Lyall muttered sourly, pulling open the door for them to go through. “Let’s eat, I’m famished.”

“You are always famished,” his mother said with a smile, and walked in with Luella close behind her.

His ward had not so much as looked at him yet and seemed strangely out of sorts. In his experience, women were usually in high spirits after getting a new gown, but Miss Fulbright looked wan, the light of battle that was usually evident in her eyes extinguished. He wondered if perhaps the dressmaker had been rude to her. She would not have done so in his mother’s hearing, certainly, but if he had overheard such talk within a few hours of his arrival in town, the likelihood was that everyone was discussing her. He told himself she was a big girl, and he did not need to worry over her—indeed he’d be a damned fool to do so—but when the soup course arrived and she had still barely spoken a word, he could stand the suspense no longer.

“So what did ye make of Mrs Rosie?” he demanded, clearing his throat as she almost leapt out of her skin. He had not meant to bark the question at her, and she had obviously not been paying attention to the conversation.

She blinked at him, and the sight of her wide, thickly lashed eyes struck him with some force. He had not deigned to notice them before, remarking only they were not the guileless, beautiful bright blue that Lilith’s had been. Luella’s eyes were grey and filled with storm clouds, troubled and turbulent. Lilith would never have let him see that; she had hidden her temper and propensity for tantrums until he’d been well and truly caught.

“She was very kind to me in the circumstances,” Luella replied dully.

She returned her gaze to her soup, which annoyed him. He wanted to see her eyes, to see if there was a crack in the façade that would give him a clue to the truth of her.

“I should think she was,” he replied, knowing Mrs Rosie would lord it over her competitors for months to come not only because Lady Morven had chosen her shop over theirs, but because she had been the first to get a glimpse of his mysterious ward. His mother gave him a warning glance. “Are ye pleased with yer new gowns? The green becomes ye very well,” he added grudgingly, for it was nothing but the truth.

Luella glanced up at him and quickly away again. “I am very grateful to you, my lord. It is certainly the finest gown I have ever owned.”

She didn’t sound grateful, he thought uneasily. She sounded worn down, but there had been a glint in those stormy eyes that made him suspect she’d like nothing more than to break her soup bowl over his head. Not that he *wanted* her gratitude, but he wanted to know what had put her in this odd mood, for until now she had been feisty enough to talk back to him. He did not want some meek, subservient attitude from her now. Why, then, was she acting so?

He turned an enquiring look upon his mother, raising his eyebrows. She was quick to understand him and replied at once.

“Luella was rather shocked and disappointed to discover her inheritance was such a meagre sum, Lyall,” she said bluntly.

Lyall glowered at her. “Ye had nae business telling her, Ma.”

“Of course I did. It is her inheritance, and she was clearly making plans for her and Jack’s future on the strength of her belief it was a larger sum. That would have been cruel.”

He had to admit the truth of that. “Aye, I suppose so. I did nae know— What plans?”

Luella set down her soup spoon with a clatter. “To get away from you as soon as possible,” she said, her voice tight.

“For I don’t imagine you wish to lord it over me for the next three years, any more than I wish to see you do it.”

“Luella,” his mother said anxiously, for the girl had pushed to her feet.

“Excuse me,” she said, clearly fighting tears as she hurried from the room.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” His mother shot him an impatient glare.

“What the devil did I do?” Lyall demanded indignantly.

“Nothing of use,” she snapped, obviously frustrated with him. “Go after her, you great lummox.”

Grumbling, Lyall set his napkin aside and got to his feet. “And say what?” he demanded. “She does nae like me anymore than I like her.”

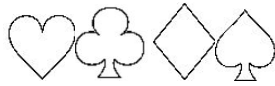
“Then I suggest you think of a way you can get along together. She is determined not to be in your debt, Lyall. I really think she means it, too. She is in this temper because she feels she owes you money for the clothes on her back and so she can take no pleasure in them.”

“Pfft,” Lyall replied. “Ach, Ma, she has twisted ye round her little finger already. Have ye forgotten Lilith?”

“Indeed, I have not,” his mother said coldly, holding his gaze. “But Lilith was an amoral child with no notion of right and wrong. Luella is a very different creature, that much is obvious. I am not asking you to trust her, Lyall, only she needs careful handling if you don’t wish the next three years to be a trial to you both. What if she won’t leave Jack in your care? You know she means to take him with her when she reaches four and twenty. If you don’t let her, she will probably stay on with him, and then what?”

Lyal let out a long-suffering sigh but had to admit the sense of this. “I still dinnae know what I’m supposed to say to her,” he muttered, heading for the door.

“Then I suggest you think of something quickly,” his mother said tartly as he went out.



Luella had moved instinctively, half blinded by tears, hurrying to the back of the inn and out into the sunshine. The rain had stopped an hour ago, though the blue sky overhead was still littered with clouds. Relieved to find somewhere she could be alone, Luella discovered a small courtyard garden, clearly used for outside dining in fine weather. It was a pretty spot, a little neglected at the moment, but small patches of daffodils and crocus lent the area colour, and it was sheltered from the rather brisk wind that had picked up.

It was private too, which was all she wanted at that moment. The noise of the busy inn was muted to a dull murmur. Luella leaned against the wall and took a deep breath, annoyed at herself for her show of emotion, especially in front of *him*. She wiped irritably at her wet eyes and tried to compose herself. Much to her dismay, the tears kept coming.

Two pounds. Good Lord. However, was she to provide for them on that? Jack would be fifteen by the time she was free of this situation, of course. That was quite old enough to earn a man's wage, but she had wanted better for him. What if Lord Buchanan insisted on *him* staying at Wildsyde until he was four and twenty? The man seemed determine to honour the ridiculous will, if for no other reason than to spite her. Jack was a bright boy who loved to read, and the moment she had heard of her inheritance she'd nurtured dreams of seeing him go to university, of making something of himself. She wanted the name of Fulbright to mean something other than it did now, a name associated with chicanery, and double dealing. But how on earth was she to make that happen?

The door to the inn pushed open and Luella turned sharply, standing straighter as she discovered Lord Buchanan filling the doorway. He sighed, with the air of a man doing an unpleasant duty and closed the door behind him.

"We need to talk, I reckon," he said grimly, giving her a curious glance. "What are ye weeping about?"

"None of your business," she snapped, furious with herself for allowing him to discover her looking so weak.



“As ye are my ward and yer welfare my concern, it is my business, though,” he said, though the words did not appear to please him anymore than they did her.

Luella snorted. “Lord Buchanan, we both know my father was a crook and that if I could afford a decent lawyer, he would prove that fact in no time at all. Why in the name of heaven don’t you employ someone and free us both from a situation which can only make everyone involved miserable?”

He gave a grunt, which might have been a sound of amusement; she wasn’t sure.

“I have been asking myself the same question, but I have nae a grand opinion of lawyers, and I am nae sure *decent* is the word ye are looking for. Clever, perhaps.”

“Very well, if you want to be pedantic about it, find a clever lawyer and set us all free.”

“And have the world believe the lies that Lilith put about, that I beat her and kept her on bread and water, kept her prisoner in that pretty house I gave her?” He made a harsh sound in the back of his throat and shook his head. “I’m nae gonna dae that.”

“She said what?” Luella said with a gasp.

He returned a sceptical glance. “Och, dinnae act like ye knew nothing about it.”

“But I didn’t,” she said in horror, pushing away from the wall and taking a step closer to him. “Good Lord. No wonder you hate us so.”

“Hmph,” he said, frowning. “I dinnae hate ye, either of ye. I just dinnae trust ye, and with good reason, aye?”

She nodded, understanding that much without difficulty. “I know it won’t help, and that you won’t believe me, but *I am* sorry. I’m sorry you ever got involved with our family, and especially Lilith. She always rather frightened me,” she admitted. “I never knew what she would take it into her head to do next. The only good thing about the disparity in our situations was that I saw little of her, unless she came for a visit and to queen it over me in her lovely gowns.”

“Aye, I can imagine she enjoyed that. She liked it when people were envious of her.”

Luella nodded, remembering such times and her own burning pride, wishing she could one day put Lilith in her place. Well, she had never had the chance to do so, for Lilith had overreached and come to a desperate end.

“I understand, ye know.”

Luella looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

He stood with his arms folded, those tawny leonine eyes fixed on her as if he might read her mind if he stared hard enough. Luella swallowed, wishing he was not such an imposing figure. He radiated strength and certainty, things she had never known in her life before, and she could only think Lilith the biggest fool on earth for not trying to put all her talents to work in making their marriage into something real. What a husband he would make for a woman he honoured and loved.

The sudden realisation that she did not wish Lord Buchanan to think ill of her was not one that Luella was pleased to admit, even to herself.

“If ye are really the proud and independent creature ye would have me believe, I can imagine how it galls ye to have me pay for everything, but ye must see, I can nae have people think I am the monster Lilith would have had them believe. I have lived here all my life, and happily most people know the truth of me well enough to not give such talk a moment’s notice, but there are always those who enjoy thinking the worst of people, and others who just enjoy scandal and wicked stories for their own sake. There are those, too, who would speak ill of you and say ye are just like Lilith and I’m a fool for giving ye a roof over yer head. We can only silence all of them if we prove them wrong, aye?”

“I suppose so,” she admitted, unable to deny the sense of this.

“Then I suppose my mother has the right of it. We had best find a way to rub along together.”

“You mean I had better not make a fuss and accept the fact I am to be forever in your debt,” she said grimly.

“I did nae say that,” he replied, temper flashing in his eyes. “Don’t go putting words in my mouth.”

“No, but it is what you meant. ‘Just shut up, Luella, and be grateful for everything you are given.’”

“I am nae asking for yer gratitude. The devil take ye! I dinnae want it!” he said indignantly. He paced the length of the courtyard, which was not far enough with his long strides, returning to her a moment later. “Ye are the most frustrating woman.”

His expression reflected those words so eloquently she could not help but laugh.

“I am, I know it. Believe it or not, my father would have been entirely in sympathy with you.”

“Why?”

“Never mind.” Luella shook her head. The anger that had given her backbone enough to spar with him suddenly gave way and she felt nothing but weary. “I *am* grateful. I am grateful for giving us a roof over our head and feeding us, but mostly I am grateful for everything you are doing for Jack. He is so happy to be learning to ride, I have not seen him so happy for such a long time, and you did that. That he is going to school, at least for the next three years, is such a relief to me, and I am grateful for that too. So I shall do as you ask, my lord, and not make a fuss. I shall keep my head down and be useful where I may and I shall do that for Jack, because he deserves a chance in life.”

He didn’t say a word and so she dared a glance up at him. His expression was shuttered, his stance defensive once more but when he spoke his tone was not unkind.

“He’ll be under my guardianship until he is four and twenty, Luella. Ye may go in three years, but he will stay, and ye may as well get used to the idea.” He held his hand up as she opened her mouth to rage at him for keeping her brother

from her. “I hear he is a bright lad, according to Mr Clugston. A quick learner.”

Luella nodded, folding her arms. “Jack loves to learn. I have always wished I could afford to buy him books for he reads everything you put in front of him and seems to absorb knowledge. I always hoped—”

She broke off, remembering who she was speaking to and determined not to let him have a grasp on her hopes and dreams.

“Ye hoped to educate him, to send him to university, perhaps?”

Luella clenched her teeth, annoyed with herself and uncertain why that was. “And why not?” she demanded.

Lord Buchanan’s eyes widened, and he held up his hands. “There is nae reason in the world he ought not, and that is something I could help ye with.”

Luella gasped, staring at him. She told herself not to be so foolish. There would be a price to pay. There always was.

“And what would I need to do to make that happen?” she asked bluntly.

He opened his mouth to reply and then snapped it closed again, scowling at her with such fury she took a step back. His voice was barely audible, yet the growl of sound was the most furious thing she had ever heard.

“If ye mean to imply I would demand favours of ye, ye may think again. I would nae touch ye with a ten-foot pole. Not under *any* circumstances.”

Luella’s cheeks blazed, but she put her chin up, refusing to admit how badly those words stung. What did she care if he felt so strongly the idea of touching her revolted him? It was nothing to her. She wouldn’t want him either, not if he were the last man on earth.

“I’m relieved to hear it,” she shot back. “I assure you the feeling is mutual, so you may put aside any ideas that I am

hoping to do as my cousin did. I would rather starve in a ditch than marry a man like you.”

“Good,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Good,” she agreed with a sharp nod.

“Fine, then we are agreed,” he said, his enraged gaze intent on hers, burning with such intensity she struggled to keep looking at him. “I will see to it Jack receives a gentleman’s education, I will ensure he goes to university and has every opportunity available to him. In return, ye will stay out of my way until ye are four and twenty. At that time ye will receive both yer inheritance, such as it is, and a sum I have put aside for ye. Then ye will leave Wildsyde and Jack in my care, and we will never set eyes on one another again.”

Luella blinked. “Leave Jack?” she repeated, too shocked to register anything else he had to say.

“Ach, not forever,” he said impatiently. “I am nae forbidding ye to have contact with him. He may stay with ye during the holidays and once he is done with education, ye may both leave and do whatever it is pleases ye.”

“You’d really pay for his education?” Luella said, hardly daring to believe it. If she could give Jack the chance of a decent future, an honest career he could succeed at, then she could endure any amount of hurt pride. And all Lord Buchanan had really asked of her was to leave him alone. Surely she could do that?

He held her gaze, an expression in his eyes she could not read. “Aye, so long as he studies and does not throw the opportunity back in my face, for I am nae a fool. Throwing good money after bad is nae an occupation I have any time for, but if he wishes to better himself, I shall help him do so.”

“He won’t do that,” Luella said firmly. She moved closer to him and held out her hand. “Thank you, Lord Buchanan. I will do as you ask and keep out of your way, if you will do everything in your power to help Jack. It’s all I really want.”

He gave her a curious glance, looking at her hand with suspicion, but reached out and took it. Luella stifled a gasp as

his large hand encompassed hers. It was warm and calloused, rough in a way she had not expected, even though he looked nothing like the elegant and fashionable noblemen she read about in romance novels. The contact was electric, sending little sparks of electricity dancing up her arm. Unsettled, her gaze fell to their linked hands as if she could see some evidence of the sensation, but Lord Buchanan dropped her hand as if she'd burned him and stepped away.

Luella fought to keep a sharp comment from her lips, determined to do nothing to jeopardise Jack's chances, but really, was she so repulsive he could not bear to shake her hand? The idea stung, but she dismissed it. What did she care what he thought of her?

His opinion did not matter a jot and so he could revile her all he wished. She didn't care a button.

## Chapter 9



*Dear Thorn,*

*I cannot believe it is May already. Work is coming on apace at Goshen Court and whilst there is still a mountain to climb, I believe it may be a place I can take a pride in soon, assuming it does not bankrupt me in the meantime.*

*For once the weather has blessed us with glorious sunshine and for the first time, I see that the gardens here, though sadly neglected, were once something special. Mama will love them, yet I am horribly aware that this season will come and go, and I promised her she and father could visit at summer's end. It does not feel like enough time.*

*I have not yet told Tilly her grandparents will visit her, but I shall. I know they will be kind to her, no matter how angry or disappointed they are with me. How could they not be? I hope you will come and spend some time with us over the coming months, too. I imagine it is time you gave your liver a rest, in any case.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to The Lord Thomas Barrington, from his elder brother, The Right Hon'ble Philip Barrington, The Earl of Ashburton. (sons of The Most Hon'ble Lucian and Matilda Barrington,**

*The Marquess and Marchioness of  
Montagu)*

**15<sup>th</sup> May 1845, The Sons of Hades, Portman Square,  
London.**

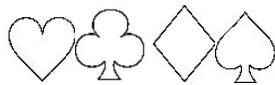
Lord Thomas Barrington, or Thorn as he was known to his friends, drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The air was damp and mild, and he was pleasantly bosky. He had also cleaned out his friend Ashton's pockets, an achievement which he would not let the fellow forget anytime soon. Still, the devil would likely get his own back the next time they sparred. Ash had a punishing right hook, which they had all been on the receiving end of at one time or another. Not that they held grudges. Despite temperaments and personalities that were sometimes at odds with one another, they got along famously, and any disputes were settled in the ring. Few people fancied arguing with Ash, which meant he got away with bloody murder.

Thorn weaved a little, taking a moment to steady himself against a wall. Perhaps he had dipped a little deeper than he realised. Well, he knew he'd pay for it tomorrow, but it had been an enjoyable evening. A shame Pip wasn't a part of things any longer, though he seemed contented in a different way. The challenge of restoring his tumble-down property and making a home for his little girl had focused his mind and given him a goal. It was what his brother had needed, even if this wasn't the way Thorn would have wanted it to happen. He understood why Pip had kept Tilly a secret, but he still wished he had not done so. Their mother would be hurt, and heaven alone knew what Pa would say. Thorn felt rather sick even considering that. Not his problem, thank God. Seeing his brother's predicament had made him a good deal more cautious about how and with whom he dallied. Facing his father with news of that nature was enough to terrify anyone. Yes, perhaps he did understand why Pip had kept it to himself.

Smothering a yawn, Thorn pushed himself off the wall and walked on. The blow came from nowhere, sending him staggering forwards. He hit the floor hard, his knees taking the



brunt of the impact as he turned, instincts forcing him to roll and scramble to his feet. Turning to face the threat, he realised too late that there were three of them and a different tactic might have been prudent. He fought hard, satisfied to hear the crunch of something breaking beneath his fist as a nose gave way, but he was too drunk and too outnumbered to taste victory this evening. Two held him still, his arms pinned behind him as the other stepped closer. His face was covered but Thorn felt certain he was smiling, the glittering eyes oddly familiar as the man drove a fist into his guts.



**21<sup>st</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

“Stop fidgeting, for heaven’s sake, ’tis another hour afore he will be home yet,” Mrs Baillie said with amusement. “You’ve been up and down those stairs so much ye will wear them out.”

Luella sighed and came back down into the kitchen, sitting down at the table with a thud.

“You don’t think the other boys will bully him for being English and not talking like they do?” she asked anxiously.

“Ach, there’s bound to be a bit of showing off and nonsense, but Mr Duncan is a grand fellow and he’ll skelp anyone who thinks to play the bully. They’re good lads, though. I know all of them, and their parents too, so if he has any bother, ye just get him to tell me, aye?”

“Thank you, Mrs Baillie, that means a lot to me,” Luella said fervently. “I just want him to be happy, to have friends and get a proper education.”

“Aye, well, he has the chance for all of that now.”

“What is the school like?” Luella persisted. Her stomach had been in a knot ever since that morning, when Jack had set off looking pale but determined upon his first day at school.

“Oh, it’s grand. The earl and Lady Morven began it decades ago, but Lord Buchanan had the place refurbished the

year before last. 'Tis a neat little building with big windows so the room is bright and cheerful, though I hear Mr Duncan often teaches the lads outside when the weather is fine. He's a believer in fresh air and exercise alongside learning, which makes sense to me."

Luella nodded, heartened by this, if not by the idea that Mr Duncan would skelp anyone who misbehaved.

"There's a girls' school, too."

Luella looked up in surprise. "There is?"

"Aye. Good Lord, child, ye have met the countess. Do ye think she would have educated the lads and nae the lasses?"

Luella smiled and shook her head. "No, I suppose not. What are you making?"

"A tarte tatin," Mrs Baillie replied. "It's French, a sort of upside-down apple tart. One of his lordship's favourites, it is. Do you want to learn how?"

Luella nodded eagerly. She had applied herself to her own studies over the past week, soaking up every scrap of information she could from Mrs Baillie.

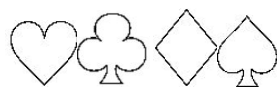
"So ye have made peace with his lordship?" Mrs Baillie asked, watching her curiously as she rubbed the butter and flour together between her fingertips.

"Sort of," Luella replied with a wry smile. "He has promised to ensure Jack is educated like a gentleman, and I have promised to pretend I don't exist."

Mrs Baillie snorted. "And how long do ye reckon you can keep that up for?"

"What do you mean?" Luella asked, frowning.

The woman just laughed and shook her head. "Ah, dinnae mind me, lassie. Now when you've done that, come here and I shall show ye how to cook the apples to make a kind of caramel sauce."



The next morning, Luella made her way down to the kitchens after breakfast. Jack had spent every moment since he got home the day before telling her about school. It seemed to have gone well on the whole. There was a lad called Logan who had done nothing but glare at him silently all day, but other than that, the lads had been eager enough to talk to the new English boy. They had teased him mercilessly for his accent, but Jack knew how to play the clown and make people like him. It was a trait the Fulbrights all had, and one they used to their advantage whenever possible. So, he had made them laugh and taken their teasing in good heart, winning them—or most of them—over with little difficulty. It was a good start. He seemed to like Mr Duncan too, who was a ‘great gun’ and so Luella cautiously hoped that Jack’s life would be a happy one whilst he lived here.

Mrs Baillie was sitting at the big, scrubbed oak table, recipe books scattered around her as she wrote a list on a piece of paper.

“Market day?” Luella guessed.

“Aye. See if we have anymore peppercorns, would ye? There’s a dear. I thought I had a good store, but now I’m wondering if I was thinking of the nutmeg I got a few weeks back.”

Luella nodded and went to investigate the labelled jars where the spices were kept. “This jar is full, Mrs Baillie,” she called over her shoulder, before replacing the lid and going to sit beside her.

“Then we need nutmeg,” Mrs Baillie said distractedly. “I wonder if there are any strawberries to be had yet?”

“How did the tarte tatin go down?” Luella asked, for it had been her dessert sent up to Lord Buchanan. He always ate alone in his study, refusing to join them in the dining room with his mother, though Luella suspected the woman had scolded him repeatedly over it. A stubborn fellow, his lordship.

“Hmmm?”

“The tarte tatin. Did Lord Buchanan like it? Jack was in ecstasies. He said it was the best thing he ever tasted.”

It *had* been divine, the delicious, caramelised apples soft and so gloriously sweet against the buttery pastry. Luella had found it hard to believe she had made it with her own hands. Jack had certainly been sceptical and had asked her gravely if Mrs Baillie had helped her.

“How should I know? He ate it all. I wonder if I ought to order a couple of dozen eggs? Those blasted hens are not laying as they ought since the fox came prowling the other night.”

Luella sighed, disappointed if unsurprised.

“I could go to the market for you,” she said, for it was a beautiful sunny day and she had the sudden urge to be out in the sunshine, gazing upon the beautiful countryside.

Mrs Baillie snorted. “I dinnae think so, lassie. Ye are nae used to bargaining. They would eat ye for breakfast and the exercise would cost himself a pretty penny more too.”

“A Fulbright, not know how to bargain? You must have mistaken me for someone else, Mrs Baillie, for I thought I was supposed to be the only conniving little thief around here. How do you know I won’t fleece them?” Luella asked, suddenly irritated, though she didn’t know why.

Mrs Baillie looked up at her, a curious glint in her eyes. Quiet for a long moment, she finally gave a jerk of her head. “See yon basket?”

Luella looked to where she directed. “Yes.”

“There are cherries ripe in the orchard. If ye are going to be crabbit because he did not fall into a swoon over the dessert ye made him, ye had best go and blow the cobwebs away and make yerself useful at the same time.”

Luella glared at her. “I don’t know what crabbit means, but I assure you I never expected any swooning on Lord Buchanan’s part.”

Mrs Baillie chuckled. “Ach, if ye say so, lassie. And crabbit means grumpy or bad tempered. Now away with ye. I can nae think with ye glowering at me.”

Luella got to her feet, indignation seething as she grabbed hold of the basket and strode to the door. She was halfway down the path to the kitchen garden before she realised she didn’t know where the orchard was. Turning in a circle, and wondering where she might find someone to ask, she jumped as a deep voice hailed her.

“Mr Anderson,” she said, smiling as he strode towards her. She was struck once again by the similarity to his brother, yet that brooding, somewhat menacing air that seemed to be part and a parcel of Lord Buchanan was entirely absent in Hamilton Anderson.

“Ach, it’s Hamilton, did I nae tell ye?”

“I beg your pardon, so you did. Good morning to you, Hamilton.”

“And a fine morning to yourself, Luella,” he said, making a grand, flourishing bow, one leg extended in the style of a previous age. “I am happy to see ye looking so well. There are roses in yer cheeks this morning and yer eyes are all a sparkle. Either ye are in love or someone has riled ye, which is it?”

“Neither!” Luella retorted, rather shocked. “You did not join us for dinner last night?”

“Nae, I was visiting, er... a friend.”

She noted the slight hesitation and grinned at him.

“Ah, why Hamilton, I believe there is a sparkle in your eyes, and roses in your cheeks too,” she quipped.

“Aye, that’s as maybe, but it ’tis nae love,” he replied with a wink.

Luella laughed and shook her head, wondering who the lucky lady was. She had no doubt Hamilton would be an entertaining lover. She sighed, remembering a time when she’d had a beau and had entertained thoughts of marriage. Jacob Tyler had been handsome and funny, and she had

thought herself in love for a time. Such foolishness. She had been trying to persuade him to pluck up the courage to ask her father if they could marry, when another woman had appeared on the scene, heavily pregnant. Jacob had married her, at least, and Luella supposed she'd had a lucky escape.

“So, what’s with the basket?” Hamilton asked.

“I’m supposed to be picking cherries, but I don’t know where they are.”

“Ach, is it that time of year again? Then Mrs Baillie is making her famous whisky cherries. Whyever did ye nae say so? This is serious business. Come along, there is nae a moment to lose.”

Amused by his enthusiasm, Luella hurried after him. The orchard was close to the castle walls and sheltered from the wind that blew in from the sea. There were only three cherry trees, but Luella looked up in wonder at their laden branches, the jaunty red bunches vivid against the blue sky overhead.

“Good heavens, how many does she need? I only have the one basket.”

Hamilton laughed. “Oh, dinnae worry, the gardeners have the job of picking the rest of them and those will be mostly for jam, but the first pick are always used to make whisky cherries, and they are the most delicious thing ye ever did taste, so get to work, lass.”

Luella did as she was asked, and they worked side by side, chatting merrily about this and that until the basket was almost full.

“You are eating more than you pick,” Luella accused him, watching as Hamilton spat yet another pip halfway across the orchard.

“That is a wicked slander, I picked most of those in the basket,” he retorted.

Luella snorted, shaking her head. “You did nothing of the sort and, if you eat any more, you will have a bellyache, mark my words.”

“Ach, but they are too sweet to resist,” he said with a sigh.

“I suppose that’s what you told your, er... *friend*, last night,” she teased him.

He narrowed his eyes at her, though they danced with laughter. “What are ye accusing me of? I am nae that sort of boy.”

“Are ye nae?” she retorted, mimicking his accent.

He grinned at her. “That was very good! Do it again.”

Luella shook her head, blushing a little. She had always been an excellent mimic, a skill her father had been eager to use, and another time she had refused to play his games.

“Ach, go on. Tell me I am very, *verrry*, bonny,” he said, rolling the r’s outrageously. “I dare ye.”

Luella hesitated and then stuck the two cherries she was carrying over her ear and sashayed towards him, giving him a seductive look from under her eyelashes. “Ye are, verry, verrrry bonny, my handsome laddie,” she purred.

Rather to her surprise, Hamilton just stared at her, an odd glitter in his eyes.

“What the devil are ye playin’ at?”

The voice was not his and was quietly furious. Luella spun on her heel, and her heart sank as she realised they’d had an audience. She did not know how long Lord Buchanan had been there, but she suspected not quite long enough to realise it had been a joke of Hamilton’s creation. His three dogs stood at his heels, glancing up at their master as the tone of his voice suggested he was displeased, to say the least.

“Just larking about,” Hamilton said easily, moving to stand in front of Luella, as though to shield her from his brother’s wrath. “What crawled up your arse and died?”

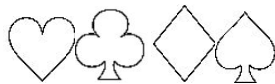
“I’ll nae have ye set your cap at my brother, Miss Fulbright, so if ye have some scheme in mind to seduce him, ye may set it aside.”

“Lyall!” Hamilton exclaimed, his shock evident.

“And ye will keep yer hands off her,” Lyall said, turning on his brother with equal fury. “I’ll not have ye caught like I was and ye are a deal too carefree to see the danger ye court.”

Luella had been too stunned by the accusation to react at once, and now she realised with growing dismay that she was more hurt than angry. She knew Lord Buchanan did not want her around and she had accepted that. She could hardly blame him for not wishing to see a constant reminder of the dead wife he had despised and had done her utmost to stay out of his way. She had believed they had come to an understanding, however, and that he had trusted her not to cause trouble in return for what he was doing for Jack. The idea she would jeopardise her brother’s chances by messing around with Hamilton...

She met his eyes and knew there must be anger, hurt, and reproach in her own, but she could not find the words to express her feelings. They seemed to crowd in her throat, making it ache, but she dared not let them loose for fear of what she might say. She would *not* endanger Jack’s chances for the future, and so she refused to make a scene. Instead, she picked up the basket of cherries and strode away without a word.



“Ye miserable bastard,” Hamilton said furiously, once Luella was out of earshot.

Lyall did not need to hear the words to have some sympathy with them. The look in Luella’s eyes had been quite eloquent enough. He cursed himself inwardly for acting with more haste than judgement, but he was not about to admit that fault to his brother.

“She’s not to be trusted,” he said stubbornly, which was nothing more than the truth. “And ye were looking at her like ye had been handed a cream cake and could not wait to take a bite.”

“Aye, and perhaps ye are that angry because ye want to take a bite yerself, eh?” Hamilton shot back.



Lyall stiffened. “Ye dare say such a thing to me? Ye think I would touch the girl after everything her family have done? Are ye off yer heid?”

Hamilton subsided. “Nah, I dinnae think it,” he admitted grudgingly. “But ye are too quick to condemn her. We weren’t doing anything. I just dared her to mimic my accent; she has a rare talent for it. She’s fun, Lyall, and clever and good company, which ye would discover, if ye would only give her a chance. She is nae the devil, ye ken?”

“Perhaps, but the devil does not tell ye he is the devil, he wheedles his way into yer life and yer heart and before ye know it, it’s too late. Just don’t dally with her, and... just be careful, aye?”

Hamilton nodded, but there was more pity in his eyes than anger now, and Lyall did not need to see that, so he turned on his heel and left his brother in the orchard.

## Chapter 10



*Gabriel, if there is anything you can do, for God's sake, do it. I am growing desperate. I have had men out looking everywhere and spoken to everyone. No one has seen him since the night of the 15<sup>th</sup>. He left the club in the early hours, a little the worse for wear, but never returned home to his rooms. I cannot think someone has kidnapped him, for there has been no ransom. God help me, I have had every morgue and back alley searched, checked every corpse until I am sick to my stomach. He has simply vanished, and I feel entirely impotent to act. Matilda is beside herself and I feel I will run mad if I cannot discover some trace of him soon. Pip is coming to stay with us, which may give her some comfort at least. We have kept this from Catherine for now. She is staying with friends in the countryside, and I pray we can keep it from her until I can offer her some better news.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to Mr Gabriel Knight from The Most Hon'ble Lucian Barrington, The Marquess of Montagu.**

**22<sup>nd</sup> May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Mrs Baillie regarded her cautiously as Luella slammed the basket of cherries down on the kitchen table.

“The fresh air and the sunshine dinnae restore yer temper, then? Ah, well, perhaps pitting that lot will do the trick. Get on with it.”

She handed Luella a small but sharp knife and, for a moment, Luella daydreamed about sticking it in Lyall Anderson’s black heart. The great miserable brute. How dare he? The more she thought about his words, the angrier she grew. How dare he stand there, with the sun behind him so she’d had to squint up at him as if she were looking up at some angry god? He’d looked like one too, the devil take him.

Frustration gnawed at her, for as angry as she was, she could not help but feel sympathy for him, too. She could only imagine how badly his pride had been hurt by the mess he’d got himself into with Lilith, and she knew how cruel Lilith could be when she was thwarted. No doubt she had rubbed his nose in it deliberately. Still, that was Lilith, not her, and she had not been doing anything she ought not. Except then she remembered the look she had given Hamilton—only in jest, mind—but she had also seen the way he had looked back at her.

Lyall had seen it too.

*Damn and blast.*

Furious now, both with herself and Lyall, she sat down and began cutting into the cherries and prying out the stone. Within a few minutes, her fingers were stained red with cherry juice.

Mrs Baillie set down a huge copper pan on the kitchen table and Luella bestirred herself to look into it.

“Sugar syrup,” Mrs Baillie explained. “I’ll let it cool awhile and then pour in the whisky. We’ll seal the cherries in jars with the whisky syrup. In a few weeks they’ll be soaked through, but they’ll get better if they’re left to bide a while longer. They’re delicious with a dollop of cream.”

“Aren’t they very strong?”

“Nah, a babe couldnae get drunk on them once they’re good and ready,” Mrs Baillie said with a smile and returned to

her work.

Luella nodded, and carried on with the cherries, still seething inwardly. It took hours to pit the entire basket, but the big jars looked lovely, the jewel-like cherries bathed in the amber liquid. If she had hoped such monotonous work would soothe her frayed temper, she was disappointed and, whilst Mrs Baillie was occupied in serving the midday meal, Luella reached for a jar and fished out a cherry. They were still sweet, but the whisky had already wrapped around them, giving them a little burst of something forbidden. Luella had never tried whisky before but, mixed with the sugar syrup, it tasted rather lovely.

Too morose to face eating her lunch with Hamilton and the countess, Luella decided she would do well to take herself off for a walk until she regained her temper and could trust herself not to snap anyone's head off. She got up, looking at the neat jars of cherries and with a last glance around to check no one was watching, she snatched one up and smuggled it outside with her.

Luella waited until she had left the castle grounds before she carefully turned the lid. It was a large jar, and heavy so she held it in both hands. The liquid was almost to the top, and she risked spilling it as she walked so Luella lifted it to her mouth and took a sip. The sweet liquid was delicious and potent and warmed her belly, sending a pleasant glow suffusing through her blood. Licking her lips, Luella took another sip, just to be sure, and then took a cherry, popping it in her mouth. She walked on, occasionally dipping into the jar and taking another cherry. After a while, her mood lifted. Who could feel angry and morose when the world around them was so lovely? She stopped in her tracks, staring, as an expanse of glittering blue appeared before her.

She had known they lived close to the sea, of course, but she had thought little of it. Luella had seen the mighty Thames often enough and had assumed... but good lord, how wrong she had been. The mucky Thames, redolent with the stench of everything vile that spewed from the city, could not compare with this pristine stretch of vivid sapphire.

Luella's breath caught, tears pricking at her eyes at the sheer beauty of it. Faced with something so glorious and so vast, she felt small and inconsequential, and strangely, that was comforting. For there must be something far greater at work than her own insignificant life could comprehend, so perhaps she ought not to worry so much. Somewhat dazed by both her philosophical musings and the sparkling sea before her, Luella sipped absently from the jar before walking on again. She was careful not to get too close to the sheer cliff's edge, though she could hear the sea surging beneath her and longed to take a closer look.

Seagulls shrieked excitedly overhead, their raucous cries ear-splitting as they played with the gusts of wind, sometimes riding the current and sometimes arrowing down, diving beneath the water like spears slicing into blue silk. Luella watched them as she walked and then noticed a well-worn path ahead that seemed to go down to the shore. Hurrying on, she gave a little cry of delight to discover a way down to a sheltered, sandy cove.

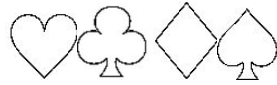
The path was steep and slippery in places, and she ended up on her backside twice as she descended, but happily saved the jar from spilling.

"Oh, how marvellous," she said aloud, her words immediately swept away by the sound of the waves. She sat down heavily on the dry sand, suddenly a trifle unsteady, and carefully set the jar down where it could not spill.

Luella hitched up her skirts, then undid her garters and stripped off stockings and shoes. Darting a cautious look around her to ensure she was alone, she also tugged off her pantaloons, not wanting to damage the delicate lacy trim with a dousing in salt water.

Setting the items carefully on her shoes, she tucked her skirts and petticoats under the edge of her corset as best she could, picked up the jar, and walked closer to the sea. She gave a little shriek as the icy water bathed her toes and danced out of the way, laughing. Popping another couple of cherries in her mouth, she watched the water with interest before daring another go. It was just as cold and she squealed, running away

again. Delighted by her new game, she took another swig of the sugary whisky mixture—it really was delicious—and ran back to the sea.



“Murdoch, come here, ye daft beggar,” Lyall shouted as Murdoch got too far ahead. He sighed, taking a moment to shrug off his coat and roll his sleeves up. It was mild for May and the sunshine was warm on his back.

The dog loped back, a sheepish expression on his face as he returned and pushed his wet nose against Lyall’s hand. Lyall shook his head. Murdoch was young yet and inclined to misbehave still. He had a worrying tendency to go off exploring on his own, which Lyall had not yet cured. There had already been several occasions when kindly neighbours had taken a considerable journey to bring the miscreant home again upon recognising his lordship’s dog.

There had always been wolfhounds at Wildsyde. His father had kept them, and Murdoch was a direct descendent of Murdo, his father’s favourite dog. Murdoch’s wives, Maggie and Moire, were more sensible than their daft husband and kept close to Lyall, watching their beloved with kindly exasperation, if Lyall was any judge. He thought perhaps he had seen that expression on his mother’s face a time or two when she looked at his father. He snorted at the idea and then remembered the look in Luella’s eyes that morning.

Something like guilt stirred in his chest. In the week since their trip to Wick and the bargain they had made, he had not seen Luella once. She had kept to the letter of their agreement, somehow making herself invisible. Now and then he would walk into a room and be certain she had been there moments before. His mother must have bought her perfume along with the dress, or perhaps it was just soap, but sometimes he caught the hint of a delicate floral scent lingering in the air.

Sometimes there would be a book set aside, still open at the page she was reading, and he imagined she had abandoned it in a hurry as she heard his footsteps. Was that what he had made her do? He had not intended for her to live like a ghost,

forever keeping out of his line of sight. Hadn't he, though? Wasn't that what he'd asked of her in return for educating her brother? She hadn't even commented upon the fact he had set money aside for her, he wasn't certain she had even registered the information, too concerned with her brother's future to care for herself. Was it just a clever act, to lull him into thinking she was a decent woman and not a calculating bitch like Lilith had been?

Lyall sighed and strode out, soothed as always by the expanse of rippling blue sea before him. It never failed to bring him perspective, to ease his temper or lift his spirits. Even Lilith could not take that from him. Lord, but how she had hated it here. She had hated his dogs too, not that Luella seemed keen on them. She had clearly thought them untrained and liable to bite her or Jack on first viewing them. He snorted at the idea. Murdoch would be as likely to lick her to death, the idiotic creature.

"Murdoch!" Lyall shouted in exasperation, just getting a glimpse of a grey tail as it disappeared down the path that led to a private beach.

It had been a favourite place of Lyall's and his brothers when they were lads, as it was sheltered from the wind and entirely hidden from view. They had come here to skinny dip and built sand forts and generally make asses of themselves. He smiled at the memories of his father teaching them to swim, or of being lifted on his massive shoulders as he strode into the icy water, muttering fiercely that it was cold enough to ensure they'd have no more siblings... a fact Lyall was glad of, as his two brothers and especially his little sister were trouble enough.

Sighing, he strode down the path after his idiot dog and was halfway down before he heard singing. Hardly able to believe his ears, he hurried to the beach and came to a halt at the bottom of the path. At his feet was a neat pile that seemed to comprise shoes, stockings and bloomers, as well as her new dress. Luella was standing in the sea in her underthings, with her petticoats hitched up and tucked under the edges of her corset, showing an expanse of long, slender legs. Her hair had

come free of its pins and cascaded down her back, the wind blowing the dark locks and making her look as wild and lovely as some mythical creature, a mermaid or a siren. Well, perhaps not a siren, as she was clearly tone deaf. She appeared to be serenading the seagulls. Her arms were thrown wide, and one held a large jar which seemed to be empty. Blinking with astonishment, he listened to the song she was belting out with more enthusiasm than tune.

*“Then, come, put the jorum about, and let us be merry and clever. Our hearts and our liquors are stout. Here’s to the Three Jolly Pigeons forever!”*

She put a good deal of emphasis on the forever, gesticulating madly to the birds wheeling overhead. Despite himself, Lyall’s lips turned up at the corners as he walked down the beach towards her. The dogs ran into the water, barking and jumping at each other as they played in the waves. Luella didn’t seem to even notice them.

*“Let some cry up woodcock or hare. Your bustards, your ducks, and your widgeons, But of all the gay birds in the air. Here’s a health to the Three Jolly Pigeons! Toroddle toroddle, toroll!”*

She turned around, apparently to make an extravagant bow, and lost her balance. Her arms windmilling wildly, she swayed backwards. Lyall hurried towards her, splashing through the icy water to grab hold of her just before she fell backwards and disappeared under the waves. In her current condition, he did not fancy her chances of getting up again.

She gave a little shriek as she stared owlishly up at him and pushed at his chest.

“Gerroff! Don’t you go manhandling me for you, sir, are... are... not very nyshe, *nice*,” she corrected.

“That’s as maybe,” he said with a wry smile. “But ye are smashed, lass.”

“Wassat?” she asked, her expression dubious.

“Ye are drunk out of ye heid,” Lyall explained patiently as she hung limply in his arms. If he let go, she’d simply collapse



into the sea.

She wrinkled her nose at him, which he took to be an expression of indignation, though it was hard to tell. “Am not!”

“Well, much as I hate to argue with ye, ye are a liar, but I suspected as much. Give me that jar.” Lyall grabbed it and took a sniff. “Holy God, ye have been drinking whisky!”

“I have *not*... not much,” she amended, pushing at his chest again. It was like being patted by a kitten. She was so drunk she could hardly lift her hand, let alone do any damage with it. “It wash only Mrshs Bally’s whiskery cherries,” she mumbled, resting her head on his shoulder with a sigh. “A babe could nae get drunk on them,” she added, which he suspected was what Sheenagh had told her.

“Whisky cherries?” he repeated, the only bit of that sentence he could decipher. “Aye, they’re innocent enough *this time next year*, ye little eejit! Did ye drink the contents of that whole jar, and eat the cherries, too?”

“Aye,” she said, grinning up at him and then giving a loud hiccough.

Lyall gave a startled laugh. “Oh, I am glad I am nae gonna have yer heid in the morning, lassie. Ye are gonna sorely regret this.”

She shrugged, such an expression of sorrow in her eyes he felt it strike at the place his heart had once been. “Add it to the pile,” she said, and suddenly went limp.

She fell so suddenly he almost lost his grip on her, but just caught her up again before her head went under the water. He lifted her into his arms, sodden petticoats and all, viscerally aware of the naked skin he could feel under his arms.

She was a dead weight, and surprisingly heavy, her head lolling back as she sang softly under her breath, “*Toroddle toroddle, toroll.*”

Lyall carried her back to the beach and set her down on the sand. She sprawled out, arms and legs akimbo like a peculiar starfish, eyes shut against the glare of the sun. The

wet petticoats clung to her body, lovingly highlighting lush curves he had no wish to become familiar with, yet he could not look away. How ridiculous and yet how glorious she looked, all inhibitions and cares cast aside, a strange, wild thing from another world, biding for a moment in his. She flung one slender arm over her eyes and hiccupped again and then groaned and the spell was broken. Lyall shook his head, reminding himself severely of exactly who and what he was dealing with.

“Get up,” he said. “The tide will come in soon and ye can nae stay here. Ye are lucky I came upon ye. Lord, ye have nae more sense than a bairn coming down here in this state.”

“Washn’t in this state,” she said indignantly.

“Well, if ye came down sober, that’s worse,” he said, reaching for her and hauling her into a sitting position. That seemed to be a mistake, for the colour left her face in a rush and then returned with a sickly green cast.

“Oh,” she said helplessly, covering her mouth with her hand.

“If ye are gonna boke...”

Well, she did, and before he could suggest it, she took herself further away. He considered putting distance between them himself but took pity. She did not look like a scheming harlot in this sorry state. So, he crouched down and held her wet hair back as she retched and made sounds of utter misery.

“There, there, lass, best ye rid yerself of it now, for it’s gonnæ get a good deal worse,” he said cheerfully, not beyond finding the situation humorous from his perspective.

Oh, she would be mortified when she sobered up.

“I want to die,” she moaned tragically and with considerable feeling.

“I dinnae blame ye for it none, but ye had better save that thought for the morning,” he said, unable to keep the amusement from his voice as he considered her getting drunk on whisky cherries when she had clearly not realised how potent they were. Of all the daft things to do. Suddenly the

situation seemed terribly funny, and he was hard pressed not to laugh.

“Come on. I think ye are done and we need to get ye home before anyone sees ye in such a state.”

Luella shook her head, dragging herself away from the mess she had made on the sand, and collapsed in a pitiful heap. “No. I’ll jus’ die here, s’pretty. I never sheen the sea, s’beautiful.”

“It is beautiful,” Lyall agreed, staring down at her. In different circumstances, with a different woman, he might have told her she was beautiful too, for she was, despite being roaring drunk and throwing up at his feet. He shook himself and bent down, hauling her up despite her vociferous protests.

“Haud ye wheesht,” he said mildly. “Can ye walk?”

“Course I can...” she began, and managed one step before her knees gave out.

Lyall caught her, holding her upright as he stooped to gather her dress, shoes and under things. He gazed at the lacy drawers for a moment before giving himself a mental shake and shoving them at her.

“Hold these,” he ordered, before lifting her into his arms.

Murdoch came running back to him, barking excitedly, perhaps thinking Luella was a new kind of stick to throw. She gave a little cry and clung to Lyall, her arms tightening around his neck.

“He’s nae gonna hurt ye,” he said with a sigh. “Can ye nae see his tail is a-wagging?”

Luella gazed blearily down at the animal. “Nice doggie,” she said doubtfully.

Lyall snorted. “Away with ye, Murdoch. Home now, lad.”

Murdoch pricked up his ears at the mention of home and sped off up the path with his wives in pursuit. Luella sighed, becoming boneless in his arms as he carried her up the steep slope away from the beach.

“Toroddle, toroddle, jolly, jolly pigeons,” she sang tunelessly, ending with a hiccup. Lyall cast her a dubious glance, wondering if she would throw up over him. “D’ya like my song?”

“Aye, it’s a fine song,” he said, for it was always best to agree with drunkards if you wanted to avoid a scene.

“My Pa taught me to sing that song.”

“Did he, then?”

She nodded. “When I was five. He taught me to fuzzle the cards too, and how to cry on demand. He taught me lots of useful skills to trick people, to make them like me or feel sorry for me, sorry enough to give me their money. He wasn’t very nice, my Papa.”

“Nae, I reckon not,” Lyall said sourly, wishing she would keep her revelations to herself.

He’d suspected as much and to hear proof of everything he’d believed ought to satisfy him. It didn’t. A picture had formed in his mind of a little girl with ebony locks, crying on demand because her father had taught her to. His stomach twisted.

“I wanted to be nice,” she went on, the words slurred but all too audible. “I tol’ Pa I wouldn’t play his tricks, and I still try to be nice, but sometimes life won’t let you. P’rhaps I’m doing it wrong, or p’rahps I don’t know how, or p’rahps I’m jus’ *not* nice,” she added, a catch in her voice.

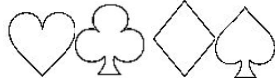
Lyall darted a look at her to see tears welling in her eyes. Good God, the last thing he needed was a weeping drunk. There would be talk enough if anyone saw them, what with her sopping wet and in nothing but her corset and petticoats, but with her sobbing too... Panic rose in his chest.

“Ye *are* nice,” he said firmly, though he didn’t know that he believed it himself.

She sniffled and looked at him, a remarkably steady gaze for one who was so thoroughly inebriated. “You don’t think so.”

“Ach, what does it matter what I think?” he said irritably. “Hamilton thinks ye are nice, so does Mrs Baillie. Hell, I think ye have won my mother over too.”

“It matters to me,” she murmured sadly, and passed out.



“Good heavens!” Mrs Baillie exclaimed as Lyall kicked the back door open and strode into the kitchen. “She’s drunk as an emperor,” he said in explanation at the horror on Mrs Baillie’s face as he carried Luella inside looking like she was half dead. “On whisky cherries,” he added with more than a hint of accusation.

“Well, the little madam! I thought there was a jar missing,” Mrs Baillie said indignantly.

“Never mind that, for heaven’s sake, get her dressed and sobered up before anyone sees her,” he ordered.

“But she is wet through!”

“I dinnae care, ye can undress her again when she’s safe in her room, but I’ll nae have the upper servants chatter about me carrying her around in her underthings.”

“Aye, well, fair enough,” Mrs Baillie said with a nod. “Did no one see ye?”

Lyall shook his head. “I came via the old gate. She was down on the beach, up to her knees in the water. Christ, she might have drowned, Sheenagh. Can ye imagine the talk if not only my wife but her cousin drowned within weeks of getting here?”

“Well, and why did she go?” Sheenagh asked him, her keen gaze skewering him with a look that made guilt burn in his chest. “She was nae at lunch and Hamilton seemed to think ye had been unkind to her. That true?”

Lyall ran a hand through his hair, only now considering what might have happened if he had not come upon her. Any amusement he had felt at the situation vanished at the idea Luella might have died, might have been swept out to sea, and

the last words he'd said to her had accused her of trying to seduce his brother.

"I..." He cleared his throat, reminding himself that he had every right to treat her with suspicion. "She was flirting with Hamilton. I told her not to try her tricks on him."

"Lord, but ye are ye father's son," she muttered crossly, sending him an impatient look.

"What does that mean?" he demanded, but was only given terse instructions to help her wrestle Luella into her dress. They made a haphazard job of it but at least she looked relatively respectable.

Lyall put her in a chair and stood back as Sheenagh forced a cup of coffee down her. Luella made faint sounds of protest but submitted to a force stronger than her own until she blinked, looking around her with a glimmer of recognition. Her gaze met his, and she stiffened, perhaps remembering now what had set her off on her jaunt to the beach with only a jar of whisky cherries for company. Her colour segued from white to green to scarlet and back to a sickly milk pudding tone that did not become her in the least.

"Are ye going to boke again?" he asked cautiously.

She shook her head, glaring at him.

"Nae, I dinnae think ye could have anything to puke with, ye left it all at the beach."

Sheenagh sent him a warning look and refilled the coffee cup in Luella's hands. "Get that down ye, lassie. Once ye can walk, I'll get ye to bed, aye?"

Luella nodded and sipped at the coffee, her expression carefully blank.

Lyall frowned down at her, intensely disliking the feeling of having done something wrong and the guilt associated with it. Why the hell should he feel guilty for protecting his little brother, who had more hair than wit? If Lyall could get caught by a scheming female, no one was safe, and he did not trust *this* female an inch. She was too... too easy to believe in. Just look at her now, sitting there sipping coffee and looking all

fragile and defeated, as if *he'd* done something wrong. She was the one who'd been laughing and messing about with Hamilton. It was she who had sent that seductive look at his brother with her eyes sparkling with mischief and that teasing note in her voice and...

Lyall's jaw tightened, and he told himself to stop being so bloody ridiculous.

"There's no need for you to stay."

The voice was remarkably steady, and ice cold. Lyall looked back at Luella, who was carefully avoiding his eye.

"I'm sure you have far more important things to do," she added, the words only a little slurred.

"Aye, I reckon, but I wanted to be sure ye are well," he said, before adding judiciously: "Though I reckon ye will feel sorry for yerself yet a while."

She shot him a look of deep irritation, which made him feel better. He much preferred to see her angry than that drowned kitten look he'd been regarding these past ten minutes.

"Ye will be willing to cut yer own heid off by morning," he added, not above enjoying her discomfort a little.

"I'm willing now," she said through her teeth.

Lyall's lips twitched. "Well, t'was a very fine song, at least. The one about the pigeons, I mean."

She shot him a look that promised retribution. "I hate you," she said with feeling,

"Reckon I believe ye," he replied, unable to hide the amusement in his voice. "Though you have a good many admiring seagulls now. I can nae speak for the pigeons, mind."

"If you laugh at me, I *will* kill you," she warned him.

Relenting, he smiled at her. It was unfair of him to tease her when she felt so wretched. "Ach, come on, Luella, there's nae harm done. We've all done stupid things when in our cups. Mrs Baillie will fix ye a cure for yer heid. Works like a charm,

it does, and... and I... well, I may have been a little hasty earlier.”

“Hasty?” she repeated, incredulous. “I have done everything in my power to stay out of your way, and you think I would jeopardise Jack’s chances by flirting with your brother?”

She sent him a look of such disgust he felt scalded by it. Guilt stirred again, which in turn made resentment burn when Lilith had ruined everything so comprehensively.

“Well, ye can nae blame me for being sceptical, aye?” he shot back.

And there was the drowned kitten look again.

“No,” she said quietly, setting down her coffee cup. “I can’t blame you.”

With more dignity than balance, she hauled herself unsteadily to her feet and lurched towards the stairs. Lyall hurried after her, afraid she might fall, but she shook his hand off as he reached to steady her.

“I’m fine,” she snapped, and so he let her go alone, shadowing her up the worn treads until he felt certain she would not break her neck.

“I hope ye feel better,” he said, to which she returned no answer, but went to her room and closed the door behind her.



## Chapter 11



*Dear Father,*

*Thank you for your confidence in me. I am leaving for Tweedmouth tomorrow morning and will meet the engineers at the station. I know you would prefer to do this work yourself, but finding Thorn is even more important and Montagu needs your support. I know how crucial this bridge is to your plans, though, and assure you I will do all in my power to ensure we find the correct placement for it. I will keep you posted.*

*Please give mother my love and remind her I am a grown man of one and twenty now. If she sends me another care package whilst I am away, I shall be forced to remonstrate with her.*

*—Excerpt of a letter from Mr Felix Knight to his father, Mr Gabriel Knight.*

**7<sup>th</sup> June 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall looked up from the bill for repairs he was perusing at the sound of laughter and turned to look out of the window. Jack was trotting his pony very competently up and down in front of the castle while his sister looked on. He watched as she applauded and saw the answering smile on Jack's face as he beamed at her, cheeks flushed with pleasure. Luella ran to him as he dismounted, hugging him tightly and kissing his

head. Jack said something that made her laugh again, the merry sound echoing around the castle walls.

It was the first time he had seen or heard her since the whisky cherry incident, as he had labelled it in his mind. According to his mother, she had spent two days in bed, utterly wretched. Since then, she had resumed her self-imposed duties in the kitchen, but on the few occasions he had gone there—merely to save Mrs Baillie the trouble of climbing the stairs—she had contrived to be elsewhere. For well over two weeks, she had simply ceased to exist as far as he was concerned. Which was perfect, he reminded himself. That was exactly how he wanted it to be.

Hamilton was not so pleased. Luella refused to do anything more than bid him good morning or good afternoon, apparently, and would only converse with him at dinner when their mother was there to chaperone. All Lyall's fault, naturally, as Hamilton was quick to point out.

Perhaps he could get his mother to take Luella with her when she returned home. Her brother seemed happy enough here, so he was no bother, and that way Lyall need not have a blasted chaperone under his roof as well as the unhappy little ghost that seemed to haunt the bloody castle and undermine his peace of mind. Yes, the sooner he was rid of her, the better it would be. For her as well as for him. She could not be happy scurrying about and keeping out of sight as she was doing. He determined to put the suggestion to his mother that afternoon. Then he could get them both out of the way at the same time and have the castle to himself again. Just the way he liked it. Hamilton would be easy enough to shake free once Luella had gone. Perhaps he would go with her. That was a worrying thought and one he would do well to get his mother to squash if Hamilton raised it.

The scent of something spicy, heavy with cinnamon and ginger, drifted to his nose, making his stomach growl. He knew Luella had been practising her skills, for Mrs Baillie was always keen to tell him of her successes, and that her fair hand had often prepared the food he ate. She seemed to have a fondness for making cakes and puddings, and Lyall could not

fault her for it. Whatever she was cooking today made him think of Christmas and happy days as a boy, when the castle had been decked out for the celebrations his parents always made so much of.

He wondered what Luella would make of it all this year and thought it might be nice to make more of an effort for once, for it seemed a bit foolish to go to so much trouble when he lived alone, and... he thrust the notion away. She would be gone before then if he had his way. Lyall glowered at the repair bill, which was far more expensive than he had hoped.

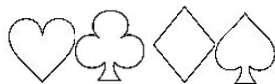
A heavy sigh from in front of the fireplace took his attention again and Lyall regarded Moire and Maggie as they raised doleful eyes towards him.

“It’s June,” he said firmly. “I am nae lighting the fire.”

Though he had to admit the day was chilly and far from the summery weather they had enjoyed at the end of May.

Sighing again, Moire put her head on her paws. Maggie gave him another reproachful glare before doing likewise.

“And where is that worthless fellow of yours?” Lyall asked them, which they did not deign to answer. “Fine, don’t ye talk to me either, see if I care,” he muttered irritably, and reached for his pen.



“Do you want to come to the stables and help me?” Jack asked, his face pink with exertion and happiness. “I’ll let you brush out her tail if you like,” he added generously, for he clearly believed this was a great treat.

“Actually, I think I’m going to stretch my legs before the rain comes,” Luella replied, ruffling his thick hair. She glanced up at the sky, which was devoid of even a glimmer of sunshine. A sharp breeze tugged at her bonnet and Luella was grateful for the cloak she had almost packed away only a week before, thinking she would not need it again for a while.

“Ye are not to walk out without telling anyone where ye are going,” Jack chided her, and she smiled a little at the trace

of Scottish brogue she heard creeping into his speech more and more.

“I beg your pardon, Jack. I am going to Bucholie Castle, and before you say it, no, I won’t go anywhere near the edge or climb in the ruins, I promise. Just there and back to blow the cobwebs away.”

“Well, I suppose that sounds all right,” Jack conceded. “I’ll see you at dinner, then?”

“You will,” she agreed. “And don’t forget to wash before you come down.”

Jack pulled a face but muttered a grudging ascent to this command before taking his pony back to the stables.

Luella watched him go before striding out. It seemed the only way she got any sleep these days was to wear herself out. If not, she was beset with that peculiar dream again, where she ran pell-mell through the darkness, away from the castle and into the unknown, though sometimes she was running from something, and sometimes desperately towards it. Except that she knew now it wasn’t a *something* at all, but a someone.

“You are not right in the head, Luella, my girl,” she scolded herself sternly, as she told herself several times a day. It did not make a scrap of difference.

The moment she closed her eyes at night, there he was: Lord Buchanan, with his broad shoulders and his muscular arms, not to mention those knees. She sighed. Lord, what a fool, to get herself in such a sorry state over a man who could not stand the sight of her. At least if it had been Hamilton, it might have been understandable. He was kind and funny and tried very hard to make her feel at home. The countess too seemed to have decided Luella was not the devil’s daughter either, and treated her with increasing warmth. Mrs Baillie was an absolute dear, despite her scolding and occasionally sharp tongue, for she had taken Luella under her wing and determined to teach her everything she knew. In fact, if it were not for the situation with Lord Buchanan, Luella would have been happier than she had ever been in her life. But there was no getting away from him, no matter how she tried.

Though she had not seen him for days, he was always there, for he was as much a part of Wildsyde Castle as the stones that made the walls. The pleasant rumble of his deep voice seemed to reach her wherever she went, the heavy tread of his footsteps a sound she had learned to recognise so she could leave a room before he entered it. There had been several times she had almost not run away, for she had wanted badly to see him halt on the threshold of whatever room she occupied. She imagined taking her own sweet time to walk past him in silence, head held high, but behaviour of that nature would only remind him she was here and how much he disliked that fact. He would send her away at best, at worst he might not do everything he promised for Jack. She could not risk that. So she bit her lip and held her indignation at bay and enjoyed her time in the kitchens, learning everything she could so she could one day have a guest house of her own, and make a proper home for herself and Jack once he was free of Lord Buchanan's guardianship. Of course, he'd be a grown man by then, hopefully earning his own wage. Maybe he'd even be married.

The idea struck her square in the chest. Not that she didn't want Jack to grow up and marry and have a family. Of course she did, more than anything. But then he would have his own life and be far less a part of her own. A sense of melancholy settled over her as the ruins of Bucholie Castle came into view. On a gloomy afternoon with ominous grey clouds chasing the daylight away, it was the perfect setting for sombre thoughts of an uncertain future.

She would not return to London, that much she knew for certain. A place in the countryside was what she longed for, close to the sea, for she had come to love the sight and sound of that vast stretch of water. There was something about it that soothed her nerves and made her feel more at peace, no matter if it was sparkling azure or a seething foam flecked mass of steely grey blue as it was now.

Luella stood for a long time, staring out at the sea, and contemplating her future. The idea of leaving this place was remarkably depressing. If only Lord Buchanan did not distrust her quite so thoroughly, she could be happy here.

*Liar*, she told herself. If he was nice to her, if he showed her even a little encouragement, she would likely do something very foolish indeed. She might go getting ideas in her head that had no business being there. Worse, she might act on them. No, it was far safer that they kept each other at arm's length and did not go about mending any bridges.

Shivering, Luella caught hold of the billowing folds of her cloak and tugged them around herself. The wind was far sharper here, blowing in off the sea and bringing with it a salty damp spray of icy water that prickled over her skin. She walked on, striding out quickly now as the idea of sitting down to a good hot dinner possessed her mind. She had helped Mrs Baillie prepare a glorious lamb stew earlier, and she had made a cloutie dumpling for dessert. It had still been simmering in the cloutie cloth that gave it the name when she'd left, but the scent of spices had permeated the kitchen, and she was eager to try it.

The wind picked up, buffeting her as she walked, and the sound of the crashing waves was such that it was a wonder she heard the pitiful whimpering at all. Stopping in her tracks, Luella turned, searching for the source of the sound. It came again, this time with an unhappy bark. The field beside her had been fenced to keep sheep in, and along one side had grown a low, scrubby hedge and the noise seemed to come from there.

Luella moved cautiously, having no great desire to come across a stray dog, but the sound had been so piteous, she could not in all conscience walk away without checking to see if some creature was in distress. She walked slowly, peering around the corner of the hedge and giving an exclamation of dismay at what she saw.

"Murdoch!" she exclaimed, as the big dog whimpered and thumped his tail at the sight of her. Luella swallowed, reminding herself that Lord Buchanan had assured her this was a good sign.

She walked closer, appalled to see the dog had been caught in a snare, his front leg trapped by a thin coil of wire that had sunk deep into the flesh. The other end was nailed

securely to the fence post, and she did not see a way she could get it free.

“Oh, you poor thing. I think that was supposed to catch a rabbit, not you. Were you chasing it?” she asked, wondering why she was having a conversation with a creature who did not know what she was talking about.

Yet Murdoch thumped his tail again and gave a soft bark, which sounded so much like agreement that she laughed a little.

“Well, that wasn’t very wise, now, was it? Just you hold tight, though. I’ll fetch help and be back before you know it.”

Luella went to leave, but the dog whimpered and cried at the sight of her walking away, trying to get up and only tugging the snare tighter.

“Oh, no!” Luella cried, moving back towards him as he yelped in pain. “Don’t move, you foolish thing. Oh, Lord, now what am I to do?”

She dared to get closer to the dog and crouched down beside him. Gingerly, she reached out and patted his head. The big wiry tail thumped, and large, guileless eyes stared trustingly up at her. Luella stared at the wire on the dog’s bloody leg and swallowed. “I’ll just see if I can—”

He growled, which made her give a little shriek, and she scrambled away from Murdoch. The big tail thumped again, and he ducked his head, looking a little sheepish.

“Well, I suppose I wouldn’t want anyone touching it either,” she admitted. “But someone will have to if we are to get you free. I suppose you’d let your master do it?”

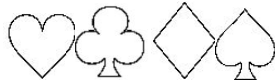
Luella sighed, looking around her. The rain had begun, a fine mizzle that settled over everything, leaving a fine shimmer of moisture. Murdoch shivered, looking utterly miserable.

“Well, I told Jack where I was going, thank heavens. That boy has a deal more sense than I credited him with. So, someone will come looking eventually, assuming your master isn’t hopeful I’ve fallen off a cliff. I suppose he would come

looking for you, though, so someone with find us,” she said encouragingly, as much for her own benefit as Murdoch’s.

With nothing much else she could do, she sat down beside the dog, stretching the folds of her cloak over him and stroking his head, taking both their minds off the situation by talking nonsense. Having soon run out of things to say, she turned to the big dog.

“Do you like music, Murdoch?”



Lyall muttered an oath. He had walked the castle grounds twice, calling Murdoch, but the disobedient wretch had gone wandering again. Now he’d get it in the neck from Mrs Baillie for missing dinner, and he’d been looking forward to discovering what Luella had made for dessert too.

He strode around to the stable, a little surprised to find Jack sneaking into Adaira’s stall, holding a bridle.

“Jack?”

The boy leapt about a foot in the air and turned, looking about as guilty as a lad could do.

“What are ye about? Ye ken better than to take Adaira out with no one knowing about it.”

Jack swallowed but met his gaze bravely, putting up his chin. “Yes, sir... I mean, my lord. Only I had to.”

“Never mind the ‘my lord,’ ye may call me Lyall. But what do ye mean, ye had to?”

Jack shifted from foot to foot, clearly nervous, but then his face set into something hard and determined. “I’ll only tell you if you promise not to be cross with her.”

Lyall sighed. He might have known. “What has she done now?”

“Nothing!” Jack said crossly. “She told me she was going to walk to Bucholie Castle and that she wouldn’t go near the edge or climb on the ruins, so she did everything she was supposed to, didn’t she?”



“Aye, she did right to tell ye, but are ye telling me she has nae returned?”

Jack nodded, his expression taut with concern. “She ought to have been home more than an hour ago, and she said she would see me at dinner and that’s now and—”

“All right, laddie, dinna fash. I’ll find her, eh?”

“You will?”

Lyall felt a surge of guilt at the relief in the boy’s eyes. “Aye, of course I will. Did ye think I would nae?”

Jack shrugged. “Everyone knows you hate her.”

“Ach, I don’t hate her,” he said uneasily. The boy stared steadily back at him, his stormy grey eyes the mirror of his sister’s, and full of sincerity.

“She’s not a bit like Lilith,” Jack said, his voice firm. “And I couldn’t blame you for hating *her*, for she was never nice to us, especially not to Luella. I think she was jealous of her, but Luella is kind and funny and she’s always looked after me. If we must share anything, she always gives me the biggest piece and...”

He swallowed hard, his throat working.

Lyall laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “Jack, she’s fine, I promise. Perhaps she has turned her ankle in a rabbit hole and it’s taking her a long time to get home but I’m certain it’s nothing serious. I’ll find her, I promise ye.”

Jack nodded, returning a brave smile. “Yes. Thank you, my... thank you, Lyall.”

“No bother. Now run along and eat yer dinner afore Mrs Baillie skelps ye for spoiling all her hard work.”

“But ought I not to come and—”

“Get, now,” Lyall said firmly, pointing at the castle. “I mean it.”

Jack nodded and ran back indoors.

Lyall hurried to saddle a horse the moment the boy had gone. What he'd said to Jack was true, but the cliffs could be treacherous, and if the foolish girl had gone down to the beach in this weather and the tide had cut her off... *No*. Just a turned ankle, or she had got herself turned around somehow and taken a wrong path. It was nothing serious. Nothing to get in a lather about. Yet something fearful and anxious twisted in his gut, and he knew he would never forgive himself if anything happened to her.

## Chapter 12



*To the Sons of Hades,*

*I thought you ought to know, this is just the beginning. I will destroy your club, and I will destroy you.*

*—Excerpt of a letter to The Sons of Hades, from an unknown correspondent.*

**7<sup>th</sup> June 1845, Gillmont, Hampstead Heath.**

“Mr Weston!”

Miss Elmira Hastings ran from the door of the pretty farmhouse building, heedless of the rain that had been falling with increasing fervour for the past twenty minutes.

“Miss Hastings, please go inside. I shall just see to my horse, and I will be with you,” Larkin insisted. The girl was too slender, despite the many food parcels he sent to her. No doubt she shared everything out and kept nothing for herself, despite the fact they kept Gillmont well provisioned. But somehow word got around and there were often hungry mouths appearing at the back door, hoping for a share of the kindness that he knew could be found here.

“But you are soaked to the bone!” she exclaimed, her large blue eyes wide with concern.

“And so shall you be if you don’t heed me,” he said, laughing. “Please, go inside or I shall be forced to carry you in myself, and then where would we be?”

She blushed and gave him an uncertain look, for she never seemed sure whether he was joking. Just as well in this

instance as she did as he told her, hurrying back inside the house.

Once his horse was comfortably settled, Larkin hurried around and let himself into the kitchen. No one stood on ceremony at Gillmont, and he was greeted with the scent of something rich and meaty as Joanie turned, rolling pin raised and a scowl on her ruddy face.

“Oh, it’s you!” she said, her face clearing. “Lord love you, I nearly brained you good. Can’t you holler when you come in?”

“Afternoon, Joanie. Sorry I startled you. That smells delicious, what are you cooking?”

Larkin hurried over and gazed into the huge pot she was stirring. He picked up a spoon, about to dip into it, and got his knuckles soundly smacked.

“No picking. You’ll spoil your appetite,” she said severely, and then caught him up in a bear hug.

Seeing as Joanie was about two feet shorter but outweighed him by several stone, this was quite an experience, but one to which he’d become accustomed. She pressed her lips to his cheek and gave him a noisy kiss before letting him go again.

“Run along, now. You’ll find Elmira and her babe in the front parlour.”

Larkin laughed, swiped a biscuit from the table where they had been set to cool, and danced out of the way as she attempted to smack his backside. He left her chortling merrily as he made his way down the corridor to the front of the house. Joanie had been destined for the workhouse when she’d heard a whisper about Gillmont and thank goodness she had. They had desperately needed a cook, and Joanie, who had grown up on a farm until circumstance found her working in a brothel, had learned her art from her grandmother.

Most of the women here had stories to tell, usually involving unscrupulous men and broken hearts. Larkin sometimes wondered how they could bear to look at him,

knowing the trouble his sex had brought them. Elmira was a case in point, and one that had touched him profoundly. She was a lady by birth, but having a child out of wedlock had cast her into the same situation as Joanie: abandoned by her family, shunned by her friends, and with no way to earn her keep than to entertain those same men who would call her a whore, yet offered her no other means of supporting herself. Happily, Larkin had discovered Elmira before she had been reduced to such desperate straits.

Gillmont had started when he and his friends had heard a man boasting at the tables of their club, of how the woman he had made pregnant had begged him for help and he had cast her aside. He had actually laughed as he recounted how he'd told her it was her own fault for acting the slut and that she deserved all she'd got. The girl had been little more than a child, taken in by promises of marriage and everlasting love. Larkin and Ashton had quietly taken the man out back and taught him the error of his ways, not that it would change anything. It certainly wouldn't change that man, nor the world, but they had found the girl, and then not had a clue what to do with her. Gillmont had been Larkin's idea, and one he was profoundly proud of. No one else knew the circumstances in which his mother had met his father, and he wasn't about to tell them, but she had been desperate, penniless, and with no other option than to become mistress to a man she'd never met in return for a roof over her head. Happily, that lonely, decent man had been his father, and it had been a love match from the beginning. But what if his mother had not been so lucky? His sister, too, had been foolish, falling in love with a man who had given her a child and abandoned her. If not for the good man who had come to her rescue, married her and loved her with all his heart...what then?

"Oh, there you are," Elmira said, getting up and hurrying to him. "Now take that coat off at once, for it is wet through."

"Afternoon, George," Larkin said, seeing the young woman lounging by the fire with her feet on the fender.

Not that anyone would know she was a woman, with her short hair and her men's clothes, but that was the way George

preferred it. She was stout and strong and gave them the appearance of having a man about the place if they needed it, without actually having a man about. As far as propriety and safety went, it was as close to the perfect solution as they could get. George had been living hand to mouth after being kicked out by her family for not being the sort of girl they could understand. She had been kind to Elmira when she'd found herself in trouble, though, and so she'd had to come to Gillmont too, naturally.

"Ere, give it to me. I'll set it by the fire to dry. You'd best get them boots off 'im an all," George said sternly before offering him a hand to shake. "How do, Lars?"

"Fine thanks, George, and yourself?"

"I'll do. This one has been fretting over you, though. Thought you'd gone for good after that last letter."

"George!" Elmira said crossly as George strode away with Larkin's coat, her cheeks flushing pink.

Lord, but she was lovely. Slender as a reed, her fair hair curled around a face that ought to be captured in a portrait. There was an innate sweetness there, but something else too, a hint of steel that warned you she would not bend to your will unless she chose to. Larkin longed to paint her himself, to capture that fierce, beautiful spirit, but it was inappropriate in the circumstances and would only cause them both trouble if anyone recognised her. Larkin turned away before the sight captivated him and he found himself staring. This was why he had kept away, but he worried for all the women and... ah well, he was here now.

A faint mewling sound issued from a bassinet and Elmira hurried over to it. She spoke softly, rocking the cradle with one hand, and the sounds subsided. Larkin moved to stand beside her, looking down at the baby, pink-cheeked and healthy, thank God.

"He looks well," he whispered.

Elmira nodded and then gazed up at him, her eyes shining with gratitude. "Thanks to you."

Larkin shook his head and went to stand by the fire. "I just sent you a few things so I could feel useful and then take all the credit," he said with a grin, trying to brush her gratitude aside, for he did not wish for her to feel that for him. Not that.

"And how goes things at the club?" she asked instead, taking her cue for she knew he did not like nor wish to be thanked.

"Oh, the same as ever. Ashton is doing his best to provoke Lord Merrington to knock his block off in the hope they can settle things in the ring."

Her lips set in a thin line at his words. "I hope he may succeed," she said tartly, and then laughed at the expression of surprise he returned. She never failed to remind him she was not the delicate little flower she appeared to be.

"I never liked Merrington. He had a way of looking at one, like he was measuring you, and he would whisper the most disgusting remarks in your ear. Wandering hands, too," she added with an expression of disgust.

Larkin made a mental note to murder the fellow before Ashton could get his hands on him.

"What else?" she pressed, for his friends were part of a world she had once inhabited too.

He suspected that, as fragile a link as it was, it made her feel better to keep up with a little of the gossip.

"Leo and Muir have become thick as thieves and seem intent on breaking their necks in the most ridiculous way possible. The usual."

"Oh, what are they up to now?" she asked, settling herself down with an expression of delight.

Larkin smiled. She had only met Leo and Muir twice, but she loved to hear of their exploits, seeming to take such a vicarious thrill in the idea of their derring-do that he wondered what she might try if given the chance. Before he could speak, the door opened and Nan came in, carrying a tea tray. Her situation was much like Elmira's, except for two years she had lived the life Elmira had narrowly escaped, earning her keep as

best she could and trying to raise her little girl, Amy. The madam in whose employ she had found herself was undoubtedly the wickedest creature Larkin had ever encountered.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” Nan said with a smile, huffing a little over the hefty tray she was carrying.

“Good day to you, Nan. You’re looking as lovely as a spring day,” Larkin said, hurrying to take it from her and set it carefully down.

“Such a gent he is,” she said approvingly, before smoothing a loving hand over the striped green gown she wore. It was well made and hugged her generous curves perfectly. “Elmira made it for me. She’s that clever with a needle and thread.”

“Oh, fustian, I merely altered it to fit,” Elmira said with a laugh.

Nan rolled her eyes. “Can’t take a compliment, this one,” she said with a sigh, before surveying Larkin with narrowed eyes. “You changed your mind, then? We thought you was keeping away.”

“It’s Joanie’s cooking what brings him sniffing around,” George said as she came back into the room.

Larkin grinned at her but gave a shrug. “I ought to stay away, for all our sakes, and I intend to, but even Leo agreed I needed to come for a visit. You see, we are worried for you. We’ve been having a spot of trouble at the club.”

“Oh,” Elmira set down the teapot and stared at him. “But I just asked how things were going and you said nothing about it. What sort of trouble?”

“I’m sorry, I was going to have a quiet word with George first,” he admitted, glancing at George, who was watching him intently.

Elmira’s expression darkened. “I’m not a child, Mr Weston.”



“I know that,” he replied hastily. “Only, this is supposed to be a safe haven, a place where you need not worry and now —”

He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling wretched. Some saviours they were if their own problems got brought down upon women they’d tried to help.

“No life is entirely free of worries and you, and the other gentlemen are the only ones who troubled to help us in our time of need. If you are in difficulty now, you ought to count on us too,” she said, lifting her chin defiantly.

Larkin smiled, touched, even though he did not have the least intention of involving the women. Far from it.

“I only came to put you on your guard. I thought of writing, but I didn’t want you to worry, and a letter seemed too impersonal. Just make sure you lock up, keep your eye out for strangers, and don’t let anyone in unless you are entirely certain of them,” he said carefully, treading a line between making them see the danger and frightening them. “I don’t believe anyone knows of our connection to this place, but I cannot be certain of that. We would never forgive ourselves if anything happened to you and we’d done nothing to stop it. So, I’m afraid Leo is arranging for a couple of men to keep guard at night.”

“Oh, bleedin’ hell, we don’t need that,” George said at once. He had known she would, which was why he’d been going to tackle her first. “I can keep watch. You know I’m a fine shot,” she added.

Larkin nodded, having seen evidence of this with his own eyes. “I do know it, George,” he said. “But we want to be certain. You won’t see the men, they won’t bother you at all. Leo is vetting them himself and you can be certain they *won’t* bother you.”

“Tell Milly that,” Nan said, folding her arms.

Larkin winced, knowing Milly had good reason to hate men. She never showed her face when Larkin was there and knowing there were men on the ground would upset her, but

he did not know how else to ensure they were safe. So far, only the founder members of the club and their property had been targeted, but he could not be certain whoever was doing this would not include Gillmont if they discovered it.

“I am sorry,” Larkin said. “Truly, I am, but our priority is keeping you and the children safe. That’s all. As soon as we have dealt with the problem, things will go back to normal.”

“And how long will that take?” George asked him.

Larkin shook his head. “That I can’t tell you, but I can tell you, we will deal with it,” he said, meaning it. The fire had been the last straw. They were hunting now, having decided they must write a list of all the people who might have taken it into their heads to do such a thing. He suspected the list would be rather longer than they anticipated, but they would figure it out, and when they discovered who was responsible, they would make them pay.

## Chapter 13



*My darling,*

*When the bloody hell are you coming home? The place is going to wrack and ruin without you and I'm losing my mind. Surely Lyall can manage his own affairs. I do not see what is so difficult about finding someone to chaperone Miss Fulbright. Especially if she is not the wicked creature you feared she might be, and by God, that is a relief. Have a care though Ruth, Lilith was beyond anything we had ever encountered before, so there's still a chance she's playing a long game.*

***—Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Gordon Anderson, The Earl of Morven, to his wife, The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven.***

**7<sup>th</sup> June 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall scanned the countryside as he rode. The sun was setting now, not that you could see anything resembling sun, as the fine mist of rain obscured everything. He blinked, wiped his face, and brought his horse to a halt. Unease began to turn to panic as he drew closer to the ruined castle without so much as a glimpse of her. An odd sound reached him, then. It sounded... It sounded a little like singing. *Terrible* singing.

“*Luella!*” he shouted, standing in his stirrups to get a better look around. A sharp bark caught his ears, and he turned the horse, trotting on. “Murdoch?”

Lyall cantered on toward the place the bark had come from.

“We’re over here!”

“Thank the Lord!” he said fervently, swinging down from his saddle and hurrying over to Luella, who was huddled on the grass with Murdoch.

“Are ye hurt, lass?” he asked anxiously, looking her over for any signs of distress. “What happened? Why did ye nae come home?”

“No, I’m not hurt, but Murdoch is,” she said, and it was only now he noticed the way she sat close to the dog, her cloak wrapped tightly around him as she stroked his head. The dog she had been afraid of. He wondered what it had cost her to come to Murdoch’s aid but pushed the thought aside to examine later.

“What have ye done, ye daft beggar?” he asked the dog gently.

“A snare,” Luella said, her voice taut. “I’m so sorry. I tried to get it off, but he growled at me, and I was afraid he—”

“Aye, he might have bitten ye out of fear. Dinnae fret, Luella, ye did just fine. Thank ye kindly for staying with him,” he said, meaning it.

“That’s all right,” she replied, looking rather dazed. “I started to come for help, but he got upset and tried to follow me. I feared he’d hurt himself worse, so I stayed. I knew you’d come looking for him.”

Lyall paused at that, turning to look into her eyes. “I came to look for ye, nae Murdoch.”

Her cheeks turned pink, and she blinked rather rapidly, but that might have been the rain. It was coming down harder now, and she must be frozen and wet through.

“Ye brother has been scared out of his wits for ye,” Lyall added briskly, not wanting her to think he had cared overly much. He was just doing the decent thing, that was all.

“Of course. He must have been worried. Well, thank you for coming.”

Lyall nodded, turning his attention to Murdoch. “Ach, ye poor gowk. What am I to do with ye?” Looking up, he saw where the wire had been nailed into the fence post, twisted it about his hand and pulled. It came free easily enough, which was something. He looked back at Murdoch with a sigh, hating that his *occasionally* faithful friend was in pain. “I reckon we had best get ye home, *a chuilein*. Ma and Sheenagh will have more luck with taking the wire off ye. I suppose I will have to hold ye down while they do it aye, so don’t go getting ideas about biting me. It’s nae my fault ye are a wee eejit. Perhaps ye will heed me and bide at my heel now, aye?”

Murdoch made a grumbling sound in response and Lyall looked up to find Luella staring at him in astonishment.

“What?” he demanded.

She bit her lip and shook her head. “Nothing,” she said, but he thought she was smiling.

“He understands me just fine,” he retorted defensively. “Come on, Murdoch. I must carry ye now.”

Murdoch whimpered but did not protest as Lyall got up and lifted him into his arms. He walked to where his horse was quietly cropping grass and Luella followed him.

“Up ye get,” he said, gesturing to his horse.

She paled and shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Do ye nae want to learn to ride like ye brother?” he asked dryly.

“Not like this, and that isn’t a side-saddle,” she added, with an indignant lift of her chin.

“Now is nae the time for splitting hairs. Ye are wet through, and Ma will have my hide if ye catch yer death of cold. Put yer foot in the stirrup now.”

She glared at him, and Lyall sighed. “I need to get Murdoch home.”

“I’ll walk,” she replied, firmly.

“Ye will nae walk, for it will be dark soon and ye will stroll off the cliff’s edge in the dark or break yer ankle in a rabbit hole. Ye will ride Jupiter.”

Luella glowered harder. Lyall sighed. “Please.”

“I can’t! He’s too big,” she exclaimed, and he saw the anxiety in her eyes.

“He’s big, aye, but he’s a gentle giant, I promise.” As if on cue, and to prove his point, Jupiter turned and nuzzled at Lyall’s arm. “Aye, I know ye are a gentleman. She does nae mean to insult ye.”

“Do you have conversations with all your animals?” she asked incredulously.

“Aye, and why not?” he retorted. “They’ve a deal more sense than most humans I know, and they dinnae blether on about nothing, either. Now, put yer foot in the stirrup. Nae, the other foot... that’s the way.”

Lyall watched with amusement as she tried to reach up and grab the saddle to haul herself up. Corsets could not make this a simple task by any means. She tried again, giving him a delightful view of slender legs, petticoats, and frilly drawers. He didn’t look away.

“I can’t do it,” she protested.

Lyall shifted Murdoch which was no mean feat as the dog weighed a ton. Carefully, so as not to hurt the animal, he managed to free his arm and put his hand on Luella’s lovely behind—not above enjoying the moment—and shoved. Up she went, landing in the saddle with a squeal.

“Now, take Murdoch,” he said, heaving the big dog carefully up to lie over the horse’s back.

Murdoch did not like this idea one bit and struggled anxiously.

“Shut yer pus!” Lyall commanded, not unkindly, and Murdoch subsided with a pitiful whimper.

“Yes, Murdoch, he *is* a bully,” Luella whispered, stroking Murdoch’s head sympathetically. Lyall grinned, swinging himself up behind her.

“Now who’s talking to animals?”

She gave a little disdainful sniff. “I like Murdoch better than you,” she said with dignity.

Lyall snorted and reached past her, gathering the reins. He felt her body stiffen as she realised how intimately close they must sit. Reaching one hand around her, Lyall held both her and Murdoch in the circle of his arm as he gave Jupiter leave to walk out. It would be a slow journey, for he did not want to cause Murdoch pain by going any faster, but at least they were on their way.

Luella shivered, the fine tremor transmitting itself to him through his arm where it circled her.

“Ye are frozen to the bone, lassie.”

“I’m fine. Murdoch is keeping me warm,” she said firmly.

“Lean back against me, ye will make yer back ache in any case, sitting forward like that. I will nae bite ye. My manners are just as good as Murdoch’s, I assure ye.”

She turned her head, giving him such a doubtful glance that he gave a bark of laughter.

“Aye, I suppose I deserved that. Well, they’re *nearly* as good as Murdoch’s, aye?”

She laughed, relaxing a little but did not lean back, so he tightened his arm until he felt her back settle against his chest. “Just move with the horse, aye? Don’t fight him. Relax, lass. Ye will nae fall, I promise.”

“It’s an awfully long way down,” she said dubiously.

“Nah, ye are going nowhere. That’s the way, close yer eyes and ye will feel the motion better. Just relax into it.”

Little by little she did, and he felt her lean into him, her head resting on his shoulder. He dared a glance down, seeing the sweet curve of her cheek, flushed with cold and glistening

with rain. The moisture sparkled in her dark, curling hair, glittering like tiny diamonds in the last of the daylight. An odd sensation stirred in his chest as her eyes opened, that stormy grey gaze meeting his. Her eyes fell to his mouth, and he saw longing there, so raw it made his entire body fire to life. She looked away at once, the moment so brief he might have believed he had imagined it if not for the simmering heat beneath his skin. Good God. She *wanted* him, and going on how stiff and unyielding her body was once more, she hated that she wanted him.

The idea was so intriguing it occupied his mind all the way back to the castle.

Once they got home, Luella's brother fell upon her, alternately scolding her for scaring him to death and congratulating her for rescuing Murdoch, whom Jack seemed to like better than most anyone else at Wildsyde except for his pony. Lyall assumed Luella would take herself off the moment she could, but she lingered as he carried Murdoch inside.

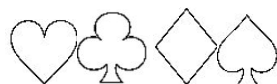
"Will he be all right?" she asked anxiously.

Lyall paused, regarding her with interest. His scrutiny made her colour and drop her gaze, which amused him. "Aye, thanks to ye," he said. "I am grateful for what ye did."

She looked up then, her cheeks pink with pleasure at his words, and such happiness in her eyes that it struck at something cold and hard, finding a tiny unguarded corner and stabbing deep.

You're welcome," she said softly, and then allowed Jack to hurry her away.

But, as she reached the stairs, she turned back and smiled at him.



**13<sup>th</sup> June 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Murdoch hobbled across the room and sat down before the fire with a heavy sigh.



“Dinnae give me that wounded soldier act,” Lyall said, not looking up from the letter he was writing. “T’was yer own stupid fault and I’m nae gonna feel sorry for ye.”

Murdoch made a pitiful sound, and Lyall set down his pen, looking up. Murdoch’s tail thumped hopefully. It was almost a week since he’d been hurt and he was recovering well, but Murdoch enjoyed a bit of fussing whether or not he deserved it. With a sigh, Lyall got to his feet and walked over to his dog, sitting down on the floor beside him.

“Spoiled, ye are,” he scolded affectionately. “Ye great numpty,” he added, hugging him and kissing the top of the dog’s head.

The door opened and Lyall looked up, a little irritated to discover Luella looking at them with obvious amusement.

“I beg your pardon, am I interrupting something?” she asked with a cheeky grin.

“Nae, Murdoch here was just enacting a deathbed scene for me. If I dinnae give him some love, he goes into a decline.”

Luella laughed and came into the room, and he saw now that she carried a folded cloth in her hands. “I thought you had gone to visit one of your tenants. Mrs Baillie said you were to go this afternoon. I just brought Murdoch a little treat to keep his spirits up, as he can’t go with you.”

“Ach, so ye are the one feeding him up. I thought he was getting fat.”

“He is not in the least fat, and it’s only a bit of chicken. Poor darling, he needs to keep his strength up, don’t you, Murdoch? Yes, my love, there you go. Oh, isn’t that yummy? Good boy, yes you are,” she crooned. “Such a handsome boy. Yes, I love you too. I do. Yes, I do.” She laughed as Murdoch licked her fingers and tried to lick her cheek too, showing his affectionate appreciation.

Lyall watched, an odd sensation in his guts—at least, he thought it was his guts—as she petted and fussed over his dog.

“I thought ye did nae like him?” he said, his voice a little sharper than he’d intended.

She paused, suddenly self-conscious, and he felt regret for speaking so harshly.

“I didn’t know he was so nice before. The stray dogs in London could be vicious, and the one that guarded the pawnshop next door to our rented rooms would tear your throat out if it had the chance,” she added.

Lyall frowned, disliking the image those words conjured of the life she had lived. He grunted, getting to his feet and offering her a hand to help her do likewise. She hesitated for a moment before taking it. He pulled her up a little harder than he ought to have done and she stumbled, righting herself by placing a hand on his chest. Her breath caught, panicked grey eyes glancing up at him. And there it was again, that look, wanting and desire, as obvious to him as if her stormy eyes were alight with flame. Her hand looked small and fragile, pressed against his chest, yet the touch burned through his clothes, as though it would scald him if she lingered. He didn’t move.

“I dinnae bite,” he said, though the words seemed to growl out of him as his body reacted to her nearness.

She swallowed and licked her lips, the sight of that delicate pink tongue sending desire lancing through him too. He stepped away at once, unsettled. Well, it was only natural to react so to having a pretty woman near him, and one he now knew desired him. She too stepped away, sensible lass, for he’d not fall for any tricks again. He was tougher now, and she had no parent living to blackmail him into doing the decent thing. If she wanted him, she had best understand there were no strings attached and never would be. Lyall shook himself, alarmed by the path his mind had taken. He was not about to and never would put a hand on Luella Fulbright, not for all the whisky in Scotland. Not *ever*.

The two of them stood awkwardly.

“Well, I had—”

“I ought to—”

They spoke at once, only increasing the odd atmosphere.

“I’d best get back to work,” Luella said, moving to the door.

“Ye dinnae work here, lass,” Lyall said irritably, annoyed with himself for the realisation that he did not wish for her to go yet.

“I know that,” she said, putting her chin up. “But I cannot sit around idle. Besides which, Mrs Baillie is teaching me useful skills so I may find work as a housekeeper.”

Lyall frowned, intensely disliking that idea. “A housekeeper?”

“And why not?” she demanded, folding her arms. “Do you think I would steal the silver?”

Lyall stared at her in shock, surprised by how defensive she was.

“I did nae say that,” he replied carefully. “I just... well, I hoped for better for ye than that.”

“Oh.” She gazed at him in wonder, apparently entirely disarmed by the comment.

“Did ye think I was content to put ye out to work? I know ye have had it hard, Luella, but ye are a lady. I know that too. I dinnae forget it. Ye were destined for better than that.”

Luella frowned, suspicion glinting in her eyes. “You don’t mean to marry me off?”

Lyall considered this. He hadn’t thought of doing such a thing, but... perhaps he ought to. He did not like the idea of her having to work for a living. Not that he thought women ought not to work. His mother had given him cause enough to know that women could achieve just as much as any man if given the chance. He just wanted to know Luella was safe and secure and... and what the bloody hell was he talking about? What did he care if she went off and became a housekeeper? It was entirely her own affair.

“Nae. Ye may do as ye please. Become a housekeeper if that’s what ye choose,” he replied tersely.

She stared at him in bewilderment, as well she might.

“What I would choose was to have a place of my own, close to the sea, and offer bed and board. Nothing grand, but a little cottage with a garden, perhaps some fruit trees,” she added wistfully.

His lip curled with amusement. “Cherries, aye?”

She flushed at that and looked so mortified he wished he’d not said anything. “Yes, well. Like I said, I had best be going.”

“Ach, don’t get all prickly. I was only baddering ye. Teasing, aye?” he amended, seeing the incomprehension in her eyes. “Look, d’ye wish to come with me? I’m just walking over to see the Grants. They lost half their place in a fire a few months back, but the work to the house is done and I need to see it. It’s nae more than five miles, just a wee stretch of the legs.”

Her lips quirked in an odd little smile, but the invitation had obviously pleased her, melting away all the indignant frostiness that had made her brittle a moment earlier. Lyall sighed, wondering what in God’s name had possessed him to invite her. Yet he could not deny he was pleased when she nodded.

“I’d love to get some fresh air. If you’ll give me a moment to fetch my bonnet, I’ll be right with you.”

She hurried away and returned a few minutes later, tying the ribbon in place.

“Ready when you are,” she said brightly.

Lyall grunted and said goodbye to Murdoch, careful to ensure he was shut in and couldn’t follow before he strode out of the castle, and wondered if Luella would be able to keep up.

“Why aren’t you riding?” she asked, as he whistled for Moire and Maggie, who materialised out of nowhere, barking with pleasure at the realisation they were going for a walk.

He shrugged. “I like to walk sometimes.”

“I do too,” she said conversationally. “Not that I knew that until I came here. Walking in London was not at all like walking here.”

Lyall heard the pleasure in her voice and wondered at it. “Ye like it here, then?”

“Like it?” she said, her expression one of such shock he wondered what he’d said. “I love it here. It’s so... so beautiful and peaceful,” she said with obvious sincerity.

It surprised him that she was happy here. Lilith had hated it with a passion, constantly demanding he take her to London.

“But there is nae society. Ye have to go to Wick for even basic shopping, there are hardly ever balls or parties or—”

She gave a burst of laughter, which made him stare at her.

“I beg your pardon,” she said ruefully. “But what exactly did you think I was doing before we came here? We lived in a horrid apartment, and I shared a room with my brother. There were no parties or balls, not that I care about that. Though it might be nice to wear pretty dresses and dance, I suppose,” she added guilelessly.

“We have the odd dance. Not so many as when Ma was mistress, mind,” Lyall admitted. “But harvest time and Christmas, ye know. Celebration times.”

“At the castle?”

Lyall nodded, touched by the innocent happiness that lit her eyes. “Aye. It’s tradition. My parents had Wildsyde until Da became Earl. Then they had to move to an even bigger and draughtier castle,” he added with a smile. “But Ma loves dancing and parties and Da will let her have anything that pleases her, so there were often celebrations here. I’ve kept some of them up, or else the staff and the tenants and the neighbours nag me day and night asking why not,” he said with a snort.

“I cannot wait to see the castle decorated for Christmas,” she said eagerly, her eyes shining with anticipation, although it was half the year away yet. “Do you put up greenery and ribbons and clove-studded oranges and—”

“Aye,” he said, turning to give her an odd look. “Have ye never done so?”

She blushed and looked away. “When I was a little girl, when my mother lived and before... before Pa lost everything. Then I have memories of the scent of pine and greenery over the mantelpiece. Presents, even,” she said with a sigh. Her face fell then, all the happiness fading. “It seems such a long time ago.”

Lyall frowned, disliking the way his chest tightened at her words. So what if she’d had a wretched time? So what if her father had been a conman and left his children in a ridiculous situation? He was the one suffering for it, not her. “Well, ye will have the chance to do it again this Christmas. Ye may decorate as much as ye like. Just sort it out with Mrs Baillie, aye?”

“Really? Can I?” He jolted as her slender hand grasped his arm, holding on tight.

“Aye,” he said, stopping in his tracks. “If it pleases ye, ye may decorate the auld place to yer heart’s content. Just... stay out of my study,” he added anxiously. “And only *red* ribbons, aye?”

She gave him an odd look but nodded happily before leaning in and kissing his cheek.

“Thank you so much,” she said, and then walked on as if nothing had happened.

Lyall stood frozen, watched her go, refusing to raise his hand and touch the place where her lips had pressed against his cheek. The simple touch seemed to linger still, the feel of her mouth on his skin remaining though she had gone. The sensation filtered into his blood, making his pulse quicken. She turned back, realising he hadn’t followed her and giving him a quizzical look.

“Are you coming, then?” she called out.

“Aye, lass,” he said under his breath, striding after him. “But where are ye leading me? That’s what I’d like to know.”

## Chapter 14



*He's home! Thank God, Thank God. He is home and safe and well. I have never been so glad of anything in my life. I have been so terribly afraid, Prue. I tried so hard not to think the worst but late at night my imagination would conjure all the worst thoughts of what might have happened until I was inconsolable. Poor Lucian has had a terrible time of it. I thank God for Gabriel, who has been such a tower of strength to him and to our family and thank Robert so very much for everything he did, too. How he kept any reports from reaching the press or allowing them to publish, at least, I do not know, but we are so grateful.*

*Tommy has been silent about what happened, short of telling us he was attacked and badly beaten, and if not for the kindness of the woman who took him in, he might have ended in a sorrier state. I want so much to thank her for her kindness, but it seems she has now disappeared too. I rather think this is a blow to my son, but as ever, he keeps his own council.*

*The only good thing that has emerged out of all the days of worry and stress was the introduction of darling Tilly to our family. I could cheerfully murder Philip for being such a damned fool, but I suppose I can understand his feelings, especially concerning his father. He is in such awe of*

*Lucian and always has been the poor boy.  
Yet I am proud of all he has achieved. We  
had quite a scene, I can tell you, but I shall  
explain all in person. There is too much to  
put in a letter.*

*—Excerpt of a letter to Her Grace,  
Prunella Adolphus, The Duchess of  
Bedwin from The Most Hon'ble Matilda  
Barrington, The Marchioness of  
Montagu.*

**13<sup>th</sup> June 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of  
Scotland.**

Luella watched as Lord Buchanan inspected the work, unsurprised to see him climb up and examine the new roof closely. From what she had seen of him, his lordship was not one to mind getting his hands dirty. He seemed to know everything that went on at Wildsyde and in its environs and was not content simply to let others report back to him. He made it his business to check on the building of a wall or the fencing of a field. She knew he visited the fishing boats often too, reviewing the size of the catch and ensuring that what went to market was of the highest quality. Some of this she had learned from Mrs Baillie and others who worked at the castle and held his lordship in high esteem; some of it Luella had seen for herself.

Her heart did a peculiar dance in her chest as she watched him leap down from the scaffolding. Summer had finally shown its face and the afternoon was warm. Never one to be concerned with appearances, he had stripped off his coat and waistcoat and rolled up his sleeves, unconscious of the effect his naked muscular forearms were having on the females in his immediate proximity.

Mrs Grant had two pretty daughters of sixteen and nineteen, and both sighed and giggled, whispering together as they admired Lord Buchanan checking every inch of their newly rebuilt home. The barn next door was still a work in progress and the men were hard at it, preparing to lift a huge beam into place. Lord Buchanan scrutinised this next, and the



eldest of the two girls made a cake of herself, batting her eyelids and offering him refreshments and whatever else she could think of in a breathless voice until her father scolded her and sent her away, much to Luella's relief. There had been an unpleasant, angry sensation in her gut as she watched the spectacle and she did not like to consider just what disturbing emotion that had been, though she knew well enough. Even Mrs Grant was not immune, and stared with unabashed admiration as Lyall helped the workmen lift the massive beam into place. Luella could not blame her. The sight of all that straining muscle and show of manly vigour had done odd things to her equilibrium, too.

Once the thing was in place, there was a good deal of backslapping and congratulations, and Mr Grant insisted his lordship take a glass of his homebrew before they left.

"No, thank you," Luella said politely, upon being offered a small glass for herself. The memory of the whisky cherries was still vivid in her mind, and she was not about to repeat the experience. Lord Buchanan met her gaze and grinned, knowing full well what she was thinking. Luella huffed and went instead to speak with Mrs Grant, who was occupied cutting up a fresh brown loaf into thick slices.

"Can I help?" she asked.

"Aye, lass, that's good of you. They'll be ravenous soon enough now they've started in on the home brew. It'll be the whisky next, ye mark my words and they'll need something to soak it up or they'll be a handful. There's a rabbit pie in the larder there. Cut it up into slices and set it on a plate for them, and there's a jar of pickles and..."

Luella hurried back and forth, following Mrs Grant's commands until they had ferried enough food out to feed an army. Finally satisfied, the lady patted Luella's arm.

"Thank you for your help. I am glad to see ye are nae the wicked slut ye were reported to be."

Luella blinked, momentarily speechless, and Mrs Grant gave a bark of laughter. "Ach, don't look so appalled. Ye know as well as I do that yer cousin was no better than she ought to

be and a good deal worse than his lordship bargained for, but ye seem to be a good sort and I'm glad of it. People talk though, ye cannot stop some folks' gums flapping, no matter if there's nae a scrap of truth in it."

"Well, er... thank you," Luella said cautiously, still somewhat taken aback.

Mrs Grant guided her back to the table and bade her sit down. Luella did as she was told, disconcerted to discover she had been saved a place next to Lord Buchanan. The daughters, seated on either side of their father where he could keep an eye on them, eyed her with simmering dislike. Well, at least Mrs Grant approved of her.

As Mrs Grant had predicted, the men had moved on from the homebrew and a bottle of whisky now adorned the table. Mr Grant was toasting the workmen, his new home and all who dwelled in her, and he downed the whisky in a large swallow before slamming the glass down and filling it again. Luella noted Lord Buchanan's plate was empty and replenished it with a selection of everything on offer, setting it before him. He glanced down at it and then at her with a quizzical expression.

"Whisky on an empty stomach is a bad idea, take my word for it," she said wryly. "I doubt you've eaten enough to mitigate the damage."

He laughed at that, his tawny eyes sparkling, and Luella watched in fascination as he devoured the contents of the plate in short order. Three more toasts and three more shots of whisky were disposed of. Luella filled the plate again.

He tried to leave several times, but each time he was earnestly entreated to stay, and more toasts followed, each more fulsome than the last. His lordship was the handsomest, finest, most honourable, et cetera, et cetera. Finally, he made up his mind to leave and no protests could keep him in his seat. There was a good deal of backslapping and demands to 'haste ye back,' but finally they set off for Wildsyde, with the dogs running excitedly ahead of them. The sun was low in the sky, casting everything in shades of gold and amber.

Luella darted an appreciative glance at the man beside her. The sunlight gilded him, turning him into something not quite real, a man stepped out of a myth, a hero of long ago, returned for one last adventure. She could easily imagine him wielding a broadsword, fighting off the English invasion to his last breath. Lord, but he was handsome, and a good man, too. She had seen that much of him. He cared for this place, his home, for the land and the people who lived here. People brought their problems to him, and he listened, no matter how trivial. He helped, too. He didn't offer lip service, but tangible solutions, whether it meant putting his hand in his pocket or helping himself. She respected him, she realised. That wasn't all, though, fool that she was. The desire to reach out and touch him, to have him touch her, was so fierce her skin ached with it. No matter how many times she told herself she was the last woman in the world he would ever want, her stupid heart refused to listen any more than her body did.

“Dinnae look at me like that.”

Luella jumped, her cheeks flaming, not having realised he had noticed her admiring gaze.

“I beg your pardon,” she said stiffly, reminded once again of precisely what he thought of her. She had begun to forget, for he had treated her more kindly of late, speaking to her with no trace of coldness or resentment. Foolishly, she had allowed herself to believe they might be friends at least. But she would always be cast from the same mould as Lilith in his eyes.

He made an impatient sound. “Ach, don't get all uppity. I dinnae mean to offend ye, but ye ought not... I just... I have had a good deal to drink, ye ken?”

“I know,” she said, turning to give him a quizzical glance. “I was there.”

“Well, then.” He said it as if that ought to answer everything.

“Well, then, what?” she asked, puzzled.

“Well, then, don't go looking at me like that. Ye might get more than ye bargained for.”

Luella opened her mouth and closed it again. “How was I looking at you, and what might I get?” she asked, too intrigued to leave well enough alone.

He stopped, turning to face her. “Ye were looking at me like ye wanted me to kiss ye, and perhaps a good deal besides.”

His voice was low, a rumble that seemed to resonate through her, disrupting her heart and her mind until both were in complete disorder. She could hear something else now, too, the soft edges to his words that told her he spoke true; he was not half so sober as he might appear.

“I... I did not,” she protested, though it was a blatant lie. Her face burned with mortification.

“Aye, ye did, and not for the first time,” he said, staring at her.

Luella swallowed and put up her chin. “Well, and what of it? I’m allowed to admire you, aren’t I? The other women were ogling you and made no bones about it. At least I was discreet. I beg your pardon if I made you uncomfortable, though. It won’t happen again.”

She turned on her heel, determined to get out of his company as quickly as she could and never look him in the eyes again, but a firm grasp upon her arm held her immobile.

“Dinnae go haring off in a temper fit. I was nae uncomfortable, I dinnae mind ye looking at me. I like it,” he added, the words a low growl that made her heart leap as his gaze fell to her mouth.

“Oh.” Luella’s heart was beating so hard she felt giddy with it. Would he kiss her after all?

He shook himself and let her go. Her heart plummeted. She knew he would never do so, not unless she made him.

“We’d best get back,” he said grimly, striding off at such a pace Luella had to run to catch him up.

“I do want you to kiss me,” she blurted out, almost running directly into the back of him as he ground to a halt.

“Then ye are a fool,” he said without turning.

Luella moved around in front of him, gazing up at his face cautiously, uncertain if he was angry or frustrated. His tone could have been either. Both.

“Why?”

“Because I’ll nae marry ye. I’ll not be caught again, nae matter the circumstances, nae matter what anyone says of either of us. So if ye want me, it’s all well and good, but there’s nothing on offer here. D’ye see?”

“Of course,” she said, having known that much, for she wasn’t the fool he accused her of being. “You’ll marry a lady, someone who can bring parties and society to Wildsyde like your mother did,” she said with a smile that sat uncomfortably on her face, feeling stiff and awkward.

“Aye. That’s it,” he agreed. “I dinnae mean to say that ye are nae a lady, Luella.”

“I know,” she said, sounding reasonably cheerful even though she had the unaccountable urge to cry. “Just not a *proper* lady, raised to the position. I never thought otherwise, I assure you.”

“Good,” he replied, letting out a breath. “Then ye ought to be sensible and go back to keeping your distance and...”

Luella flung herself at him before she could think better of it, pressing her mouth to his. For a moment his entire body was unyielding, as if she had tried to hug the castle walls, and then his arms came around her, tightening as his mouth softened, and she melted as he gave her what she had so explicitly demanded.

Luella had been kissed before. She was not entirely innocent. Jacob Tyler had seen to that, though thank heavens she had not been fool enough to give him everything. She had escaped the indignity of finding herself pregnant and abandoned, though he *had* married the ‘other woman.’ She had often wondered which one of them he would have honoured if they’d both ended the same way. But though she had been

tempted with Jacob, the man she had intended to marry, his kisses had never felt like this.

Lyall's arms were strong, his body fiercely hot and hard against hers. The delicious slide of his tongue was beguiling, inviting her to take more. He tasted of whisky and smelled of new wood, fresh air, and the musky scent of a working man. She was entirely intoxicated by him. His mouth was at once fierce and tender, taking what she offered and demanding more, but never overwhelming her with his greater size and force. Even foxed as he undoubtedly was, she did not feel uncertain of his intentions. If she said stop, he would. No, it was her own desires she feared, for she wanted him like she had wanted nothing in her life before and there was no place to take such desires. He might take her to bed, give her pleasure, but then what? He had made his intentions clear and unambiguous, she would be a fool to ignore the warning. She wanted him badly, more than she wished to admit even to herself, but did she really intend to ruin herself over him?

He drew back, staring down at her, perhaps sensing her hesitation as she considered where this was leading.

"Run along home, Luella," he said, his voice full of smoke and heavy with desire. "Before I decide not to let ye leave."

He let go of her and stepped back, and the loss of his heat made her shiver, leaving her bereft in some intangible way she had no way of explaining. She nodded, though, for she was not hell-bent on self-destruction. Not when there was Jack to consider.

She turned away and hurried back to the castle alone, feeling his eyes upon her until she knew she was out of sight.

## Chapter 15



*Father,*

*We have settled on the perfect location. I believe you will be pleased with the price I negotiated with the landowner on the Berwick side of the river. We are having far more difficulty with the owner of the Tweedmouth location, but I am determined to get the deal done.*

**—Excerpt of a letter to Mr Gabriel Knight, from his son, Mr Felix Knight.**

**14<sup>th</sup> June 1845, The Sons of Hades, Portman Square, London.**

“Lyall sends his regrets, but Muir and I represent him, aye,” Hamilton said, sitting down around the long table as his brother pulled out a chair beside his.

Leo nodded his agreement and cast an eye around the room. Pip and Thorn, the Barrington brothers, were both here. Ashton Anson, looking about as grim as Leo had ever seen him, sat with Larkin on one side and Jules on the other. Conor poured out drinks as everyone got settled. Hart arrived last, looking irritated. He strode into the room, bringing with him the scent of greenery and the outdoors.

“Well, get on with it. Some of us have got work to do,” he said, pulling a chair out and sitting down.

“How charming to see you, Hart, it’s been too long,” Leo said pleasantly, earning himself an eye roll from the man

himself. “And surely you have finished work for the day? It’s gone nine.”

“You’d know about working for a living, would you?” Hart replied, eyeing Leo with amusement.

Leo didn’t rise to the bait, knowing Hart too well to be offended by the remark. Besides which, Hart was big enough to flatten all of them. Even Ashton would think twice before provoking the man, and he had no sense whatsoever when it came to a good mill. Hart surveyed the table, his gaze resting on Tommy Barrington.

“Well, you don’t look any the worse for wear. Are you well, Thorn?”

“Fit as a flea,” Thorn remarked with a grin, though his older brother was regarding him with concern.

Pip was a serious fellow these days. Leo hadn’t seen him in months and couldn’t remember the last time he’d come here to the club. Once upon a time, Pip had practically lived here, keeping permanent rooms for when he needed them. It had been a long time indeed since they had all been in the same room together. Leo looked around with a familiar sense of regret.

Things were changing. Jules and Conor were married, Pip had clearly found something that occupied him more thoroughly than the club did, and Hart’s ambition to succeed had attained such proportions Leo doubted he even slept, let alone took time off. Lyall had never been one for London life, but he had come and raised a riot with his brothers from time to time. Hamilton seemed to think his disastrous marriage had put paid to that and his brother had lost his sense of humour entirely, no matter that he was free of the woman now.

Ashton and Larkin were still active members, but Leo sensed a change in them too, a new restlessness that would drive them to seek something else in their lives. Thorn was still ready to jump into whatever madness Leo proposed, or he had been, and Muir too, but it felt like things were coming to an end and Leo hated it. So, he was damned if any other bastard was going to end things for them.



“So, you’ve all made a list?” he demanded, deciding it was time to bring the meeting to order.

“No,” Hart said, folding his arms. “I don’t have enemies.”

Ashton snorted at that. “Give over, Hartley. What about that fellow you threw in the Serpentine?”

Hart frowned. “That was ages ago. Besides, he was annoying me.”

“He wanted to fight you because you told him he was an idiot, and you told him he was a bigger idiot for suggesting it, so he hit you,” Ashton reminded him with amusement.

“And I didn’t want to fight him,” Hart replied, folding his arms. “He was half cut, and I wasn’t in the mood.”

“So you threw him in the Serpentine?” Muir repeated, laughing. “I reckon ye have Scottish blood somewhere in ye history, Hart.”

Hart shrugged. “Seemed for the best. Anyway, he’s still an idiot, but that doesn’t make him an enemy.”

“Write his name on the list,” Leo said firmly. “If we’re going to figure this out, we need to consider every option. Has anyone else had any trouble we don’t know of?”

“I think someone was following me last night, but I gave them the slip,” Muir said. “I might have imagined it, but I don’t reckon so. Fair gave me the shivers, though.”

“From now on, everyone must be on their guard,” Leo said firmly. “No staggering out of here, three sheets to the wind and alone. Thorn got worked over good and proper; the next time one of us might not walk away.”

“Can you still think it’s another club trying to put us out of business?” Pip asked. “It seems an odd way of going about it. I can understand the fire, that seems a more obvious attempt, but the attack on Thorn was personal, as was the threat. Whoever it is not only wants to destroy the club, but us along with it.”

Leo shrugged. “It’s an easy explanation when nothing else is obvious. My father has suffered such attempts before now.

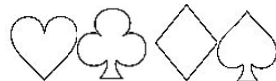
Success makes people jealous, whether they are trying to compete or whether they've simply been turned down for entry. So yes, I still think it *could* be another club and they're trying to intimidate us, making it seem personal in the hope we'll turn tail. I'm not set on the idea, though. It could be someone we rejected, or perhaps someone who lost heavily and blames us. I did think of Lincoln. He's all to pieces, last I heard."

"We tried to stop him," Ashton said indignantly. "When a man insists on gambling on foolish outcomes when he's already lost so heavily, he has a problem which none of us can solve. We barred him, after all, but he just found his way to the lower hells and completed the job he'd begun. I don't see how we can be blamed for that."

"Far easier than taking responsibility and blaming himself, perhaps," Pip said quietly.

Leo frowned, uneasy with the sincerity in the man's voice. "Right, come on, give me the names and we'll see which ones we've all written down."

Somehow, they were going to figure out who was doing this and why, and then things could settle down and go back to normal.



## **12<sup>th</sup> July 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

"Heels down! Heels *down*! Move your hands up! That's it, gie it laldy! Well done, lad!" Lyall shouted, feeling just as pleased by the accomplishment as Jack.

Jack gave a whoop of triumph as rider and pony sailed over the jump, cantering around the enclosure. For a few weeks now, Lyall had taken to coming out here for an hour before dinner, once Jack was home from school, and giving him an extra lesson. He enjoyed the time. Jack was a likeable lad, eager to learn. He looked at Lyall with something

approaching hero worship, too, which was unaccountable but nice all the same.

“I did it!” he exclaimed, his face flushed with excitement as he dismounted, hugging his mount tightly before gazing up at Lyall, his eyes shining with pleasure.

“That ye did, and in fine style, aye. Ye have the makings of a fine horseman, Jack, I am proud of ye,” he said, slapping the boy on the back in a show of approval.

The lad stared in such astonishment that Lyall wondered what he’d said. Before he could figure it out, Jack flung his arms around Lyall’s waist and held on tight. Lyall blinked, startled, and wondered if the boy’s father had ever said he was proud of him—for doing anything decent, at any rate.

Lyall gave the boy a hug and then crouched down, looking into his face, and seeing with dismay that his eyes were wet. Jack swiped at them with his sleeve.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m not a crybaby usually.”

Lyall shook his head. “Of course ye aren’t. I saw ye fall on yer arse last week. Ye came down with a mighty crash and ye dinnae murmur a word. Just got up and got back on. I was proud of ye for that too, aye?”

Jack swallowed, looking as though he was struggling to keep his composure.

“Out with it,” Lyall said firmly. “I cannae help if ye dinnae tell me.”

Jack took a deep breath and then spoke in a rush. “You won’t... You won’t send us away when Luella reaches four and twenty, will you? It’s just I’ve been so happy here. I’ve never had a pony of my own, and friends and school, and Mrs Baillie cooks such lovely food and... and you... you...”

The boy’s voice wobbled and broke and he closed his mouth with a snap.

“Ach, ye daft beggar. I’m nae sending ye anywhere, Jack. This is your home.”

Jack shook his head. "But it isn't, is it? We ought not be here. Luella knows it and she might not tell me so, but I know it too. Papa tricked you into it somehow. That's why you were so angry when we got here. I don't bl-blame you for it either. I know we're... cuckoos in the nest," he said bitterly.

It had the ring of something repeated, words someone else had thrown at him.

"Where d'ye hear that?" Lyall said, a sudden and shocking burst of anger exploding in his chest. "Who said such a thing to ye?"

Jack's lips firmed, stubbornly mute now.

"One of the lads at school, aye?" Lyall regarded him steadily.

Jack didn't respond, but he didn't need to.

"They are nae giving ye trouble?"

Jack shook his head. "I have friends, good friends. It's only one of the lads and... and I can handle him," he said stiffly.

"I never doubted it," Lyall said, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "But ye listen to me now, Jack, and ye listen good. Ye are right enough, your pa did force ye on me and I was none too pleased about it. I cannae deny it. After everything with Lilith... well, I dinnae need to explain, I reckon."

Jack shook his head, his face the picture of misery. Lyall took the lad's arms in his hands and gave him a gentle shake.

"Look at me. Your pa forced ye on me, but I reckon it was the one decent thing he ever did for ye, aye? And I'm glad to have ye, Jack. I was suspicious of ye both, ye cannae blame me for that. But ye are decent and I like ye fine. I'm happy ye are here, and that ye make yer home here. It will always be here if ye want it. Ye ken?"

"For Luella too?" he pressed, and Lyall could not deny the fear he read in the boy's expression.

"Aye," he said, though with a little less enthusiasm.

The boy blinked, hope a living thing in his eyes now.  
“Truly?”

“Have ye ever heard me tell a lie?” Lyall demanded fiercely.

Jack shook his head, his expression solemn. “Never.”

“Well, then.”

Jack hugged him again and Lyall returned the embrace, touched more profoundly than he might have expected. Perhaps something good had come out of his recent misery after all.

His thoughts drifted to Luella, as they did far too often, to the way she had looked up at him after he’d kissed her, all soft and dazed, her sweet lips red, those stormy eyes heavy with wanting him. Lyall slammed the door on the image, refusing to consider it, though it was getting harder to do. She had been sensible at least and stayed out of his way. Now and then, their paths inevitably crossed, and they did their best to pass a few meaningless pleasantries before going their separate ways... but he always knew where she was. It was as if he could sense her, his body vibrating like a tuning fork if he heard the whisper of her voice or caught the delicate scent of her lingering perfume.

She was driving him distracted. Well, he’d not been with a woman since the debacle with Lilith, and he’d not been able to bear touching her after they’d married. So yes, it was hardly surprising he was crawling out of his skin with stifled desire. Affairs in this part of the world were not so easy to arrange if you didn’t want the whole neighbourhood talking about the woman in question. His only option was to ride into Wick and there wasn’t time to do that too often when the round trip took three hours on a good day.

Lyall had determined to be rid of Luella once and for all and had a plan of how to achieve it. In so doing, he hoped to rid himself of the impatient sense of frustration that burned constantly within him. He even dreamed of her now, of that moment walking home from the Grants with whisky simmering pleasantly in his blood. Except it didn’t end with a

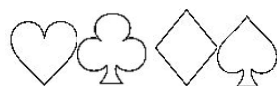
kiss in his imagination. Oh, no. In his dreams, he took her to the ground and took everything he wanted until she cried out his name and he woke with a start, hard as iron and angry at knowing he must endure another day of balked lust.

His mother had been gone for over three weeks now, much to his father's relief. In her place was Mrs MacLeod, a decent woman in her fifties who didn't interfere with their lives more than she had to. She simply seemed grateful to have a roof over her head and three meals a day, since her husband died some years ago, leaving her living on a meagre annuity. Lyall didn't begrudge her that security, though he resented having someone else under his roof who didn't belong there. But if he could send Luella to stay with his mother, perhaps he could stop thinking about her. He could certainly stop tripping over Mrs MacLeod, who was always mortified if he noticed her presence in his house. There was a letter on his desk right now, asking his mother to invite Luella *and* Mrs MacLeod, and as soon as possible.

Now, though, with Jack's words about them always having a home with him ringing in his ears it seemed cruel. Yet it would be the second time he'd put it off if he didn't do it now.

*Hell and damnation.*

Leaving Jack to rub down his pony, Lyall stalked back to the castle.



Luella sighed, something shifting in her chest as she watched Lyall crouch down to speak to Jack. She could not hear what they said to one another, but she could tell it was serious. That he had taken such pride in Jack's achievement had only made her stupid infatuation worse, if it could even *get* any worse, and the way Jack had hugged him...

She swallowed hard, seeing that whatever had been worrying Jack of late, Lyall had resolved. Jack clung to him, his face buried against Lyall's shirt. Her heart hurt as she saw Lyall hug him back before ruffling the boy's hair and sending him off with a parting shot that made Jack laugh heartily. Her

brother was happy here, and he worshiped Lyall. That much was obvious. Sadly, Luella was in a far worse state than her brother.

She spent most of her days hidden in the kitchen with Mrs Baillie, absorbing as much knowledge as she could. Lyall knew this and never went there, so she knew she was safe. Jack and Mrs MacLeod ate dinner with her in the dining room, though Lyall never joined them.

*Lyall.* She had never actually called him that to his face, but he was Lyall in her daydreams, which were getting increasingly out of hand.

Mrs MacLeod was a dear, but Luella found she missed Lady Morven. Lyall's mother was an intelligent woman with a wicked sense of humour and Luella had come to admire and like her. She thought perhaps the feeling was mutual. She hoped so, anyway. Lady Morven had certainly embraced her fondly when she'd left Wildsyde, giving her a wink and a gentle admonition to 'have courage,' though Luella was uncertain what she was supposed to be courageous about.

With a heavy sigh, she turned away and made her way back to the kitchen via the back door.

"There ye are," Mrs Baillie said with relief. "I sent that daft girl to cut some salad, and she still isn't back. Could ye take this up to the study for me? I cannae leave this sauce right now."

Luella hesitated. She was in no hurry to see Lyall.

"Ach, ye need only set it on his desk and leave, lassie," Mrs Baillie said, a knowing look in her eyes that made Luella's cheeks heat.

She turned away before the woman could notice, though she had the distinct impression Mrs Baillie knew everything that went on at Wildsyde, with few exceptions.

"Never mind putting your apron back on, ye are no serving wench," she scolded, giving Luella a critical once over. "Aye, Lady Morven chose wisely. That new dress looks bonnie with its tartan trim."

Luella smoothed her hand over the gown, a little uncertain. The dress had been a surprise, arriving out of the blue. A gift from Lady Morven. The tartan trim was Lyall's colours, and it gave her an oddly pleasurable sensation to wear them. What would he think, though? She could hardly be blamed for being presumptuous if his mother had given the dress to her. The idea of him seeing her wearing it made her feel more daring, even as her heart skittered behind her ribs.

"Very well," she said, going to the tray of soup Mrs Baillie had left ready.

"Courage, lassie," the woman called after her, winking as Luella sent her a doubtful glance, remembering Lady Morven saying the same thing.

She walked to Lyall's study, her heart thudding harder with each step. Thankfully, he'd left the door slightly ajar this time in anticipation of his dinner, so she just tapped the door frame with the toe of her shoe.

"Come," he called, his gruff voice making her breath catch in anticipation of being near him, if only for a moment.

*Stop it, you great ninny*, she scolded herself, and walked briskly in, head high, intending to set the tray down with a cheery word and stride out again.

"Good evening, my lord. Mrs Baillie asked me—"

She stopped in her tracks as she discovered him standing right in front of her, almost driving the tray directly into his chest.

"Steady!" he exclaimed, taking the tray from her grasp. "Ye are in a mighty hurry, lass," he remarked, carrying the tray to his desk and setting it down for her.

"Oh, er... no. Not really. It's just Mrs Baillie asked me to bring the tray up but I... I didn't wish to disturb you." She gave him a bright smile and prayed she wasn't blushing.

"Not disturb me," he repeated, his tone mild but the look in his eyes making her heart skip a beat. "Aye, we'd not want that."



“Um. No,” she said cautiously, aware of the sudden charge in the atmosphere. Her skin prickled with it, and she did not know whether to run or take a step closer to the source of her agitation.

“Did ye come here to disturb me, Luella?” he asked, his voice a smooth purr of sound that made her breath catch.

“You know I didn’t. Mrs Baillie—”

“I don’t mean today.”

Luella blinked, hurt that he was back to accusing her all over again. “You must know that I didn’t.”

“Must I?”

“Yes,” she said, indignant now.

“All I know is that ye disturb me mightily. I can nae sleep, Luella.”

“Y-You can’t?” she asked stupidly, as her imbecilic heart seemed to do a complicated series of cartwheels in her chest.

He shook his head, those tawny eyes glittering with something she knew to be dangerous. She reminded herself of the lion trapped in its cage, awaiting the moment he could strike, but she was too foolish to heed the warning.

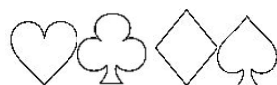
Luella cleared her throat. “Neither can I. It’s... It’s awfully inconvenient.”

He snorted at that. “Aye, that’s a word for it.”

Luella stared at him, wondering what was in his mind. Well, she knew what was in his mind, it hardly took a genius, but he had been a gentleman the last time and... She sucked in a breath as he took a step closer.

“Y-Your soup will get cold,” she said, cursing herself for saying something so inane but her wits had gone begging.

“Damn the soup,” he muttered, and reached for her.



Lyall was losing his bloody mind. He knew it before his hands made contact with her lush curves, but he couldn't stop himself. Perhaps it was the sight of that bloody dress, trimmed with his tartan. The surge of possessive desire had tipped the balance between sanity and madness. This was the way he'd got into trouble before, he reminded himself, except what he'd felt then was nothing to this. Lilith had been temptation incarnate, beautiful, wicked, hell-bent on seducing him. Luella was different, though in what way he did not yet know. He knew only that he wanted her, wanted his hands on her skin, the taste of her in his mouth. The idea had taken control of his mind and would not let go.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, a punishing kiss that was part anger and frustration, part relief. She didn't hesitate, pressing herself into his embrace, her arms curving about his neck. He felt her hands in his hair, tugging. Lord, but she could kiss. He'd discovered that after their visit to the Grants, but it had not signified to him then. But if she knew how to kiss like that, she was not entirely innocent. Perhaps not innocent at all, with the life her father had led. The man had been unfit to be a parent from all Lyall could gather; he'd hardly have made a fine chaperone. Luella kissed like a woman who knew what she wanted and intended to get it, and that was fine by him. If she knew what she was doing, what she was asking for, he could hardly be blamed for giving it to her, for accepting what was on offer.

His hand moved from her waist to her breast, cupping the generous swell. She made a shocked sound but there was no protest. He heard a soft whimper, but nothing to imply a desire to stop. Lyall dropped his head, kissing the swell of her breast visible above the neckline of her gown. His tongue traced patterns on her silken skin, and he heard her gasp, her hands in his hair, holding his head in place now, as if he was going anywhere. Lyall dipped his tongue into the valley of her cleavage, pleased when her breath hitched. There was another whimper.

“Murdoch,” she said, a slightly irritated note in her voice. “Wait, darling, just... Oh.”

Lyall's other hand firmed on her bottom, pulling her closer, making her aware of just where this was going, should there be any doubt. He kissed her again, and she met his passion head on, her soft moan stirring his blood higher.

There was an impatient scratching sound and a bark of annoyance.

"Hush," Lyall said, too lost in the warm, willing bundle of femininity in his arms to care for anything else.

"I think... I think he wants..." Luella gasped, but Lyall stole the words with a demanding kiss that had her clinging to him. He deepened the kiss, gratified when she not only let him but clung to him harder, as if she couldn't get close enough. Well, he could do something about that if she liked.

Murdoch barked. He barked and barked, louder and more insistent, until Lyall's head came up, his senses returning to him in a rush. Did he *want* to end up married to another bloody Fulbright? Absolutely not. He stared at Luella, at the soft look in her eyes, desire and heat, and... and he needed her out of this room, out of the bloody castle. *Now*.

"I beg your pardon," he said, letting her go and stepping away. "I... I apologise, Luella, I ought. I dinnae ken what got into me." He hastened to the door, wrenching it open to let the unfortunate Murdoch out. "I'd best..."

He gestured helplessly after the anxious dog.

"Of course," she said, her cheeks burning with mortification.

"Luella, I..."

"You'd best go, before he does something Mrs Baillie won't like," she said, giving him a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"Aye. I best had. I'm—"

"There's no need," she said, standing and regarding him, as proud as a duchess. "We are both adults. It's a bad idea is all. We both know it. Good evening, Lord Buchanan. I won't wait on you again, don't worry."

Lyall nodded, knowing she'd keep to it, and hurried after Murdoch.

## Chapter 16



*I never said it would be easy. You've done well, but we can't proceed with our plans for the bridge until that sale has been completed. Every day is another delay I cannot afford. You find who owns that bloody land, son. Even if you must scour the country from one end to the other to do it. I need that land and I need it now.*

*—Excerpt of a letter from Mr Gabriel Knight to his son, Mr Felix Knight.*

### **30<sup>th</sup> July 1845, Wildsyde Castle, Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall looked down at the letter in his hands. It was exactly what he had wanted, an invitation from his mother to Luella and Mrs bloody MacLeod, thank the Lord. It did not say for how long they could stay, but Lyall hoped Luella would be sensible and make it a good long time. Perhaps until she was four and twenty.

He let out a breath and, despite having read it several times over, scanned the letter again, just to be certain it was real. There it was. His troubles were at an end. Luella would go and he could be easy again, rid of this... this *ridiculous* feeling. It couldn't happen soon enough. He moved to the window, disturbed to discover himself staring out to catch a glimpse of her as she waited to greet Jack on his way home from school. She always stood outside at this hour, and he bloody well knew it. *Fool*. Today she wore that damned dress again, the gift from his mother. A pale apple green trimmed with blue-and-green tartan. *His* tartan. What his mother was playing at, Lyall didn't know, but he didn't like it.

He didn't like the way it made him feel, the hot, possessive sensation that stirred in his guts whenever he saw her wearing it. The sight of it brought back memories of those moments in this room with his hands on her, the way she had responded so fiercely to his kisses. She would have given him anything he wanted, he was certain of it. He could have had her there and then on the floor of his study and she'd have let him do it. The thought was the worst kind of torment, enticing him to act like an utter bastard when he had told her he would offer her nothing in return. He'd meant it, too. Never again would a woman have his name, not unless he was certain of her, and he was by no means certain of Luella.

Lyall watched as she greeted Jack with her usual enthusiasm, kissing the boy soundly despite his good-natured protests. The lads from the stables had joined in too, telling her she could kiss them all she liked. Luella laughed, returning some sally that made them all roar. Lyall couldn't hear what it was she'd said, but he knew he didn't like it, didn't like that she was laughing with them and not him and... and bloody hell!

She had to go.

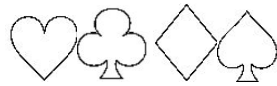
He ate his dinner alone in his study, resenting her for that too. If she wasn't here, he could eat with Jack in his own dining room, discuss what the lad had done that day, his schoolwork. Perhaps he could get Jack to confide what manner of trouble he was having with the boy at school. Not with her here, though. He couldn't sit on the other side of a dinner table and make polite conversation when all he could think of was getting her out of her clothes as quickly as possible.

Well, he would tell her about the invitation tomorrow. It would be safest if he went to the kitchens and spoke to her. He wasn't so far gone as to seduce her on the kitchen table with Mrs Baillie about, at least. Though if the woman left them alone, he wouldn't put money on resisting, he thought dryly.

After he'd eaten, he stayed up reading by the fire. These past weeks, he'd stopped bothering to go to bed until it was so late he couldn't keep his eyes open. It wasn't as if he'd get any sleep otherwise. Even then, he was plagued with dreams of

her. Strangely, they weren't all about getting her naked, either. Mostly, but not all. Often his troubled brain returned to the day on the beach, watching her singing terribly off key, serenading the seagulls. She had seemed so joyous, so full of life, and he'd wanted to reach for that, for her, to bring the colour back into his world. Even now, when he remembered her spread-eagled on the beach in her underwear, sandy and ruffled, he could not help but smile, utterly charmed for reasons he could not fathom. The dreadful girl. Perhaps she was not Lilith, but she was trouble of the kind he didn't need or want.

Cursing himself for thinking of her again, he turned his attention back to the book and tried to concentrate on the story.



Luella stared up at the ceiling, wishing she could just close her eyes and go to sleep like she used to do. Somehow, she'd lost the knack for it. If she closed her eyes she thought of him, of the way it had felt when he'd reached for her. If the kiss had started out angry and frustrated, it hadn't remained that way. His touch had been gentle, and the memory of his mouth on the swell of her breast was enough to make her sigh with regret and frustration. If only Murdoch hadn't been there.

If Murdoch hadn't been there, she'd be ruined, she reminded herself severely, and Lyall would not want her under his roof a moment longer. It stood to reason. For now, she was a temptation he was resisting because he was a gentleman, for he knew she would deny him nothing. She was a fool, but an honest one, at least. It was one thing staying away from him but, if she found herself in his arms again, the result would be inevitable. Then she would be forced to leave. He would not want people gossiping about him again and they'd not keep it quiet for long in a remote place like this.

The talk would hurt Jack when he discovered it, too, and Luella could not have that. She'd have to go. The cruel truth sank sharp teeth into her heart, and it hurt more than she'd been prepared to admit.

The day she'd seen Lyall with Jack, speaking to him so earnestly and then hugging him tight and ruffling his hair, that

had been the *coup de grace*. Perhaps she could have kept her heart in line if not for that but seeing him treat her brother with such affection had wrought devastation upon her emotions. Here was a man who was strong and decent and principled, one who honoured his obligations, no matter how onerous, and was kind-hearted enough to care for a boy who'd been foisted upon him in the worst possible circumstances. Oh, lord, she was done for. Even if he never so much as looked at her again, how was she to remain here with him, feeling the way she did? Yet the idea of leaving here tore at her heart. She loved being in the kitchen with Mrs Baillie, loved walking the wild countryside and watching the sea glitter in the sun, or explode furiously against the cliffs in bad weather. It was a joy to see Jack so happy, riding his pony with growing skill and confidence, or chatting with his school friends and larking about. She loved Wildsyde. The old castle had made itself her home. It was the only place she wished to be, especially her pretty room with its glorious view, and even the worn steps of the staircase that spoke of the generations who had lived here before them.

Sighing, Luella threw back the covers and padded to the window. She would never get any sleep at this rate. When she pulled back the curtains, she was presented with a velvet soft sky, inky black and bright with thousands of stars. How beautiful it was, and how she wished she could stay here forever. For a moment, she allowed herself to daydream that Lyall fell madly in love with her, and they married, living at Wildsyde and bringing up a chaotic parcel of merry children.

“Idiot,” she said under her breath.

Dreams like that would only see her with a broken heart. She was no innocent girl to believe in fairy stories. Life had opened her eyes to reality a long time ago, and reality was impossible to avoid.

*Well, this is fun*, she thought gloomily. If she kept this up all night, by morning she'd be ready to fling herself off the highest tower. *No*. No man was going to destroy her happiness, or her sleep. She'd just make some warm milk, perhaps with a generous splash of whisky in it. Mrs Baillie seemed to think



whisky was a cure all for most problems, mixed with hot water and honey for a cold, or with milk for a good night's sleep. Luella didn't doubt she'd half a dozen other remedies with whisky as the key ingredient, but she'd not learnt of them yet.

The old building was silent and the night warm, even inside the castle, which was nothing short of miraculous. Luella didn't bother with her dressing gown, just tugged on her slippers and hurried down to the kitchen. She padded about, pouring a small amount of milk into a pan and stirring the fire to life enough to warm it through. Mrs Baillie kept a bottle of whisky hidden at the back of the pantry, behind a sack of flour. Carefully, Luella retrieved it and dosed the milk, then poured the mixture into a cup. Once she had set the saucepan aside to soak, she sat down at the table and sipped the milk.

It was surprisingly good, and she sighed as the whisky warmed her blood, easing the tension that crackled up and down her neck. By the time she had finished the cup, she was feeling pleasantly drowsy and eyed the whisky bottle speculatively. Perhaps she ought to have another cup, just to be certain she would sleep.

The kitchen door opened, and Luella froze as a large, dark figure strode down the stairs. He was at the bottom before he noticed her.

"Christ! Ye gave me a start." Lord Buchanan glared her at, his face dimly visible in the moonlight that slanted through the kitchen window. "What are ye playing at? Is that whisky?"

"I couldn't sleep," Luella said, pushing to her feet. "Mrs Baillie says warm milk with a dash of whisky is an excellent remedy."

He snorted at that. "Aye, she'd feed us that when we were boys and had a bad dream. It worked right enough."

His eyes glittered, and she felt his gaze travel over her as explicitly as if he'd touched her. Luella swallowed, immediately conscious that she wore only a thin nightgown.

"Why can ye nae sleep?"

“I don’t know,” she lied, which was pointless, as they’d both admitted to being sleepless and plagued by repressed desire.

He shifted, moving further into the moonlight, the eerie glimmer casting his features in silver. He looked cold and remote, every inch the mythical hero she had once compared him to, yet there was amusement in his voice when he spoke.

“Me either. It’s a conundrum, aye?”

Luella reminded herself sternly of everything she’d been thinking earlier. If anything happened between them, this would be impossible. He’d want her to leave, to leave Wildsyde and Jack and the life she loved here. There was no future with him, no happily ever after. He’d made that very clear.

“Well, goodnight, then,” she said, and hurried to the stairs without daring to look back.

She left the kitchen, telling herself she was not the least bit disappointed when he didn’t follow her. Murdoch greeted her in the hallway, leaping about and barking as if he’d not seen her for six months.

“Hush!” she pleaded, as the dog gambolled about like a spring lamb. “Oh, Murdoch, do be quiet, you’ll wake Jack and Mrs MacLeod.”

Murdoch didn’t want to hush, however, he wanted to play, so she hurried into the study and shut the door to muffle the sound.

“Yes, I love you too,” she said, laughing as she got to her knees and the big dog almost knocked her flat. “Now, do behave, you wicked creature.”

“I’ve nae done a thing wrong, though I was sorely tempted.”

The wry voice came from the doorway and Luella sighed. Fate was determined to see her ruined. There was no escaping it.

“Murdoch, bed,” he commanded, and Murdoch went docilely to the pile of blankets in the corner and lay down with a huff. Lyall walked to her then, gazing down at her.

“Are ye going to tell me to behave, too? Ye had best do it quick.”

Luella’s heart beat too hard, her breath coming too quickly. Desire hit her hard and fast, an unstoppable wave that drew her towards her demise like a magnet seeking true north. Unable to speak or stop herself from inevitable self-destruction, she simply shook her head and reached out, putting her hand on his knee. His breath hitched as her palm inched up, over a powerful thigh dusted with coarse hair, the muscle tensing as her trembling hand slid higher. Lord, but he was warm to the touch, it was almost a surprise when she had gazed upon her mythical Highland warrior and thought how cold and remote he looked just moments ago. But he was no illusion, no dream sent to keep her from sleep, but a flesh and blood man and, if the look in his eyes was anything to judge by, he wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

There was a muttered curse and then he was on his knees too and she was swept up, his mouth on hers and he bore them both down to the floor. Luella thanked providence for the thick rug before the fireplace as his weight settled over her.

“Lyall,” she whispered, daring to speak his name aloud for the first time.

“I cannae stop thinking about ye, about this. Ye have stolen my wits, Luella,” he said, a bewildered tone to the words that might have been funny if he’d not sounded so frustrated.

“It’s the same for me,” she whispered, stroking his hair. She sighed as he pressed hot kisses down the length of her neck, his hands moving restlessly over her. “I have tried so hard not to want you. I don’t want to cause you trouble, but... but I—”

His mouth on hers stopped her from making any foolish declarations, for which she was grateful. She did not wish to see pity in his eyes in the morning. Perhaps they could just go

back to ignoring each other, she thought wildly, even though she knew it was impossible, but she couldn't stop it, could not stop him, because she was too caught up in the madness of wanting him too. Her body clamoured for his touch, an unendurable ache of emptiness inside her that needed him more than her sanity could bear for another moment. His hands tugged at her nightgown, one warm palm sliding up her leg, up her thigh. He shifted sideways, and she gasped as he cupped her mound, pressing gently. Luella responded the only way she could, pushing back against his touch, her breath catching as a jolt of sensation thrilled through her.

“You want me,” he said, and it wasn't a question, not that she'd been about to deny it.

“I do. I think I have from the first.”

“Aye, ye draw me to ye like ye have stolen my reason and I have nae will enough to keep away, though this is insane.”

“It is,” she agreed, and then closed her eyes as his fingers caressed her intimately, stroking and petting her until she was mindless with pleasure.

“We have to stop,” he growled, as he kissed her again.

“Yes,” she sighed as his lips trailed a path down her neck. “Y-Yes, we m-must,” she agreed, hardly knowing what she was saying, only knowing that she would not be the one to make it happen.

“Take it off,” he commanded, yanking irritably at her nightgown.

Luella dragged her unwilling eyelids open to see him watching her with feverish intensity. Somehow, she got hold of the hem and tugged it off. He groaned and fell upon her breasts like a starving man presented with a feast. Luella stroked his hair, beyond sanity, as his fingers continued their delicious torment between her thighs and his hot mouth trailed kisses over her breasts, nipping at the taut peaks with his teeth and toying with her until she was trembling with need.

“By God, but ye are lovely. How am I to think when ye are by me?” he said, sounding increasingly unhinged and

almost indignant, as though she had been sent expressly to drive him distracted.

“If I can’t, I don’t see why you should,” she retorted, but then he shifted, moving the folds of his kilt aside and the hot, silken press of his arousal was hard between her thighs, skin to slick skin. She sucked in a breath, torn between terror and desire. She wanted him, wanted this so badly, and yet...

“Lyll,” she whispered, needing some assurance from him, some sign that he would not simply use her and cast her aside.

“Aye, lass,” he said, his voice husky with desire.

“I’m—” Frightened, she wanted to say, afraid that her feelings for him were entirely one-sided. She did not expect him to love her, but did he care, even a little? What if she got with child, what if—

“Luella, I want ye, so much... I—”

The door to the study opened, lamplight spilling over them as they looked up to see Mrs MacLeod, stricken, gazing at them in horror.

“My lord!” she exclaimed.

“Christ almighty,” Lyll growled, and pushed to his feet, leaving Luella to grab for her nightgown to cover herself.

He stood, rigid with anger, and Luella knew before he spoke what he was thinking. He looked between them, and Luella shook her head, misery clogging her throat, for she knew he would never believe she hadn’t arranged it, hadn’t made some pact with Mrs MacLeod to capture him as he had been caught before.

“And there I was thinking I was safe in my own home. Ye must think me a fool and damn me for proving ye right. I’ll nae do it, Luella. I don’t care what anyone says of either of us. Ye may go to the devil.”

He strode out, leaving Mrs MacLeod gaping with appalled amazement and Luella in a fog of despair and regret so profound she could see no way out. Wordlessly she tugged her

nightgown back on and got up, hardly able to look Mrs MacLeod in the eye.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be gone in the morning, but I’m sure Lord Buchanan will keep you on for Jack’s sake. You... You’ll look after him for me?”

Mrs MacLeod’s lips were pursed in a disapproving line, but her expression softened a little at that. She nodded. “Of course.”

“Thank you,” Luella said, her voice choked, and fled.

## Chapter 17



*The dress worked a charm, I reckon, though the stubborn gowk is still acting like she's cut from the same cloth as Lilith. I feel bad about it, but I dare not speak to him. Ye son is a stubborn devil, but he's made in his father's image. I'm keeping everything crossed that he comes to his senses. The poor girl is so in love with him it's pitiful.*

**—Excerpt of a letter from Mrs Sheenagh Baillie to The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven.**

**31<sup>st</sup> July 1845, Wildsyde Castle, Highlands of Scotland.**

Luella slipped the letter under Jack's door, praying that he would forgive her for leaving like this, but she could not face Lyall again. The idea of seeing disgust in his face, of hearing him throw further accusations at her... it was all too much. She would break down and cry and she still had a little pride that she refused to let him take from her. Bad enough that she must steal from him, but there was no help for it. He already thought the worst, so why not hammer the point home and let him believe she was the scheming bitch he always believed her to be? She knew he kept a few pounds in a locked box in his desk drawer, and she'd seen where he kept the key. He could consider it an advance on her inheritance, she thought bitterly.

It was not as early as she'd hoped to get away, as she made her way down the stairs, but Mr Clugston had mentioned going into Wick this morning after breakfast, and she intended

to go with him. With luck, she could get away before anyone noticed. By the time Clugston got back with the news he'd left her in town, she ought to have found some transport to get her away from here. To where, she had no clue, but she could not stay. At least she had some skills to get a job now, and she could always forge a letter of recommendation. She was her father's daughter, after all.

Wearily, Luella set the carpetbag stuffed with her belongings down out of sight. The tartan-trimmed gown was still up in her room, for she had known she could not stand to see it again, let alone wear it. Her head ached at the thought of everything she was facing, and she felt utterly exhausted. The only sleep she had managed had been disturbed by the dream, which she now understood all too well. She had been searching for something from the start, running from her past and seeking a home in a world fraught with danger. The dream had changed when she had met Lyall, for then she had run through the darkness with a purpose in mind, running towards him, towards the love and safety she instinctively knew he could provide for her and Jack. How foolish dreams were, yet last night the safety she had sought had been missing, and she simply ran endlessly through the darkness with no glimmer of light to guide her.

Despair settled over her as she wondered what on earth she would do, where would she go? With regret, she realised that Mrs Baillie and Lady Morven would also think the worst now, and that hurt. Losing their good opinion was hard to bear, but she was no delicate flower. She never had been fragile, she was strong and determined and she would survive, somehow.

With a glance up and down the corridor to check no one was around, she walked to Lyall's study. She was about to reach for the handle when there was a knock at the front door. Muttering a curse and praying no one else had heard her, Luella turned and hurried to answer the knock.

A well dressed and very handsome young man stood on the threshold. He looked rumpled and rather weary, as if he'd spent a considerable time in the carriage behind him, but upon seeing her, he snatched the hat from his head and smiled.



Luella mentally upgraded him from handsome to utterly gorgeous.

“Can I help you?” she asked, praying she could send him away quickly. His expression became brighter still upon hearing her speak.

“I do hope so, for I have been scouring the country. Looking for you, I think, Miss Fulbright? You *are* Miss Fulbright? You certainly match the description I was given and you’re English, so I assumed—”

“Yes, I am she,” Luella replied, perplexed.

“Thank heavens,” he said with a sigh. “Might I come in? I have something of great importance to discuss with you.”

“No,” Luella said shortly. “But if you want to drive me to Wick, or to anywhere, actually, you can talk to me on the way.”

“Oh.” The man looked rather at a loss. “I was hoping to see Lord Buchanan too, he’s an old friend, you see, and—”

“You said it was important, Mr...?”

“Mr Knight, Felix Knight,” the man said, extending his hand to her.

Luella shook it, glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone had noticed there was a visitor yet. “I am pleased to meet you, Mr Knight, but you have precisely one minute to decide what to do. I am leaving Wildsyde now. This instant, so —”

“Then I’ll take you wherever you wish to go!” he exclaimed.

Luella nodded, retrieved her carpetbag, and then hesitated. “I don’t have any money,” she said bluntly.

Mr Knight’s expression softened, though his eyes were troubled. “Actually, Miss Fulbright, if we can come to an agreement about a little piece of land you own, you will have a great deal of money.”

“Land?” Luella said blankly. “But I don’t...”

She paused, remembering the lawyer who dealt with her father's affairs, telling her of a scrubby piece of land by a river somewhere that was utterly worthless.

"Yes, that bit of land," Mr Knight said with a warm smile. "Come along, Miss Fulbright. I will take you wherever you wish to go, and we will talk. That is... Do you have a companion, someone to chaperone?"

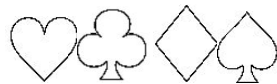
"No, Mr Knight, I am alone. But that is for the best, I assure you," she said coolly. "Well, let us be off then. I am eager to know what you want with my land."

"Are you certain you wish to leave like this? Are... Are you in some kind of trouble?"

His green eyes were filled with concern and Luella felt relief that he appeared to be a gentleman at least. As for being in trouble, she almost laughed.

"Quite certain, Mr Knight, and I assure you, I am leaving trouble behind me. Can we go at once, please?"

Mr Knight still looked concerned, but he nodded, offered her his arm, and escorted her to his carriage.



Lyall groaned and clutched at his head. At least, he thought it was his head. It felt like a lump of raw meat, all the nerves exposed. His stomach felt little better, his guts churning like fury. He lay still, breathing cautiously, wondering what the bloody hell had happened, and why the worst pain seemed to be in his chest. Was he dying?

A warm, wet tongue laved at his cheek, and he pushed Murdoch away with a grunt.

"Pack it in, ye daft beggar," he protested, and then he remembered. Luella. Luella's body warm and willing beneath his, her hands on him, her desire as fierce as his own as she gave herself to him. Except she hadn't, because they'd been interrupted by Mrs MacLeod, damn her eyes and... and then he'd truly lost his mind.

He sat up with a groan, uncertain whether to hold his head or his guts. His head felt as if it was barely attached, but his guts were protesting louder. Breathing steadily in and out, he ordered himself not to boke. *Christ*. He needed to straighten himself out and go to Luella at once.

He'd been three hefty measures into the bottle of whisky he'd opened before he'd come to his senses and realised Luella could not have orchestrated the scene last night. There was no way she could have known he'd stayed up late, or that he'd go to the kitchen to find something to eat. She could not have predicted that he would follow her out, or that Murdoch would bark, and she'd have to try to keep him quiet.

She had done the right thing, leaving him when staying in the kitchen would have meant him taking her in his arms, for he'd meant to do it. Luella had gone, and he'd been the one who'd followed, he'd been the one who'd gone to the study and closed the door behind him. No one had forced him to go after her, to flirt with her and tempt her into doing what they were both desperate to do. It was all on him and, bastard that he was, he had put the blame squarely at her feet and left her to face Mrs MacLeod all by herself. Christ, he ought to be horsewhipped for that alone. He ought to have gone to her last night, but he hadn't dared, not reeking of whisky and half seas over. It was too important he not mess things up and, in his current state, Lyall didn't trust himself to say the right thing. If she hated him now, he had only himself to blame.

The idea made something like panic squirm in his chest. He couldn't bear the thought that she might hate him. What would he do if he never again saw her blush as he caught her staring at him with that soft look in her eyes? What if she went away, so she never had to look at him again? The irony wasn't lost on him, as he remembered the relief of his mother's invitation. Yet instead of relief, the panicky sensation grew claws and teeth and scabbled in his chest and Lyall pushed to his feet, suppressing a cry of pain. His head pounded as if someone were using it as an anvil.

"Pull yerself together, man. Ye must face her now, this instant," he told himself, swallowing down the unpleasant

taste that rose in his throat. Before he could take a step, the door burst open and he winced as it crashed against the wall, the sound exploding in his tender brain like a bullet.

“Jack,” he rasped, closing his eyes. “For the love of everything holy—”

“You promised!” Jack cried, and Lyall opened his eyes, realising now the boy’s face was red and tear-stained, his gaze furious. “You promised she could stay, that she had a home here. What did you do?”

A cold sensation of dread swept him from head to foot as Jack’s accusing words penetrated his whisky-soaked brain. “Where is she?”

“Gone!” Jack said, his lip trembling. “She’s gone.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know! She says she’ll let me know when she’s settled, but she’s got no money, nowhere to go. She would never leave me, not like this, not unless she had to. Not unless you told her to.”

Lyall shook his head. “I did nae,” he said, though guilt and regret made the words hard to speak, for he wasn’t certain they were true. He might not have told her to go, but he’d not given her many options, had he? Not after what he’d said. “Oh, God.”

Jack launched himself at Lyall, hitting and kicking and for a moment, Lyall was too stunned to react. Then he caught hold of the boy, hugging him tightly.

“I’ll find her and bring her home, Jack, I swear it,” he said, not letting go until the boy subsided. Jack sobbed, clinging to him. “You’re right. It’s my fault, Jack, I... I made her feel she was nae welcome, but it’s nae true. I... I’ve been a fool. A pigheaded, stubborn fool. I’ll make it right. I swear it.”

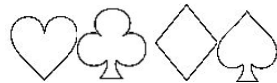
Jack stared up at him, his face pale now the anger had left him. “You mean it this time? You’re not telling lies?”

Lyall met his gaze steadily. “I never tell lies, Jack. I’ve done a bad thing, something I regret more than I can tell ye,

but I'm going to find her and bring her home, and I... I'll never make her feel she doesnae belong here again."

"Then I believe you," Jack said, his expression uncompromising. Lyall knew then, if let him down, Jack would never forgive him for it. "Bring my sister home, Lyall. Please."

"I will," Lyall said, nodding. "I will nae come back again until I can bring her with me. My word on it."



**4<sup>th</sup> August 1845, the offices of Knight Enterprises, Piccadilly, London.**

Felix Knight gave Luella an encouraging smile as he gestured for her to go ahead of him up the stairs at the offices of Knight Enterprises. The young man had been a charming companion on their tedious journey to London, or he'd tried his utmost to be, at least. Luella had tried to rally herself but even this sudden and unexpected piece of good fortune landing in her lap could not shake her out of the misery of regret that clouded every moment of the day.

The offer that Felix Knight had put forward on behalf of his father had been more money that she could ever have dreamed of. Her situation being what it was, Luella could not simply sign papers and let the fellow leave, though. She needed ready money at once, to find a suitable home for herself, and for Jack when he came to stay with her. That he would not be with her every day and that she would be all alone was something she did not allow herself to dwell upon. She also knew a thing or two about negotiation from her father, and she knew better than to accept the first offer, or to deal with the young man when his father was the one holding the purse strings. If he wanted her land so badly, he could pay for it. Luella was not greedy, but she was tired of being at the mercy of fate. Money meant security for her and for Jack, and freedom from relying upon Lord Buchanan, and that meant everything to her now.

“You may stay here, Mrs Cooper,” Luella said, smiling at the middle-aged woman Mr Knight had hired to act as her companion and lady’s maid.

He had refused to consider travelling on with her if the proprieties were not observed, and she could hardly blame him. Whether or not he knew the significance of her name, he was a wealthy, handsome fellow and heir to the Knight fortune. Lilith would not have hesitated to trap him if the opportunity arose. Even Luella knew his father, Gabriel Knight, was one of the wealthiest industrialists in the country.

Mrs Cooper nodded and took out her knitting, making herself comfortable as Felix Knight escorted Luella to his father’s office, knocked, and entered.

“Good morning, Father. May I present Miss Luella Fulbright? She is the owner of that troublesome piece of land I have been searching for.”

Gabriel Knight stood, moving from behind the enormous oak desk that dominated the office and coming to greet her. He was an imposing man with an air of contained energy. She found it hard to judge his age. His dark hair was shot through with silver, but he was obviously fit and vigorous, so perhaps somewhere in his late fifties?

“Miss Fulbright, it is a pleasure to meet you. You have led my son on quite a journey around the countryside,” he said with a smile. He had a pleasant voice, certainly not upper class, but cultured, and his manners put her at ease at once. This was not a man to browbeat someone he judged inferior into submission. “I hope the journey from Scotland was not too fatiguing. Please sit down and we will see if we can come to terms. May I offer you some refreshment?”

Luella refused his offer of tea, but did as he asked, and Mr Knight returned to sit behind his desk while his son leaned casually against it.

“Felix tells me you have rejected our very fair offer,” he said, a twinkle in his eyes giving her reason to believe he did not blame her for doing so.

Luella's heart beat hard, and her palms felt horribly sweaty, but outwardly she did not so much as blink, remaining utterly composed. "I have."

Mr Knight smiled, and she wondered if he knew how much it cost her to show him such a cool façade. She suspected he did. "You realise no one else in the world will have the least bit of use for it? For anyone but me, it is entirely worthless."

"Indeed, but it is crucial to your plans. You must believe me a simpleton if you think I ought to grab at your first offer." She quirked an eyebrow. *Your move, Mr Knight.*

"I do not believe you a simpleton," he replied steadily. "Though I must warn you, Miss Fulbright, that I could find another location for my bridge."

"You could," Luella agreed, keeping her tone conversational and entirely calm. "And that will cost you more money and, more significantly, time. I suspect you dislike wasting time, Mr Knight."

He chuckled at that, a warm, inviting sound that suggested he was enjoying himself. "Indeed, I do, Miss Fulbright. Very well. I shall make you another offer for your worthless land, but I suggest you think very carefully before you try another tack. I respect your determination, but I am not a fool to be manipulated by a chit of a girl."

"I never thought it," Luella replied blandly, watching as he took a pen and wrote a figure down on a piece of paper.

He slid it across the desk to her and Luella had to work hard to bite back an exclamation of astonishment. Mr Knight *really* wanted that land. It was an extremely generous offer. Luella swallowed, sweat prickling down the back of her neck. Steeling her nerve, she raised her head and looked Mr Knight in the eyes.

"Add another two thousand pounds in shares in your next venture, and it's yours."

She held out her hand to him, holding his gaze.

Mr Knight did not so much as blink, just regarded her steadily. Luella held her nerve and kept her hand extended. Finally, Mr Knight smiled. “Well done, Miss Fulbright. You have a deal.”

He shook her hand warmly, his expression one of pleasure.

“I’ll have my lawyers draw up the agreement at once, but my son informs me you are suffering a little pecuniary embarrassment,” he said, his voice kind.

Luella laughed. “You might say that, or you might be less polite and say my pockets are to let.”

“Well, that is a situation easily remedied,” he said, reaching into his desk drawer and taking out a money purse. “Hopefully that will tide you over until we can finalise the deal. Do you have a bank account?”

Luella blinked. “Um...” She assumed the money her father had left to her must be somewhere, but she couldn’t touch that, even if she knew where it was.

“Not to worry. I will have one opened for you,” he said briskly. “But I am under the impression you are alone in town. Do you have friends here? Family, perhaps?”

Luella shook her head. “My father died. That’s why I was sent to Wildsyde, you see. Lord Buchanan is my guardian.” She tried hard to keep the bitterness from her voice but suspected she had failed. Perhaps that was what made the two men stiffen.

“Your guardian?” Mr Knight repeated, his expression grave. “But Felix led me to believe you are of age?”

“I am,” Luella said impatiently. “Only my father made this stupid will, making Lord Buchanan my guardian until I am four and twenty. It’s quite ridiculous.”

“That’s as may be,” said Felix Knight, his expression grim. “But the land was part of your inheritance, which means you need Lord Buchanan’s approval before the sale can complete.”



The young man winced slightly as his father regarded him with impatience.

“No!” Luella said in dismay.

“You believe he will withhold his consent?” The elder Mr Knight demanded, his keen eyes narrowed.

Luella shook her head. “No. No, I don’t believe that, only... only I must make it a part of the agreement that you deal with him. I don’t wish to see him. I don’t *ever* wish to see him.”

Father and son exchanged a meaningful glance, but Luella did not care what conclusions they drew from her outburst. Only that they saw it done.

“That won’t be a problem,” Mr Knight replied gently. “Felix, I hope you’ve not unpacked yet.”

His son groaned. “All the way to bloo—to Scotland again?”

Mr Knight gave him a wry smile. “Let that be a lesson to you, Felix. Make sure you have all the information before you act. Now, then. If you have no objection, Miss Fulbright, I believe I would like to introduce you to my wife. It seems you need a place to stay until you are settled, and I suspect you need a little guidance on finding and setting up home for yourself.”

“Oh.” Luella stared at him in shock, unprepared for such kindness from a businessman with a reputation for ruthlessness. “But I cannot believe your wife would be the least bit interested in the affairs of a stranger, and—”

“And that just goes to show, you do not know my wife,” he replied, winking at her. “She will be charmed to be of assistance, I assure you.”

Luella sighed, returning a grateful smile. “Then I shall be forever in her debt, for I confess I am a little daunted by everything I need to do.”

“Oh, never fear, Miss Fulbright,” Felix Knight said cheerfully. “Mother will soon take you in hand, whether you

like it or not.”

## Chapter 18



*Dear Jack,*

*I have discovered your sister has gone to London. You may rest assured that I am following her and won't return unless she is with me. I don't forget my promises. Be a good lad and mind Mrs Baillie, and don't go skipping school. I will find out and then you'll be sorry.*

**—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan* to his ward, *Master Jack Fulbright*.**

**11<sup>th</sup> August 1845, Bond Street, London.**

Luella regarded the two swatches of fabric with interest. “The green would be stunning with your eyes,” she said, holding it up to Lady Helena’s face.

She was a beautiful woman still and looked far younger than the ‘wrong side of fifty’ that she admitted to, with a figure a woman half her age might kill for.

Helena nodded. “Yes, I adore it. Though I think half my wardrobe is green, for Mr Knight always says the same thing. I think I’ll get the burgundy too. Such a rich colour and it will be autumn before we know it. Now, are you going to get that blue-grey silk made up? It’s quite perfect for you.”

Luella reached for the glossy fabric again, touching it reverently. She had never worn anything so fine. Even the lovely gowns Lady Morven had been so kind to order for her

—at Lyall’s expense—had been nowhere near as extravagant as this.

“Just imagine it with some beading, here, and here,” Lady Helena said, gesturing to where the neckline would sit on the dress they had discussed.

“I’ve already spent a small fortune,” Luella said with a soft laugh, hardly able to believe she could afford to do such things.

Lady Helena returned a warm smile, a knowing look in her eyes. “You realise you are financially secure now, Luella? So long as you are not foolish, you may live comfortably for the rest of your days. The two thousand in shares you negotiated was a shrewd move, too, and will likely make you a very wealthy woman in years to come. So, you can afford to indulge yourself now and then.”

“Then I suppose I ought to buy it,” Luella said, though the pleasure she ought to feel in spending her own money on something so beautiful was missing. She knew fate had been kind to her for once, giving her everything she could have dreamed of. Now she had financial security for herself and Jack, the chance to buy the property she dreamed of, even the friendship of someone as lovely as Lady Helena. For Mr Knight’s wife had welcomed her with open arms and more kindness than Luella had any right to expect. Yet she could find no joy in any of it. Her thoughts were still consumed with Lyall, with the feel of being in his arms, the relief of knowing he wanted her as badly as she wanted him, and then the icy revulsion in his eyes once Mrs MacLeod had discovered them.

Once they had made their purchases, they returned to the carriage, which was stacked high with dozens of boxes, most of them Luella’s. The carriage moved slowly through the heavy traffic, returning to Lady Helena’s magnificent home on Grosvenor Square.

“What’s wrong?”

Luella turned to see Lady Helena watching her closely.

Blushing, Luella shook her head, dismayed in case the woman believed she was ungrateful for all the kind attentions she had been so generously given over the past week.

“Nothing,” she protested. “I’ve had a wonderful day. It’s all been a glorious dream since the moment your son arrived on the doorstep of Wildsyde.”

Helena nodded. “Yes, the place you were running away from with only a carpetbag and without so much as a farthing in your pocket. Won’t you tell me what happened? I promise you may trust me.”

Luella shook her head and turned to look out of the window, feeling the colour drain from her face. She suspected she could trust the lady, but she did not dare do so. Even if she didn’t say a word to anyone, surely a lady like Helena would think less of her for her wanton behaviour. There were enough people thinking ill of her to want to add another to the list. Besides, she would do nothing to cause Lyall any further embarrassment, no matter if he deserved it. He’d been badly burned by Lilith and his reaction was hardly to be wondered at, no matter how unjust it had been.

“Lady Morven is one of my closest friends, did you know that?”

Luella’s head snapped around, her eyes wide with alarm as she stared at Lady Helena.

“Oh, don’t look so horrified,” she said, laughing softly. “She only had lovely things to say about you, though she admitted it took her some time to believe you were not like your cousin.”

“She believes it now?” Luella asked, her heart thudding too hard.

“She does.”

Luella licked her lips, hardly daring to ask, but she had to know. “But when did you speak to her last?”

“I received a letter from her this morning. I wrote to tell her you were with us, you see. In case she was worried as you disappeared from her son’s house so precipitously. She wants

to know ‘what the devil that fool boy has done now.’ Her words, not mine.”

Luella gave a little bark of startled laughter, alarmed to find tears welling in her eyes, but the relief was enormous. She could not bear the idea Lady Morven and Mrs Baillie despised her and believed she had tried to trap Lyall for mercenary reasons.

“What did he do, love?” Helena asked, reaching for her hand.

It was too much. The misery Luella had been holding so tightly in check burst forth in the light of Lady Helena’s sympathy. Luella pressed a hand to her mouth to muffle the broken sound that tore from her, but there was no helping it. The tears rolled down her cheeks as she gave in, agonising sobs wracking her frame as Helena gathered her into an embrace and pressed a handkerchief into her hands.

“Oh, you poor dear. That’s it, you have a good cry. You’ll feel better for it, I promise. Once you feel able, you can tell me all about it, and I promise you I won’t tell another living soul. Not even Lady Morven, though I suspect from what she wrote, she may have a fair idea.”

Helena made soothing noises, rubbing circles on Luella’s back as though she were a little girl with a grazed knee. Little by little, Luella brought herself back under control.

“I’m so sorry,” she said thickly, wiping her eyes. She blew her nose. “Good heavens, what must you think of me? And after you’ve been so kind. I ought not to have made such a scene.”

“Oh, piffle,” Helena said crossly. “Whyever not? I don’t know why people set so much store by keeping one’s emotions so tightly battered down. I certainly don’t. I’ve got a frightful temper,” she added confidingly.

Luella gave her a dubious look, and Helena smiled.

“It’s true. Just ask Mr Knight. Are you terribly in love with him? Lord Buchanan, I mean, not my husband.”

Blinking in shock at the sudden question, Luella could only stare at her for a moment. “In l-love?”

“Yes, dear. Are you in love with Lyall? I wouldn’t blame you if you were. The strong silent types are terribly appealing, aren’t they? Especially if they’re wounded or emotionally damaged in some way. Quite irresistible. Added to the whole rugged Highlander thing and, oh, the *kilt*... well, a girl doesn’t stand a chance,” she said with a wistful sigh.

Despite everything, Luella gave a choked laugh, and Helena returned a mischievous grin. “Don’t tell Mr Knight I said so, he’s the jealous type. Not that he has any need to be. I love him as much now as when I first laid eyes on him. Far more in truth. But sometimes men are terribly obtuse. I had to chase him down, you know. I was quite shameless about it. The poor darling didn’t stand a chance.”

“You chased Mr Knight?” Luella repeated, for Lady Helena was the beautiful daughter of a duke and could surely have had anyone with a snap of her fingers. The idea Mr Knight might have needed persuading was interesting.

Helena nodded. “He had some mad notion about not being good enough for me, not being a blue-blooded aristocrat. Good heavens, as if I cared a button for such snobbery.”

“Lyall thinks I tried to trap him, just like Lilith did,” Luella said in a rush, her throat tightening as she remembered once again how hurt and furious he’d looked, staring down at her. Shame and misery fought for domination in her chest. “We... we were found in a rather compromising position.”

“You didn’t, though, because you’re in love with him,” Helena guessed.

Luella nodded, deciding to throw caution to the wind. “I knew he would not offer marriage or... or anything. I was just so tired of wanting what I couldn’t have, and he wanted me and...” She broke off, not daring to look at Lady Helena now. “You must think me immoral. I suppose I got what I deserved. If I’d behaved like a lady—”

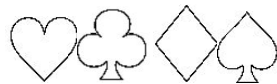
“Oh, to the devil with being a lady,” Helena snapped. “Don’t be such a fool, Luella. You love and desire the man. Why shouldn’t you express those feelings? And, if he thinks less of you for doing so, it’s him that ought to feel ashamed, and so I shall tell him.”

Luella stared at her in alarm. “Oh, no! Lady Helena, please. I don’t believe he thinks that, it’s only that he believes I tried to force his hand, that I orchestrated the appearance of my chaperone to make him marry me and—”

“And he’s an idiot,” Helena said firmly. “But then he’s a man with feelings for a woman, so the two things are inextricably entwined. The blasted fool. Oh, I could shake him.”

Blinking with shock, Luella could only gaze at Lady Helena in wonder. She had never had someone to stand beside her before, to take her side. Certainly not a woman like this, and one who knew so little of her.

Lady Helena shook her head and reached over, giving Luella’s hand a squeeze. “Don’t you worry, dear. Ruth—that is, Lady Morven—and I have things in hand. You just leave it to us and don’t you worry. It will all work out for the best.”



Lyall groaned as the sharp knock on the hotel room door informed him it was seven in the morning and time he was up. Having arrived in London far too late and with no time to alert the staff at the house his parents kept in town, he’d booked a room in the first place he found. That it was within spitting distance of Peregrine House, the Knights’ town residence, was neither here nor there.

His journey had given him far too much time to think and, the more he thought, the more evidence that he was an idiot was provided for him. Memories assailed him. Luella standing over him, demanding he eat the bread she’d made, her expression eager and hopeful; Luella drunk as an emperor on whisky cherries and singing exuberantly off-key; Luella huddled beside Murdoch in the cold and rain, her cloak



covering far more of his injured dog than herself; Luella lying beneath him, her eyes soft with desire and... and what?

Had that been merely affection, or something more? His guts twisted with regret. Why hadn't he seen what had been right in front of him? Had he missed his chance now? For she'd spent the past days with Felix bloody Knight. Had he been kinder to her? Had Felix seen what Lyall had only now realised, that Luella was special, that she brought joy to everyone's lives and made things better?

Lyall had drunk rather more than he ought last night, but it was that or spend the next hours having murderous thoughts about Felix, or worse still, turn up on his parents' doorstep demanding to know what their son had done with Luella. Lyall's mother and Lady Helena were very close friends, and the Knights were practically family. He even addressed the lady as *Aunt* Helena, though he had never addressed Gabriel as *Uncle*. That was far too intimidating a prospect for a small boy. Gabriel had been a lot of fun, though, and he and Lyall had always been close. He was a man Lyall respected greatly, not only for all he'd achieved, but for being far more of a gentleman than most others who claimed the title by birth. Everything Lyall knew about Felix told him that he, too, was a gentleman to his core, but Lyall was not feeling entirely rational.

Felix Knight was only a little older than Luella, but even Lyall could see he was a handsome fellow and being heir to one of the largest fortunes in the country hardly hurt his prospects, even if his father was a self-made man. His mother was the daughter of a duke, so no one could say he entirely lacked breeding. Lyall reminded himself sternly that Luella didn't care about such things, but it didn't make him feel better.

How Luella had fallen into company with him, he could not fathom. It wasn't until he had reached Manchester that he'd discovered who it was she was with. The mysterious carriage that had appeared at Wildsyde the morning she had disappeared had remained just that, with no one any the wiser who had been there or why. Had it been Felix, and if so, what

the devil was he doing visiting without a word and disappearing again? No, that sounded too bizarre. But who else? Luella must have taken a chance and asked them to take her with them. But how on earth had Felix arrived on the scene? Lyall had followed the carriage all the way to Carlisle, none the wiser who she was with, but certain Luella was in the company of whoever owned or had hired it.

At Manchester, he'd lost the trail, and had spent several terrible days uncertain of which direction to take or what to do next, when he'd chanced to bump into an old friend who had remarked he had seen Felix in company with a very tasty morsel. On further interrogation, Lyall had concluded it was certainly Luella and had been more relieved than he could say when his friend confirmed she had been travelling with a middle-aged chaperone and bound for London.

The tedious journey back to London had been rendered interminable by the noxious churning of guilt and regret that sat heavy in his guts and tormented his every thought. Why had he been such a damned fool? He knew she was different. He'd known for some time she was not like Lilith, not even close. Luella was kind and caring and giving. Yes, she had a temper, and she didn't suffer fools, but he liked that about her. He liked her very much. So much so that the thought of seeing her in the company of someone like Felix Knight was making him wretched with jealousy that he had no right to feel.

The same questions circled his brain as he forced himself to wash and shave. How had she fallen into company with Felix, of all men? Why had she gone with him? Where was she going? She had no money, no friends in town that she had mentioned, and certainly no family that she wished to contact. Was she so desperate to be out of Lyall's company that she would do *anything* to be free of him? That idea made him sick to his stomach. Surely, she would never leave Jack unless she had a plan. But what the devil was it?

Delayed and cancelled trains hampered his journey, which took far longer than usual. By the time he'd finally reached London, he was beside himself. Though he was frantic with the desire to storm the Knights' front door and demand to see

Luella, Lyall forced himself to dress with care. He needed all the help he could get, and the one thing he had going for him was that the foolish girl wanted him as badly as he wanted her. Was that all it was, though? The question sat uneasily in his chest, making him remember every interaction with her. They had been drawn to each other from the first. He had been aware of her attraction to him from the moment he'd laid eyes on her, and then he had seen that naked desire shining in hers. His own feelings had been too tangled with revulsion for Lilith for him to make sense of them to begin with, but Luella's spirit and quick wit had drawn him in, and evidence of her kindness had taught him the truth. She was her own person, and nothing like her scheming cousin. He had forgotten that at a crucial moment, and now his future hung in the balance.

He dreaded to think what people would say when they discovered he was courting his wife's cousin, and after Lilith had made such a fool of him. Especially if Mrs MacLeod didn't keep her tongue between her teeth. No doubt they'd say he was the biggest fool on earth. He would be, too, if he let her get away from him. The realisation that he didn't care what people said anymore, not if Luella really cared for him, spurred him on.

Lyall forced down a hasty breakfast in the hopes it might quiet his stomach and clear his head and was hurrying down the steps of the hotel when a carriage pulled up. The window came down and a peremptory upper-class voice hailed him.

"Lyall Anderson, don't you take another step."

Rather astonished to be addressed as if he were a small boy, Lyall turned with a scowl, about to remonstrate, when he locked gazes with a familiar pair of glittering green eyes.

"Aunt Helena!" he exclaimed, rather shocked. The fierce expression she wore told him he was found out.

Luella was indeed with the Knights, and Helena had a fair idea what he'd done.

"Get in."

It was a command, not a suggestion. Heat crawled up the back of his neck and he did as he was told, not being entirely stupid.

He climbed into the carriage and sat down opposite Helena, struggling to meet her uncompromising glare.

“How do you do, Auntie? Ye are looking well.”

“Never mind the flummery, you great lummo. What the devil have you to say for yourself?”

The heat burning the back of his neck reached his ears and Lyall cleared his throat awkwardly. “Not a great deal,” he admitted.

Helena snorted. “Then you had better start thinking, for that girl needs an elegant apology if you want to come anywhere near repairing the damage you’ve done.”

“She er... she told ye, then?” Lyall said, appalled, his colour rising.

“Yes, she did. Enough to know you behaved like an utter cad. The poor child was inconsolable, you big lout. How could you, Lyall?”

Lyall rubbed the back of his neck, acknowledging the roil of mortification and regret as a sour mixture churning in his guts. “Ach, I dinnae ken how. I lost my mind, but when that blasted woman strode in on us, it was Lilith all over again. I did nae stop to think. I was just so... so disappointed.”

It was a massive understatement, but Lyall saw Helena’s expression soften somewhat, something in the way he’d said it revealing the depth of his regret.

“It must have been a horrid shock,” she admitted. “And I suppose it is hard to trust again when one has been so ill-used. But Lyall, could you not have stopped to think before you threw accusations around?”

“Aye, but the Andersons are nae known for having even tempers. We’re quick to anger, but it did nae take me long to realise I’d made a mistake. I wish I had gone to her at once now, only it seemed wrong to go to her room in the middle of

the night, especially as I'd had a skinful. I was afraid I'd say the wrong thing."

Helena tsked, shaking her head. "What a pair you are, and her running away before you had the chance to make amends. Not that I blame her. I don't think I could have stood remaining under your roof after such an accusation. Still, she does not need to marry anyone for money now, Lyall, so you can put such suspicions to bed once and for all. She's a rather wealthy young woman. So, if she forgives you, you'll know it's for your own sake. Personally, I hope she makes you work for it."

"What's this?" Lyall asked in astonishment. "How does that come about?"

Helena shrugged. "Apparently, she inherited a scrubby bit of land from her father."

"Aye, and it's worthless," Lyall said in confusion.

"Not anymore. It is the chosen site of Gabe's railway bridge across the River Tweed. Not only did he pay her a small fortune for it, but she negotiated shares in his next venture. She's set to be quite the heiress."

Lyall met Helena's cool gaze with one of his own. "She does nae care for such things," he said grimly, though there was an anxious sensation squirming in his belly now alongside the other noxious emotions.

"Oh, don't be a fool," Helena said impatiently. "She's not the least bit mercenary, no. Your mother gave me her opinion of Miss Fulbright some weeks ago and, even on my brief acquaintance with her, I see it is accurate. Your mother was ever an excellent judge of character, though. But every woman cares for financial security. Especially if the option is being at the mercy of a man, she cannot trust who throws her affection back in her face."

"She can trust me!" Lyall retorted, stung.

Helena merely raised one elegant eyebrow.

"Aye, well. I suppose I shall have to prove that to her," he grumbled, folding his arms.

“Aye,” she replied with a wry smile. “I suppose you shall.”

“Aunt Helena, ye *will* help me?” he asked, not entirely confident of her reply.

Helena snorted. “Of course I will help you. But only if you are entirely sincere. You’ve both been through a lot, and I don’t want you rushing in and—”

“It’s nae a rush,” Lyall said with a wry smile. “She’s been in my mind since the moment she arrived back in May. I dinnae know when she reached my heart, but she’s there now, and I reckon she intends to bide there. I’ve nae chance of shifting her now even if I wanted to. Which I don’t,” he added ruefully.

Helena gave a heartfelt sigh. “Oh, a happy ever after. I’m so glad.” She reached over and took Lyall’s hand, squeezing it tightly. “Come for dinner tonight. I’ll arrange things just so. It will be perfect.”

“Tonight?” Lyall objected, not wanting to wait that long.

“Tonight,” Helena said firmly, and so he had to be satisfied.

## Chapter 19



*Dearest Helena,*

*Thank the Lord! I was never more anxious than when Sheenagh wrote to tell me Luella had fled Wildsyde with no one any the wiser where she had gone. What an odd stroke of luck, and how fate does like to play games with us. I am so glad for Luella. She deserves some good fortune after all she has been through, and I thank Gabriel with all my heart for his generosity. I don't doubt he could have bargained harder, but it is a weight of my mind to know she has options. I have thought for some time that she and Lyall would be an excellent match, but he is his father's son, and he was bound to make a mess of it through sheer pig-headedness. One thing I can say about the Anderson males, however, they apologise very prettily.*

***—Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven to The Lady Helena Knight.***

**12<sup>th</sup> August 1845, The Sons of Hades, Portman Square, London.**

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” Leo remarked, pushing away from the windowsill he was leaning on and grinning as Lyall strode into the private rooms they kept at the club.

Larkin raised his head from the accounts book he'd been perusing and sat back, eyebrows raised. "Lyall! This is a surprise."

"Well, then it's ye lucky day, aye?" he remarked gruffly.

He didn't want to be here, he wanted to speak to Luella now, but Helena had made it clear he would not do any such thing. Not having anything better to do, he supposed he ought to look in on the club and his old friends.

"The place looks very fine," he admitted.

They'd redecorated some since he was last here. The rich furnishings were sophisticated, with lots of heavy brocade and velvet in dark wine and bottle green, and many big leather armchairs, it was comfortable and yet elegant.

"Ashton must take most of the credit for that," Leo admitted. "It's amazing how a fellow with such a devastating right hook and such appalling taste in waistcoats can achieve such results, but there you are. One of life's little mysteries."

Lyall snorted and threw himself down in a chair, putting his feet up on a small inlaid table.

Larkin laughed, tsking at him. "He'll have your head if he sees you doing that," he remarked.

Lyall yawned and rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. "Aye, I might let him, too."

"Oh?" Leo walked over and sat down opposite him. "What's amiss?"

Lyall shook his head. "Never mind me, what's all this I'm hearing about someone out to get you?"

"*Us*, Lyall, as you are also a founder member. Someone is out to get us. Thorn got worked over by three masked men back in May. We've had goods stolen, someone tried to set fire to the place, and now our own properties are being targeted. Hart's got security at his place now as he's had to replace a ton of glass since someone threw stones at his greenhouses."

Lyall frowned at Leo. "Who have ye pissed off now?"



Leo threw his hands in the air. “Well, I like that! Don’t bring me into this. I’m entirely blameless... for once.”

“As blameless as the rest of us,” Larkin remarked with a snort. “The truth is, we don’t have a clue what we’ve done. We think it might be one of our competitors trying to put us out of business, but we’ve no real idea. This is all we have to go on.”

He reached into a drawer in the desk he sat behind and got out a letter, handing it to Leo, who passed it to Lyall. He read it out loud.

“To the Sons of Hades, I thought ye ought to know, this is just the beginning. I will destroy yer club, and I will destroy ye.” Lyall looked up, his eyebrows raised. “It’s short and to the point, aye?”

Leo laughed at that. “Indeed. For all we know, we’re dealing with a madman.”

“What makes ye think it’s a man?” Lyall asked with interest. “A woman can be just as keen to take her revenge, and anyone can pay a few thugs to do their dirty work.”

“I confess, I hadn’t considered that,” Leo said with chagrin. “Oh, bloody marvellous. Now we have even more suspects.”

“No, we don’t. The writing is very clearly masculine,” Larkin said, getting up and taking the letter back. He showed it to Leo, who nodded.

“Thank God, you’re right, it is.”

“She may have disguised her writing, or got someone else to do it,” Lyall said with a shrug, not above playing devil’s advocate.

“Lyall, thanks for your help, old man, but things are complicated enough,” Leo said tersely.

Lyall chuckled. “Suit yourself.”

“Why are you here?” Leo asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I had business,” Lyall replied coolly.

“Lyall, we were all very sorry to hear what happened,” Larkin said, his expression one of sympathy.

Lyall’s jaw tightened. He’d hoped they’d not mention Lilith but trust Larkin to be the one to broach the subject. “Were ye? I was nae sorry,” he said defensively. “It’s taken me a while to admit to that, but it’s the truth. She was a manipulative baggage and whilst I would never have wished this on her, I can nae be sorry I’m free of her. I’ve a second chance, and I dinnae mean to waste it.”

There was a short, rather shocked silence, and then Larkin’s mouth quirked in a smile.

“Who is she?”

Leo laughed as he saw Lyall groan and roll his eyes. “You’ve hit the nail on the head, Larks, old man. Come on, Lyall. Out with it. You know he’ll winkle it out of you in the end, you may as well confess.”

“I dinnae want to,” Lyall admitted. “Ye will roast me something terrible, for it sounds mad.”

“Even better,” Leo said, grinning now. “We could do with a good laugh.”

Lyall muttered under his breath and closed his eyes, knowing he would never hear the end of it, but knowing too that these men were his friends and wanted the best for him. “It’s Lilith’s cousin, my ward. Luella.”

Silence reigned for approximately thirty seconds. Then they fell about laughing.

Lyall sighed, but he was smiling too, for he was going to get Luella back, no matter what he had to do or say to make that happen.



“I cannot believe they made the dress up so quickly,” Luella said for the third time, as her maid fastened the back of her dress.

“The perks of being disgustingly wealthy,” Helena said with a laugh. “They already had a gown half done for another client, but it’s not due for several weeks. They’ll simply start over—with a different design, of course. So they only had to tweak it a little and adjust the sizing for you and finish the beadwork, which I must say is simply stunning. You look quite wonderfully lovely.”

Luella turned this way and that in front of the full-length looking glass. She had worn nothing so beautiful in her life, or looked prettier, it was true. Yet it hardly mattered, for if Lyall was not here to see it, or to care about it, she didn’t care either. Lady Helena had seemed so keen for her to wear the gown tonight, however, and she had been so very kind that Luella could hardly protest.

“It seems a little much for a family dinner,” she remarked, though, at which Helena just smiled.

“Sometimes it is good to dress up, if only for our own benefit.” She came to stand behind Luella and put her hands on her shoulders, looking at her reflection in the mirror. “Just look at that young woman in front of you. How lovely she is, and how strong and brave. She deserves everything good in life, love and happiness, and a wonderful family. Don’t you agree?”

Luella nodded, though her throat felt tight. She remembered Jack and wondered what he was doing tonight. She hoped he was not angry with her for leaving as she had. Though she had written to him several times, it seemed far too long since she had seen him, and she missed him dreadfully... but she supposed she must get used to that now.

“Come along, then,” Helena said, guiding her from the room. “I need a drink before dinner, and I suspect you ought to have one too.”

Mr Knight and his son were already waiting for them and got to their feet as they entered.

“My word, Miss Fulbright!” Felix Knight’s expression was one of frank admiration as she entered the room. “You look exceptionally lovely tonight.”

Luella blushed, unused to such fulsome praise, especially from a man who looked like he did. “You are too kind, Mr Knight.”

“Indeed, I am not,” he replied with a laugh. “And do call me Felix when we are in private, it gets terribly confusing when Father is here.”

“Very well, Felix, if you will call me Luella.”

“Well, now you have that sorted, can I offer you a drink, Miss Fulbright?” Mr Knight asked with a smile. “We are very informal here, so if you would like a small brandy? My wife says it is good for the nerves. That’s her excuse, anyhow.”

Luella laughed and nodded. “Why not? Thank you, Mr Knight, I should like that.”

“Don’t bank on it,” Felix said with a wink. “I remember the first time I tried brandy. I thought it vile.”

“Sadly, it grew on him,” his father said, giving his son a speaking glance as he handed Luella a small measure of her own.

She sniffed it and gave a tentative sip. It stole her breath but left behind a rich taste that filled her mouth and set a warm puddle glowing in her belly. “I think it might grow on me too,” she admitted, pleased when Mr Knight laughed appreciatively.

Luella stared down into the glass, remembering the last time she had tried something alcoholic. She smiled sadly as she recalled the exhibition she’d made of herself on the beach, and the feel of Lyall’s powerful arms as he carried her home. Sipping her brandy, she warned herself sternly not to become maudlin.

“Lord Buchanan is here, my lady.”

“Ah, he’s early. I thought he might be. Show him in.”

Luella jolted out of her little reverie at the sound of his name, not having heard the butler knock. She stared at Lady Helena in shock, who returned a warm smile.

“Don’t let him off too easily, Luella, dear,” she advised with a wink.

A moment later, Lyall strode in. Lord, but he looked magnificent. Luella's breath caught at the sight of him, filling the doorway and dressed magnificently in full Highland regalia. For once, he looked every inch the nobleman he was born to be, the son of an earl, and Luella wondered what on earth she had been thinking, considering for a moment she might have had a chance with such a man. And then he looked at her.

"Luella," he said, his voice gravelly and low. His glittering gaze was full of warmth and relief and... was that regret? She hadn't a moment to consider the significance or reality of his expression for the next moment he was striding towards her.

"Time for us to leave," Helena said briskly, ushering her husband and son out of the room. "Cook will be serving any moment, in any case. It's a big house, Luella, the dining room is miles away, and there is not the least need to join us, but you need only ask one of the staff if you need me or Gabriel. No one will disturb you here, though, so... take your time." She winked at Luella, gave Lyall a look that seemed to promise retribution if he didn't behave like a gentleman, and hurried after her family, closing the door behind her.

Luella swallowed and looked up into the whisky-coloured eyes of the man she had been dreaming of. "G-Good evening, my lord," she managed, her courage failing a little as she saw him scowl.

"Dinnae *my lord* me, Luella. I'm Lyall, and I... Devil take it, I'm the biggest idiot that ever walked the earth. Can ye forgive me, *mo leannan*?"

Luella stared at him doubtfully. "Forgive you?"

"Dinnae say ye can nae," he said, grasping her around the waist and pulling her roughly into his arms. "I have missed ye so, and I've been driving myself mad, thinking of ye spending all this time with Felix. I ken he is a fine fellow, handsome, aye, far more than me and..."

Luella blinked up at him, suddenly aware he was babbling with nerves. A smile quirked her lips as she reached up and placed her hands on either side of his face.

“Lyll?”

He broke off, gazing down at her, his expression troubled.  
“Aye, lass?”

“You *are* the biggest idiot that ever walked the earth, there’s no question of that, but I love you.”

For a long moment he said nothing at all, and then he hauled her tight against him and kissed her long and hard. By the time he let her go, she could hardly breathe, let alone find a coherent thought. Helena’s advice not to give in too easily flitted into her mind and she gave a rueful smile. Ah, well. She was a hopeless case.

“Do ye mean it?” he demanded, one large hand cupping her face. Luella closed her eyes and turned into his touch, pressing a kiss to his palm.

“I do,” she said simply. “Though I don’t entirely know why.”

“It’s the knees, aye?” he said with a twinkle in his eyes.  
“Ma says it’s the knees.”

She let out a breath of laughter and smiled up at him. “In part,” she admitted. “But I don’t think that was all.”

He bent and rested his forehead against hers. “I’m sorry, Luella. It’s taken me far too long to see ye for who ye are. To see ye are not Lilith and never have been. I’ve been blind and I regret it. I feared I might regret it for the rest of my days when I discovered ye had gone.”

Luella swallowed, hardly daring to believe his words.  
“*Would* you regret it for the rest of your days?”

He raised his head again and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, his touch gentle and reverent. “Aye, lass, and I dinnae want to spend a second more of my life in regret. Ach, Luella, come home with me. Say ye will.”

Luella hesitated. Going home with him was the only thing she wanted to do, but... but what exactly was he offering her? They could not go on as they had been.

“I can’t, Lyll.”

The colour left his face in a rush, a frown darkening his features. “Why? Is... Is it Felix, has he—?”

“Oh, don’t be a fool,” she said in frustration. “Of course not. I just told you I loved you. Do you really believe me that fickle?”

“Nae,” he said at once, rubbing a hand over his face. He looked tired, she realised now. “Nae, I dinnae think any such thing. I think perhaps I am losing my wits over ye, though.”

She smiled at that. “Well, now you know how it feels. But you must see we cannot go back, Lyall? I cannot live under the same roof as you. It’s impossible.”

“But why?” he asked, so obviously bewildered that she wondered if he was fooling himself, if the feelings he had for her were as fierce as he had implied.

“Because I can’t keep my hands off you, obviously,” she said hotly. “I won’t be condemned to have the world tattling about me and believing...”

“Luella!” he bellowed, so furious she jumped. “For the love of God, I am nae asking ye to return as my ward, nor as my mistress, but as my wife!”

“As... as... as your...?” No matter how hard she tried, her mouth could not seem to shape the word correctly.

“Wife,” he said firmly. “Ye little halfwit. I ken I have nae acted very well of late, but I am nae such a bastard as that, and now ye have made me mess up my proposal.”

“I have?”

“Aye,” he grouched, looking so adorably indignant she could not help but kiss him again.

“Oh, dear. I’m so terribly sorry, but I... I had no idea. Do you really want to marry me?” she asked, hardly daring to believe it.

“Aye, and seeing ye in that gown, I reckon I had best get the job done quick before someone else steals ye away. Good God, woman, d’ye have any idea how beautiful ye are? Ye make my heart hurt just gazing at ye.”

“Oh.” Tears filled her eyes and his fierce expression melted away, replaced by one of such tenderness that the tears spilled over.

“Ach, *mo chridhe*, dinnae cry.”

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

Lyall smiled and wiped the tears away with his thumbs, holding her face in his hands. “It means ‘my heart,’ for I have given mine to ye. Truth be told, ye stole it away and I could nae stop ye, but I dinnae want to stop ye now, Luella. These past days without ye have been misery. Ye brought the joy and the colour back to my life. Dinnae make me live without them again.”

Luella shook her head, fighting to keep her composure. “Oh, Lyall, I’ve been so unh-h-happy. I want to go home.”

He embraced her so tightly she could hardly breathe, but she didn’t care. She clung to him, burying her face in his neck and somehow finding the familiar scent of the place she loved, for he was that place as much as Wildsyde and the magnificent setting around it.

“Then we shall return to Wildsyde together, and we shall have a fine wedding and celebrate so merrily no one will be able to gossip and say we’ve done it for anything but love, because everyone will see the truth, plain and simple.”

“Will it really be for love?” she asked him, hardly daring to believe it even after all he’d said to her.

Those leonine eyes were warm and filled with everything she had ever dreamed he might feel for her. “Aye, sweet lass. It will, at that.”

“Then... Then that sounds perfectly wonderful,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

“But Luella, there’s just one condition,” he said, the words stern despite the amusement glinting in his eyes.

“Oh?” she asked cautiously.

“Ye have to say yes, aye?”



“*Aye!*” Luella cried, laughing now.

“Ach, that’ll do,” he said with a grin, and kissed her again.

## Chapter 20



*Dear Mr Barry,*

*Please forgive me for writing to you in such a bold manner. If my brother finds out, I dread to think what he will do, but you told me once that you owed me a debt for tending to you when you were so grievously injured, that you would help me if I wished to escape the circumstances I found myself in. I was far too afraid to do so before, but now I am afraid what will happen if I do not.*

*Help me, sir, I beg you. I do not know where else to turn. I will wait in the gardens of St Paul's Church in Covent Garden on Friday at midday. Please, do not fail me.*

***—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Rosemarie Fortesque to Mr Thomas Barry – AKA The Lord Thomas ‘Thorn’ Barrington (son of The Most Hon’ble Lucian and Matilda Barrington, The Marquess and Marchioness of Montagu).***

**20<sup>th</sup> August 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

“Oh, how handsome you look!”

“Ma! Ye can nae just come barging in without knocking! I’m nae a wee laddie anymore. Heaven alone knows what ye

might see,” Lyall protested as his mother bustled through his bedroom door.

“Don’t be daft,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I know very well you’ve been up since dawn. Fretting yourself to death, I don’t doubt. Did you eat any breakfast, at least?”

“Aye,” he replied with a sigh, for there was no point in trying to fob her off or act indignant. She’d been in alt since she’d arrived at Wildsyde yesterday, with his father and brothers in tow for the wedding this morning. “Sheenagh made me an enormous plate of sausages and eggs, said I needed to keep my strength up,” he added with a snort.

His mother laughed and handed him a small pile of letters. “Well-wishers, I assume?”

He glanced at the post and nodded. “Aye, I reckon. Did Georgie arrive yet?”

“Yes, your sister arrived just before I came up. Jack has taken little James and Rochford to see Adaira. He wasn’t the least bit intimidated by the duke, you know. Oh, Lyall, you should have seen him. Jack is so pleased to have little cousins. He kissed baby Isla very sweetly and said how pretty she was. And he said it was almost as good as having a little brother, for James is already following him around like a lamb. You and Luella must hurry and have children so he can have a proper family around him.”

“Give us a chance, Ma,” Lyall remonstrated in exasperation, though he had every intention of doing just that.

Jack had been so happy to discover Luella was marrying him that Lyall had been touched more than he’d been able to express. The boy badly needed a father, and Lyall was ready to do his utmost to fill that position. He figured he’d best get some practice in before they had bairns of their own, in any case. It was no hardship, for he was very fond of the lad, who had a good heart and already felt like part of the family.

Sitting down on the bed with the letters his mother had handed him, Lyall looked them over. There were several notes from his friends, congratulating him with varying degrees of

rudeness. The one from Larkin made him exclaim out loud, though.

“What is it?” his mother said, looking at him with concern.

“Leo’s had an accident.”

“Oh, no! Is he well? What happened?”

“Well enough, but he’s broken his ankle and bashed himself up a bit,” Lyall said, reading the rest with a frown.

“I suppose he was off on one of his mad escapades,” she said crossly, folding the towel he’d cast carelessly over the back of a chair. “Poor Alice, she’s fretting herself to death over the wicked boy. I have a good mind to give him a piece of my mind. He’s one of the oldest of you and yet he’s the worst behaved.”

Lyall glanced up at her. “He’s the most reckless, aye, but it sounds like this was nae his fault, Ma.”

He didn’t tell her the rest of it: that it had undoubtedly been sabotage. Someone had deliberately sawn through the axle of Leo’s curricule, so an accident was inevitable. According to Larkin, he’d been lucky to come off as lightly as he had. Whoever had made it their mission to make the Sons of Hades pay for some nameless crime, they were intent upon their goal.

“Oh, well, in that case, I am sorry,” his mother relented, her face softening. “I’ll get Sheenagh to make up a basket to send him. Where is he convalescing?”

“At Trevick. Apparently, the accident happened only a few miles away, so it was the closest place to take him to.”

“Well, that’s fortuitous, what with having Aisling close by. Conor made a tremendous recovery when the doctors wanted to take his leg. He says it was all her doing, so Leo is in expert hands.”

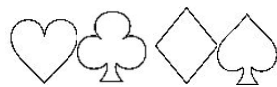
“Aye, if Violetta doesn’t kill him before his ankle mends,” Lyall said with a wry smile. He got up and set the letters aside

before moving to the looking glass and ensuring he still looked tidy. “Will I do, Ma?”

She moved to stand beside him and took his arm, sighing wistfully as she regarded his reflection. “You are the image of your father. So very handsome. I am proud of you, son, and I like Luella very much. I think you will be happy.”

“Of course we will,” he said firmly. “I will nae allow anything else.”

His mother laughed and shook her head, patting his arm fondly. “That’s my boy.”



Luella dithered in front of the looking glass. Her stomach was roiling, and she thought she might cast up her accounts—or boke, as Lyall would put it—her nerves were jittering so badly. A knock on the door made her leap almost out of her skin. Mrs Cooper tsked and went to open it.

“You’ve ages yet,” she said gently. “It’s probably Lady Morven, come to see if you are ready.”

Mrs Cooper opened the door and started with surprise to discover it was not Lady Morven but the earl himself. She stood back so that Lord Morven could address his son’s bride.

“Miss Fulbright,” he said, smiling warmly at her. “Or may I call ye Luella now, as ye are to be my daughter, aye?”

“I should be very pleased if you would,” Luella said, gathering herself as the shock wore off.

“Excellent. And may I say how bonnie ye look? Lyall is a lucky fellow.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at the earnest compliment.

“’Tis nothing but the truth, lassie. Well, then Luella—oh, and you must call me Gordy. Everyone does. Or Da, if you prefer. Your choice. I dinnae like ‘Lord Morven;’ reminds me of a fellow I couldnae stand the sight of. Now, I think ye need a wee dram. Just to steady the nerves, aye? Come along, now.”

He held out his arm to her and so Luella hurried out of her room and took it, allowing him to escort her downstairs to the study. She wondered how she would ever dare refer to him as Gordy or Da, but perhaps she would get the hang of it. It was sweet of him to make the offer, though, and she felt a swell of warmth at being treated so kindly.

“Make yerself comfy,” he told her, and he went and poured two ‘wee drams,’ which looked to be hefty measures to Luella’s eye.

She sat down, realising it was the first time she had actually been at ease in this room. Usually, her attention was riveted on Lyall, for one reason or another, and so she had never really paid the room much mind. It was a lovely space, warm and cosy. She could imagine sitting by the fire with a good book on a winter’s day, perhaps with Lyall at the desk, his head bent over some correspondence. The thought made her smile, and she looked around the room, her gaze snagging on a large stag’s head with an impressive rack of antlers. Tied to the antlers were faded pink ribbons.

Gordy returned and handed her a drink, smiling as he noticed the object of her attention.

“I’m glad ye noticed those,” he said conversationally. “For I have a little gift for ye.”

Reaching into his pocket, he took out a small paper bag and handed it to her. Luella peered inside, perplexed to see several glossy ribbons in shocking pink.

“The first time yer new husband makes ye really furious, fetch them and tie them up there next to the others, aye?”

Luella regarded him dubiously. “Whatever for?”

“Dinnae question it, lassie,” he said, laughing now. “I promise ye, he’ll apologise.”

“Very well, then,” Luella said, shaking her head. “I’ll keep them safe.”

“Ye dae that, and I have nae doubt that ye will be as happy as I have been with Ruth.”

“But you hardly know me,” she said with a smile. “How can you be so sure?”

He leaned against the fireplace and regarded her solemnly. Luella smiled, seeing in him a reflection of her husband-to-be.

“My wife is a fine judge of character,” he said, his lips quirking as he continued. “And despite the odd action to the contrary, my son is no fool. I trust them, and I trust ye to make him happy.”

“I will,” she promised gravely. “You have my word.”

“I never doubted it. Now, drink up, lassie. It’s almost time, and—” He didn’t get to finish the sentence as a young woman hurried in, carrying a crying baby.

“Oh, Da, there you are. Take Isla, will you? She’s fussing and no one soothes her like you do.”

Luella watched with interest as a small wailing bundle was settled in Gordy’s arms.

“Ye are just flattering me, so I’ll take her from ye,” he said, though he didn’t seem displeased. He rocked and jiggled the baby, making soothing noises, and the young woman sighed with relief as the baby quieted.

“Not flattery in the least, Da, as you see,” she said with a smile.

“Fine, fine,” her father said, gazing down at his little granddaughter with a fond expression. “Oh, and have ye met yer new sister? Ye burst in on us in such a hurry ye did nae give me the chance for introductions.”

The young woman turned, and Luella held her breath, uncertain what Lyall’s sister would make of her. She was a very tall woman of ample proportions, with dark hair like her mother and a bright, engaging smile, which was now turned upon Luella.

Luella set down her drink and got to her feet, bracing herself just in time as she was engulfed in a fierce hug.

“A sister at last!” the woman exclaimed, kissing Luella’s cheek. “Goodness, how beautiful you are! Oh, I am so pleased

you came, and that you have made Lyall happy again. We've all been so worried about him."

Luella hesitated, uncertain whether to thank her for her kind words or to apologise that her family had caused so much trouble. Georgie didn't seem to need an answer, however.

"Oh, is that whisky? Pour me one, darling Da. Honestly, travelling with small children is enough to put you off the business for good. If James asked, 'are we there yet?' once he asked me a hundred times. Though I suppose I ought not say that in the circumstances," she added, giving Luella a saucy look. "Ignore me. Babies are wonderful."

Georgie accepted the glass her father handed her with a grin.

"They are, and I want plenty of them, so don't go putting the lass off the idea. Lyall will certainly not thank ye if ye spoil things before the wedding night," he added with a chuckle as he turned his attention back to the baby. He glanced up and winked at Luella as Isla grabbed at the finger he offered her and cooed.

Luella blushed and drank the last of her whisky so fast it caught in her throat. She coughed and spluttered as Georgie hurried over and pounded her on the back.

"Poor darling," she said sympathetically. "We take a bit of getting used to, don't we? But you'll get the hang of us in no time."

The door burst open again and Hamilton stuck his head into the room. "What are ye all doing in here? It's time to go to the kirk. Hurry up!"

Luella got to her feet, feeling a little as if she'd been swept up in a benevolent tide as she was ushered to the front door.

"What a gorgeous dress," George commented, admiring her gown.

Luella nodded, smiling. "Lady Helena persuaded me to buy it when I was in town," she said, smoothing her hand over the grey silk.



There had been no time to get another made up, for Lyall had wanted to marry without delay and Luella, still finding it hard to believe she wasn't dreaming, had no fault to find with this plan.

"Ah, Helena has a wonderful eye for fashion. I wonder what she'll be wearing today. No doubt she will put me to shame," Georgie said merrily, accepting the now gurgling bundle her father handed back to her.

"Stop blethering on and take my princess for me," he said with a smile. "I have a duty to perform."

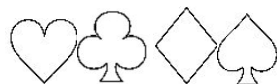
Luella looked at him with interest as he gestured for Jack to come over. Jack grinned, obviously in league with him. He and Gordy then both held out an arm to her.

"As ye father is nae here today, we hoped ye might allow us the honour of walking ye down the aisle." Gordy lowered his voice, adding softly: "Jack was a wee bit nervous to do it all by himself. I hope ye dinnae mind?"

Luella blinked, tears pricking at her eyes. This astonishing family had opened their hearts to her, even after everything her family had done to them. She and Jack had a home, a proper home in a castle of all places, with people who liked and cared for them. It was more than she had ever dreamed of.

"How lucky I am to be escorted by two such handsome men. I should like that more than anything," she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

Gordy and Jack beamed at her, the earl looking so pleased she knew he really did think it an honour. They escorted her to the waiting carriage, with Luella so happy and excited she felt she must be floating rather than walking.



It didn't take much of a crowd to fill the kirk at Canisbay, so well-wishers surrounded Luella as she walked down the aisle towards Lyall on his father's arm.

Lady Helena, Mr Knight and Felix had all come to celebrate with them, much to Luella's surprise and pleasure,

and both of Lyall's brothers were here too. They'd arrived the day before with Lady Morven, or Ruth, as Luella must now address her. Hamilton had embraced her fondly and introduced Muir to her, saying solemnly that she could not expect the entire family to be as handsome and witty as he was. Muir elbowed Hamilton and told her with equal gravity that she'd chosen to marry the wrong brother, but he hoped they'd be very happy all the same. Luella suspected there was to be a lot of laughter and teasing in her future and looked forward to it immensely.

Mrs Baillie attended alongside the fellow with whom she'd been walking out with for many years, according to Ruth. Willy Murray was a stocky man, entirely bald but with a fine, bristling moustache, and he looked at Mrs Baillie as though a goddess walked beside him. The lady beamed at Luella as she watched her proceed down the aisle, arm-in-arm with her brother and Lord Morven, but Luella hardly noticed her or any of the congregation. They might have been entirely alone, for all she could see was Lyall.

How splendid he looked, tall and handsome and magnificent in full Highland kit, complete with a sword, and a jewelled dagger—which she had learned was called a *sgian-dubh*—tucked into his sock. A swathe of tartan crossed his broad chest, pinned on his shoulder with a large brooch, and the silver mounted sporran completed his impressive ensemble. In Luella's admittedly biased opinion, he looked far more beautiful than she did. As she drew closer, she saw his whisky-coloured eyes were soft with tenderness, his smile wide and full of joy as he took her hand.

"Ye have made me very happy," he whispered to her, clasping her hand tightly in his. "Let's get on with the rest of our lives, aye?"

"Yes, please," she said fervently, and turned to face the minister, eager to make their vows.

## Chapter 21



*Pip,*

*I'm in a bit of a fix. How would you feel about having guests stay at Goshen Court? In one of the cottages, of course, not under your roof. I may need to bring a young lady to stay for a while. Now don't get on your high horse, it isn't like that. She's in trouble – not that kind of trouble – but she has nowhere to go. I suggested Gillmont obviously, but I see now it won't do for she is gently bred and terribly shy. I need her to be safe, Pip. Please, brother, I would not ask if I had any other option.*

***—Excerpt of a letter from The Lord Thomas 'Thorn' Barrington to his elder brother, The Right Hon'ble Philip Barrington, Earl of Ashburton (sons of The Most Hon'ble Lucian and Matilda Barrington, The Marquess and Marchioness of Montagu).***

**20<sup>th</sup> August 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall watched, happiness and pride a warm glow in his chest, as his father danced with Luella. Wildsyde was ablaze, the glorious summer's evening having faded to night some time ago. The sound of music and laughter echoed around the great hall and far across the landscape beyond. Though he had always done his best to give parties when called upon, Lyall knew he had not seen an event so merrily and exuberantly

celebrated since his parents lived here. It was wonderful to see his family and friends and tenants all coming together to feast and rejoice. Though he was aching to take Luella off to their room, she was having such a wonderful time he was loath to put an end to it. He had never seen her laugh and smile so much, and it pleased him more than he could express to see her happy here, in their home, surrounded by the people he loved.

“She’s perfectly lovely.”

Lyall looked down as Helena took his arm and smiled up at him.

“Aye,” he agreed. “She is that. I am a lucky fellow, am I nae?”

“You are, and you deserve to be,” Helena said, pulling his head down and kissing his cheek. “Be happy, love. The past is dead and gone, and you have a wonderful future ahead of you.”

She hugged him then and hurried off to embrace her husband, who smiled fondly at her, suspecting no doubt, as Lyall did, that she’d had quite a lot of champagne.

The dance finally ended, and his father returned Luella to him, pink-cheeked and breathless. Lord, but she *was* lovely. His heart ached as he looked down at her, it was so full. The gorgeous grey silk gown brought out the storm clouds in her eyes but, despite the dramatic colouring, those eyes were peaceful and filled with joy now as she gazed up at him.

“I believe this beautiful creature belongs to ye,” his father said, a knowing glint in his eyes.

“Aye,” Lyall said firmly. “She does.”

“Then I’d carry her off while ye have the chance.” His father winked at him and kissed Luella soundly on the cheek before calling to his wife. “Ruth! It is time ye danced with yer husband. Gabe, put her down or I shall make ye!”

Lyall laughed as his father strode off, intercepting Gabriel on the way to the dance floor with his mother. He looked back at his bride to find her still staring at him.

“Ye are happy, lass?”

She nodded and threw her arms about his waist, hugging him tightly. “So, so happy,” she murmured.

Lyall held her tightly, giving a bark of laughter as something caught his eye.

Luella glanced up, and he gestured to the dance floor, to where Mrs Baillie was dancing with Jack and giving the boy loud instructions while Jack tried his best not to tread on her toes.

“Oh!” Luella exclaimed, pressing a hand to her mouth as a bubble of laughter escaped her. “Oh, how sweet. He’s beside himself to know he has a home and family, Lyall. You have made us both so very happy.”

“Then perhaps ye will forgive me if I take ye away from all this merriment. I dinnae want to share ye for another second, Luella.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she said earnestly. “I have been waiting impatiently for you to ask me all evening.”

He laughed at that, delighted by her, and with a quick glance around, took her hand, hurrying her out of the room before anyone noticed. Lyall was grateful the castle was large and the walls thick as the sounds of celebration dulled to a quiet murmur as he led her up the stairs and along the corridor to his own room. When he finally closed the door, it was quiet, and all he could hear was the anticipatory thud of his own heart.

Luella walked in, looking around with interest. He felt a surge of possessive pride upon seeing his beautiful wife in his room. His body stirred as she moved to the bed, one hand resting on the heavy oak post as she laid the other on the blue-and-green tartan blanket folded across the end of the covers.

“I’d like a dress made in the colours of your tartan,” she said, turning to glance shyly at him. “Would you mind?”

“Mind?” he said, laughter behind the word. “Do ye still nae ken what it did to me, seeing ye wearing that pretty green dress, trimmed with my colours?”

She shook her head, interest glimmering in her eyes.

“Nae,” he said with a huff of amusement. “Ma knew though, I reckon. She says I am like my Da, so she’d gauged that just perfectly to make me lose my wits. Well, then, just so ye know. I love seeing ye wearing my tartan, Luella. I want the world to know ye belong with me, not because I own ye or anything crass like that, but because ye are a part of me, as I hope, I am a part of ye. Ye ken?”

She nodded, her eyes bright with emotion and he crossed the room, gathering her in his arms.

“Ouch!” she exclaimed, as the hilt of his sword jabbed at her.

He moved away, his expression rueful. “Curse the thing. Excuse me a moment, I had best get rid of some of this getup.”

Luella sat on the edge of the bed, more than content to watch her handsome husband disrobe. He unbuckled the sword and set it aside, before removing the sgian-dubh and unpinning the large brooch on his shoulder. Fascinated, Luella watched as the layers were set aside one by one, until he stood before her in only his shirt and kilt, looking not a whit less impressive for having shed his finery.

“That’s better,” he said with a sigh. “Now then, lass, it’s time for ye to do likewise.”

Luella knew she ought to look suitably bashful at this point, but she didn’t have the patience for it. She wanted to love her husband and show him exactly how she felt, and she did not see why she should hide that from him. So she leapt up from the bed and turned, gesturing to the fastenings.

“Undo me then, please,” she demanded, glancing over her shoulder to find him grinning at her.

His hands settled upon the fastenings and Luella held her breath as the dress loosened, eager for the moment she could cast it aside. Soon enough, it was all undone, and she stepped out of it. Lyall lay it over a chair as she turned her attention to her petticoats, her fingers none too steady as she untied them

one by one, kicking each aside in turn until she was left in her corset, shift, and drawers.

Lyall turned her once more, tugging at the corset ties as Luella's heart hammered with increasing urgency against her ribs. She closed her eyes on a gasp as his breath fluttered warm against the nape of her neck and he pressed his mouth there, kissing her softly. A murmur of sound escaped her as he nuzzled the tender spot beneath her ear, kissing her neck and trailing his mouth down to the spot where it curved into her shoulder. Finally, the corset sagged and fell to the floor, and his large hands circled her waist.

Luella leaned into him, feeling a solid wall of warmth at her back. "At last," she said on a breath of laughter.

She felt rather than heard the rumble of amusement he gave as his hands glided up and up to cup her breasts. He sighed then, a gust of warm air ruffling her hair.

"At last," he repeated, with such emphasis that she snorted and turned in his arms, coiling her arms about his neck.

"Have I told you I love you?" she asked, hardly able to believe life could be so kind after so many years of struggle and wanting.

"Aye, lass, several times, though I reckon I can stand to hear it again," he said, staring down at her with such an expression of adoration in his eyes that her heart could hardly contain the happiness she felt.

"Then I love you, Lyall Anderson. With all my heart, and I shall do everything I can to make you happy, and never regret your decision for a moment."

"I never could," he said, his expression fierce as he kissed her.

Luella sighed, sinking into the kiss as his hands roved over her, exploring and caressing, until he broke away, reaching for her chemise. "Take it off. I want to touch ye."

Luella obeyed him, tugging the chemise over her head and then, with a shy glance at him, pushing her lacy drawers to the

floor and hurrying to the bed. She laughed, tugging the covers over her as he watched in consternation.

“That’s nae fair.”

“All’s fair in love and war. Now, hurry. Your wife is cold,” she said impatiently, though it was a lie. The bed had been warmed for them, despite the heat of a summer’s day shining down on the castle. The heat did not penetrate the thick stone walls to any great extent, but it was not cold that made her skin prickle, rather anticipation as she watched Lyall tug the shirt over his head and cast it aside, and then unbuckle his kilt.

“Ye are nae gonna faint, are ye?” he asked dubiously, as the heavy tartan fell in a heap on the floor.

Luella closed her mouth with a snap and shook her head, though she didn’t think she could be blamed for doing so. He was a wonder to her eyes as she took in a landscape every bit as rugged and harsh as the one she had fallen in love with outside the castle walls. The arms that had lifted her with such ease were heavy with muscle, his shoulders and chest broad and tapering down to narrow hips.

“Stop staring at my knees,” he said, laughter behind the words as she had clearly not been looking at them this time.

She laughed, blushing and shaking her head. “How beautiful you are,” she said reverently.

“Ach, ’tis love speaking,” he said, chuckling with amusement. “But I am nae going to complain if it pleases ye to look upon me.”

He climbed into the bed, causing the mattress to dip, and Luella rolled towards him. Lyall caught her against him, and she sighed at the first touch of his skin, so hot against hers. He stroked her hair, holding her close to him, and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“*Mo chridhe*, I thought this had been stolen from me, this happiness. The first day of my life joined with the woman of my choosing, the woman I will always love above all others. Fate has been kinder to me than I have any right to deserve, but I shall take it, and I intend to wring every ounce of joy from it



too. Starting now,” he added, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Oh?” Luella asked nervously as he grinned at her and kissed her hard, easing her on to her back and down on the bed.

“Aye,” he murmured, kissing his way down her neck and trailing his tongue over her breasts as his warm hands caressed and kneaded.

Luella sighed, closing her eyes, content to let him do as he pleased, for it pleased her too, knowing that he wished to make her happy. She trusted him, as she had trusted no one in her life before. He would not let her down. Lyall was a man to be depended upon for the rest of her days, and the knowledge chased away any hint of nerves or doubt that she might have felt, leaving only pleasure.

Her mind clouded as his hands and mouth made their way down her body, no part of her missed, every inch blessed by a kiss or a reverent touch. His rough hands were exquisitely tender, making her shiver as they explored, just as his murmured endearments made her heart soar. He seemed intent on mapping every tiny detail, touching his tongue to every freckle and leaving no part of her unkissed. Daring to look up, Luella watched, rather dazed, as he finally settled between her legs and pushed her thighs wide, trailing more kisses along the tender skin and nuzzling at the soft nest of curls. She sucked in a breath, letting her head fall back to the pillow, but the first sweep of his tongue still shocked her, though she had known what was coming. His mouth was hot, his tongue slick against her intimate flesh, and the delicious shock of it stole what remained of her wits. Before she could gather her thoughts, his tongue swept over her again, leaving her gasping and arching off the bed, forcing him to grasp her hips and hold her still. She heard his soft chuckle before he settled to his work and the next moments disappeared in a cloud of sensation as she floated in some warm, pleasure filled void where the rest of the world could not touch her. In no hurry, Lyall pleased her with intense concentration, his mouth the source of a slow siege upon her sanity, dismantling her inhibitions and any

suggestion of maidenly modesty, not that she'd laid claim to much of that anyway. His fingers moved, sliding inside her with gentle caresses and adding to the sensual assault until she was wild with the tension that built inside her, filling her until she could contain it no longer.

"Lyall," she said, the breathless sound of his name holding a hint of protest, but he kept his touch just elusive enough to keep her from the goal she sought. Though she moved restlessly, trying to convey her frustration, to seek more from the touch that slid away just when she needed it, he only teased her more. "Lyall!" she exclaimed, believing she would lose her mind now if he did not...

The firm touch of his mouth was exactly what she needed, and she held her breath as the rush of sensation gathered and then broke over her. Luella cried out, clutching at the bedclothes, her body feeling as though it were more under her husband's control than her own as he guided her on, easing her through the waves of pleasure until she lay spent and breathless in a wanton sprawl across the bed.

Lyall moved over her, and she could tell he was smiling even as he pressed kisses to her belly, the shape of his mouth curving upwards as he made his way up the bed.

He gazed down at her, his tawny eyes dark with desire and his expression one of smug, male satisfaction.

"I don't know why you're looking so self-satisfied... I'm terribly sleepy now," she said, feigning a yawn and stretching luxuriously. "I think I might just have a little nap."

She turned on her side and closed her eyes, and then squealed with laughter as he tickled her.

"Ye are heartless, wife, and after I treated ye so splendidly."

Luella snorted and reached for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling his head down for a kiss. "Oh, as if I would do such a thing, and it was splendid, Lyall. *You* are splendid. Thank you." She kissed his nose, and then his chin, and then each cheek.

“Hmph,” he said, though there was laughter in his eyes. “I see I shall have to take matters into my own hands again and take what’s mine. Aye?”

He settled between her legs and Luella gasped at the intimate contact as his arousal pressed against her sex, her body reacting at once to the touch against her sensitive flesh.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Take what is yours. Yours always, Lyall.”

Her body welcomed him inside with no resistance, giving easily to the new sensations as though she had only been waiting for this moment. He moved carefully, treating her with the utmost care as she sighed and clung to him. Lyall made an indistinct sound of pleasure that made her heart skip, and she understood in that moment how giving her pleasure had pleased him too. Luella gasped as he moved faster, thrusting deep inside her, so that little eddies of joy glittered through her blood, reawakening the sensations that had overwhelmed her so splendidly and promising more.

Luella closed her eyes and revelled in it, in the feel of powerful muscle shifting beneath his skin, in his broad shoulders and the heat of his body pressed so intimately to hers. She knew she was blessed then, that she had been given a gift greater than she’d ever expected to receive. For a moment she felt a shaft of pity for her cousin, for the life she’d scorned and never even tried to win for herself and thank the Lord for that. For Luella would never take this, take *him*, for granted. With a soft moan of desire, she felt the shimmering edge of her peak rushing towards her once more and clung tighter to him. Time ceased to exist, nothing mattering except this moment, in her husband’s arms, and in his heart.

Lyall’s body moved harder and faster, his breathing increasingly erratic until he cried out, burying his face in her hair. His powerful frame jerked, and she held on as he spilled inside her. The sight of him given over to pleasure, his body helpless to do anything but give itself to her in this moment, was the only thing she needed to send her spiralling away into the velvet dark as they held each other close.

They lay quietly for a long time afterwards, holding each other in a tangle of limbs and sheets, content simply to exist in this moment. Luella sighed, exquisitely happy, and then looked up as a rumble of laughter shook Lyall's chest.

"What?" she asked curiously.

He shook his head, and she let it go, snuggling back against him.

It came again a moment later, this time his chest shaking silently. Luella sat up and stared at him.

"What's funny?" she asked again.

Lyall shook his head, his lips pressed together, but laughter glittering in his eyes.

"Lyall?"

He appeared to make a supreme effort to rearrange his face, cleared his throat and said with apparent composure. "Nothing, love."

Luella narrowed her eyes at him. His lips twitched.

"Lyall!"

"*Toroddle toroddle, toroll.*" He sang the chorus to a familiar song and Luella blushed fiercely, knowing exactly what he was remembering.

"Oh!" she said crossly, snatching up a pillow and hitting him with it.

"*Here's a health to the Three Jolly Pigeons!*" he sang at the top of his voice.

Luella tried to smother him with the pillow, but he fought her off, laughing helplessly, adding "*Toroddle toroddle, toroll!*"

Casting the pillow aside, he pinned her to the bed, staring down at her and grinning. "Do I need to put the whisky cherries under lock and key, love? Ye had best tell me now, for I am uncertain what I ought to do about your terrible habits. I dinnae know the rules yet, but I will nae tell the neighbours, I promise."

“The rules are that you don’t embarrass your bride on her wedding day,” she remarked tartly, not really cross with him but rather mortified all the same.

A tender expression chased the laughter from his eyes as he gazed at her. “Ach, Luella, don’t ever be embarrassed with me, and though I am in nae hurry to see ye drunk as a wheelbarrow, nor casting up yer accounts anytime soon, it did my heart good to see ye that day. Ye could not carry a tune in a bucket, my love, but ye were so full of joy. Ah, I love ye something fierce.”

“Oh,” she said, mollified by this obviously heartfelt declaration. “I love you too, Lyall, so much, but I don’t know what you mean. I have a splendid singing voice.”

He looked at her in wonder until she could stand it no more and burst out laughing.

“Ach, ye wee devil. I thought ye were serious.”

Luella snorted and shook her head. “Sadly, no. Jack says it sounds like cats fighting.”

Lyall chuckled and gathered her close again. “Then I must be mad for ye indeed, for I love to hear ye sing. Dinnae stop, will ye?”

She glanced up at him, seeing in his eyes the promise of a wonderful future. “I will keep singing, *badly*, so long as you keep loving me.”

“A deal, *mo chridhe*,” he said softly, and kissed her.

## Epilogue



*Dearest Helena,*

*Thank you so much for the beautiful gift you sent me. It was far too lavish a gift, but I am thrilled with the gown, which fits me like a glove. I shall certainly wear it at Christmas. I'm so sorry you cannot join us, for I shall miss you and Gabriel, and Felix, too. I understand, of course, that you must celebrate with your own family. I cannot wait to meet Evie and Louis in the spring, though Lyall has made me promise I shan't fall in love with the beautiful comte. Is he really so handsome?*

*I have had the most wonderful time decorating the castle for Christmas. There is not an inch that hasn't been swathed in greenery and red ribbons and Mrs Baillie is cooking up a storm – with my help, I might add. I never believed I could be this happy. Not only do I have a marvellous husband, but I have a family and a wonderful home, and friends like you to send me Christmas gifts I'm certain I do not deserve. Jack is beside himself with excitement. He has begged and begged Lyall for a puppy for Christmas. I cannot wait to see his face.*

*Do come and visit us soon, Helena. You would be most welcome at any time.*

***—Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Luella Anderson, Viscountess***

*Buchanan.*

**25<sup>th</sup> December 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.**

Lyall looked across the vast dining table. It had been a glorious sight some hours earlier, with bowls of Christmas roses and crystal and silver shining in the candlelight. Now it was rather in disorder after a long and very indulgent Christmas dinner, as they had told the staff to go and enjoy their own festivities. Mrs Baillie and Luella had excelled themselves and everyone was too stuffed to move. He watched in amusement as his father patted his stomach and gave a satisfied sigh.

“I could nae eat another bite, but I wish I could. That was undoubtedly the finest cloutie dumpling I ever tasted, Luella.”

Luella beamed at her father-in-law, for he could have said nothing to please her more.

“Did you really think so? I am glad. Even Mrs Baillie says I’m not a bad cook these days,” she added with a grin, for they all knew that was high praise indeed.

“The best thing I’ve ever tasted,” Georgie said with a sigh.

Her husband, Alden, nodded, shifting his sleeping son in his arms. Baby Isla had been put to bed a while ago, but James had kept going, fuelled by overexcitement until he’d finished his pudding and then fallen fast asleep on his father’s lap.

Lyall reached over and took Luella’s hand, squeezing it gently. “It was all delicious, though we are stuffed fuller than the turkey was, so I hope ye have nae plans for anything strenuous on the agenda now?” he asked quietly, giving her a wink.

It had amused him that Luella had taken the holiday so seriously, meticulously planning everything out so it would be as perfect as she always dreamed of. Naturally, a few little things had gone awry, like Muir knocking over a bottle of wine in the middle of one of his most exuberant stories, Hamilton getting a clip around the ear from their mother for

telling a bawdy joke in front of the children, and temptation getting the better of Murdoch, who'd stole at least six sausages from a plate when Luella's back was turned. She had taken it all in her stride, though, and orchestrated a wonderful family celebration.

"Nothing strenuous, I promise, just a few presents to unwrap still," she said, waggling her eyebrows at him with a *get on with it before I lose patience* look.

Lyall grinned and glanced down the table at Jack, who had sat up straight upon hearing those words.

"Nah, there are nae more presents to open, Luella, there cannae be," Lyall said in a too-loud voice.

"Yes, there is," she said firmly, getting up and tugging at his arm.

Lyall laughed and did as she asked him, following the rest of the family into the large parlour. Greenery decked the huge stone mantelpiece: holly and rosemary, and large swathes of fir studded with cones, and with walnuts and red ribbons tied along the length of it. The yule log was still blazing merrily, and the room was cosy and warm. Everyone settled themselves down and Lyall gave it ten minutes before his father started snoring.

They had a tree this year for the first time, as his mother had told Luella about the new fashion for bringing a small pine tree inside and decorating it. Lyall sat back and admired it while Luella handed out the remaining presents. She had done a wonderful job of decorating the tree with the box of glass balls and candles that his mother had sent to her.

"Lyall, there is one missing."

"Hmm?" Lyall feigned innocence as Luella turned to him, hands on hips. "Where is the present for Jack? It's not here," she said, reciting the words they had agreed on that morning.

"Are ye sure? It was there this morning."

"Well, it's not there now," she said with a heavy sigh.



Lyall hardly dared glance at Jack, who was almost quivering with excitement. “That’s very odd. Well, I wonder if it could have...”

He went to the door and opened it, careful to fill the gap so Jack couldn’t see. Mrs Baillie’s fellow, Willy Murray, stood in the hallway, holding a small squirming bundle of grey fur. Lyall grinned at him and took the puppy. It was an adorable grey Irish Wolfhound bitch, and the finest of Willy’s last litter. He bred the best dogs in Scotland and Jack didn’t know how lucky he was to get his hands on one. Only Mrs Baillie’s insistence that Jack must have the puppy had won the fellow over, as they’d all been promised to clients months before they were born.

“Thanks, Willy. There’s a bottle of something to warm ye on the desk in my study.” Lyall hesitated for a moment before adding. “And then go and ask Sheenagh to marry ye, for the love of God. It’s about time ye persuaded her into it and made an honest woman of her.”

Willy blushed to the top of his bald head and made an odd choking sound.

“Courage, man,” Lyall said bracingly, to which instruction Willy reacted by standing a little straighter and striding off down the hall.

Lyall grinned and turned back to the room. “Well, well, would ye believe it, the little devil was in the hallway.”

Jack leapt to his feet with a cry of delight and ran to Lyall.

“A puppy! Oh, is it really for me?”

“She is for you,” Lyall said, his voice quiet as he carefully handed the pup over to him. “Gently now, no shouting. You don’t want to frighten her, aye?”

Jack beamed, his eyes shining with happiness as the puppy licked his chin, wagging her entire body with excitement. Picking up on Lyall’s warning, Jack kept his voice quiet though he looked as if he was about to burst with glee. “Luella, look what Lyall gave me! Isn’t she beautiful? I shall call her Skye,” he whispered.

“She is *very* beautiful,” Luella agreed, and Lyall could hear the emotion in her voice. It had been important to her to make certain Jack had a wonderful Christmas, for he had never known such a thing before. “How lucky you are.”

“I am,” he said, cradling the puppy against his chest. “We’ve both been very lucky, haven’t we, Luella? I’m so glad Pa was dreadful and sent us to you, Lyall. I can forgive him everything else now, because... because this has been the best Christmas ever!”

He ran to his sister, kissing her cheek. “Take Skye for a moment, please,” he said, giving the precious bundle reluctantly into his sister’s hands, and then went to Lyall and hugged him tightly. “Thank you,” he said fiercely. “Thank you for everything.”

Lyall felt a lump rise in his throat, but he hugged the boy firmly to him. He loved the lad as much as if he’d truly been a son and not just his wife’s little brother. “Ye are more than welcome. Ye must introduce little Skye carefully to Murdoch and his wives, though, aye, and then settle her somewhere quiet. She’s just a wee bairn like Isla, ye ken, and cannae take too much excitement. Ye will find a bed for her in yer room but be ready to clear up after her until she is trained. When she is old enough, we’ll teach her to sit and stay and to mind ye, like I did with Murdoch.”

“Aye, train her to steal sausages,” his father said with a snort. “Murdo would never have done such a thing. Ye come to me, laddie. *I* shall teach ye how to train the pup.”

“Ach, Murdoch is just as fine a dog as Murdo was,” Lyall said stoutly, for there was ever a bit of competition between him and his father about their best dogs. Murdo had been his father’s favourite dog and had died many years ago, but his finer points seemed to get better and better whenever his da compared Murdo to Murdoch, who was a distant relation.

“You seem to forget Murdo ate my best hat,” his mother put in, earning herself a scowl from her husband.

“Well, how was he to know the birds weren’t real?” he demanded, as everyone laughed.

Lyall watched as Jack took Skye away from the family gathering, which was just as well, as everyone looked ready for forty winks and the lad would be bored. Georgie yawned and snuggled up to her husband as Muir and Hamilton got out a pack of cards.

Lyall watched as Luella came over to him, her heart in her eyes as she stared down at him. He reached out his hand to her and when she took it, tugged her into his lap. She came without a murmur of protest, knowing no one here would mind at all.

“Jack was right, I can forgive Pa everything, especially for being so dreadful as to foist us onto you, Lyall. Any other man would have got rid of us and denied any responsibility, for there was none. Only you would have seen it through. You are the best man that ever lived. You do know that?”

Lyall snorted. “I shall remind ye of that the next time ye poke me in the ribs and scold me for snoring.”

She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Snoring notwithstanding, you are quite wonderful, and I love you a rather alarming amount.”

“I’m glad of it, and I think I can even be glad for Lilith too, for all she put me through, because if not for her, I would nae be here with ye now, and that would be such a tragedy I can nae bear to think of it.”

Luella nodded. “Then we can forgive the past and anyone who ever wronged us, because we have the most wonderful future ahead, and... and a family of our own,” she added quietly.

Lyall stilled, staring at her. “Luella?”

She nodded, blushing prettily. “Yes. Sometime towards the end of June, I think.”

Lyall’s breath caught, and he held her to him, burying his face against her neck.

“You’re pleased, then?” she asked, when he had finally composed himself enough to look up, though from the expression on her face she knew the answer well enough.

“Pleased?” he repeated with a huff of laughter. “Nae lass, not pleased. Overjoyed, overwhelmed, and so in love with ye I have nae words enough. Ye clever wee devil. Why did ye nae tell me before?”

Luella shrugged, snuggling against him as he held her close. “I wasn’t sure until now, and I thought it would be a lovely Christmas present.”

“The best Christmas present,” he agreed, leaning in to kiss her tenderly.

A loud and invigorating snore broke the romantic scene as Lyall’s father did just as he’d predicted and fell soundly asleep.

Luella giggled and poked him in the ribs. “See, I told you, you *do* snore. It’s obviously hereditary.”

“Ah, well,” Lyall said with a wry smile. “If I inherit the knack of being a father from him, too, I have nothing to complain about.”

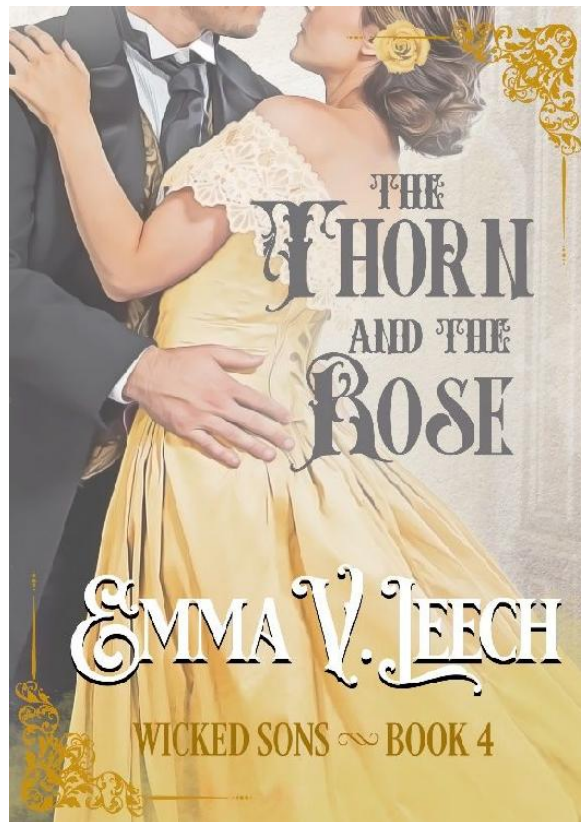
“No, but then you don’t have to listen to the snoring,” Luella pointed out.

Lyall laughed and kissed her again and promised to make it up to her. She didn’t seem to have the slightest problem believing him either.

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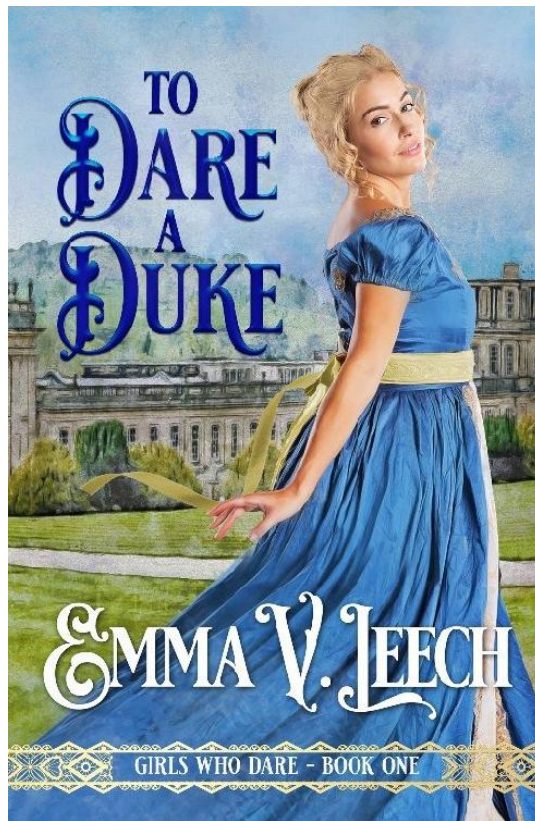
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Robert Adolphus, The Duke of Bedwin, is in no hurry to marry, he's done it once and repeating that disaster is the last thing he desires. Yet, an heir is a necessary evil for a duke and one he cannot shirk. A dark reputation precedes him though, his first wife may have died young, but the scandals the beautiful, vivacious and spiteful creature supplied the ton have not. A wife must be found. A wife who is neither beautiful or vivacious but sweet and dull, and certain to stay out of trouble.

## ***Dared to do something drastic***

The sudden interest of a certain dastardly duke is as bewildering as it is unwelcome. She'll not throw her ambitions aside to marry a scoundrel just as her plans for self-sufficiency and freedom are coming to fruition. Surely showing the man she's not actually the meek little wallflower he is looking for should be enough to put paid to his intentions? When Prue is dared by her friends to do something drastic, it seems the perfect opportunity to kill two birds.



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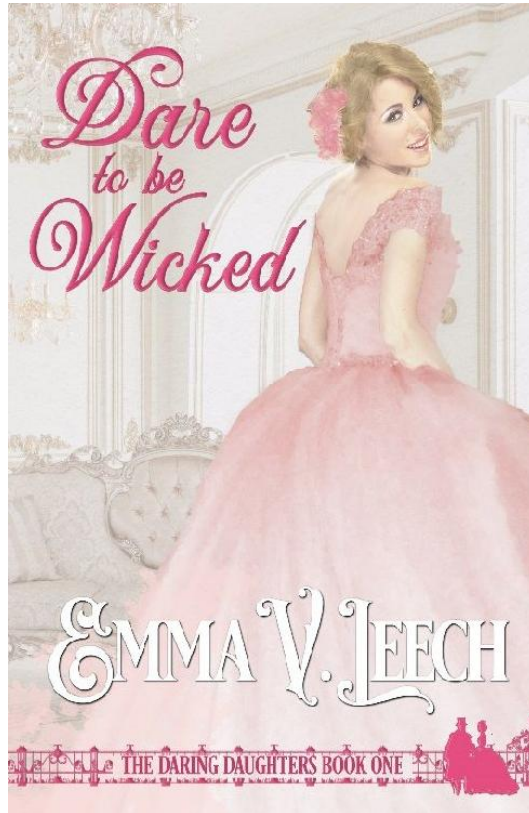
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*Daring Daughters Book One*



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Lady Elizabeth and Lady Charlotte are the daughters of the Duke and Duchess of Bedwin. Raised by an unconventional mother and an indulgent, if overprotective father, they both strain against the rigid morality of the era.

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Cassius Cadogen, Viscount Oakley, is the only child of the Earl and Countess St Clair. Beloved and indulged, he is popular, gloriously handsome, and a talented artist.

Returning from two years of study in France, his friendship with both sisters becomes strained as jealousy raises its head. A situation not helped by the two mysterious Frenchmen who have accompanied him home.

## ***And simmering sibling rivalry ...***

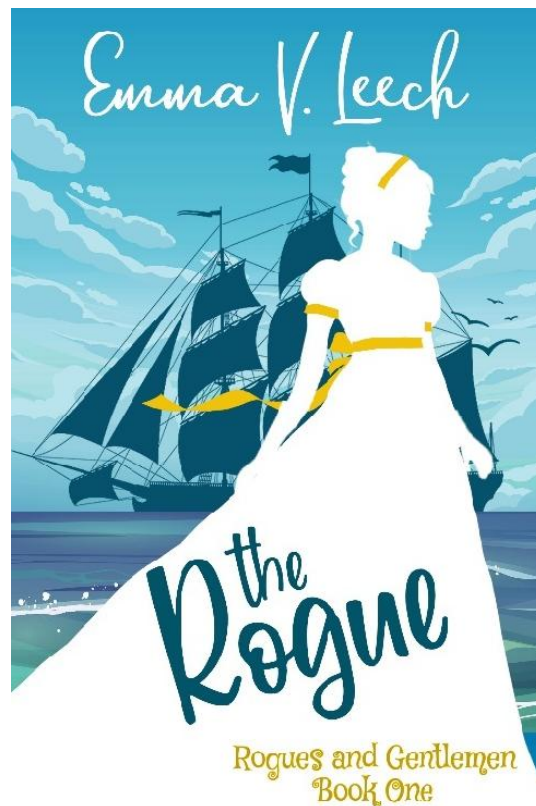
Passion, art, and secrets prove to be a combustible combination, and someone will undoubtedly get burned.

[Dare to be Wicked](#)

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## **The notorious Rogue that began it all.**

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Henrietta Morton knows to look the other way when the free trading ‘gentlemen’ are at work.

Yet when a notorious pirate bursts into her local village shop, she can avert her eyes no more. Bewitched by his wicked blue eyes, a moment of insanity follows as Henrietta hides the handsome fugitive from the Militia.

**Her reward is a kiss, lingering and unforgettable.**

In his haste to flee, the handsome pirate drops a letter, a letter that lays bare a tale of betrayal. When Henrietta's father gives her hand in marriage to a wealthy and villainous nobleman in return for the payment of his debts, she becomes desperate.

Blackmailing a pirate may be her only hope for freedom.

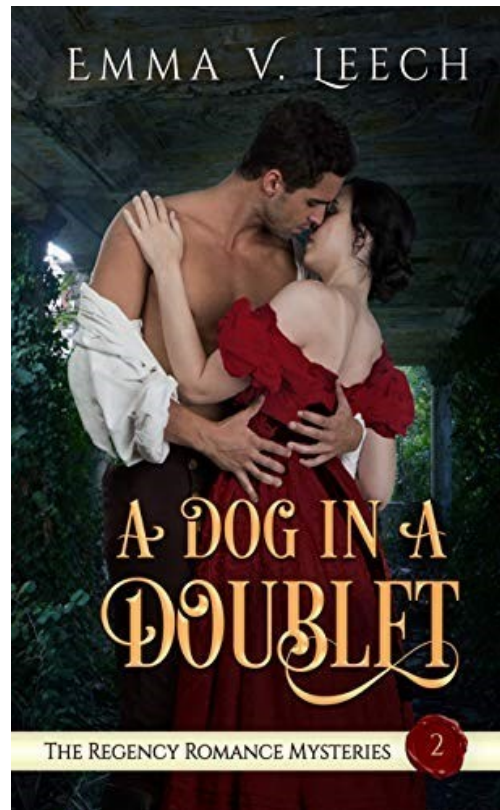
\*\*\*\* **Warning:** This book contains the most notorious rogue of all of Cornwall and, on occasion, is highly likely to include some mild sweating or descriptive sex scenes. \*\*\*\*

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## **A man with a past**

Harry Browning was a motherless guttersnipe, and the morning he came across the elderly Alexander Preston, The Viscount Stamford, clinging to a sheer rock face he didn't believe in fate. But the fates have plans for Harry whether he believes or not, and he's not entirely sure he likes them.

As a reward for his bravery, and in an unusual moment of charity, miserly Lord Stamford takes him on. He is taught to read, to manage the vast and crumbling estate, and to behave like a gentleman, but Harry knows that is something he will never truly be

Already running from a dark past, his future is becoming increasingly complex as he finds himself caught in a tangled web of jealousy and revenge.

## **A feisty young maiden**



Temptation, in the form of the lovely Miss Clarinda Bow, is a constant threat to his peace of mind, enticing him to be something he isn't. But when the old man dies his will makes a surprising demand, and the fates might just give Harry the chance to have everything he ever desired, including Clara, if only he dares.

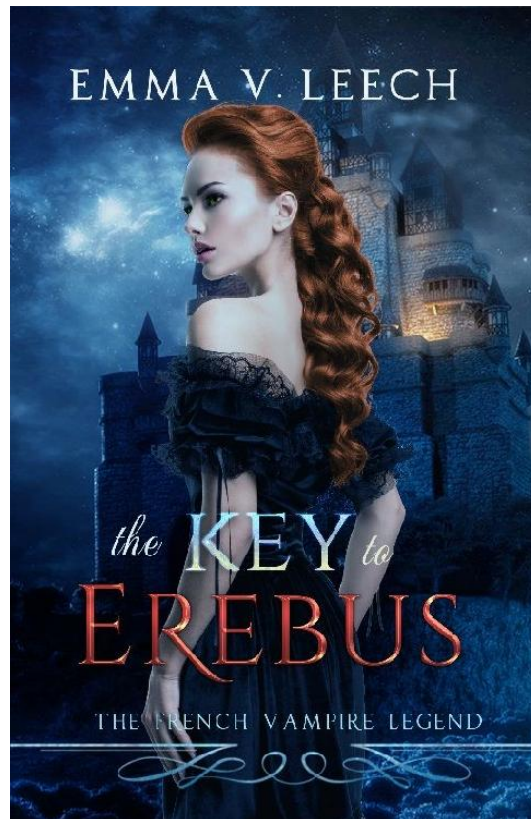
***And as those close to the Preston family begin to die, Harry may not have any choice.***

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Despite her Gran's dire warnings, she is inexorably drawn to the dark and terrifying figure of Corvus, an ancient vampire and master of the vast Albinus family.

Jéhenne is about to find her answers and discover that, not only is Corvus far more dangerous than she could ever

imagine, but that he holds much more than the key to her heart

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# The Dark Prince

*The French Fae Legend Book 1*



*Two Fae Princes*

*One Human Woman*

*And a world ready to tear them all apart*

Laen Braed is Prince of the Dark fae, with a temper and reputation to match his black eyes, and a heart that despises the human race. When he is sent back through the forbidden gates between realms to retrieve an ancient fae artifact, he returns home with far more than he bargained for.

Corin Albrecht, the most powerful Elven Prince ever born. His golden eyes are rumoured to be a gift from the gods, and destiny is calling him. With a love for the human world that runs deep, his friendship with Laen is being torn apart by his prejudices.

Océane DeBeauvoir is an artist and bookbinder who has always relied on her lively imagination to get her through an unhappy and uneventful life. A jewelled dagger put on display

at a nearby museum hits the headlines with speculation of another race, the Fae. But the discovery also inspires Océane to create an extraordinary piece of art that cannot be confined to the pages of a book.

With two powerful men vying for her attention and their friendship stretched to the breaking point, the only question that remains...who is truly The Dark Prince.

The man of your dreams is coming...or is it your nightmares he visits? Find out in Book One of The French Fae Legend.

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[The Dark Prince](#)

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