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JENNIFER HAYMORE

THE
HIGHLAND
KNIGHTS
∞

A romantic scene between a man and a woman in historical attire. The man is shirtless, and the woman is wearing a purple dress with white ruffles. They are embracing and kissing on the lips. The background is a blue and white plaid pattern.

*Highland
Awakening*

Highland Awakening

The Highland Knights

Jennifer Haymore



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Chapter 1

Camden McLeod stood at attention, his stance stiff and his arms straight at his sides. All his senses were on alert: his eyes focused, his hands poised to retrieve his pistol or his dirk in a fraction of a second. He listened for any suspicious noises while at the same time trying to ignore the sounds of grunts and pants emanating from behind the closed door at his back.

His gaze moved around the tiny anteroom. It brimmed with sumptuous décor, from the white-painted and gold-trimmed door that opened into the corridor, to the plush Aubusson carpet that dominated the floor and the red-velvet-covered settee that spanned the length of one wall.

Of course, Pinfield only chose the best. The best horses, the best brandy, the best damned whorehouse in all of London. Not to mention the most skilled men in England to protect him from danger.

Which was why Cam was here, armed to the teeth and standing guard at the closed door of one of the many elegant bedrooms in Mrs. Trickelbank's high-class brothel. The Highland Knights, the elite mercenary group of which Cam was a member, were guarding Viscount Pinfield, who had been receiving so many death threats that he had been granted the Knights' protection twenty-four hours a day.

Unfortunately, it was Cam's assigned week for evening duty.

"Oh yes, my lord. Yes! There!" The lass's high-pitched squeal was followed by the groaning complaint of the mattress as its occupants thrashed about.

Cam pasted a stony look on his face and crossed his arms over his chest. He tried to ignore the sounds of the bed-sport, but it wasn't easy. He concentrated on the closed door in front of him rather than the one behind

him, and other noises emerged: the muted sounds of quick footsteps in the corridor, and low but urgent female voices.

Cam stiffened when the footsteps stopped outside, and the voices grew louder.

“But who...?” one of the females began to say. The handle turned. Cam’s hand went to his pistol just as the door burst open. Two women stood at the threshold. He knew one of them—Mrs. Trickelbank, the mistress of this place. The other wore a hooded cloak and stood in shadow with her head down, her hands clasped around a small book she held tightly to her middle. Cam could see just enough of her body shape to know that she was female, and of the slope of her cheek to conclude that she was young.

Probably one of Mrs. Trickelbank’s lasses who’d been out at a client’s for the evening. Perhaps the book was some kind of means to keep records of her conquests.

He dropped his hand from his weapon and locked eyes with Mrs. Trickelbank, who knew full well that Lord Pinfield required privacy while he conducted his “business.”

“Sorry, lad,” the older woman said briskly, ignoring his pointed look. She grasped the cloaked woman’s shoulders and thrust her into the antechamber. The woman stumbled inside, and would have tumbled headlong into Cam had he not caught her by grabbing her upper arms. She made a low sound of distress as he held her at arm’s length and looked over her shoulder to raise a brow at Mrs. Trickelbank.

She gave him a pursed-lip grin and brushed a lock of her graying hair back, tucking it efficiently into her chignon as she said, “Be a peach and keep an eye on the chit for a minute, will you, Mr. McLeod? I’ve a problem with one of the newer girls and Mountebank. You know how he is.”

Cam gave an inward sigh. Oh yes. He knew Mountebank well. Cam's charge, Lord Pinfield, was a run-of-the-mill profligate. Mountebank, on the other hand, was a perverse bastard.

He gave a short nod of agreement. "Go on, then," he said, his voice a quiet rasp.

"That's right, plum nubbins," Pinfield said gleefully from beyond the door at Cam's back. "Bounce upon me. Bounce! Bounce!"

Plum nubbins? Cam fought not to roll his eyes heavenward. The cloaked woman made another small sound of distress, and her arms tensed under his hands. All rather odd, considering she must be quite familiar with sounds like these. Chuckling, Mrs. Trickelbank disappeared, closing the door softly behind her.

Without releasing the woman, Cam looked down at her for the first time. From beneath her hood, she peeked up at him with wide brown eyes that sparkled with amber flecks. Golden candlelight splashed over smooth olive skin colored faintly across the cheekbones with a blush. Her scent—it was so different from the usual fleshy odors of this place. It was sweet and fresh, evoking sun-swept meadows and crisp country air.

She was clearly not one of Mrs. Trickelbank's girls—not yet, at least. He knew most of them, but more than that, he knew the jaded look in their eyes. This woman—she was...pure. Fresh. Hell, she was *virginal*. She would be none of those things for very long if she remained in a place like this.

She was also quite beautiful, but not in the traditional sense of the word. Taken separately, her features would not be considered attractive—her cheekbones a bit too broad, her nose and eyes too large, her brows too thick, her mouth too wide. But somehow, arranged upon her face, they came together in a way that captured a man's attention. *Striking*—that was what she was.

Cam gazed down at her for a long moment, unable to move. Combating a sudden sensation that coursed through him. Sadness...or regret...or something like that. He sure as hell didn't want to put a name to it.

He shook himself inwardly and dropped his hands, taking a step back from her. He didn't even know this woman. If she chose to become one of Mrs. Trickelbank's high-priced whores, it was of no consequence to him.

She swallowed hard and looked down, her lashes fluttering. "Sorry," she whispered.

He frowned. "What for?"

"For intruding upon you and your...ah...solitude?"

She spoke like a lady. Intriguing.

He gave a low laugh and then revealed how he spoke as well—like a Scottish gentleman, which ultimately wasn't fair to her, since he *really* wasn't one. "Aye, well, I generally prefer my solitude to be more solitary."

As if to punctuate his statement, a high-pitched giggle emanated from the door behind him.

The woman took a hesitant step backward, her gaze flickering toward the door his body was blocking. "I...uh...er..."

Still clutching that wee book to herself, she dropped her gaze to the floor, as though the leather toes of her boots poking out of her floor-length wool cloak were the most fascinating things in the world. Her shoulders shuddered as she drew in a long breath. He could only see a bit of her skin, where the candlelight brushed her cheek. It had turned bright pink.

His lips twisted into a wry grin. What did she think? That he intended to tear off her clothes and drag her to the floor right here, right now?

Yes!

His body made the command, shouting it in his head as if through a hunting horn. He squeezed his hands into fists at his sides as images tumbled through his mind. Tossing away that drab brown woolen cloak. Thrusting his hands into her hair. Dragging her to the floor, flipping up those skirts, and discovering the treasures that lay beneath...

Hell, he was on duty. He shouldn't allow that thought—any of those thoughts—to enter his head.

He thrust them out. They weren't so easily deterred, though. They still crowded the edges of his mind, nudging, trying to find a way back in.

He clenched his jaw and reached forward, tilting her chin up. He would merely reassure her.

"I won't bother you," she said, her words rapid and breathy. Her face had turned a deep, alluring shade of pink. "I'll just wait for Mrs. Trickelbank—"

"You're no bother," he said, his voice rough. Though she *should* bother him. She was a distraction from his duty, and he shouldn't have allowed her to step one foot inside this little room.

Her skin...it was impossibly soft. Instinctively, his fingers moved in tiny circles under her chin, as if he might drink in that softness through his fingertips.

"And I wilna bite." His lips curled. "Unless you give me permission to."

Energy shimmered from her...When he stood close to her like this, he could *feel* it, skipping off her in waves of light and sweetness, insinuating beneath his skin, making him feel...*alive*.

He kept a firm hold on her chin and reached up his other hand to push her hood back. "You dinna need this in here."

The hood fell away to expose a mass of rich dark brown hair only partially wrestled into a single braid, which plunged down her back and disappeared behind the collar of her cloak.

Her gaze had dropped somewhere in the vicinity of his chest.

“Look at me,” he commanded, squeezing her chin gently.

Her eyes flew up to meet his.

The speed at which she obeyed stunned him. It made him instantly hard. He lost his focus for a fraction of a minute as the erotic images crashed through him once more. When he regained it, he asked softly, reverently, “What’s your name, lass?”

She took a stuttering breath. “Esme.”

He liked it. It suited her, and that made him smile. “I’ve never met a woman with that name before.”

“It...is not very common. My mother...” Her words dwindled.

He waited patiently for a moment then raised one brow, expecting an answer.

She understood the unspoken order, and she licked her lips before answering in a shaky voice. “My mother is...eccentric.”

“Ah, I see.” His thumb moved up from her chin to stroke the soft skin of the lower part of her cheek. Her skin here was hot with the flush, and she fairly vibrated with tension.

He released her and lowered his hand, moving it to cover hers, which still held that book against her stomach. “And what’s this?”

“My notebook,” she breathed. Her fingers tightened over the book. Clearly she wasn’t ready to volunteer

anything more on that topic.

“Come. Sit down,” he said, letting that topic go. For now. If she thought she could hide the contents of that mysterious notebook behind her delicate little hands, she was grossly mistaken.

He steered her to the settee, noting that the corridor had gone quiet and the grunts and moans behind the door had diminished to murmurs and the occasional giggle. A break in the action, then. Pinfield would start up again soon, no doubt, after taking some time to regain his strength—Cam had enough experience with his habits to know this.

Cam pressed Esme onto the velvet cushion and stood gazing down at her. She rounded her shoulders and clasped the leather-bound notebook to her chest, the posture closing her off completely.

His fingers itched to pry that book away from her. To force her to sit up straight and look him in the eye.

Perhaps someone somewhere had infused a bit of the gentleman into him, because he was in the mood to be patient. So he did none of those things. *Yet.*

Instead, he sat beside her, keeping a distance between them that might be considered decent, though he'd never been much for propriety and other restrictive nonsense people had always attempted to force upon him.

He cocked his head, listening once again for anything suspicious. Hearing nothing, he turned back to Esme, who gazed down at her lap, her shoulders still hunched.

He stared at her. God. Why was this woman in this place? She didn't belong here. The wolves would eat her alive.

And he was one of those wolves. Not only that, in most situations he was the leader of the pack. The one who would fight to the death, if necessary, to become the

dominant. The one who would be the first to conquer his prey.

He reached out and touched her cheek, gentle despite the predatory instincts that throbbed within him. “Why are you in this place?”

She didn’t look at him. Just pressed her lips together and shook her head.

“Why won’t you look at me, Esme?” His voice rumbled when he spoke. “Why do you have difficulty speaking to me? Is it shyness? Or fear?”

He watched her close her eyes in a long blink. Finally, she turned her head to him. “I...am not good with people. Especially...” She swallowed. “Ah...men.”

He cocked a brow, impressed by her candor. But still...“You’ll be in the wrong place, then, if you’re no good with men.”

She winced. “Well, I hope to become better. Oh!” Her flush deepened. “I don’t mean...” For the first time she separated one hand from that infernal notebook, raising it in a frustrated gesture. He watched her. *Patience*. Finally, she shrugged. “You see? I am hopeless. I cannot help myself. I always say the wrong thing. *Always*.”

“On the contrary,” he murmured. Because even though she didn’t fit in this place, she fascinated him. He *liked* what she said. He liked how she looked, though he wished he could see more of her body, and her hair loose. He liked her soft, breathy voice. He liked how the flush still pinked her cheeks. He liked those downcast eyes, and how whenever she looked at him they sparkled with a rare vivacity.

She wasn’t one of Mrs. Trickelbank’s whores, so who was she? What the hell was she doing here?

“If you won’t tell me why you’re here, I will be forced to form my own conclusion,” he said in a low voice. Her gaze flickered in his direction, and in that brief glance, he

saw the flare of interest. She wanted to know how he saw her.

“You’re a lady come upon hard times,” he told her. “You heard of Mrs. Trickelbank, mayhap you’ve a brother or a father who frequents this place...”

She blew out a breath—half laugh, half gasp. It either meant he’d hit the nail on the head or was very, very wrong. It didn’t matter. He continued.

“You heard of this establishment and came to Mrs. Trickelbank tonight to see if she might have use of your services. If you could sell your bonny self to one of her gentleman patrons who would be discreet about your identity after he took his fill of pleasure from your body.”

“Oooh,” Esme breathed. She gazed at him directly now, clearly fascinated by what he would say next.

Her reaction shocked him. He’d expected her to be scandalized, to cry out in denial, perhaps to cover her ears, even if his assumption was true.

Grinning wickedly, he continued. “Mrs. Trickelbank was giving you the grand tour, in a manner of speaking, to ensure your commitment to this course of action, when she was interrupted by the unfortunate incident with Mountebank.”

Esme’s lips twitched in the semblance of a smile. A smile! Again, it was unexpected. And it thrilled him. And her lips...God. They were lips that begged for a man’s mouth on them. *His* mouth.

“You tell a good story, sir,” she murmured in that soft, sweet voice.

“Hmm. Do you ken what I think?”

She bit her lower lip. Lust coursed through him at that glide of teeth over that soft, plump skin.

“I think,” he said slowly, “you need to be tried. Mayhap you dinna possess some of the subtler attributes required

of the ladies of this establishment. I think there was no unfortunate incident with Mountebank. I think Mrs. Trickelbank brought you to me to be tested.”

“Do you?” she breathed. Her eyes were so wide. So bright and clear, with those burning amber flecks...

He'd snared her in the trap of his gaze, and he wouldn't let her break away. A primal triumph rushed through him.

He had her now. He could loosen the reins on his control. Not all the way...but a little.

He nodded sagely. “Aye. Mrs. Trickelbank allows no lass to join her household until she has passed my test.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed. And then...she licked her lips, swiping her tongue over them in a quick motion that left them glistening.

Holy hell. Cam took in a shuddering breath. This woman had no idea how sensual her every movement was to him. She had no idea what kind of a man he was. She had no idea of any of the debauched things he'd like to do to her.

It had been a long time since he had encountered an innocent. And he'd never encountered an innocent who intrigued him like this one did.

He curved his lips, knowing his smile was a feral, hungry one. But he didn't care. “Do you think I'll be kissing you now, Esme?”

She didn't break her gaze away from his. “I...I don't know.”

He leaned forward, until he could feel her quick breaths puff over his cheek. “Do you want me to kiss you? Are your lips tingling with the anticipation of mine pressing against them?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice a mere tremble.

“Good. Because I want a taste.”

Her breath caught audibly, a small choke. He didn't let her think about it for another instant. He hauled her into his arms and slammed his lips down upon hers.

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Chapter 2

Oh. Dear. God.

Lady Esme Hawkins's muscles had transformed into putty. She knew what she should do. What a lady who was able to function properly in society *would* do.

Gasp. Yank away. Scream. Run. Slap him, *hard*, across the face.

But she could do none of those things. Because she was putty...*melted* putty, and her body had molded to his. Her hands moved against the wool of his coat, and her fingers curled into it, holding on, because if she didn't hold on, she'd faint, fall to the floor, float away on this tide of...*what?*

Desire.

Yes, that was what it was. This man—Mr. McLeod, Mrs. Tricklebank had called him—was so beautiful. Jet-black hair, tall and broad, with thick muscles apparent beneath his form-fitting coat. He wore a pleated kilt of blue-and-green tartan—she'd always found kilts and the Scots who wore them intriguing—and high, dark brown leather boots. His eyes were a shocking blue—she hadn't known it was possible for a man to be so dark and yet possess such piercing, light-colored eyes.

And the way those eyes had studied her, as if she was the most fascinating person in the world...Nobody ever looked at her like that. And to have this beautiful man gaze at her as if she were an object of desire...Lord, but that was a heady experience indeed. His gaze had bored under her skin, through her blood, and into her bones until she was a shaking mass of tingling nerves.

His lips moved against hers in a firm, sensual stroke. Possessive. Dominating. As if through this kiss he was

claiming her as his own. She had no choice but to submit. She *wanted* to submit.

His lips nudged her mouth open. She gasped, and he swallowed the sound. His tongue grazed her top teeth, and she tentatively swiped her own tongue against his. The wet heat of their touching tongues sent a deep shudder through her. His hands glided up her sides until one of them cupped her breast and his thumb rolled the tip. Through all the layers of material, her nipple beaded, became a hard, aching, sensitive point.

“Oh!” she whispered into his mouth, arching toward him. Her body had a mind of its own, and she gave it free rein. She had no choice. Reality nudged at the back of her mind, but he had overwhelmed her senses. At some point she’d released his coat and had wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingertips moving up the powerful cords of muscle at the back of his neck and diving into the silky softness of his black hair.

His arm slid around her lower back, pulling her tight against his hard body, and she came willingly, pressing ever closer.

Desire. Lust. Need.

She knew she was capable of these sensations—that they were an intrinsic part of her. But knowing something existed within her and having it brought to life by a man’s touch were completely different things. She’d never expected this. She’d never believed it would come to pass. She’d always expected her sensual nature to remain firmly locked away from the world, only to be daydreamed about and later expressed in her stories...

Her stories!

Gasping, she jerked back, wrenching herself from the lock of his arm. His hand fell from her breast. His lips parted from hers.

Oh God.

Sweat broke out over her forehead and trickled down the side of her face. She jumped up from the settee, frantically searching for her notebook.

There it was...on the back of the velvet cushion, half-hidden behind his body. She lunged for it, her arm outstretched.

She was too slow.

He snatched it away. Leaping to his feet, he held it up, high out of her reach.

“My notebook,” she cried softly, standing on her tiptoes and reaching for it, to no avail.

His piercing eyes burned her. His smile was a slow, wicked curve. “Well, aren’t we easily distracted?”

“Yes...I mean, no! Please...”

She allowed no one to touch her notebooks. No one. Ever.

“What’s in here, Esme? Weren’t you enjoying our kiss? What could be so important to drag you away from me?”

Once again, her face burned. What had she done? It was wrong. She was wrong. She shouldn’t have gone near him. She was wicked for touching him.

“Please,” she whispered. “I’ll go away. I’ll leave you alone. Just...please. Give me my notebook—”

“Do you think that’s what I want?” Incredulity laced his voice. “For you to *leave me alone*?”

“I...don’t know...” She couldn’t make sense of this conversation. All she could think about was the enormity of what she’d just done. The enormity of his hands on her notebook...on *her*.

He shook his head and bent down until his face nearly touched hers, their noses a hairsbreadth apart.

“Don’t leave me alone, Esme. Don’t *ever* leave me alone.” He straightened. “Now let’s be seeing what’s in here that has you so agitated.”

Keeping the notebook out of her reach, he opened it.

“No!” she cried. “Please—”

Just then, the door to the bedchamber opened, jerking their attention to it. A round woman with a shock of curly carrot-colored hair peered out, kohl smeared beneath her eyes. It was Betty, Esme remembered. She’d met her once before. Esme recalled Betty’s earlier exuberant shouts, and her face grew even hotter.

The woman gave them a bright smile. “Hullo, luvies. I didn’t mean to interrupt. Pinny and me was just wanting to get a bite from the kitchen.”

Mr. McLeod lowered Esme’s notebook and gave the woman a terse nod. “Of course. I’ll see that something’s brought for you.”

It was odd how quickly his tone changed from the wicked rake to the sensible, curt man of business. Who *was* he, anyhow?

“All right, then.” Flashing another toothy grin at them both, Betty shut the door. At the same time, the door to the corridor opened and Mrs. Trickelbank bustled in.

“Well, that’s taken care—” Mrs. Trickelbank stopped speaking abruptly. She frowned at Mr. McLeod, then turned her gaze to Esme. Seeing Esme’s expression—Lord, she didn’t even want to think of what she must look like at this moment...flushed, disheveled, alarmed, terrified, guilty, thoroughly kissed...

“Mr. McLeod,” Mrs. Trickelbank said crossly, “might I ask why you are in possession of the lady’s notebook?”

Mrs. Trickelbank knew Esme’s rule of never allowing anyone to look inside it. The older woman was one of the very few people privy to Esme’s biggest secret.

Mr. McLeod cocked one sleek black eyebrow. “She misplaced it,” he said smoothly. “I was merely returning it to her.”

“I should hope so.” Mrs. Trickelbank gave him a warning look.

Pursing his lips, he handed Esme the notebook. She took it, suddenly unable to meet his eyes, which spoke to her clearly nonetheless. *I intend to discover the secret of your notebook*, they told her. *I intend to discover all your secrets*.

That was impossible. He couldn't discover any of her secrets, because she wouldn't allow it.

Her lips still tingled from his hard kisses. Her nipple was still sensitive, still ached, yearned for his touch. Wetness seeped between her thighs. Despite everything, she was still aroused.

She looked away even as shame flooded her.

Mrs. Trickelbank threaded her arm into Esme's. “Come along, dear. Let's go to my private sitting room. I'll order some tea, and we can talk.”

She allowed Mrs. Trickelbank to lead her out the door. But she couldn't resist casting a quick glance over her shoulder.

Mr. McLeod was gazing at her, those piercing blue eyes offering both a promise and a threat: *This isn't over*.

“Goodbye, Esme,” he said softly, and Mrs. Trickelbank closed the door.

She would never see him again, she reassured herself.

That should have been a relief. So why wasn't it?

Chapter 3

Esme woke late the next morning—well, “early afternoon” would be more accurate. She hadn’t arrived home until after four o’clock in the morning, but no one in Trent House was aware of that. As far as the household knew, Esme had been dreaming away in her bed since ten o’clock the night before.

Her brother and sister-in-law never said so outright, but Esme was certain they thought she was lazy. Esme wished she could tell them the truth about what she did—if she wasn’t off researching in secret late at night, she was penning her stories. But that would only lead to more shame on her family’s part—they’d been shamed more than enough in the past few years—and ultimate heartbreak for her. Her brother would want her to stop writing, and Esme wouldn’t risk that, because she *couldn’t* stop writing.

No doubt damaging her reputation with her family even more, Esme remained in her room for another two hours, writing and daydreaming, before she rang for her maid to help her prepare for the day.

As she waited for Polly, she rested her chin in her palms and gazed at the wall.

Last night had been...*inspiring*.

No, it had been more than that. She couldn’t stop thinking about the wicked, handsome Scot. Lord, how she wanted to see him again. But that was unlikely. She did plan to visit Mrs. Trickelbank’s establishment again next week to complete her research, but it was doubtful he’d be there. Although it *was* possible...

He was so different from her kind and gentle brothers. He was forceful and commanding. He was the kind of man who knew exactly what he wanted, and he went after it with single-minded intent.

And last night, he'd wanted *her*. She'd felt his desire for her shimmering around them both. He'd wanted shy, stuttering Esme, the shamed, awkward spinster who could never say anything appropriate for the moment. He'd wanted her even while she wore a dull brown cloak and with her messy braid lying loose down her back.

The man knew nothing of Lady Esme Hawkins, who wore silks and furs and glittering jewels and whose brother was the Duke of Trent, one of the most influential men in England.

She'd have to be that Esme tonight, unfortunately. Trent was hosting a grand dinner party—he'd invited twenty people, mostly prominent politicians and their wives. It was going to be excruciating. It was going to take everything Esme had not to embarrass her brother and his wife, Sarah.

Sighing, she dropped her arms and glanced down at the open page of her notebook. Today would be a busy day, and she'd already spent most of it locked up in her room.

He gazed down at her, his eyes such a piercing, light blue, they reminded her of ice reflecting a clear winter's sky...

She stared at the line, her mouth dropping open. She'd written her hero, the Duke of Rockwell, to have brown eyes. When she'd been writing this morning, she hadn't been imagining Rockwell at all but a certain blue-eyed Scottish rogue who'd held her in his arms last night...

Her maid knocked softly on her door, and Esme slammed the notebook shut, vowing to fix the mistake later. She had to push all thoughts of Mr. McLeod—and Rockwell—out of her mind, for now. Those two men belonged in her secret life, which never overlapped with her real life as the youngest sibling of the House of Trent.

An hour later, dressed in a white muslin day dress, Esme entered the drawing room, where she found her sister-in-law on the sofa embroidering while her little sons, Lukas and Theo, played with wooden toy horses and knights on the carpet.

Sarah looked up as Esme walked in, and gave her a bright smile. “There you are, Esme. Did you have some breakfast?” She glanced at the clock on the mantel. “Luncheon?” she corrected.

“I did, thanks. How are you feeling?”

“Oh, just fine. The little one never seems to sleep, though.” Sarah patted her rounded belly. “He kicks me day and night.”

“He?” Esme teased.

“Or she,” Sarah said with a grin.

“I think you’re due for a sweet girl after these two scoundrels,” Esme said affectionately as she crouched down beside her nephews. Fifteen-month-old Theo toddled toward her, his thumb in his mouth, and she drew him into her lap, kissing the top of his downy blond head. Three-year-old Lukas looked up at her, then retrieved one of the horses from the group on the floor and held it out to her. “I don’t want it,” he proclaimed. He leaned forward, his little mouth curling into a scowl. “You have it, Auntie. It’s a *French* horse.” He pushed it into her hand.

Setting her notebook beside her, she turned the horse over in both her hands, looking at it curiously. It appeared to be no different from the five or six still on the carpet. “Why do you say it’s a French horse?”

“Because its name is Jean-Paul.” Lukas said “Jean-Paul” with a perfect little French accent. He didn’t like speaking French, but he understood it perfectly—his nurse had been speaking in that language to him since he was in the cradle.

“Who told you his name is Jean-Paul?” she asked him.

He pointed an accusing finger at the horse. “He did.”

“Ah.” Esme nodded sagely. “I see.”

She glanced at Sarah, who was watching the exchange with a look of motherly love and concern on her face. It was something that made Esme’s heart feel so full—and yet so melancholy at the same time. These days there was no scarcity of love in the House of Trent, and while some of that love was bestowed upon her, she didn’t have the kind of romantic, passionate love her three oldest brothers had. She didn’t have anyone she could spill her heart out to. Anyone she could share her secrets with. Anyone who knew her to the very depths of her soul.

She’d made her choice—set her future in stone. And now she doubted she’d ever have any of those things.

She squeezed the “French” horse in one hand. “Is everything ready for tonight?” she asked Sarah.

Sarah gave a small laugh. “No. But we’re never completely prepared, are we? And yet everything always turns out lovely in the end. I refuse to allow myself to fret about it.”

“Good.” Esme nodded in agreement. She settled in beside Lukas and steadied the wooden horse on its four legs on the carpet.

“Are you looking forward to seeing Mr. Whitworth tonight?” Sarah asked softly.

Esme jerked her head up. Lord. Mr. Whitworth. *Henry*. Last time she’d seen him, he’d asked her to call him Henry.

Forcibly, she pressed her lips into a smile, but she looked back down, unable to keep eye contact with Sarah as she murmured, “Of course I am.”

In truth, she hadn’t thought about the fact that he’d be here tonight. Of course she knew Trent had invited him,

but she hadn't given it a second thought.

What was *wrong* with her? Henry was honorable, kind, and quite handsome to boot.

"Are you sure you're—?"

Thank heavens Lukas interrupted. "These are all *English* horses," he announced, gesturing to the small group of horses he'd gathered. "They will crush Jean-Paul into bone dust!"

Esme raised her brows and glanced at Sarah, wondering where the boy had heard such language. Evidently, no age was too young to learn bigotry.

Sarah frowned and shrugged as if to say, *Who knows?* Then she spoke firmly to her son. "Jean-Paul looks like a very nice horse. Why would you want to hurt him?"

"He's *French!*" the boy exclaimed.

Though almost a year had passed since the Battle of Waterloo, it was still very popular to dislike the French. But not to the Hawkins family—Esme's oldest brother, Sam, had married a Frenchwoman a year and a half ago. "Your Auntie Élise is French," Esme argued, "and you wouldn't want her crushed, would you?"

Lukas's scowl deepened. "No." He looked at Sarah. "Mama, don't let Auntie Élise be French anymore."

"But she *is* French, darling. There is nothing I can do about that. And I wouldn't want to even if I could."

Lukas drew back, stunned, a look of such dismay on his face, Esme pulled him onto her lap beside Theo and wrapped her arms around both boys. "Aunt Élise is part of our family. I love her, your mama and papa love her, and so do you, right?"

Lukas nodded hesitantly. "But—"

She tapped the tip of his blunt little nose. "No buts. Not all French people are bad. Your Auntie Élise is a

perfect example.”

“They are all bad. Very, very bad,” Lukas said stubbornly.

Esme glanced at Sarah, alarmed. Sarah sighed. “He’s been eavesdropping on too many adult discussions.”

Esme nodded and squeezed her nephew. She pressed a kiss on his blond head, then turned at a knock on the door.

Trent entered. He came first to Esme, smiling as he bent down to kiss her cheek, then he wrapped his arms around his wife, drawing her up off the sofa. He pressed his hand to her belly and his lips to the top of her head, then laughed as little Lukas barreled into his knees. “Papa! Papa!”

Theo left Esme’s lap and toddled over to his father, too, at a much more sedate pace. Trent included both boys in the family hug.

“I see you’re playing with your new horses this morning, Luke.”

“I am, and they’re all good English horses. Except for Jean-Paul. But that’s all right, because we’re going to kill him.”

“You’re going to kill one of your horses?” Trent asked, one blond brow quirking upward.

“Yes, because he’s French, and French horses are very bad horses.”

“Are they?”

“Yes!” the boy declared.

“But you know the war is over, right? The French are no longer our enemies.”

Lukas gave his father a skeptical look.

“It’s true. That’s why all the soldiers have come back from the Continent. They don’t want to fight the French anymore. And the French don’t want to fight us, either. They want to be our friends.”

“Really?”

“Yes, son,” Trent said gravely.

“Jean-Paul is a pretty horse, Papa. He’s...brown.” He said the word *brown* as if he’d just learned it.

“Yes, that’s true. He is brown, but when a horse is just that color, you call him a chestnut. A chestnut stallion, that’s what your Jean-Paul is.”

“He shall be friends with all my horses now,” Lukas said with a grin.

“Good. Now go play, lad.”

Lukas strode off happily, and Sarah hugged Trent. “You’re so good with him. I would’ve argued with him all day, but you always know just the thing to say.”

Trent cast his fond gaze from his son to his wife. “I don’t think you would’ve argued with him all day. He’s a reasonable boy, and he gets it from his reasonable mama.”

“I rather think you’re the reasonable one,” Sarah told him with a smile.

He planted a peck on her cheek. “I’m off to Westminster. What are you ladies up to?”

“Discussing tonight’s dinner party,” Sarah said. “Do you have any last-minute suggestions for us?”

Trent gave her a bemused look. “Me? I have complete faith in your planning abilities, love. You know that.”

“I know. But just in case...”

He kissed her, the act so intimate Esme had to look away. She’d never seen Trent kiss anyone until he

married Sarah. He'd always been gentle but aloof. Now all that aloofness was gone, and he'd become an affectionate man.

Esme was so glad Trent and Sarah had finally found happiness with each other. She'd always loved Sarah, who was the daughter of the gardener at their country house, Ironwood Park. Esme's mother, the dowager duchess, had taken a liking to Sarah as a girl and had included her in many of the family activities, an action the rest of society found utterly appalling. But Esme's mother had never cared one way or another about what society thought of her.

After Trent took his leave, there was another knock on the door. This time it was the housekeeper with the tasks to complete for tonight's dinner party. Esme rose to stand by Sarah and they pored over the long list of things that must be done. The nurse came in to watch Lukas and Theo as Esme and Sarah went to the kitchen to check on the cook's progress with tonight's dinner.

The rest of the day passed in a flurry of preparations for Esme, interrupted only by daydreams of Mr. McLeod. Her lips still tingled from their kiss, and she caught herself skimming her bottom lip with her fingertips at least a dozen times throughout the afternoon.

Hours later, she stood in her bedchamber as the maid finished buttoning her new gown—a silver crepe trimmed with pearls over a white satin slip. The waist was very high, the skirt flowing in shimmering silver from just below her bosom. A line of lace skimmed the tops of her breasts and trimmed the off-the-shoulder cap sleeves.

Usually Esme wore more modest clothes, preferring high collars and long sleeves, but the dressmaker had assured her that this gown was the height of fashion.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she swallowed hard. Her collarbones were visible, as well as the swell of her

breasts.

She was always terribly ill at ease in crowds of people. Tonight, feeling half-naked as she was, she'd be even more self-conscious than usual.

She cast her gaze to the closed notebook on her dressing table. She'd rather lock herself in her room and start a new story tonight. A story about a man with black hair, icy blue eyes, beautiful lips, and strong hands...

No. She closed her eyes. She needed to do this. She could not disappoint Sarah and Trent.

This was her life. Her duty.

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Chapter 4

Four of the Highland Knights sat in the drawing room of their headquarters in London. George Fraser had just helped Cam dress for the evening while Sir Ewan Ross and their leader, Major Campbell, sat across the way from them. Under his mop of red hair, Ross grinned at Cam, while the major, entirely disinterested, read today's issue of the *Times*.

Scowling, Cam swung his arms back and forth. The damned tailcoat was so tight, the seams strained with every movement.

Ross smirked at him and took a deep swallow from his glass of whisky before commenting, "Feeling a wee bit constricted?"

Cam made a growling noise. "How the hell can I draw my weapon quickly in this thing? And, by God, these pantaloons are crushing my bollocks to a pulp." This was why he, and the rest of the Knights, preferred their kilts. He'd never understand the English and their need for confinement.

He could use a hearty glass of whisky, too, but he'd abstained. He needed his senses somewhat sharp tonight—it was a remote possibility that one of the men who posed a danger to Pinfield might be present at this party.

The major looked over the top of the newspaper he was reading. His sharp eyes gave Cam a thorough once-over, then he shrugged. "Tear the seam if you need to move quickly," he advised.

Fraser, who had become the most fashion conscious of the group, gasped. "Nay! If you'll be needing to choose between the saving the coat and saving Pinfield, for Christ's sake, man, save the coat. D'you ken how much it cost us?"

Cam rolled his eyes. Fraser had taken responsibility for Cam's wardrobe tonight, because he said Cam couldn't be bothered to look respectable in the presence of such esteemed company.

And he was right. Cam didn't give a damn what princes and dukes thought about his appearance. He didn't care if society whispered that he was a slovenly cur.

However, unfortunate as it was, Cam was the son and heir of an earl, and tonight he needed to look the part.

"Anyhow," Fraser said, "your coat and pantaloons are too tight. There's nowhere to put your pistol without it looking obvious."

Cam gave Fraser a "what the hell?" look. "How am I to be protecting Pinfield without a weapon?"

"Bring your *sgian dubh*," Fraser suggested.

Cam crossed his arms, feeling the wool of the coat tighten over the backs of his shoulders in complaint. "I'm to fend off unknown numbers of murderous insurgents with a three-inch blade?" he asked archly. "I ken you have great respect for my prowess in battle, but—"

"Take a pocket pistol," Ross said.

Fraser shook his head. "Even a wee pocket pistol will destroy the lines of the fab—"

Cam narrowed his eyes. "Do you have yours?"

The major's dry voice came from behind the newspaper. "O' course he does. You ken he never goes anywhere without it."

Cam held out his hand. "Hand it over, then. Consider it repayment for making me spend the evening with a group of pompous asses."

"Pompous *English* asses," Ross agreed.

"Aye. The worst kind," Cam said.

With a deep sigh, Fraser pulled the pocket pistol from his coat and handed it over. “Only for tonight, and only because I’ll be taking the night off. I want it back in the morning.”

Cam’s lips twitched. “Canna stand to spend a night away from your beloved?”

Fraser wasn’t amused. “That weapon has given me more comfort than any lass ever has. So treat her well.”

Cam stroked the butt of the tiny pistol with his thumb. It couldn’t have been longer than four or five inches—it fit nicely in the palm of his hand. “Mmm, sleek as a lass’s arse...I can see why you derive such comfort from it. But satisfaction?”

Giving the gun a dubious look, he turned it over in his hands. Because while he could understand how this weapon might provide comfort, it would offer none of the kind of comfort of the woman he’d held in his arms last night.

Esme. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her. All day, she had encroached on his every thought, his every conversation.

Fraser raised a brow. “Satisfaction is purely physical, my friend. And I dinna need to seek it out; it comes to me.”

“Tonight, hopefully, it’ll come to us both,” Ross said.

“Oh?” Cam asked. “Where are you off to while I languish in purgatory with the dullest of the dull?”

Ross flashed a grin. “Oscar Rohan’s opened a new gaming hell in Covent Garden.”

Fraser nodded. “We’re going to go see what they have to offer.”

“Gaming hells usually aren’t populated by lasses,” Cam reminded them.

“This one is,” Ross told him. “Not only are the lasses allowed to play, but all the employees are female—selected by Rohan for their ‘beauty and grace.’”

Cam whistled through his teeth. “Now there’s something I’d like to see.”

Not as much as he’d like to see the mysterious Miss Esme again, though. And he *would* see her again. He’d find her, and he’d learn more about her.

He wanted her, and Cam always found a way to get what he wanted. *Always*.

The major glanced over his newspaper again to give Cam a pointed look. “It’s almost eight o’clock. Time for you to go, McLeod.”

Cam released a sigh. He wouldn’t be going to a gaming hell tonight. Nor would he be returning to Mrs. Trickelbank’s establishment to find Esme—that would have to wait for another day.

Instead, he was going to play nursemaid to a pompous lord in a group of tedious aristocrats.

He tucked the pocket pistol into his coat pocket. It produced the smallest of bulges, though it was large enough to make Fraser groan.

Cam shrugged and clapped Fraser on the shoulder. “There’s naught to be done about it. I’ll not be going without a weapon.”

“Right,” Fraser grumbled.

Cam paused, an unsettling feeling coming over him all of a sudden, then he squeezed Fraser’s shoulder a little harder before releasing him. “Have a good night, then.”

Fraser nodded. “I intend to.”

Cam bade Ross and the major farewell and went upstairs to tuck his *sgian dubh* into his stocking. As he walked out of his bedchamber, he cast a longing look at

his dirk and pistol lying side by side on his bed. He rarely went anywhere without his two weapons, but tonight the *sgian dubh* and the pocket pistol would have to do.

He arrived at Pinfield's house by hackney fifteen minutes later. Another Highland Knight, Sir Andrew Innes, answered Pinfield's door. Innes had been assigned the task of keeping Pinfield safe in the daytime this week. When he saw it was Cam at the door, Innes released a sigh and pushed a relieved hand through his blond hair. "He's been a pain in the arse today," he said in a low voice. "Good luck."

Cam made a disgruntled noise. All he needed was for the usually disagreeable Pinfield to be even more intolerable.

"There you are!" Pinfield screeched, rushing down the corridor toward the entry hall. "You are late!"

Cam stepped aside to allow the stout man passage into the hall. "Sorry," he said mildly, even though he was right on time.

Pinfield turned on Innes. "Is my carriage ready?"

"Aye, sir," Innes said. "It'll be awaiting you in the front."

Pinfield didn't answer—just walked through the open doorway and stomped outside. Innes raised a commiserating brow at Cam before Cam followed the viscount.

Pinfield stopped just outside the carriage door, waiting for someone to open it for him. He couldn't deign to open a damned door. This kind of pomposity so often exhibited by men and women of his class irritated the hell out of Cam.

Before the coachman could climb down, secure the horses, and do the deed, Cam wrenched the door open. He gave Pinfield a mocking bow. "After you, sir."

Pinfield was far too dense to pick up on the sarcasm in Cam's voice. He lumbered into the carriage.

Thank God the ride wasn't long. He only had to endure the cloying scents of Pinfield's flowery perfume and pomade for just a few minutes as they rode to St. James. As they approached the house, the row of gaslights lining its front casting golden beams over the street, Pinfield turned his beady gaze on Cam. "Keep your distance tonight, McLeod. I don't want you hovering."

Despite the heavy wave of annoyance that crashed over him, Cam gave the other man a pleasant smile. "I've checked into everyone in attendance tonight. I dinna think there'll be any problems. I'll be close if you need me."

Pinfield rolled his eyes. "Your little group is far too heavy-handed. This is an intimate gathering. You shouldn't feel the need to attend at all."

"What you consider heavy-handed is us performing our duties how we know best."

Pinfield began to argue, but just that moment the coachman opened his door. Thankfully, the man shut up and slid his bulk out of the carriage.

Cam followed Pinfield into the house, which was crowded with people and bright with the lights of hundreds of candles. They were ushered into the drawing room, where guests were enjoying pre-dinner refreshments.

Cam stood well behind Pinfield, whose mood had turned jolly as he hailed people by name. Cam had separated himself from this world a long time ago, so he didn't recognize very many of the men and women in attendance. But they were glittering and stylish, and just as stiff and dull as he remembered them to be.

It was going to be a long night.

As Cam watched Pinfield exchange a hearty, beaming handshake with a man he didn't know, he clasped his hands behind his back. The weight of the pistol in his pocket was comforting, but not as heavy—nor as comforting—as his regular pistol would be. His eyes scanned the crowd in the opulent dining room. Nothing looked ominous; everyone looked just as he expected. He almost wished he could sense *something* malevolent—the promise of danger would keep him alert instead of miserably bored.

“I know you! It's McLeod, isn't it?”

Cam turned around, brow raised. The voice was familiar, and when his gaze landed on the other man, he did indeed recognize him. Henry Whitworth. Henry had been in Cam's year at Eton, though the two had never been friends—Cam had been a hell-raiser, while Henry was a model student.

A dark-haired woman stood beside him in a shimmering silver dress, and something about her posture made Cam's gaze snap to her.

Esme.

He stared.

Her arm was linked with Whitworth's, and Cam's mind scrambled, unable to wrap his head around the sight. The woman he'd kissed so passionately last night, who he hadn't been able to stop thinking about today. Standing here, amongst these people. Touching Henry Whitworth.

It made no sense. No sense at all.

It didn't to her, either, clearly. She had gone pale, all color completely drained from those cheeks that had been so flushed and pink last night. She seemed to sway a little on her feet.

As if from a great distance, Cam heard Whitworth's voice.

“Have you two met?”

Neither of them spoke.

Whitworth waited a moment, then he cleared his throat awkwardly. “Mr. Camden McLeod,” he said, “allow me to introduce you to my fiancée, Lady Esme Hawkins.”

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Chapter 5

The world around Esme faded into a confused blur. She had panicked; indeed, she had nearly fainted when Mr. McLeod had turned around. Her gaze had clashed with his, and she'd stared. He'd stared back. Both of them were frozen in place, staring, for seconds that seemed to tick on for hours.

Her life was in this man's hands. He could ruin her, disgrace her family. He had all the power. And it was her fault.

She swayed. Black spots swarmed in her vision. Around the spots, she stared up at McLeod. He was still unbelievably handsome, even though he wasn't wearing the kilt she'd found so appealing at Mrs. Trickelbank's. Power, strength, and confidence radiated from him.

He reached out and took hold of her upper arm. "Are you all right, milady?"

She blinked hard. He'd recovered, she realized. But she hadn't. Not yet.

Perhaps she never would.

With great effort, she swung her head to Henry. He gazed at her, his brow furrowed in mild concern. "Do you feel faint, Esme?"

She managed a small nod.

"She needs air," Mr. McLeod said. "Best get her outside."

"Excellent idea," Henry said. "We'll catch up later, eh, old chap?"

"Aye." Mr. McLeod spoke to Henry, but Esme felt those icy-hot eyes on her. Burning into her. She turned to face him. She parted her lips. She needed to say something...but what? She couldn't beg him to pretend

as if he'd never seen her before, not in front of all these witnesses.

She had...nothing. No words. She simply gaped at him like a landed fish. Remotely, she felt Henry tugging on her arm. It was irritating, and she almost yanked her arm away before she remembered where she was and what was happening. He was taking her outside. For air.

McLeod was right. She needed air. It was a very good idea.

Dragging her gaze away from him, she allowed Henry to tug her along. They weaved through people, some of them speaking to them, but she couldn't hear a thing over the roar in her ears.

He could destroy you.

He's here. Here, in your home.

She and Henry emerged onto the terrace that looked over Green Park, and Esme ground her steps to a halt, taking a deep gulp of fresh air.

Henry covered her hands with his own, his forehead creased with concern. "What happened in there, Esme?"

"I..." Her voice dwindled, because how could she answer that? The truth was so awful that it would send poor Henry running screaming from this place, never to look back. Henry, who believed she was far more innocent than she actually was.

Inappropriately, laughter bubbled in her chest.

I was out last night at a whorehouse—not to partake in the...er...festivities, so to speak, but to research my next novel. Oh? You didn't know? I'm a lady novelist who writes sensual romances. Well, when I was there, I was locked in a room with Mr. McLeod for a while. We were immediately attracted to each other, and we kissed. It was the best kiss of my life...

She was a horrible person. The laughter died in her throat, and she looked down, appalled.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Henry squeezed her hand. “It’s quite all right. I’m simply concerned for your welfare.”

He was so *good*. Yet the man had never made her heart beat frantically. He’d never brought sweat to her palms. He had never *aroused* her.

Not like McLeod had after she’d known him for only a few minutes.

But that was of no consequence. *This* was the man she was going to marry. Anyone would tell her that craving the tingling feeling in her core was a waste of time when considering a husband.

She didn’t love Henry, and she was quite certain he didn’t love her. But Esme needed to marry, and when Henry had been presented as an option, it had seemed like the perfect solution to her troubles.

It had all happened this past winter. After many months, the chatter about the Dowager Duchess of Trent’s marriage to a gypsy had died to a dull roar, and the greedy gossipmongers had needed something new about the House of Trent to spew to the hungry masses.

When she was twenty, Esme had been kidnapped by an evil man trying to use her as bait to get to her brother Sam. She’d spent days tied up in an attic before her brothers had finally rescued her.

By last winter this was an old story, but people were hungry for *something*, and it was a prime opportunity for some inventive person to speculate.

And speculate, he did. He published an anonymous piece in one of the gossip rags about how Lady Esme hadn’t been kidnapped, but instead was trysting with an unknown lover, only to be found and yanked from the

man's arms by the frantic Duke of Trent a few days later. The writer proclaimed that since then, the duke and his family had done everything in their power to hide the truth: Their sister was no better than a Covent Garden strumpet.

Esme had been stunned at the viciousness of this attack, but Trent was enraged. He did everything he could to find the author of the piece, to no avail. The best he could do was force the paper to publish a retraction, write his own rebuttal describing the events of the kidnapping, and contract a marriage for her to a decent, respected gentleman who truly believed in her innocence.

That man had been Henry. He'd been acquainted with her since she was a child. He was a family friend. A respected gentleman. And quite eager to marry her, especially once he'd heard the enormous number attached to Esme's dowry.

Trent's efforts had worked, for the most part. Esme knew some still whispered about her, wondered if she'd indeed run off with some man. But most people had dismissed the article as vicious slander.

Now she just stood on the terrace, looking down and watching the glow of the wall sconces flickering over the tiles, while Henry pressed on her hand for several minutes. He was so kind, so patient. Finally, she sucked in another deep breath of the cool night air and looked up at him.

"I'm so very sorry. I just..." Her voice dwindled. She still couldn't explain it.

He shook his head, looking stern. "Don't be." His brows drew together. "Was it Mr. McLeod? Do you know him?"

"Ah..." She scrambled in her brain for a response. "I don't know him, really. I might have seen him once

before.”

That was the truth, after all.

“Then it wasn’t him who upset you?”

“Oh no!”

That was a lie.

“Good,” he said firmly. After a beat, he cocked his head and added, “Are you ready to go back inside?”

She looked at the French doors, dread clawing at her gut.

For all she knew, McLeod had spent the last ten minutes in there regaling everyone with the story of their encounter in the whorehouse. She swallowed hard.

She’d never considered herself a brave woman. But now was the time for bravery. She needed to know if McLeod had destroyed her. If he hadn’t, she’d be strong and get through this night. If he had...well, she had no idea what she’d do.

They returned inside just as dinner was announced. They all filed into the grand dining room. Henry wasn’t paired with her as her dining partner; instead she was partnered with Lord Pinfield, a round man who always made Esme feel vaguely uneasy. Esme knew Pinfield and her brother sat in Parliament together and were of a mind about most of the issues. However, while the men encountered each other frequently, Esme knew they had never been friends. And though Trent had told her nothing of his opinion of Pinfield, she knew why. Pinfield was...slimy.

He held out his arm for her, and she hesitated openly before coming to her senses and taking it. She forced a smile onto her face as she looked up at Pinfield. “I hope you are enjoying your evening, my lord.”

“Oh, I am.” Pinfield chuckled. “Immensely.”

And...she had no more weapons in her arsenal of pleasant conversation. She'd run completely out of things to say to him. She was a poor conversationalist in the best of times, but right now she could feel McLeod's presence behind her. She could feel his eyes burning into the exposed skin of the back of her neck.

Yet no one else appeared to be looking at her askance. Everyone was talking gaily, and the atmosphere was cheerful. Surely that wouldn't be the case if McLeod had told them about Esme's foray into the whorehouse.

With that thought bolstering her, she lowered herself into the seat Pinfield held out for her. He sat to her right and she took a deep breath, watching as Trent, Sarah, and the remaining guests took their seats around them.

The grand dining room was just that—*grand*. Esme and her family only ate in here on special occasions, usually preferring the cozy, sunny comfort of the breakfast room to take their meals. The grand dining room was a long, stately room with an enormous walnut table running its length. Three crystal chandeliers hung over the table, each one containing scores of candles to cast light over the meal.

The table itself was decorated with a dozen candles placed at intervals interrupted by a pair of large crystal-and-silver epergnes brimming with red roses and blocking Esme's view of the people sitting across from her.

The seat to her left was pulled out, and she turned just as McLeod sat down beside her. He was facing away from her, seeing to the comfort of the lady he'd been paired with, and Esme's mouth went dry as she gazed at the soft-looking strands of black hair that curled against the collar of his stylish, tight-fitting tailcoat.

Probably feeling her eyes on him, he turned. A slight, wry smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

“Lady Esme,” he said cordially, with a tilt of his head. But she didn’t miss the slight emphasis on *Lady*, as if he was chastising her for forgetting to include that very important bit of information when she’d told him her name last night.

“Mr. McLeod,” she pushed out, her voice sounding breathless and weak. There didn’t seem to be enough air in this room.

“Will you look at all those lovely roses!” the woman to McLeod’s left squealed, and with a slight nod to Esme, he turned away to answer his companion.

“Hot in here, ain’t it?”

She heard Pinfield’s voice as if from miles away, and she returned her attention to him, murmuring yes, it was very hot indeed, and perhaps she should ask to keep the doors open...

Pinfield kept up a blustering conversation throughout the meal, talking mostly of the food, criticizing it for not containing enough salt, or of the meat being too thoroughly cooked or the vegetables not soft enough. He ladled her turtle soup, then handed her a plate for her fish and carved her venison roast.

Esme usually possessed a rather hearty appetite, but tonight was different. Her stomach was tied up into so many knots that the thought of introducing food into it made her nauseous. So she moved the food around on her plate to make it look at least partially eaten, and took sips of her wine, all the while pretending to commiserate with Pinfield on the low quality of the food—which everyone else around them appeared to be complimenting generously.

Pleasant conversation was punctuated by the clink of silver on porcelain, but even as she tried to pay attention to Pinfield, she thought about the man who was currently making the entire left side of her body burn.

It was odd that McLeod was at this end of the table. The guests were seated in order of precedence, and he was up here toward the duke's end, just below Viscount Pinfield. As a "mister" he wasn't a lord—not yet, at least. To rank just below a viscount, he must be the son of an earl, or the younger son of a marquis, and it wasn't like the country was awash with earls and marquises. In fact, even as seldom as she was out in society, Esme knew all of the marquises and many of the earls both in England and Scotland by their titles, most of them by sight. So why on earth had she never heard of him before? Why had she never *seen* him before?

It was a mystery that whipped around in her head even as she halfheartedly stirred the food on her plate and nodded serenely at Lord Pinfield's declaration that rump of mutton was the best kind of meat in the world.

At last it was time for dessert—cherries, apricots, and cheeses, along with an apricot ice and lemon syllabub.

"May I offer you some cherries, milady?"

Mr. McLeod's voice in her ear made her jump, and she turned to him. When she didn't answer him right away, he cocked his head expectantly.

"No," she breathed. "No, thank you."

"Very well." He set the bowl of cherries on the table in front of his plate. A quick glance beyond him revealed that his dinner partner was talking with the gentleman to her left. Pinfield was speaking to Lady Bellingham, who sat to his right.

Esme and Mr. McLeod were free to converse.

He held up his wineglass and gave her a meaningful look. He was offering to take wine with her. She lifted her wineglass, squeezing the stem tightly. He raised his glass to hers, his eyes glinting with...with what?

What did it *mean* that his eyes glinted like that? She had no idea. Nor did she have any idea how to interpret

the slightly mocking expression upon his face.

He hadn't told anyone. She was sure he hadn't betrayed her secret. If he had, she would have known by now. Then why was he looking at her like that? Did he intend to reveal it later, during the dancing?

Snap!

The stem of her wineglass broke, flinging the entire upper part toward her. The bottom portion toppled onto the table while wine splashed over her bosom and the rest of the glass plopped directly into her lap.

She stared at her hand, now empty.

She'd been clutching the crystal with all her strength. Too hard obviously.

A cool trail of wine trickled between her breasts, and she looked down. The beautiful dress was ruined, with blotches of red staining the bodice and a big deep-red blob right in the middle of her lap—the most unfortunate location possible. As the liquid began to seep over her thighs, she looked back up to find a dining room that had gone dead silent, more than twenty pairs of eyes staring at her, aghast.

Her heart began to hammer in her chest. Her palms grew wet. She sucked in short, choppy breaths.

Mr. McLeod removed the glass from her lap and handed her his napkin before rising and holding out his hand to her.

“Lady Esme was given a deficient wineglass,” he announced to the room at large, his tone polite but with a tinge of disapproval directed at whomever would be so despicable as to give her a wineglass on the verge of breaking.

She allowed him to help her out of the chair. But then Sarah appeared, standing at her other side.

“Thank you so much, Mr. McLeod. Esme, dearest, I’ll take you to get cleaned up. Everyone, please, enjoy your dessert. Lady Esme and I will return shortly.”

Esme was mute with horror as they left the dining room and headed upstairs. “Oh, dear,” Sarah murmured as she ushered her along. “You’re going to have to change your dress. I don’t believe this one is salvageable—at least not tonight.”

Esme managed a nod as they reached the top of the stairs and turned toward her bedchamber.

She was hopeless. She’d embarrassed her family yet again.

Once they were safely inside her room, she stopped short and put her head in her hands. “Oh, Sarah,” she said, her voice laden with misery. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Sarah said with her usual efficient kindness. “You are hardly to blame for a faulty wineglass.”

She shook her head miserably. “Mr. McLeod was just being kind. You and I—along with everyone else in that room—know there was nothing wrong with my glass. I have failed you and Trent again. I knew I shouldn’t—”

“Stop,” Sarah said, her voice quiet but firm. “Of course you should. You haven’t failed us. All you did was spill a glass of wine.”

“I...just...I can’t...” Her voice shook, and Sarah led her to the chair at her desk.

“It’s all right,” Sarah soothed.

Why was she like this? In the grand scheme, Sarah was right. She’d only spilled a glass of wine. But people would giggle about it tomorrow. There might even be another idiotic caricature of her in the gossip rags.

It was yet another failure to add to all her other public failures, and en masse, they threatened to crush her.

There was a knock on the door—Polly come to help her change her dress. Sarah must have summoned her at some point during the long walk from the dining room.

As Esme sat, trying to get her breathing under control, Polly and Sarah chose another dress for her to wear, speaking in low tones in her closet. They emerged with a primrose ball gown edged with white, with a wide white belt just below the breasts.

“What do you think?” Sarah asked.

She gave a nod of approval. “Yes.”

Sarah came over and laid a hand on her shoulder. “I need to go back downstairs. You’ll be all right?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll rejoin us as soon as you’re dressed?”

She gave Sarah a hopeless look. “Are you sure you want me to?”

“Of course.” Sarah’s voice was warm and honest. “Listen, I know how challenging these parties are for you, Esme. But your brother and I are proud of you. We think you’re brave and strong for attending these events that are so difficult for you.”

Esme managed a small smile, amazed that they were so kind to her after everything she’d done. It surprised her that they hadn’t given up on her long ago. Perhaps the time she’d caused a half-dozen partygoers to fall into a heap on a ballroom floor, provoking a riot of glee in the gossip rags the following day. Or when she’d been so buried in her secret writings that she hadn’t noticed her mother had disappeared from her house without a trace days earlier. Or perhaps when she’d inadvertently given Princess Charlotte the cut direct...

Truly, she should not be allowed outside her bedchamber. It would be better for everyone.

“Thank you, Sarah.”

Sarah bent down and kissed her cheek, and in a flurry of skirts she was gone, closing the door softly behind her.

“Here now, milady,” Polly said, “let’s get you out of that wet dress.”

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Chapter 6

Ten minutes later, Esme headed back downstairs, her hands clutched into fists at her sides, reminding herself with each step that she needed to do this. Avoidance was cowardice, and it was her duty to make a reappearance.

But a part of her knew it wasn't only duty that drove her; it was an insatiable curiosity about Mr. McLeod. She needed to glean some information about his real identity...and learn what he intended to do with the information he now knew about her.

She found the ladies congregated in the drawing room, awaiting the gentlemen, who were still in the dining room enjoying their port.

Ladies flocked to her as soon as she appeared, murmuring how sorry they were about her defective wineglass and commiserating with her regarding the ruin of her lovely dress, though several agreed that they liked the one she wore now even better.

She managed tremulous smiles and nods until the ladies were drawn away by someone's suggestion to take turns singing and playing on the pianoforte. She took several deep breaths, watching them as they laughed and argued good-naturedly over sheet music, and Sarah came to stand by her side.

"Are you all right?" her sister-in-law asked in a low voice.

"Yes. I think so."

"Good." Sarah paused. "What Mr. McLeod did in there...I thought it was very kind."

Esme latched on to this opening. "Who is Mr. McLeod? I have never seen him in Town."

Sarah's lips curved. "He is the heir of the Earl of Sutton."

Esme blinked. "Oh."

The Earl of Sutton she did know. He had once been a friend to her father, but Trent despised him for reasons she'd never been able to determine. She'd met the man once, at a ball, and he'd looked at her with cold blue eyes—eyes, now that she thought of it, quite similar to his son's. In fact, the earl looked very much like an older version of Cam. She was surprised, come to think of it, that she hadn't made the connection earlier.

"Mr. McLeod does not interact with society much," Sarah continued in a low voice. "He had a very open falling out with his father years ago. Evidently, it included a decision on his part to avoid the *haute ton* altogether. He did so by joining the army and participating in many campaigns, including Waterloo. But now he's evidently given up his commission and returned to London. We invited him because he's a friend of Lord Pinfield, and Pinfield asked if we would extend the invitation. Your brother thought it would be a good idea to get to know him a little better."

Esme frowned, remembering Betty at the whorehouse telling her and Mr. McLeod that she and "Pinny" wanted food. Had she meant Lord Pinfield? Had Mr. McLeod and Pinfield come to the establishment searching for the same thing?

Maybe when she'd encountered him, Mr. McLeod hadn't yet found his "girl" to entertain him for the evening. Perhaps he'd intended for *Esme* to be that girl.

She'd been so lost in the memory of his kiss, she hadn't even considered these possibilities. Now the thought of them made her twisted stomach feel like a stone had settled somewhere within the knots.

One of the younger ladies began to sing, and all eyes in the room riveted to her. The air in the drawing room was close and thick, and Esme clenched her fists with the now-familiar feeling of her skin prickling and sweat beading at her temples. She gave Sarah's arm a squeeze. "I think I'll go outside for a moment. I'll be back shortly."

"Should I send...?"

But Esme was already opening the double doors to the terrace. She slipped out into the night and closed the doors quietly behind her, moving to stand in the narrow space between two potted trees. She placed her hands on the railing and looked out over Green Park.

The spring evening was very dark, with no moon and just a smattering of stars breaking through London's coal haze. There was no one else on the terrace, perhaps because it had grown somewhat cool. She gazed at the park, only able to make out the shadowy outlines of trees and bushes in the dimness.

Except those moments when she was in his company, she'd hardly thought about Henry tonight. She hadn't even noticed where he'd been seated at the dinner table.

Guilt swept through her, tightening her chest. She bowed her head in shame. McLeod had swamped her thoughts to such an extent that she hadn't been able to allow anyone else in. And it wasn't only fear that he'd reveal her secrets. It was the thrill of having him close to her again.

"Lady Esme."

She went stiff all over. It was him, the silky rumble of his Scottish brogue. He'd come up behind her, his lips very close to her ear. She kept her head bent, gazing down over the railing. "Mr. McLeod," she whispered.

"Where's your wee notebook tonight?" he asked, pressing his body between her and the tree. She squeezed closer to the other tree to give him more room.

She didn't move her eyes from their focus upon the railing. "I...didn't bring it to the party."

"Is it hiding in your bedchamber, then? Upstairs?"

She glanced toward the dark window at the corner of the upper story of the house. He followed her gaze, a smile curling on his lips.

"Is that your bedchamber, Esme? That one?" The brazen man pointed directly at her room. "Is that where I can find your notebook?"

She ground her teeth. "That's none of your business, sir."

"I intend to make it my business."

The wickedness of his words sent a strange jolt of heat through her. She drew in a shaky breath, trying to harden her resolve. Looking at him from the corner of her eye, she said, "You mustn't tell anyone where I was last night."

"Why not?"

She swung her head around to face him, knowing he had to be teasing, as she didn't think he was that dim-witted. "Because it will put the final nail in the coffin of my reputation. And worse, it would hurt my family."

"I see." He gave a low, deprecating laugh. "Well, if I'd wanted to tell anyone, lass, I already would have. I've no interest in those people or their gossip."

He seemed sincere, and relief washed over her.

"But what I do have an interest in, *Lady* Esme, is you."

Her heart pounded so hard he must have been able to hear it. He was a flash of white-hot energy in the cool night air. He was *electric*, and his presence, so close to her, made her skin prickle with sensitivity.

"Why was an innocent lass like you—the sister of the *Duke of Trent*, no less—in that whorehouse last night?"

He moved closer to her, the length and heat of his body just an inch away from hers. "What's in that notebook of yours?"

She gripped the railing so tightly the white of her knuckles seemed to glow in the dim light. "That's none of your concern," she said faintly.

"Oh, but you're wrong about that, milady. I'm concerned." He inched close enough that she could feel the whisper of his breath on her lips. "*Deeply* concerned."

"You shouldn't be."

"Here's what I'd like to know," he murmured, his lips a hairsbreadth from hers. "Why did you kiss me when you're marrying that bore Henry Whitworth?"

Esme squeezed her eyes shut. McLeod reached around her, and the tips of his fingers skimmed down her arm, from the top of her sleeve to her wrist, leaving a trail of heat in their wake that made her shudder.

"I shouldn't have kissed you," she pushed out through her closed throat. "It was very wrong of me. I can't do it again." She gripped the railing even tighter, fighting her body's impulse to press against him, to lose herself in the heat of his embrace.

"You dinna love Henry Whitworth," he whispered, his lips skimming the shell of her ear.

"How...how can you possibly know that?" she managed.

His laughter was a soft puff in her ear. "Oh, I ken," he said confidently. "You dinna want him." After a beat of silence, he added, "End it now, before 'tis too late."

She gasped and straightened, every muscle in her body going rigid in anger. How dare he presume to know whom she loved and what she should do with her life?

"You are very forward, sir."

He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. Shocked by the forceful movement, she stared up into his face. Even in shadows, it was incredibly appealing, the dark slashes of his bone structure and brows and the glint of his light eyes. “Dinna play the innocent English miss with me, Esme. That might work with those idiots in there”—he gestured roughly toward the house—“but not with me. Dinna pretend to be one of them when I ken you’re not. You were at a whorehouse last night. There’s something about that notebook you carry...”

She didn’t move. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d drawn breath, but she didn’t need air. She felt suspended, frozen in time. Terrified and thrilled at once. On the edge of something that would change her life, but whether it would destroy her or bring her happiness, she couldn’t tell.

His fingers dug into the skin of her shoulders. Not to the point of pain, but almost. The sensation buzzed through her—a heady rush of arousal...and to combat it she clenched her thighs.

“Does Whitworth ken you visited a whorehouse?”

That broke the spell. She drew in a deep, shuddering breath, turning her face away from him.

He gave a cynical laugh. “I thought not. He doesna know about your wee notebook, either, does he?”

She bowed her head, shame rushing through her all over again.

“Does he know you at all? Or do I already know you better, after meeting you only once before tonight?”

Oh God. He was right. She squeezed her eyes shut and balled her fists over the railing. She’d known Henry almost her whole life, and this man—this arrogant, handsome, forceful man—already knew her better than her own fiancé.

A sense of doom flooded her, dark and forbidding.

He took her by the chin as he had last night, forcing her to face him. He leaned forward until his lips feathered against hers. “Dinna think you can keep any part of yourself from me, Esme. I’m going to learn all your secrets. I’m going to know every inch of you. Of your mind, of your thoughts, of your body. Then we’ll see what you think about marrying Henry Whitworth.”

And then, for the second time in two nights, his lips crashed onto hers.

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Chapter 7

She tasted so damn good. She'd reeled him in tonight, and he'd gone willingly, eagerly, a fish eyeing the bait, then wanting to devour it.

Her big brown eyes, that flushed, fresh skin, that thick, dark hair. He'd thought she was delectable at Mrs. Trickelbank's. Here...she was like some erotic goddess who made him hard as a rock and his self-control a distant memory.

The Duke of Trent's *sister*. Good God. He never would have guessed it. Not in a million years.

On the other hand, it explained a lot. Like her charming, sweet innocence. He wanted to take it and wrap himself in it. It was warm, comforting, so sweet he wanted to devour it like a confection.

And right now he ached to kiss her until that innocence was part of him—until she was part of him. She tasted like nothing he'd ever experienced, and he'd kissed many women in his time. She was hesitant and shy, but there was heat, a deep, throbbing sensuality in her. He could taste that, too, and it made him crazy.

He slipped his arms around her, around the dip in her waist hidden by the straight line of her dress. His fingers slid over the pink silk, and he flattened his palms on her lower back, feeling the slope of her arse at the bottom of his hands. He ground against her, dizzy for it, for wanting her.

She gave a soft moan that he swallowed up like the greedy bastard he was.

Scenarios ran through his mind. Of how to most quickly rid her of this annoying silk that was between him and his pleasure. Top down, revealing her skin bit by

bit? Unwrapping her like a delectable gift? Or bottom up, ripping it off her so he could see all of her faster?

Bottom up, he decided. He had never been a patient man.

She gave a little gasp. Her hands cupped his cheeks, and she drew back, holding him at arm's length. "Stop, Mr. McLeod. We need to stop."

He looked at her through lust-clouded eyes. No woman in his entire life had ever asked him to stop. He didn't exactly know what to do, so he just gazed at her.

"Someone might come out onto the terrace," she breathed. "The scandal...it would be...it would be unbearable."

Who gave a damn about scandals? He sure as hell didn't.

But then he remembered her position. Her brother was a paragon of society, well loved, and very much in the public eye. Society would have no compunction about throwing her to the wolves.

And surprisingly, he didn't want there to be any kind of carnage. Not with Esme, and not because of him. He didn't want to analyze the protectiveness that surged through him at the thought of those bastards tearing this woman apart.

He pressed on her lower back. That exquisite feeling—the pressure of her body against his—would sustain him. He hoped. "Esme," he said, and his voice was gruff as hell, "I canna wait to unwrap you." And he meant that in every way possible.

Her eyes widened, but then she shook her head slightly. "That's impossible."

"Nothing's impossible. Not if we both want it. I definitely want it, and I ken you do, too." She did want him. He could sense these things—he had a nose for it.

The woman wanted him, maybe even to the same extent he wanted her.

This knowledge only made him hotter for her.

She glanced toward the door that led from the drawing room onto the terrace. “Who *are* you, Mr. McLeod?”

“It doesna matter.” It didn’t. None of it mattered. He could be a gravedigger or the king. He was a man when he was with Esme. He didn’t care about anything else.

“You came with Lord Pinfield,” she observed.

Cam pressed his lips together, annoyed at the intrusion of Pinfield on this moment. “I did.”

“You are good friends?”

He raised a brow. “You’re full of questions, aren’t you now, milady?”

“I am merely curious.”

He loved her voice. It was hesitant, but it was clear and smooth, a bit lower-pitched than most female voices.

His lip curled. “Nay, we are not good friends.”

“Then...why did you come tonight? My sister-in-law said you and he were friends and he asked for an invitation for you.”

“Ah, is that what he told her?” Cam tried not to roll his eyes.

“It wasn’t the truth?” she pressed.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “There is a price for my secrets, Lady Esme.”

She pulled farther back from him. “What...what would that be?”

“Och, I can imagine many things that you could give me in recompense.” He let his eyes make a hot trail over her body. “But...let’s begin with a secret for a secret. I’ll tell you one of mine; you tell me one of yours.”

Her lips pursed, and she turned to face Green Park, clutching the railing. “Then, no. I don’t need to know your secrets that badly.”

“Don’t you now?”

She shook her head, and he studied her. Her secrets—What was in her notebook? Why had she been at the whorehouse?—they were deep ones. So deep, he’d wager the clothes on his back that even her family didn’t know them.

And they were driving him mad. He *would* learn them. He didn’t know how—not yet. But if this beautiful, exotic, stimulating woman thought she could hide from him forever, she was in for a great disappointment.

She slid her eyes to him. “You’re staring at me.”

“There’s nothing else I’m interested in looking at,” he answered honestly.

She took a shaky breath, gripping the railing so hard he could see the whiteness in her knuckles. “I can’t...I shouldn’t even be talking to you. I am engaged to Mr. Whitworth. He is to be my husband.”

A wave of disgust washed through him at that. “Nay.”

It was her turn to cock a brow. “Nay?”

“That’s what I said.”

“You have no say over what I do.” Her words were harsh but her tone was soft, and she watched him carefully, as if curious as to how he might react to her statement.

“Oh, but Lady Esme, I would very much like to have a say over what you do.”

Her lips curved ever so slightly, but then she shook her head. “Alas, it is too late for that...any of it,” she murmured.

“’Tis never too late.”

“You’re wrong about that, Mr. McLeod.” She said it with such certainty it felt like a slap.

He hesitated only a fraction of a second. “Aye, well, I concede, sometimes it is. After the vows have been spoken and a marriage consummated. Only then is it too late.”

She was silent for a moment, and then her lips curved higher. “That, of all the things you’ve said tonight, impresses me the most.”

He tilted his head at her, not comprehending.

“Many of the men in our society believe a consummated marriage doesn’t mean it’s too late to engage in flippant affairs,” she explained. “In fact, many believe that after they’re married, adultery is the next logical step.”

Cam thought of his father, and bitterness rushed through him, so potent he had to look away from Esme and turn to gaze out over the park. “’Tis a good thing I’m not part of society, then,” he said quietly.

“But you are part of society. You are here tonight,” she argued.

“Only because—” He broke off, then slid her a glance. “I nearly forgot, I’m not to be telling you why. But I’ll say my presence here is in no way an effort to reestablish myself into society.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I think I believe you. You possess little regard for society, don’t you?”

“Very little,” he agreed. “But back to your belief that it’s too late. That you are already well and truly tied to Whitworth. I’m going to say again—’tisn’t too late. Engagements can be broken. You must break yours.”

“You cannot be serious.”

He gave her a dry look. “I’m completely serious.”

She simply stared at him.

He gave a patient sigh. “Esme. I’ve made no secret of my interest in you. Now I ken where you live. I ken your true identity. D’you really think I’ll stay away?”

“I...” Her voice dwindled, and he shook his head firmly.

“I wilna stay away,” he said softly. “Because I want you.”

She closed her eyes. “I cannot break my engagement. I would not do that to Henry. I could not hurt him like that.”

Cam held back a snort of disgust. Because he was fairly certain that Henry Whitworth was exactly one of those men who considered adultery the natural next step after marriage. But he couldn’t prove it—he hadn’t seen Whitworth in years and had no idea where and with whom he spent his time.

Obviously Esme thought the man was some kind of a saint.

He gave her a slow smile. “You’ll change your mind.”

She looked away from him, smoothing out the nonexistent wrinkles in the skirt of her dress.

Her lovely, expensive, stylish dress. The dress of an English duke’s sister. A part of him was amazed by the intensity of his attraction for her. Even knowing that she was an English duke’s sister—the *Duke of Trent’s* sister—hadn’t dampened his interest.

“I don’t think so,” she said quietly. “I made my decision, Mr. McLeod, long before I knew you.”

He shrugged.

“And even now I hardly know you at all. I know you’re an earl’s son.” He stiffened, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“And that you’re Scottish. But that’s all. How can I break an engagement based on those simple facts?”

Simple? Hardly. “You ken more,” he said.

“Such as?”

“My name. What I look like. What my lips feel like on yours. How much I want you.”

Even in the dim moonlight, he could see the blush spread over her cheekbones. He wanted to touch her there. Feel the heat rushing over her skin against his fingertips.

She lowered her eyes, her lashes lush on the light olive tone of her skin.

“Mr. McLeod...you...” She shook her head. “The things you make me...”

“Feel?” he said softly.

“Yes.” She raised her gaze until it met his. “Yes. The things you make me feel...The things you say to me...I don’t know how to...what to...” She pressed her lips together.

He couldn’t help himself; he slid a finger down the side of her cheek. “’Tis all right, love. You will understand those feelings one day. Because I wilna be stopping until you do.”

She leaned into his touch, her lashes lowering once again. “A part of me doesn’t want you to stop.”

“Good,” he said huskily.

“But you must.” She drew away from him.

He ground his teeth. He needed her to stop worrying about Henry Whitworth. Cam wished he could just demand pistols at dawn and be done with it. But no. He was going to have to woo himself out of this one.

He was better with pistols than with wooing, unfortunately. His previous women had been more than willing to join him for a romp or two. After that, more often than not, they realized what an ass he was and disappeared. He never much cared—it was what he expected. His father’s blood ran in his veins, after all. Like his father, he couldn’t hold on to women. The one woman his father had managed to hold—Cam’s mother—had died at a young age, of misery and unhappiness more than anything else.

Cam had always made it a personal policy to avoid becoming too close to any woman. He promised himself never to marry so that he’d never destroy a woman like his father had destroyed his mother.

He didn’t want Esme to think he was an ass after one or two meetings with him, though. He wasn’t anywhere near finished with her yet.

In truth, he didn’t know if he’d ever be finished with her.

Cam pressed his lips together, startled at the thought, because he couldn’t know that he would even want her more than once. The only way to know if you wanted to bed a woman a second time was to bed her the first time. With this one, he wasn’t even close to that point yet. Unfortunately.

“Mr. McLeod—”

“Call me Cam.”

She blinked at him, her eyelashes fluttering. Then she said, slowly and softly, as if tasting it on her tongue, “Cam.”

“Mmm,” he said. Because the way his name rolled off her tongue was delicious.

“You must leave me alone, Cam.”

He gave a mirthless snort. “You’re too entrenched in your English society’s expectations, Esme. You ken I hold them in no regard. Be true to yourself and damn the lot of them.”

Her eyes were glassy when she shook her head. “I cannot.”

“Why?” he demanded.

“For my family,” she said quietly. “They have been through so much. I cannot disappoint them.”

He gazed at her. He was uncertain how to respond—he’d never owed his family any loyalty. Except Anna. He’d do anything to ensure her safety and welfare. Was that how Esme felt about Trent and the others?

He searched his memories, considering her family. She and Trent had several more brothers—four or five of them, if he recalled correctly—and their mother still lived. He was acquainted with one of the brothers—Sam Hawkins, the illegitimate eldest one, who worked closely with the Highland Knights.

Did she mean all of them? Probably.

“’Tis honorable to be loyal to one’s family,” he told her. “But sometimes a person needs to make her own choices, not allow them to be dictated by those whose motivations aren’t her happiness.”

“You’re wrong again.” She seemed to strengthen before him, growing a bit taller. “Their motivation *is* my happiness. Which is the main reason I cannot disappoint them.” Again, she glanced back toward the drawing room. “We have been out here far too long.”

Well, if she wanted to remain pure and virginal in her family’s eyes, she was right about that.

He sighed heavily. “Go back inside. I’ll wait a while out here before I reenter. I’ll tell them I went for a walk in the park.”

She smiled at him, and he nearly stepped back at the sheer radiance of it.

“You surprise me,” she said.

“Why?”

“You do the most unexpectedly thoughtful things.” And with a small tilt of her head, she lifted her skirts, turned, and walked toward the double doors.

He stared at her until the doors closed behind her. No one had ever called him thoughtful before.

He turned back to the railing and gazed out into the silence of the night. It was late now, and there was no movement in the park.

He was supposed to be watching Pinfield. The man could have been murdered while Cam was outside with Esme, and he wouldn't have been the wiser.

But that hadn't happened. It wasn't just that there hadn't been a disturbance inside; it was that Cam had a keen sense of danger, often spotting it before it manifested. It made him damn good at what he did for the Highland Knights.

Tonight—this party was innocuous. This was an insipid group of aristocratic ladies and gentlemen. No murderers among them, Cam could tell.

Nevertheless, he ought to go inside and continue his position as nursemaid. One good thing about returning there was that he could keep his eye on Esme for the remainder of the evening. With that thought bolstering him, he walked toward the door and gripped the handle. He could hear music and laughter, and he opened the door and slipped inside.

No one noticed his reentrance, except Sarah, the duchess, whose eyes widened as he entered, but then she gave him a small smile and inclined her head.

The duchess was an intelligent one. Clear as day, he could see the warning in her eyes. She wouldn't stand for anyone trifling with her sister-in-law.

He should be annoyed by that warning, but instead he was oddly pleased. Happy that Esme had someone who cared about her.

Hell. He was doomed.

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Chapter 8

“Wake up, man!”

Cam stretched, opening his eyes into a pained squint. The light in his bedchamber wasn't bright with day but dim with early morning haze. Jesus. He felt like he'd just gone to bed, but it had probably been two hours ago. The Duke of Trent's dinner party hadn't ended until long after midnight. Now, despite not having imbibed an ounce last night, he had the headache from hell.

His fellow Highland Knight Sir Colin Stirling was leaning down and gripping Cam's shoulder, his face ravaged. His expression sent Cam surging up to a sitting position.

“What? What is it?”

“Just come downstairs. Now.” Stirling rose, swiveled, and left the room abruptly.

His heart pounding, Cam quickly buckled on his kilt and strode downstairs, just a minute behind Stirling.

He found the Knights already gathered in the drawing room. Well, five of the Knights—he was the sixth to arrive. Fraser wasn't present yet.

They all looked at Cam as he entered, and his heart sank as he looked upon the five pale, drawn faces. “What's wrong?” he asked.

“It's Fraser,” the major said. Silence swept over the room.

Cam stepped deeper inside, tilting his head in confusion. “What about Fraser?”

“He's dead,” Duncan Mackenzie, the youngest of the knights, said. “Dead.” Mackenzie sank down into the chair nearest to Cam and rested his face in his hands, his wide shoulders heaving.

“Dead?” Cam stared at the man uncomprehendingly. “I dinna understand. What d’you mean?”

“He was murdered last night,” Innes said darkly.

The world spun around Cam. Dizziness swamped him. He looked around the room through blurry eyes, his gaze finally settling on Ross, who hadn’t said a word since Cam had entered the room. “You were with him last night,” he said. “At Oscar Rohan’s gaming hell.”

“Aye.” Ross looked like a damned ghost—the only color in him provided by his shock of curly red hair, which was arranged in a haphazard mess around his head—pressed flat on one side and askew on the other.

“What the hell happened?” Fraser...dead. Cam couldn’t believe it. He looked at the other men, who appeared to be as stunned as he was. Except Mackenzie, who appeared to be ragged with grief. Mackenzie and Fraser were close friends—had been since they’d enlisted in the 92nd Regiment as privates when they were untried youths of sixteen. They’d fought together at Waterloo and in many other battles.

Ross swallowed hard. “We had a long night at Rohan’s. Fraser went off with a lass at about midnight. I think he went upstairs. He said he’d see me in the morning. I stayed, intending to play the tables for another hour or two. I...” He looked away, rubbing his head. “I was a wee bit drunk,” he admitted. “I dinna ken how much time passed, but later, a woman started screaming outside the game room. It was the lass Fraser had gone upstairs with.”

“Bloody hell,” Stirling murmured.

“She was in hysterics. She claimed she and Fraser had been upstairs. That men came in, grabbed him. Cut...” Ross’s voice broke. “Cut his throat.”

“Jesus.” Innes thrust a hand through his blond hair.

“Where is he now?” Cam asked, suddenly wanting to go to Fraser, irrationally wanting to be at his side, even though it was too late.

“I went up to the room where the lass said they’d gone.” Ross seemed not to have heard Cam’s question. He blinked hard, and his eyes shone. “There was blood everywhere. It looked like he fought hard, but couldna overcome them—him. Whoever it was.”

“Where is Fraser now?” Mackenzie repeated Cam’s question. “Is he still there?”

“Aye.”

“We should go,” Cam said, his feet itching to move, to not stand around discussing this but to do something. Find Fraser’s killer and let him know exactly what happened to someone who hurt a person Cam cared about.

“Aye,” the major agreed. “Let’s go.” The men separated—the major and Mackenzie going off to talk briefly to their wives while the rest gathered their weapons.

A few minutes later, the Knights met at the back door. As they headed toward the stable, Stirling asked, “Who would’ve done such a thing?”

“Fraser wasna the kind of man anyone would want to kill,” Mackenzie said. “I dinna think he had any enemies.”

“Aye, but the Highland Knights might,” Innes pointed out. “People are beginning to know us. What we stand for.”

“Are you implying someone wants us dead?” Cam said. “All of us?”

“I dinna ken. After what happened in Manchester last year, our name doesn’t elicit love in some circles.”

“I was at the hell with Fraser,” Ross argued. “No one tried to kill me.”

“Aye, but you were surrounded by people the whole time,” the major said. “Fraser was alone with a woman.”

“Did anyone but us know that you and Fraser went to Rohan’s hell?” Cam asked Ross.

“Nay,” Ross said. “No one.”

“They could have been followed,” Stirling said.

Stepping inside the darkness of the stables, they looked at one another uneasily. The thought of people watching outside their house, following them, made Cam’s stomach twist.

“Our location isna the secret it used to be,” the major said, the lantern he held casting a ghostly light over his rugged features.

It was true. The Highland Knights were still new, but they’d quickly acquired a reputation after their first assignment of quelling an insurgent group in Manchester, and saving an English earl’s daughter—now Mackenzie’s wife—in the process.

The major turned toward his horse and reached for his saddle. “We need to see our brother home to the Highlands. Then we need to find whoever did this.” He gave each of them a grim look. “And kill him.”

—

“My dear Esme.” A broad smile spread across Henry’s face. He really was a handsome man, tall and blond and well built, with straight, white teeth and a deep dimple in his right cheek.

He’d scheduled an early evening visit with her today, and Esme had told herself she would spend their time together cataloging his positive traits—reminding herself of why she’d agreed to marry this man.

“Good evening, Henry.” She hated the shy inflection of her voice. One would think she’d be able to be herself with this man—she’d known him all her life, after all.

She held out her gloved hand to him and he brought it to his mouth and kissed the back, his touch light, almost limp. Every time Mr. McLeod had touched her, his touch had been firm, strong. He'd taken control.

No, she mustn't compare Henry and McLeod. That wasn't at all a good idea.

"You look lovely this evening."

"Thank you." She was wearing a new dress that had been delivered just this afternoon. It was a light-blue silk with the usual high waist and cap sleeves but a bit of flare to the skirt, and darker blue satin ribbon trim.

He took one of the armchairs near the window. Esme poured the tea and was proud that she spilled only a few drops—unlike the last time he'd come and she'd dumped half his cup onto the floor before it reached him. He'd been very kind about that. He'd always been kind to her, which was more than she could say about the majority of the members of the *ton*.

You're rationalizing, a voice inside her said. McLeod is right—you don't love this man.

She handed him his tea and sat in the chair across from him, the low table between them. Henry was handsome—but in a different way from McLeod. He was light where McLeod was dark, soft where McLeod was sharp.

No! She *must* stop comparing them. Immediately.

They sipped in silence, until Esme fidgeted, her mind scrambling fruitlessly to conjure some relevant topic of discussion.

"So," Henry finally said, "I was surprised to see Mr. McLeod here last night. I wasn't aware your families were close."

Oh dear. This would not have been Esme's choice for conversation. She would have to tread carefully to not

give away her confused feelings.

“I believe my brother had expressed some interest in becoming reacquainted with Mr. McLeod. Evidently, he’s been away with the army for several years.” Good, that sounded just as it should have, she thought.

“Yes, he has.”

“How do you know him?” The words popped out of her, and she clenched her hands before releasing them. The question was merely a politeness. Henry wouldn’t think it too forward, surely.

“We went to Eton together. For almost ten years.”

“You are the same age?” she asked. For some reason, McLeod seemed older than twenty-nine.

“Almost exactly, as I recall. Our birthdays are a month apart.”

“So you knew him well?”

“Yes. But we weren’t the best of friends. McLeod was...” His lips thinned as he considered how to say whatever it was he wanted to say. “Well, he was rather a hell-raiser.”

She tried to swallow down a snort of laughter, but failed. What emerged was an embarrassing grunting noise. Heat flaming her face, she attempted to continue. “For some reason, that doesn’t surprise me.”

Henry raised a brow. “It doesn’t? Why not?”

“Oh...ah...well, he gives off the air of hell-raisery, I suppose.” Goodness, hell-raisery? She should just stop talking altogether.

“I suppose he does,” Henry said. “He was always getting into trouble in school—and he was always caught, which seemed to make little difference in his desire to flout the rules. He was also stubbornly...*Scottish*.”

She raised her brows. “He *is* Scottish, isn’t he?” It felt like a foolish question. But what else would Henry expect from a Scot?

Henry rolled his eyes. “He insists on being Scottish—adopting the brogue, speaking of his homeland like it’s heaven on earth. He never stopped complaining that he couldn’t wear a kilt at Eton.”

“I hear Scots do like their kilts,” she murmured.

“But he was raised in London. He rarely visited Scotland as a child, and I think his mother was English. He’s almost as English as you and me.”

“But his father is a Scottish earl, isn’t he? That makes him a Scot, surely.”

“I suppose, technically, but it’s the principle. He couldn’t deign to be like the rest of us boys. He had to make himself different. Above us.”

“I doubt that’s what he meant to do.”

“Perhaps not. But it felt as if he looked down upon us for being English.”

Surely not. He had never even noticed her Englishness, as far as she knew. There had to be something more to it than that.

“After Eton, he bought a commission in the army, and I didn’t see him or hear from him again until last night. I didn’t know if he’d survived the war.” He shrugged. “I suppose it’s not too much of a surprise that he did. He always did have a rather strong instinct for survival.”

“Are you not pleased he lived?”

“Oh, yes, of course I am,” Henry said, a beaming smile spreading over his features as if on cue.

It wasn’t as if he was lying, exactly. More like he simply didn’t care one way or the other whether McLeod had lived or died.

“Though I’m not sure why he’s come back,” Henry added.

“Because the war’s over, I imagine,” Esme murmured.

Henry shook his head. “Why not Scotland, then? By all accounts he loves the place. Why come here, to London, where his father resides?”

That was a good question indeed. She considered Lord Pinfield and his connection to Mr. McLeod. Then she thought of the Earl of Sutton. Sarah had said McLeod had had a falling out with his father—but what did that mean, exactly?

There was so much about Camden McLeod she wanted to know...to understand. He was a mystery to her. A *fascinating* mystery.

Henry was giving her an odd look. She cleared her throat then took a swallow of tea in an—undoubtedly vain—attempt to cover her thoughts.

How was it possible that she felt a stronger connection to a man she hardly knew, who wasn’t even here, than to the man sitting across from her whom she’d known her whole life?

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Chapter 9

Cam paced his bedchamber. He'd been avoiding the rest of the Knights all evening. They didn't need to see him like this. Usually in such a situation, he'd imbibe until the darkness turned gray, then find himself a woman who could bed the rest of it out of him.

He knew what he wanted right now, and it was neither of those things. He wanted Esme.

He lay back on his bed, his fingers threaded behind his head, and closed his eyes, going over the information they'd learned today. There wasn't much. The woman who'd been with Fraser, one of Rohan's employees, was still hysterical and upset. Rohan had given her a tonic, which hadn't helped; instead it made her memories vague and her speech slurred.

From what they could gather, she and Fraser had been kissing on the bed when a man had burst inside. The intruder wore a hooded black cloak and had blue eyes. Other than that, he evidently had no distinguishing characteristics. She'd turned away and buried her head under the pillow, not to emerge until long after the man had killed Fraser and left.

They'd questioned everyone they could find from the gaming hell, staff as well as patrons, but the place had been crowded, and a quiet man in a black cloak hardly garnered extra attention.

Cam gripped the back of his skull. Why would someone take the life of a good man like George Fraser? Cam had liked—no, *loved*—Fraser. He was loyal to the bone, strong, with a ready smile and a joke when he felt the men needed it. They'd never stop feeling his loss. He'd leave a hole in the Knights that would never be filled.

Someone knocked on his door. "Come in."

The door opened, revealing Stirling, who came in as if each of his feet weighed a hundred stone.

“Checking on you,” Stirling said.

“I’m fine,” Cam said. “But how’s Mackenzie?”

“Not well.”

“Aye.” Last Cam saw Mackenzie, he’d been starting to write a letter to Fraser’s family, a task that none of them would consider easy.

“He’ll be all right,” Stirling said. “Lady Grace is with him.”

Lady Grace was Mackenzie’s wife. She and the major’s wife, Lady Claire, were sisters, and the two of them had been doing their best to help the men with their grief since they’d returned from Rohan’s house earlier this evening. Of course, both of them had been fond of Fraser, so they struggled with their own grief as well.

“He’s lucky to have her,” Cam said.

“Aye, that’s true.” Stirling lowered himself onto the edge of the bed. “But you dinna look so well yourself. And you haven’t any Grace for comfort.”

The image of Esme pushed itself into his mind, and he tried to thrust it aside.

“Aye, well”—he shrugged—“neither do you.”

“True enough,” Stirling agreed.

Cam sighed. “I need to find who did this.”

Stirling nodded.

“I feel like it’s my fault.”

“Nay. It wasna your fault. You were with Pinfield.”

“Aye, but I had Fraser’s pistol.” Cam swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. If he hadn’t insisted upon taking Fraser’s pocket pistol, would he have been able to

protect himself? Would he be alive tonight, teasing Cam about his lack of fashion sense?

“You couldn’t’ve known there’d be murderers lying in wait for him.” Stirling rose stiffly. When he turned back to Cam, his eyes were narrow and dark. “There’s too much evil in this world, McLeod. Too much death.”

“Aye,” Cam agreed. Stirling didn’t take evil and death well. To this day, nearly a year after he and the other Knights had left the army, he suffered from horrible visions and nightmares. Since Waterloo, Stirling had been fragile, and the rest of the Knights knew it. There was something volatile in him close to the surface, which if ignited would certainly explode. None of them wanted that to happen.

“We’re going to find whoever did this,” Stirling said.

“How?” Cam asked, sitting up. “The damn trail is already cold.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it,” Stirling said. “We have to. Otherwise, none of us will be able to live with ourselves.”

Cam was still for a minute, then he nodded, remembering Anna. He hadn’t been able to move on, to live again, until he’d taken care of the men who’d hurt her. It would be the same with Fraser.

Anna! Oh, damnation.

He raked a hand through his hair and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Bloody hell. I was supposed to go to my sister’s house tonight. I’m late.” He glanced at the clock over the mantel and winced. “By over an hour.”

“Will you still go?”

“Aye.” He wouldn’t miss his weekly dinner with his sister, even though the food would surely be cold by now, and she’d probably given up on him. If it were anyone else, he wouldn’t bother. But this was Anna.

Anna lived in Holborn, in a house of her own that Cam had purchased for her seven years ago. After the falling out with their father, he'd suggested she return to Scotland, but she'd been younger than Cam had been when she'd last seen her homeland, and she said she'd feel more comfortable, less conspicuous, in London.

It was luck that the house assigned to the Highland Knights was only a ten-minute ride from her house. Cam exited into the mews, went to the stable, and quickly saddled his horse. The traffic wasn't too bad this time of night, and he kept glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone was following him. He wasn't keen on leading murderers to his sister's home.

For good measure, he made a few extraneous turns before arriving at his sister's and securing his horse.

"Cam!" Anna said, opening the door to greet him. "I was worried."

"Aye, well, it wasna a good day."

She *tsked*, a sound that reminded him of his mother, who'd died when he was fourteen years old. She'd loved them with all her heart. And Cam couldn't help but think that if she had lived, Anna could have somehow avoided the terrible things that had happened to her.

"Come. Martha kept dinner warm for you."

That brought a smile to his face. Anna had known he'd come, despite his tardiness.

"Thanks," he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "I'm famished." It was true, he realized. He hadn't eaten a thing today.

Anna led him into the dining room, where her servant, Martha, greeted him, then laid a veal pie on the table. He sat and dug into the savory dish. Anna sat across the table from him. When Martha left, he raised a brow at his sister. "You're not eating?"

“I already ate. You’re quite late, you ken.”

“Aye. Sorry.”

“You’re forgiven.” She smiled at him, but as always, it was a sad smile. Full of all the suffering she’d been through. He’d do anything to see a return of the bright, happy smiles she’d given him when she was a girl.

Those smiles had disappeared when their older brother, Alastair, who’d been born with a weak heart, had died. Alastair had been the heir to the Earl of Sutton, and their father had never let him forget it. From the moment their brother could walk and talk, the earl had put endless strain on him, punishing him brutally whenever his actions fell short, which, according to their father, was constantly. Finally, when Alastair was twenty-four years old, his heart couldn’t take any more. He’d fallen asleep at his desk one afternoon and never awakened.

At the age of twenty-two, Cam had come home to bury his brother. He had never returned to his father’s house after that.

“Tell me what happened today,” Anna said quietly. “It was nothing good—I can see it in your eyes.”

Cam shook his head stubbornly. “I dinna wish to talk about it.”

Anna nodded. She knew full well by now that Cam disliked talking of violence and horror with her. That didn’t mean she’d stopped trying to question him about that part of his life. “Aye, well, if today was so awful, tell me about your yesterday, then.”

He remembered the dinner party at the Duke of Trent’s house, and his first smile of the day curled his lips when he thought about Esme, about her flushed cheeks and dark hair and bonny, curvaceous body.

“Ah...” Anna leaned forward. “Something good happened. Tell me about it.”

Cam snorted. “You’re a gossiping harpy.”

She raised a brow. “I don’t have anyone to gossip with but you. Now, tell me.”

He shrugged. “Just a lass I met.”

Her brow notched up higher on her forehead. “Aye? Well, I’m sure you’ve met many lasses. But this is the first one you’ve told me about. What’s her name? Is she English?”

“Aye, she’s English. Her name...” He hesitated. Saying it out loud to Anna felt as good as publicly declaring his interest in the woman.

And, he realized, that was exactly what he wanted to do.

“...is Lady Esme Hawkins. She’s the sister of the Duke of Trent.”

“*Och*, Cam.”

“What?”

Her smile was playful, but there was worry in her eyes. “I’ve heard of the Duke of Trent.”

“Aye, well, everyone has.”

“You like to aim high, don’t you? I’d imagine the Duke of Trent’s sister is about as accessible as the queen.”

He laughed. “She’s a bit more accessible than the queen, I think.”

“Still...”

“I ken. And she’s engaged—” Oh hell. He flinched. Why had he said that?

“She’s engaged!” Anna’s voice was a near shout. “Cam —”

He raised his hand to stop her. “The engagement won’t last. He’s a bore.”

“Don’t be a child,” Anna snapped.

He scowled at her.

“Just because you don’t think a marriage should happen doesn’t mean that it won’t.”

“She doesn’t love him.”

Anna threw her arms up. “How can you possibly know that?”

Cam took a big bite of pie, chewed, swallowed, and downed a deep gulp of wine from the glass Martha had given him. “I just do.”

“How?”

“A man can see these things.”

Her gaze went serious. “What game are you playing, Cam? This sounds like something Da would do, and—”

Cam stiffened. “Da would rip the lass from her loving family and take her how and when he pleased.” That was what he’d done with their mother. He’d manipulated her, seduced her, forced her into a loveless marriage, then proceeded to make her life a living hell. And while he’d slowly killed their mother, he’d taken countless mistresses and treated them no better. “Do you really think I’d do that to a woman, Anna? Any woman?”

He clenched and unclenched his fists. Damn it. Because ultimately Anna was right—what he was doing with Esme *did* sound like something their father would do.

But he didn’t want to stop. He *couldn’t* stop. He didn’t intend to cause Esme any harm, truly. He’d try like hell not to. But he wanted her. He *wanted* her, and he couldn’t let her marry Henry Whitworth. He *couldn’t*.

That was how this would end, wouldn’t it? He’d hurt her. How could there be any other outcome?

Damn. Damn damn *damn*. He truly was a bastard.

“Nay, you would never hurt a woman deliberately,” Anna soothed, clearly seeing the emotions that must be twisting his face. “I know that.” She leaned forward, her expression earnest. “But what are your intentions? What do you intend to gain from this course of action?”

“I want to save her from an unhappy marriage.” He blew out a breath. That was the absolute truth. An intriguing, complicated woman like Esme would wither away shackled to a lifeless lump like Henry Whitworth.

Anna released a frustrated breath.

“Getting that man away from her would be a favor,” he said.

“Why? Is he a bad man?”

Cam snorted. “Bad for Esme, aye.”

She still didn’t seem satisfied. Cam couldn’t think about this anymore. Endlessly comparing himself to his father was going to drive him mad. He needed to stop reminding himself of the McLeod blood running through his veins that had made him into the ass he was. He *knew* all that already, damn it.

“I think you’d like Esme,” he said, forcibly lightening his voice. “I hope you can meet her someday.”

“I don’t meet dukes’ sisters often,” she said with a smirk.

“You should, though.” As the daughter of an earl, she should be at all of the social events of the Season. But no. She had been disowned by her father and was now shunned by every member of the society who had once venerated her for her position alone.

“Aye, well, I don’t miss that life.”

“Don’t you?”

“Nay,” she said, and he believed her.

“I dinna miss it either. I’m being forced back into it because of bloody Pinfield, and I hate it.” As far as he was concerned, the whole hypocritical lot of them could go to hell. They had all known Anna wasn’t at fault for what had been done to her, yet they now treated her as if she were less than nothing. Even the girls who had proclaimed themselves her lifelong friends had turned their backs on her. He despised them all for what they’d done to his sister.

Anna’s mouth turned down in an expression of distaste. “How is dear Pinny?”

“Annoying as hell.”

“Does he ever mention Da?”

“Nay. Not once.” Last Cam and Anna knew, their father and Lord Pinfield had been close friends. Now, Cam had no idea. “He’s never acknowledged my identity either. He treats all of us Knights like lowly servants.” He didn’t care about Pinfield ignoring the fact that Cam was his father’s heir, but it chafed him that the man disrespected the Knights.

“Does he know who you are?”

Cam snorted. “Oh, aye, he does. He’s idiotic but he’s not an idiot.”

“He’s terrible. I always despised him.”

Cam raised his brows. That was a strong statement, coming from his sister. “Why?”

She shrugged and looked away. “When I was a lass, he used to pinch my bottom whenever I walked by.”

“Jesus!” Cam nearly shouted. *What the hell?* “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She sighed. “You were gone, Cam, those times he was at the house. You were off at school.”

“Alastair, then. Why didn’t you tell him?”

“He was ill. I couldn’t put even more strain on him.”

Cam bowed his head, looking at his half-eaten pie. His brother’s untimely death. Fraser’s untimely death. He closed his eyes. It was so unfair that so many of the best people were taken long before the worst. “You’re right. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“You were there for me when I needed it most, brother,” Anna said seriously. “And that’s all that matters.”

Their conversation shifted to lighter topics, but Cam was only half present. His mind was jumbled with thoughts of Fraser and of Esme...and that damn notebook of hers. And his conversation with Anna about Esme was gnawing at his insides with the sharp teeth of a rodent.

He was destined to hurt Esme. The thought of seeing pain in those bonny amber-flecked brown eyes lashed at his gut. God, he didn’t want to hurt her.

He should just stay away.

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Chapter 10

Cam stayed away, and he did a good job of it, too.

For about four hours.

He paced his room, thrusting his hand impatiently through his hair, unable to sleep. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was after one o'clock in the morning.

He knew it was a bad idea. He knew it was folly. But before he could stop himself, he'd pulled his boots on and was trudging through the streets of London.

St. James wasn't far, and before long, he'd reached the curving drive of the Duke of Trent's house.

The front door was bolted shut, but the back door lock was simple to pick, and in a few moments, he found himself in the dim larder. He walked carefully, listening for any sound, but all was quiet. He slowly went through the kitchen and into the corridor beyond, which was so dark he had to feel his way along the wall. He passed several doors before finally finding the entry hall and the stairs leading up from it. He mounted them, his hand gliding along the curved, polished rail.

At the top, Cam turned to the right. Four closed doors greeted him along the side of the house that bordered Green Park. Esme's bedchamber would be the one at the far end, the last door.

He crept down the corridor, careful not to make any noise that would awaken the other members of the household. He stopped at Esme's door, turned the handle, and pushed it open before stepping quietly into her room. The moon was just rising and glowing through the sheer curtain on the window. From the doorway, Cam could see the spill of dark hair across the pillow where she slept.

Esme was in a deep sleep and unmoving on her bed. Cam stood still for a long moment, watching her. Moonlight splashed over her cheek, making her skin look soft and inviting.

Jesus. What was he doing here? He shouldn't wake her. He'd just wanted to see her. He drank in the sweet smoothness of her complexion, which made his lips tingle with the urge to kiss her; the thick waves of her hair that he wanted so badly to push his fingers into; the curves of her body beneath the bedcover that he longed to feel pressed against his skin.

But there was more. *The notebook*. It was here somewhere. He'd find it and discover the secrets it contained. Then his curiosity would be satisfied and he could go home and get some much-needed sleep. He had Pinfield duty tomorrow.

He stepped into the room and closed the door gently behind him. The room was carpeted, luckily for him, and it muffled the sounds of his boot heels as he walked across it toward the bed.

She lay on her side with her mass of dark hair fanned out behind her. Her lashes were dark arches against her cheeks, and her lush lips were slightly parted, showing a glimpse of white teeth.

She breathed in deep and let out a soft sigh.

He wanted to hold her. But then what? How would he explain his presence? He wasn't in the habit of giving people explanations for his actions. But if she woke, that was exactly what he'd be doing—explaining himself and why he was here.

And why *was* he here?

Because his friend was dead. Because there was too much evil in this world, and right now only Esme could remind him that good still existed. Because he wanted to touch her and hold her and soak up all the healing

sweetness that emanated from her like a soft glow of light.

He'd sound like a damn idiot if he told her all that.

He watched Esme for a long moment, then turned and scanned the room. There was a fireplace with two chairs arranged near it. A basket lay beside one of the chairs—probably for her embroidery or sewing, or whatever fashionable activity dukes' daughters engaged in when they were sitting by fires.

Two windows graced the far wall. Between them sat a desk covered in a chaos of writing implements, stationery, and books. Cam's lips spread into a grin as he approached the desk. This was one area that was pure Esme—not tidied and arranged and dusted by maids, but controlled entirely by her. Esme wasn't neat as a pin—she was actually rather untidy. He liked that immensely.

The chair was already pulled back from the desk, and he sat in it. He stared at the desk, swiping his fingertips over some of the random pages of parchment strewn on it. Her notebook wasn't here.

He tugged on the single desk drawer, but it didn't budge. He leaned back to look down at it and found a tiny key wedged into the keyhole. He turned it and pulled the drawer open.

There was her notebook, sitting atop another pile of papers. He drew it out and set it atop the desk, then slowly opened it to the first page. He frowned when he saw what was written there: *The Dangerous Duke Takes a Bride by Jean Hayden*.

What? What dangerous duke? And who the hell was Jean Hayden?

He turned the page.

The Duke of Rockwell lived alone. He was a solitary man, with no family, no wife, and no

friends to speak of. He did have a dog, a small creature, who, even though it was fed and cared for properly, looked upon the duke with a wary sort of fear in its eyes.

That expression of fear wasn't reserved for the dog. Just about everyone who associated with the duke gazed upon him with similar caution. He was imposing—extremely tall and muscular, with dark hair and eyes and a narrow face that gave him a harsh, hawkish look. He saw the world through cynical eyes, because throughout his life, he had not been given much reason to be optimistic—

Cam flipped through the pages. They were covered—back and front—with writing. It was a story, he realized—the story of the Duke of Rockwell and one Miss Conners.

And as it progressed, the story became...erotic.

Heat crawled up the back of Cam's neck as he read a passage about two-thirds of the way through.

"I shouldn't be here," she murmured. "Please. Let me go."

His eyes were narrow slits, dark and forbidding. "Then why are you here, Miss Conners?"

"I..." She couldn't explain it—not out loud. How to explain this mad compulsion she had to see him? To touch him? To cover him—every inch of him—with her lips? With her tongue? She shuddered.

She wanted him so badly, but it wasn't right. None of this was right. She should not be alone with this man in this quiet, dark house.

"You...? You what?" Rockwell asked.

“I just...” She closed her eyes tight, then opened them, looking straight at him. She wasn’t coy. She wasn’t a tease. She’d always been forthright, and she wasn’t going to start to be someone else, not now, not with the Duke of Rochester pressing her body against the wall. “I just...wanted to see you again.”

A wicked smile curved his lips. “Did you?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You wanted more than just to see me, yes?”

Her eyes flickered away and then back to him. She nodded.

He reached up and curved his palm on her breast over her dress. She gasped.

“This?” he asked, his voice smooth as brandy.

“Yes,” she breathed.

His lips pressed against hers.

Cam turned to look at the bed, where Esme still slept, her deep breaths audible from across the room.

Good God.

He’d known she was a sensual creature, but this...This was unexpected. She behaved so innocently—and he knew she *was* innocent, inexperienced when it came to physical relations with men. But not so innocent, perhaps, in the deep inner workings of her mind and heart.

Henry Whitworth didn’t know about these writings. No one knew about them. Which was why she kept this notebook hidden, why she used the false name of Jean Hayden. And why she’d fallen into a panic when Cam had snatched it away from her at the whorehouse.

Lady Esme Hawkins was a clandestine writer of novels.

Cam sat motionless for a long moment, then he closed the notebook and slipped it back into the desk drawer before locking it. He rose and walked over to the bed. Carefully, he sat on its edge. Tenderness sifted through him as he watched Esme, so peacefully resting. Even in sleep, she was such a bonny lass.

A lock of hair had fallen over her mouth, and he reached up and gently tucked it away, his fingers sliding down the silky strand. Then, he couldn't help it—he trailed his fingertips across her cheek, her skin soft and pliant and warm under his touch.

Her eyelashes fluttered, and he pulled back, but not in time. Her eyes opened, and he watched as they focused to see him. With a small cry, she lurched up to a seated position.

He wrapped his arm around her and clamped his hand over her mouth. If the duke caught him here it would either be wedding bells or pistols at dawn. “Shh,” he murmured. “It’s just me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She jerked out of his hold, but he could tell she no longer intended to scream bloody murder, so he let her go.

“Why are you here?” she gasped, her eyes still wide with panic. “What are you doing here, Mr. McLeod?”

He snorted. “I think we’re in an intimate enough position that you ought to be calling me by my given name.”

“Why are you in my room, Mr. McLeod?” she asked, apparently not hearing him, as she scuttled farther away from him. Clutching the bedcover to her chest, she slid off the bed on the opposite side and stood facing him, looking not only appalled, but angry to boot.

He blew out a breath. “My given name is Camden. Call me Cam.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“I...” He looked down, drawing circles on the sheet with his fingertips. “I came because...” Well, here was the moment. The moment he hadn’t wanted to come but had anyhow. As much as the urge was there, he wasn’t going to invent some farfetched story. He would tell her the damn truth, as much as it made him want to cringe to do so. “I came because I couldna stop thinking about you.”

She stood still, studying him. Then she shook her head in exasperation. “You could have come at a more acceptable hour! I was fast asleep!”

“Aye, that’s true. But...” He shook his head, then admitted, “Yesterday wasna a good day. And I wanted to see you to...” He looked down at the sheets again. “...to remind myself that there are bonny things in life, too.”

Esme’s muscles relaxed just a tiny bit at his admission. His voice was raw as he said it, and he didn’t look at her. He was sharing a vulnerable moment with her...even though she was the one who should be feeling vulnerable right now.

Because...good Lord, he was in her room! In her private bedchamber—a room that no one ever entered besides her and her maid. At—she took a quick glance at the clock—two o’clock in the morning.

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

He looked at her, and his eyes were dark in the dimness of the room, a deep blue-black, like the ocean in a storm.

“I missed you today. I wanted to see you.”

“You might have gone about it the usual way,” she said dryly. “Like...perhaps sending a letter? Or coming to call in the afternoon?”

He gave a mirthless laugh. “You know enough of me by now, Esme, to understand that I dinna crave to be ‘usual,’ at least not to conform to society’s ways of behaving.”

“Yes, well...Do you understand that you’ve snuck into the Duke of Trent’s house in the middle of the night?”

“Aye, of course.”

She shook her head. It took a certain kind of recklessness to do such a thing. “What do you want from me, then?”

He smirked. “Everything.”

She took a step backward, still clutching the counterpane to her chest. Then she braced herself to scream if he came at her.

He didn’t. He remained seated calmly on the other side of the bed, his posture chasing away most of her fear. Most, but not all. “But for now...just to see you,” he said. “That’ll be enough.”

“All right.” She paused, then shrugged. “You’ve seen me. Perhaps you should go.”

“Probably,” he agreed. Then he narrowed his eyes at her, no doubt seeing the panic that still bubbled within her. “I’d never hurt you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know that. I hardly know you.”

“You ken that much about me.”

“Do I?” she whispered.

“Aye, you do.”

She waited, watching him warily.

“I dinna wish to go,” he said quietly. “Not yet.”

“You should, though. It’s dangerous for you to be here.”

He looked down at his lap, then back up at her, very deliberately shaking his head. “I want to talk to you. I know I disturbed your sleep, but...” He hesitated, and something dark passed over his expression, something raw. Grief and sadness and loneliness she recognized only because she’d experienced those things herself. “Will you...will you talk to me for a while?”

Her gaze flickered to her desk, where her notebook lay in the drawer. It was closed, thank God. He hadn’t invaded her—

“I saw your notebook.” Slowly he rose from the bed and faced her from across it.

Esme’s gaze shot back to him. Panic froze her for a few seconds, and then every muscle in her body tightened, poised to flee. To grab her notebook and run until she was safe.

Nothing about Camden McLeod was safe. Not to her mind, or her body, or her reputation...perhaps not even to her sanity.

“I read part of it,” he continued.

Esme didn’t move. Oh God. He’d read her notebook. He *knew*.

Panic bubbled more furiously inside her, and then...it exploded. Into raw, pure anger. How dare he invade her privacy?

And...oh Lord, he must be completely scandalized. Her face burned at the thought of some of the things he must have read.

He tilted his head at her. “Did you think I’d judge you, Esme? Is that why you didn’t let me see it?”

“It is no business of yours,” she gritted out.

“Everything about you is my business,” he said softly, and an unwelcome frisson of awareness shot up her spine.

Her lips tightened and she spoke through gritted teeth. “No. I didn’t give you leave to make everything about me your business.”

“You’ve no control over what I make my business.” He gave a wry smile. “Neither, it seems, do I.”

She looked down at her hands. Even in the dim light, she could see her knuckles had turned white, she was clutching the counterpane so tightly.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked him, her voice throbbing with intensity. “Why are you invading my life? My room? My story?” Her mind? Her fantasies? She felt desperate, out of control when it came to this man. She looked up at him. “*Why?*”

“’Tis a fair question,” he said softly. “I dinna wish to make you feel invaded...Unless it’s what you want.”

She jolted at that.

Because he was right. The way she was speaking to him was not how she should be speaking to a near stranger who’d just invaded her bedchamber. She should be screaming, crying out for help, for Trent to come in and get this horrible, frightening man away from her.

But she didn’t shout out for her brother. Because she *wanted* Camden McLeod to be here. She wanted to be talking to him. She wanted to understand him.

She wanted all of that, and more.

She released the counterpane and returned it to the bed, where it belonged. Then she walked around the bed clad in only her nightgown, fully aware that no one except her maid had ever seen her in so few clothes, and stood before him, facing him head-on.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she said softly.

For the first time, he looked as confused and helpless as she felt. “I couldna help it,” he murmured. “I *needed* to see what you’d written in there.”

“Tell me what you think of me now.” She looked him in the eye. “Now that you know what I write. The kinds of things I write about.”

His lips curled. “I think I want you even more.”

“Why? Because of the content of my story? Do you think that just because you know some of the things I have written that I’ll give my favors freely?”

He blinked in surprise. “Nay.”

She stared at him in disbelief.

“Not because of *what* you write, Esme,” he said softly. “Because you *do* write.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it canna be easy for a lass in your position. You need to be determined, ambitious, cautious... intelligent.”

Those were all traits Cam himself seemed to possess—well, except for caution, clearly. “What would you think of me if I told you that three of my books have been published? That this is my fourth, and it’s due to my editor in three months’ time.”

Surely he would be horrified to hear such a thing. Not only had she engaged in writing such scandalous content, but she had participated in the trade of publishing her books and selling them to the public. Most gentlemen would think she’d debased herself beneath the lowest of the low.

“I’d say that’s an impressive feat for any writer.”

She blinked at that, thrown off balance for a moment. Then she gathered her composure and held it tightly against her. “What would you say if I told you that I’ve lied to my family, friends, and acquaintances about my stories? That no one knows about them except my brother Sam?”

“I’d say well done. And well done to Sam, who has evidently earned your confidence.”

She laughed despite herself, her stiffness melting away like butter in sunlight. “You, sir, are truly unconventional.”

He grinned. “So, it seems, are you.”

She nodded. She’d always felt like an outsider in her family. She even looked different from the rest of the duke’s offspring—and it had only been recently that she’d learned why. She wasn’t the true daughter of the last Duke of Trent—she was the product of the duchess’s long-standing affair with Steven Lowell, a gypsy man from a traveling circus, of all crazy things.

What would Camden McLeod say if she told him that? She smiled, deep inside. Unlike everyone else in the *ton*, he’d probably like her more for it. She loved his reaction to her writing...it was like a breath of fresh air, and so unlike how anyone else she knew would react.

“So tell me, then,” she said, the last of her wariness fading away.

“Tell you what?”

“Why you’re here. You said yesterday wasn’t a good day. Tell me what happened.”

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Chapter 11

Cam gave Esme a thoughtful look, trying to decide how much to tell her. Finally, he relaxed his expression. “’Tis a long story.”

“Well, I have all night. Or the rest of it, in any case.”

He nodded and held out his hand to her. “Sit with me?”

She took his hand and he led her to the pair of armchairs near the fire. “You’re saying I’m unconventional, and that’s true,” he said after they’d both taken a seat. “But my work is also unconventional.”

“My sister-in-law said you were in the army, but I know many of the regiments were disbanded after Waterloo. Is that what happened to you?”

“Not exactly. Five officers and two enlisted men from the regiment of Gordon Highlanders were summoned to London and given the opportunity to leave the army and do something different. We all accepted.”

“What was it?” she asked.

He seemed to hesitate for a second, but then he said, “We formed a brotherhood called the Highland Knights.”

She released a long breath. “Ah.”

He raised his brows in surprise at her stiffening posture. “You’ve heard of the Knights?”

“Yes. My brother Sam works with the Agency.”

He nodded. “I am acquainted with your brother.”

“From what I’ve gathered, the Highland Knights are an offshoot of Sam’s group.”

“Aye, we are.” He tilted his head at her. “How much do you know of the Agency?”

“Too much,” she said flatly.

He nodded, understanding immediately. Sam Hawkins had been an elite assassin for the Agency for many years, but he was deeply incognito and very few knew the extent of the work he did for the country. Clearly, Esme did, though.

“The Knights have only been in service to the Crown since Waterloo. The work we’re involved in is much the same, though most of our assignments will be in Scotland and the north.”

“Why are you in London, then?”

“I dinna ken, exactly. We were in Manchester for a time, but since then we’ve been in London guarding Pinfield. He’s evidently been receiving death threats. We’ve been assigned to protect him and uncover the nature of the threat. Our superiors believe the danger might have originated in Scotland.”

“I see.” She paused. “You’ve worked with Sam, then?”

“He was with us through the beginning months. He introduced us to the work.”

“Are you an assassin?” she breathed.

“Nay. Though if my duty calls for it, I’ll do what must needs be done.”

“So did what happened yesterday have something to do with your work?”

“Aye, in a way. It was...it was one of the other Knights...George Fraser...”

She leaned forward, reaching out to cover his hand that was resting on the arm of the chair. He was trembling, very subtly, and he wondered if she could feel it as she squeezed his hand gently.

He was unused to being comforted. It was a singularly odd sensation. He liked it more than he’d expected to.

Quite a bit more.

“What happened?” she asked.

“He was killed.” He closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. “He was my friend. My brother. He was murdered while I was here at your brother’s dinner party.”

“Oh, Cam,” she murmured. “I am so sorry.”

They sat in silence for a long moment. Cam kept his eyes closed and his body relaxed, even though it felt alive and awake in every possible way, his senses humming with awareness radiating out from their point of contact at his hand.

“The worst part about it,” Cam said after a time, “is that we dinna ken who murdered him. And we dinna ken why. Fraser had no enemies.”

“But the Highland Knights must,” Esme said.

“Aye.” Again he was surprised at her perceptiveness. She was no insipid female. “Even as green as we are, it’s possible we’ve already acquired enemies.”

Esme shuddered. “That means you’re in danger, too.” She squeezed his hand a little tighter. “What will you do?”

“We’ve questioned everyone at the gaming hell where he was last night. Whoever did it covered their tracks well.”

“It was planned, then.”

“Aye. Probably. And they waited for him to be alone... or not surrounded by a mob, in any case. He was there with another one of the Knights, Ross. But Ross didna leave the tables at all.”

“And Mr. Fraser did?”

“Aye, he did.”

“You’ll need to be careful, Cam.”

He didn’t respond.

“Please. Tell me you’ll be careful.”

“Aye. I’ll be careful. But I’m no’ going to stop until I find who did this, and why.”

“I understand,” she said softly. “If anything happened to one of my brothers, I’d feel the same.”

Her loyalty to her family didn’t surprise him.

“It seems to me, though,” she continued with a shiver, “that you won’t need to be looking for whoever did this. If it’s truly an enemy of the Highland Knights, I think they’ll be coming to you.”

“Let them come,” he said darkly.

They were quiet. Having her here, quiet and strong and holding his hand, was like a soothing balm to his soul. He never talked comfortably with women. He always avoided attachments like this, had always known such relationships would be destined for failure. He wouldn’t think of the destiny of this particular relationship, though. Not right now. He was going to remain in the present and drink in all the peace she offered him, like the greedy bastard he was.

He stroked the top of her hand, loving the feel of her skin under his thumb.

She was still engaged to marry that damned Henry Whitworth. But Cam wasn’t going to think of that right now, either. He’d tuck that problem aside. But God knew, he’d be dealing with it later.

—

They talked for a very long time, Cam telling her about his brother Knights and their experiences in the army before the Highland Knights had been formed. Esme

spoke of her stories, her inspiration for them, and of the research she'd done.

In a lull in the conversation, Esme glanced at Cam to find him looking at her, a softness in his gaze she couldn't even begin to decipher.

No, that was wrong. Perhaps she could decipher it. It might be...affection. As one might feel for a sister or a good friend. She desperately hoped that was all it was, even when a part of her scoffed—loudly—and knew that it was so much more. Of course, the traitorous part of her wanted it all.

“We're friends, aren't we?” she asked hopefully. Naively, perhaps.

“Aye, lass.” His voice was a low rumble. “Friends...and more.”

“We cannot be more,” she breathed. But the tone of his voice sent heat spiraling through her, and she knew he could read it in her eyes.

He stood, pulling her up beside him, and before she could protest, he kissed her, slow and long and languid, his arms wrapping around her and pressing their bodies tight together. God, he tasted so good. Like whisky and strength and masculine appeal.

He ran his hand down her back, exploring her curves thoroughly now that the only thing between his fingers and her skin was the thin material of her nightgown.

He pulled back for the second it took for him to say, “So bonny, lass,” and kissed her again.

He stroked the dip in her waist, then glided his hand over the curve of her hip and thigh. When his arm had descended to its limit, he bunched up her nightgown in his hand and wrapped his palm around the back of her thigh, just beneath her bottom. She gasped at the sheer intimacy of the touch.

But she didn't pull away. Instead she thrust her body into him instinctively, and as he held her tight, locked against him, she could feel his hardness pressing into her stomach.

"God, lass," he murmured, nibbling kisses over her jaw. "I want you. So bad. Tell me yes. Tell me to take you. Here, now."

She wanted him, too. She wanted to live all the things she wrote about; experience what she'd never believed was possible. This man could give all that to her, and she sensed he'd be generous in doing so.

But if she pursued this course, chances were high that she'd once again become a topic of gossip and scandal. And that would not only hurt Henry, it would also damage her entire family.

She'd done so much wrong, so much to hurt Trent and the rest of the family. Her panics and public awkwardness were uncontrollable parts of her personality that she'd always struggled with but had never been able to conquer. While the desire to explore the forbidden with this man was strong, it was controllable. Indeed, it was one thing she *could* control.

"I need you, lass," Cam murmured. "You...fill something inside me. Something that's missing in my soul. You can replenish it for me. Make me whole again."

She wanted him to an extent that scared her. But he was a man, and she knew from her research that men were prone to say and do things that they didn't necessarily mean when driven by these primal urges. He might mean those pretty words, but she couldn't begin to contemplate what it meant for both of them if he did. More likely, he was being driven by forces over which he had no control.

If he'd lost all sense, she couldn't afford to. Still...Oh, but she wanted him. So badly.

She gathered all her strength, all her desire to hold true to her promises and all her loyalty to her family and to Henry, who would be part of her family soon, and pulled away. She breathed hard, and her cheeks were so hot, she was certain he could see the flush of pink in the moonlight.

“Cam,” she whispered. “I can’t. We can’t..” The despair seeped through, that war she was waging against herself revealed by the broken syllables of her words.

She turned and pushed her hands into her hair, striding the length of the room and sinking onto the edge of the bed. “Oh God. I’m such a terrible person.”

“Nay.” He sat beside her, his presence solid and surprisingly comforting. “You’re the opposite of terrible, lass. You’re a complex package of intriguing and intelligent. Bonny and sweet. Innocent and a minx.”

He wrapped an arm over her shoulder, and drew her against him. “Call it off,” he said.

He meant her engagement, of course.

“You know I cannot,” she said miserably.

He sighed. “Here’s one thing I canna understand about you—this need for propriety, this desire not to be the cause of gossip or to disgrace yourself or your family. Who cares about everyone else? This is about you and me.” His expression clearly said, *You don’t want that insipid Whitworth, lass. You want me.*

“Why do you care what any of them think?” he continued.

“It’s complicated,” she murmured. “You have been out of society for so long, you probably don’t know all that my family has been through.”

“You’re right. I dinna ken any of it, except that there’ve been rumors that all your brothers aren’t full brothers.”

She gave a bitter laugh. “That barely touches the tip of the iceberg of the matter.”

“Tell me, then. I want to understand you.”

She looked up. “Do you? Are you certain you really want to know? It’ll take the rest of the night to list the scandals poor Trent has had to endure in the course of his life.”

“Your brother isn’t that old.”

“I know—he’s only thirty-three. That’s why he shouldn’t have to bear any more scandal. He’s had more than enough to last a lifetime. And through it all, he has done everything in his power to protect me. I owe him so much. I cannot disgrace my family after all he’s done for me. Without him, I’d be nothing.”

“How?” Cam demanded. “How has he protected you?”

She couldn’t tell him. It was too complicated. She looked sideways at him. “My family’s secrets are deep. It would be stupid and careless of me to bring you under the heavy weight of our confidence.”

“I don’t care about your family’s secrets,” he murmured. “Only yours.”

“But mine are entwined with theirs, don’t you see? I cannot bring you into my confidence without betraying their secrets, and I won’t do that.”

“Your loyalty is admirable.”

She gave a short, self-deprecating laugh. “Very little about me is admirable. I can’t even be myself without being a disgrace. I live behind masks and shadows, but there’s naught to be done about it.” She looked down, distractedly noting that her fists were curled into tight balls in her nightgown. “I don’t deserve my position in this world,” she whispered. “I have always been a failure at it.”

Cam made a low sound of disapproval in his throat. "Nay. Your position doesna deserve you."

Surprised, she snapped her head up to look at him, then shook it in wonder. "I've never in my life been in the presence of a person who truly makes me feel as if I can be me."

"You've led a lonely existence, then."

Her bare toes curled into the carpet. "Yes," she murmured, "sometimes. But the writing helps. It takes me to places I could never otherwise go."

"And gives you experiences you've always felt you could never have."

She nodded in agreement.

"But you can have them, Esme. With me," he said softly.

I wish I could have them with you... "You know I cannot."

"Picturing you with him..." Cam shook his head, looking away from her. "Damn it, lass. I canna give you what you deserve. But Whitworth canna give you what you need."

"I don't know what you mean."

"How will you write your novels when you're married?" he asked quietly. "Propriety is important to Whitworth. He wilna stand for having an authoress for a wife."

She flinched. These were things she forcibly pushed from her mind the minute they started intruding. "I've tried not to think too much on it. I'll take a hiatus from writing for a time. Then, maybe, as he begins to know me better, he'll understand..."

"You're lying to yourself," Cam said shortly.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tightened her fingers over her shins. “Please.”

“Please dinna torture you by making you think about this? What kind of torture will it be when you wish to write and you cannot because he’s forbidden that activity, or strangled the creativity from your soul? Or do you plan to skulk around, continue writing in secret, keeping the truth from your own husband?”

She wanted to cover her ears and pretend he wasn’t introducing these things—her biggest fears about her upcoming marriage—into her head. “Please. Stop.”

He ground his teeth. She sent him a covert glance. He looked frustrated beyond measure, as if he wanted to shake her until sense untangled her snarled thinking.

“I dinna wish to stop,” he told her darkly. “I dinna want to see you unhappy.”

“You want me to be happy?”

“More than anything.” He seemed as surprised by his admission as she was.

She gave him a soft smile. “I like you very much, Cam. I really hope we can remain friends, even after I am married.”

“Whitworth wouldna take kindly to our friendship.”

She sighed but didn’t deny it.

“Dinna do it, lass.” His words emerged strained, almost as if on a moan of pain.

She didn’t respond this time, just settled against him. She didn’t want to think about this anymore. She just wanted to be with him.

“When is the date?”

“The date?” she asked, confused. “Today’s date?”

“No, of your marriage.”

She took a shaky breath. “A month from now. The nineteenth of May.”

He gritted his teeth. “Too damn soon.”

“You can’t come here again,” she said softly. “If we were caught...If my brother found out—”

“Aye, I ken. Disgrace. Embarrassment. Pistols at dawn.”

They were silent for a long moment. Finally, she said, “I wish things were different.”

“They’ll only be different if you grab the reins, lass, and take charge of your future.”

Why hadn’t she encountered this man a year ago, when the world had been open to her? Why had she agreed to marry Henry Whitworth?

Well, she knew the answer to that. She’d agreed to marry him to save the House of Trent from scandal, and because Henry was decent and simply *safe*.

Cam said she should take the reins of her future, and in a way she’d thought that was what she’d done. But maybe she’d been wrong. Maybe she’d just taken the reins from Trent and handed them to Henry. And she didn’t love or trust Henry like she loved and trusted Trent.

She pushed her fingers into her hair and cupped her forehead in her hands. “What are you doing to me?”

“I’m making you think,” Cam said.

“I’m not certain I like the things you’re making me think about.”

“Better to think them now than before it’s too late.”

“Maybe it’s better not to think at all.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Do you really believe that?”

No, she didn't. A sigh was her only response.

Cam was the kind of man who'd be more than willing to give her pleasure. To teach her all the joys of the marital bed without tying either of them to it.

As enticing as that would be, it wasn't what she needed. She needed stability. A decent, unassuming husband and a quiet, uninteresting home that would shield her from the judgments of society.

"Kiss me," Cam whispered.

She gazed at him for a moment. Then, for the first time, she leaned in, initiating a kiss. He sat passively for a long moment, allowing her to explore him with her mouth. She licked his lips, tasting their softness, which contrasted so dramatically with the hardness of his body. Turning more fully toward him, she slipped her hands around him until her fingertips played with the soft strands of hair at the back of his neck.

Every time she touched him, every time they kissed, so many sensations rushed in all at once, nearly overwhelming her. It was difficult to separate one from the other, discern what was happening to any single part of her body.

She moaned, struggling against the desire that swamped her, that made her want to give this man everything.

He gently pulled away and laid her back on the bed, then lay atop her. She gazed up at him. "You won't hurt me," she said. "You wouldn't." Her conviction on that score was strong, although she knew it didn't hold much logic. In the dim light, he looked dangerous—dark and piratical.

"Och, Esme." He stroked a rough finger down her cheek. "You are so naïve."

"Probably," she admitted.

“You’re too trusting. You canna imagine all the things I want to do to you right now.”

“Oh,” she murmured, “but I can.” She’d done her research, after all. She knew much, much more than a virgin of her status should.

His expression darkened, and he pressed his weight upon her.

“Mmm,” she said.

“You’re going to be the death of me, lass.”

Pleasure rushed through her. A feeling of power. She felt like one of her heroines. Unlike most of those experienced, sensual ladies, she’d never before had any confidence she possessed feminine wiles.

Cam smirked. “Is that what you want, then? To be the death of me?”

“Would it be so bad?” she asked coyly.

He made a growling noise and kissed her again. This kiss was hard. Demanding and so dominating it made her toes curl. She wrapped her arms around him and held him close, kissing him back until her whole body vibrated with a deep-seated need.

He moved downward, kissing her jaw and her neck. Then he pulled back a bit, undoing the ribbon ties of the bodice of her nightgown, then pulling the edges apart, exposing her breasts to his hungry gaze.

“Oh,” she whispered as his breath washed over one of her nipples. And then he leaned down and wrapped his lips around it.

“Oh God,” she groaned as sensation burst through her. It felt good—almost unnaturally so. She had, of course, touched herself there, experimented, but it was nothing like this, nowhere near as intense. “Cam...”

He didn't respond, too intent on his task. Her nipple had tightened to a taut nub, and he flicked his tongue over it, making her gasp in pleasure-pain.

"Do you like that?" he murmured.

"I...think so. I..."

"What? What do you want? Tell me what you want."

"You," she admitted.

It was his turn to groan. He moved to her other nipple, giving it the same attention. She was on the verge of losing her mind. Of giving him everything—her body, her virginity, her never-ending adoration. If only he'd satisfy the need burning so deep in her core.

But she needed to rein all that in. She needed to control herself—that one aspect of herself she could control.

"Cam..." His teeth scraped over her nipple, and she gasped in pleasure. "Please." *Please more...or please stop?* She hardly knew. "You must...stop."

He pulled back, cupping her face in his big hands and rubbing his thumbs gently over her cheekbones. "I'll stop if that's what you want, lass."

It wasn't what she wanted. Not at all. But she said, "Yes. Please. The household will awaken soon, and if we're caught..." She couldn't even fathom the horror of that.

"Aye," he murmured. He retied the ribbon of her nightgown, hiding her breasts once again, as she lay on the bed. Then he held himself over her for a long moment, silently staring at her. His gaze communicated so many things, she couldn't quite keep up with all of them. He didn't want to go—that much was clear. But he would. Because that was what she'd told him she wanted.

He slid off the bed and drew on his boots as she watched. He rose to leave but hesitated at the door.

“Good night, Esme.”

“Good night, Cam.”

“I’ll see you again.” It was a promise, and relief flooded her, because even though she knew it wasn’t wise for them to see each other at all, she couldn’t stomach the idea of *not* seeing him again.

She nodded, but it was too late. He’d already gone, slipping silently from her bedchamber.

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Chapter 12

A few days later, Cam was at Mrs. Trickelbank's establishment yet again, sitting on the sofa outside the room where Pinfield was "meeting" with Betty, who, it seemed, had become his favorite girl.

Cam stifled the urge to cover his ears like a child and hum loudly to ignore their exuberant sounds. Instead, he rose and paced the tiny antechamber.

When he and Pinfield had arrived earlier this evening, they'd gone into the common room, where Pinfield liked to drink a glass or two of brandy and flirt with the girls before retiring to this private room with Betty.

Henry Whitworth had been in the common room speaking with a willowy blonde—a woman rather opposite in appearance to Esme. When their gazes had met, Whitworth had grinned, like they were two comrades sharing an enjoyable common interest. Cam's return smile was no more than a baring of teeth.

Whitworth was an ass.

And he would be the one Esme would give herself to. This man who would never understand her, not like Cam did. Who couldn't bring her the satisfaction Cam could. Who would look for and find his true pleasures outside the marriage bed.

Who would never make her happy.

Cam swiveled around and stared at the door. Pinfield and Betty were fine, and their night had just begun. They would be perfectly all right if he left them for a few minutes. There had been no evidence of anyone wanting to cause the man harm since they'd begun this seemingly fruitless endeavor months ago.

Lately, he'd begun to wonder if it wasn't all just a massive waste of time. Adams didn't have any real

assignments for the Knights, so he'd saddled them with this ridiculous task to...what? Have them prove their mettle when it came to matters of extreme boredom?

Just in case, though, he locked Pinfield in the chamber, using the key Mrs. Trickelbank had given him. Then he strode down the corridor toward the common room.

As Cam had expected, Whitworth was still there. He'd been enjoying himself with one blonde earlier. Now that one was gone and another sat on his lap upon a long, red-velvet divan. His hand was up the woman's skirt, and he was lazily opening his mouth as she fed him grapes.

A few other men lounged in similar fashions in the room. The girls milled about, giggling, groups of them hovering around each of the men.

Cam strode right up to Whitworth and sat in an adjacent armchair. "Mind if I join you?"

He'd tried to sound light and friendly, but the words came out clipped.

Whitworth looked over the lass's shoulder at him, chewed his grape, swallowed, and said, "'Course not. Care for some brandy?"

"Whisky," Cam said.

Whitworth snorted. "Right. Nothing but a Scottish drink for a Scot such as yourself. How could I forget?" He patted the girl's rounded behind. "Go on, then, Tess, and fetch the man some whisky."

She hopped up and disappeared to do as she was bade. Whitworth watched her, his eyelids at half-mast, while Cam watched Whitworth.

Whitworth sighed happily as she reached the sidebar. "Surprised I haven't seen you here before, man. It's one of my favorite haunts."

"Hmm. Well, it's not one of mine."

“Why on earth not?” Whitworth cast his arms in a grand gesture. “Have you seen the ladies here? Prime meat, I say.”

“Oh? And what of your fiancée? Do you consider her to be prime meat?” The words were out before Cam could check them. Just being near this pompous bag of wind infuriated him.

Instantly, Whitworth’s face darkened. “I trust you weren’t speaking of Lady Esme? I wouldn’t want to have to call you out, McLeod.”

“Why not?” Cam demanded. “Afraid for your life?”

He should be. Whitworth was soft, untrained. He was no warrior. It didn’t matter what weapon was chosen—Cam would beat him in a duel within seconds.

Whitworth laughed. Cam didn’t.

“Seems your time away has dis-educated you in the ways of things,” Whitworth said.

“What ways are those?”

“There is a code, man. We don’t speak of our families, of ladies, while engaging in these less...er...*refined* pursuits.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Whitworth said self-importantly, “ladies of our rank are to be kept in their gilded cages. In every way. You wouldn’t discuss a lady of importance here any more than you’d discuss Tess in the presence of such a lady. Ah, there you are, Tess.” He smiled warmly at the whore as she handed Cam the whisky with a broad wink. Whitworth patted his lap, inviting the woman back onto it.

“Even after you’re married to such a lady?” Cam asked as Tess wiggled her way into a comfortable position.

“Oh, especially not then.” Whitworth tilted his head in question. “Have you become stupid in the army? I hear that happens to some. They return from battle dim-witted, and not only from injury, I hear.”

Cam ground his teeth—if this man had fought against the French, he’d be dead, not merely dim-witted—but he managed a shrug. “Aye, well, I intend to tell my wife everything, if I ever marry.” Which was a stupid thing to say, since he’d never thought about what secrets he’d tell a wife. There was no point—he never planned to have a wife to begin with.

Whitworth snorted. “Much to your detriment, I’m sure.”

“Why? I don’t intend to engage in adultery while I’m married. Do you?”

“Not *adultery*—of course not. A little fun now and again, though, keeps a man in his prime.”

Cam glanced around at the giggling whores, many of whom were dressed in a fashion that most ladies of Esme’s class would find appalling—short dresses that revealed ribbon garters, too-small bodices with breasts pouring over their tops, garishly bright cosmetics.

“The kind of fun to be had here?” he asked Whitworth.

“Precisely.”

“If a man is married, that still qualifies as adultery.”

Whitworth gave him an exaggerated shocked look. “When did *you* become such a prig?”

When I saw how my father ruined women’s lives.

He said nothing. But he remembered the morning when he was about ten years old that he’d found his mother sobbing in her bedchamber. He’d gone next door to his father’s room to investigate and had discovered his father asleep with a naked woman beside him.

His father had brought one of his mistresses into the house—*with Cam's mother in residence*—and hadn't bothered to hide the woman. Later, with all three children huddled in the corner of the room, he'd shouted to Cam's distraught mother that he was the Earl of Sutton and had the right to bed whomever he damn well pleased. And furthermore, he'd prefer to bed anyone over her, because she was a sniveling, skinny, ugly excuse for a woman.

"Of course it doesn't qualify as adultery," Whitworth scoffed. He was such a damned idiot. "Mrs. Trickelbank runs the finest establishment in London. All the girls are extremely discreet."

"Because they dinna blab about it makes it not qualify as adultery?" Cam asked in disgust. Asses like Whitworth would make themselves believe anything in order to justify their actions.

Whitworth slid his arm over Tess's chest, his hand cupping her breast, and drew her close. She slumped back against him, her legs opening. Cam would have a prime view if he bothered to look. Whitworth glanced at Cam over her shoulder and said, "When no one's the wiser for it, who's to say anything ever happened?"

Cam said nothing.

"Come on, man. You know one gentle lady—especially a lady as gentle as..." Whitworth paused, seemingly unwilling to say Esme's name in this place. "Well, she cannot serve the needs of a single man."

Cam thought he might vomit. He kept his mouth shut. Whitworth made it clearer with every passing second that he knew nothing about Esme. What would he think if he knew Esme had actually visited this establishment? That she'd probably talked to the very lady Whitworth now jiggled on his lap?

He might suffer from a fit of the vapors and need the smelling salts, that's what. The thought made Cam genuinely smile for the first time tonight.

"I see you agree," Whitworth said smugly. "Our ladies are too delicate to manage a man's natural appetites."

"Nay." Cam didn't want this man operating under the assumption that he agreed with him on any level. "You underestimate Lady Esme."

Whitworth jumped, then scowled in reaction to Cam voicing her name. "Please," he said darkly, "be discreet." He pushed Tess off his lap and straightened. The girl pouted, thrust out her chest, and reclined against the arm of the divan.

"And don't presume to know anything about my fiancée," Whitworth said, swallowing the last of his brandy and holding his glass out to Tess to fetch another.

"I don't presume," Cam said. He *knew*.

"She's a very delicate lady, prone to fits of nerves at times. She's handsome enough, but she possesses a mixed reputation of being a terrible bore and an utter social failure. Not to mention being the subject of even more unsavory gossip, all of which is untrue, of course, but nonetheless still affects her image in society." Whitworth shrugged and gave him a conspiratorial look. "However, she's a duke's sister and she comes with a rather large dowry, and those facts trump her debilitating shortcomings, wouldn't you say?"

Something inside Cam turned black as coal, but he managed to hold on to his composure. "I see. She's delicate, is she? Then surely she would understand and support your"—he gestured to the room at large—"proclivities."

Tess returned with Whitworth's brandy, prompting Cam to take a swallow of his forgotten whisky. Tess took his glass and wandered off again.

Whitworth leaned toward Cam, brandy cupped in his hands. “You are naïve, man. She’ll never know about my private life. We will have a very public marriage. Put on a show for the people. What I do in my private life, however, is none of her concern.”

“What about what she does in *her* private life?”

Whitworth’s lip curled. “She will be my wife. I will retain all control over everything she does, public and private.”

“And you believe that’s fair?” Cam asked mildly.

Whitworth snorted. “She is a woman, I am a man. It is the way of things.”

“And if she pursued ‘activities’ that didn’t meet your approval?”

“Such as what? Adultery? She wouldn’t dare. She’s too well-bred.”

Oh, of course, it was perfectly fine for Whitworth to be an adulterer, but heaven forbid if Esme were to do the same thing.

God, he was reminded all over again why he hated this world so damn much. Give him the life of a simple Scottish countryman—where honor and loyalty ranked above all, and equally for both men and women—than this life of debauchery and dishonesty.

“Not adultery.” Cam took the whisky Tess proffered and drank it down in one long swallow. He set the empty glass on the side table with a *clunk* as the woman returned to Whitworth’s side. “But what if it was something else? What if she engaged in something that didn’t affect you at all, but that you wouldn’t approve of?”

“Such as?”

Cam held Whitworth’s gaze evenly, but his mind was scrambling. This was his chance. He could end it right

now, right this second.

Esme might hate him for it. She might never speak to him again. But at least, at the *very damn least*, she wouldn't have to be subjected to spending a lifetime married to this idiot.

Whitworth didn't deserve her. He shouldn't even be allowed in the same room with her, as far as Cam was concerned.

"What if she were secretly an authoress of romantic novels that were published and sold to the public?"

He gritted his teeth. Bloody hell. He'd done it. Esme was going to consider this a horrible betrayal. Cam wouldn't blame her for that. He didn't deserve her, either, after all.

But he was doing the right thing, damn it. That thought brought him strength.

Whitworth held very still. After a long silence, he motioned to Tess to go. She sighed dramatically and flounced away.

Whitworth tapped his thumb on the lip of his glass. "I assume you're speaking hypothetically?"

"Hypothetically. Of course." Cam's voice was dry as autumn leaves.

Whitworth shrugged. "Absurd."

"But if she were? What if she engaged in this activity secretly? What if no one knew about it?"

Whitworth grimaced. "No matter. Such a thing would be a disgrace. It would never happen."

"But if it did?" Cam pressed.

Whitworth cocked his head. "Are you telling me something, McLeod? Are you sending me some kind of message?"

Cam finally looked away from him. He curled his hands into fists. “Make of it what you will, Whitworth. I’ve told you nothing.”

“Fine,” Whitworth bit out. “I would have naught to do with an authoress of any kind. And romantic novels...” He shuddered. “I would not countenance it. In fact, I would not deign to have any communication whatsoever with a woman who engaged in such activities.”

“Of course you wouldn’t.” Cam felt like he was speaking through a mouthful of grit.

“Would you?”

“Mayhap. Depends on the woman, not on her choice of profession.”

“Profession.” Whitworth grimaced. “As far as I’m concerned, unless a woman is a whore, she should have no profession, save the care and keeping of her children and husband. Either way, she spends her life in service to a man.”

At this point, Cam shouldn’t have been surprised by anything this man had to say. But Whitworth was growing more intolerable by the second.

“So,” he said carefully, “I’m just wanting to understand. If Lady Esme—”

Whitworth held up his hand as if to stop Cam from speaking her name.

“If *Lady Esme*,” Cam repeated firmly, “was secretly Jean Hayden, writer of romantic novels, you’d cast her aside?”

Whitworth sneered. “Instantly.”

Regrets—so many of them—bubbled up inside him, but he pushed them forcibly down. He managed to keep his posture stiff and his expression as hard as granite even as a thousand fissures cracked over his heart.

He was not a man who handed out others' secrets freely. He was a loyal man, down to his marrow, to those he cared about. And he cared about Esme, damn it. He was doing this for *her*. For her happiness. For her freedom.

Esme wouldn't see it that way. She'd see this as betrayal, not loyalty.

But he intended to try like hell to make her see reason. If he succeeded, maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't lose her. Yet.

"I see." Cam hesitated. "Well, then, Whitworth, you might be wanting to learn more about Jean Hayden and her connection to this woman you're planning to marry."

Whitworth swallowed the rest of his brandy and set his glass down hard, right next to Cam's. "I'll do that, McLeod. You can be sure I will."

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Chapter 13

Esme and Sarah had been shopping all morning—Sarah had purchased a new top hat in the latest fashion for Trent, as well as a new pocket watch for his upcoming birthday. They were smiling and laughing as they entered Trent House. They paused in the entry hall to hand their gloves, pelisses, and hats to their maids.

“You should have bought it, Esme. It was so perfect for you.”

Esme sighed. The amethyst bracelet had been a beautiful piece, and she didn’t have anything like it. Yet it was an extravagance she didn’t really need.

“You are too frugal,” Sarah said, but there was deep affection in her voice.

“I don’t want to be a burden,” she said quietly.

“Don’t be silly,” Sarah said. “You’re never a burden, Esme, dear.”

When Esme had first become a published author, she’d racked her brain on how she could use the monies earned from her writing to become more independent. In the end, she hadn’t been able to find a solution that didn’t include revealing her secret. She’d ended up donating all her earnings anonymously to various charities. Which meant that everything she possessed, even now, came from the coffers of the Duke of Trent. She still hadn’t found a way to solve the problem without revealing her secret identity to someone who might decide to reveal it to the world.

One of the footmen appeared at the door. “I’m sorry to interrupt, Your Grace, my lady.” He nodded to Sarah and Esme in turn. “But you have a visitor, Lady Esme. Mr. Henry Whitworth. I told him you were not at home. He

said it was urgent and that he'd wait for you. He's in the drawing room."

"Goodness," she murmured, pulling out the last hat pin and handing her hat to Polly. "I'll go to him this instant," she told the footman.

She said goodbye to Sarah and followed the footman down the corridor to the drawing room.

"Good afternoon, Henry," she said as she entered. He was standing with his hands clasped behind his back, gazing through the window at the rose garden. The blooms were out in full force—deep reds and pinks in a veritable explosion of color.

He turned to her, inclining his head in greeting as the footman closed the door behind her.

She stopped in the center of the floor, then stood awkwardly. "I...um...I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

"No. Not long at all." He stood facing her for a long moment, then cleared his throat. "I must speak with you, my lady."

Well, clearly he wanted to speak with her—otherwise why would he be here? And she couldn't remember the last time he'd called her *my lady* when they were alone together.

"Of course," she said. "Ah...won't you sit down?"

"No."

Well. All right, then. She didn't move. He stared at her.

Something was wrong. Her heart began a heavy thump beneath her breastbone.

Henry shifted awkwardly from one foot to another, looking anywhere but directly at her. Finally, he cleared his throat again, then said, "I fear I cannot marry you."

It took her a moment to understand exactly what he was saying. She blinked several times. “Oh.”

“You see,” he said uncomfortably, reaching up to pull on his cravat, “I have learned something about you that I feel is incompatible with what I require in a wife.”

Oh no. There were only two things that could make Henry say such a thing. The first was that he’d somehow learned about her true heritage. The second was that he’d found out about her writing.

Either one was disastrous.

“What’s that?” Her voice was a strangled whisper.

“You...” He pressed his lips together until they were so thin they seemed to sink into his mouth. “You have written novels.”

It was like someone wrapped a cord around her windpipe. She couldn’t breathe. She opened her mouth but no words would emerge from her strangled throat.

His expression grew hard. Even angry, and she’d never seen Henry angry. She could feel the blood draining from her face and the strength leaving her leg muscles, making her knees wobble. Somehow, somehow, she found the strength to remain standing.

“You’ve been writing disgraceful novels. Romantic”—he said the word with a disgusted sneer—“shocking, scandalous drivel that is an embarrassment to your family—indeed, to *me*.”

Spots swarmed her vision. He was right, of course, which was why she kept her writing a secret. She kept the secret highly guarded—even her editor didn’t know her real identity. Only two people knew. Her brother Sam, who was the most discreet person she knew—he wouldn’t tell a soul, probably not even under penalty of death.

The other person who knew was Camden McLeod.

Cam had told Henry about her stories. She'd trusted him—hadn't even worried once about the disastrous power he held over her—since he'd left her room three mornings ago.

He'd betrayed her.

She staggered backward, her arm flailing to find something she could lean on, because her legs could no longer support her. She came in contact with one of the pillars and sagged heavily against it.

“Do you deny this allegation?”

She didn't answer. All she could see was the utter disgust in his expression. That would be how Trent and Sarah would look at her when they found out. After all they'd done for her, they would be so disappointed...

After a moment of silence, he pulled a thin book from his coat.

“Well, then. Does this look familiar, my lady?”

It did. She could see the title from here. *One Night with an Earl*, her most recent published story.

Henry opened the book to a random page and read aloud. “‘He kissed her. Hard, bluntly, thoroughly.’” He was turning red in the face, each word now coming out with bluster. “Good God!” He slammed the book shut and threw it to the floor as if it were a hot coal that had burned his hand to the bone. It landed at her feet.

He looked at her, for the first time. “What kind of woman are you?”

A living, warm-blooded one, she wanted to say. But what good would that do? Henry didn't want a living, warm-blooded woman. He wanted a duke's daughter. He wanted a dowry. He wanted someone who would meekly stand by his side and bear his children and refrain from embarrassing him.

The biggest secret of all, the one that her family members all held close to their chests in hopes of protecting her, was that she wasn't even a duke's daughter. She was the product of the duchess and her gypsy paramour. She was only a half-sister to the Duke of Trent, and not through the duke's line.

What would Henry say if he knew all that?

She'd planned to marry him under false pretenses. What on earth had she been thinking? Looking at him now, she hated herself for pretending she was someone she was not, for trying to live a life she wasn't meant to lead.

She sank to her bottom on the floor, sliding down the pillar. She buried her face in her hands. She was a stupid, stupid girl.

He stood over her. Not the Henry she knew, who was so kind and solicitous. This Henry was an angry, callous man. A man who despised her for the sin of being who she was.

"I will leave it to you to inform your family," he said coldly.

She looked up from her hands, knowing tears streaked her face, but who cared? "Inform them?" she asked shakily.

"That we are no longer engaged," he clipped out.

That suddenly seemed insignificant compared to what he might tell them. What he could now tell the world, and would, if she knew him. Surely he'd be interrogated about the reasons surrounding the dissolution of their engagement. There was no reason for him to lie. In fact, his reasoning would reveal her as the guilty party. His excellent reputation would remain intact.

"What about...about...?"

“About your perverse activities?” He made a noise that sounded like he was spitting. “Believe me, I would be happy to discuss this with your brother—in fact, I would be happy to reveal your disgusting hobby to the world. But I won’t. Your *secret* is safe.”

“Why?”

“That is none of your concern.”

“What?” How could it be none of her concern?

“Tell them you changed your mind. I don’t care what excuse you use, as long as it doesn’t portray me in a negative light.” He hovered over her. “If you slander me in any way, the truth will be revealed. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” But why wasn’t he shouting the truth from the rooftops? It made no sense.

Glancing at him, she found him looking down at her with that same expression of disgust. “Very well. I shall take my leave, then.”

She nodded.

He stepped to the door, then turned back to her. “I am very disappointed to learn this about you, Esme. I’ve known you your whole life and thought you were a better woman than this. I’m thankful this truth about you was revealed before it was too late. This is just proof that women need a tight rein, or they will abuse their freedoms. I will find a wife, and trust me, she will be biddable and compliant, not someone who will abuse her freedoms to engage in despicable practices.”

She stared at him. What would he have done—what would *she* have done?—if he’d discovered her secret after they were married? Good Lord, she couldn’t even imagine.

He swiveled and went out the door, closing it with a *snap* behind him.

Esme didn't move for several minutes, her heart racing, her scrambled mind trying to make sense of what had just happened.

She was no longer engaged to marry Henry Whitworth.

She needed to invent an explanation for the end of her engagement.

The last thing on earth she wanted to do was hurt her family. But could she continue to lie to them?

Cam had betrayed her. He had learned her second-biggest secret; he'd told it to her fiancé.

Henry knew about her writing but didn't intend to tell anyone about it. Why?

She was no longer engaged to marry. She was...*free*.

Why would she think of herself that way? She should be brokenhearted, but she wasn't. She was confused and so, so angry. Not with Henry. With Cam, for not being the man she thought he was.

He'd been right, though. She should be brokenhearted, devastated, miserable right now. Her fiancé had just broken off their engagement. But she wasn't. Instead, it felt like a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

She'd been lying to herself since the day she'd agreed to marry Henry. She'd never loved him. She'd never wanted to be his wife. His rejection had broken the mask over the truth, and she could see it clearly now. Cam—horrible traitor that he was—had been right. She never would have been happy with Henry Whitworth.

This was proof that she shouldn't trust herself in matters of the heart. She'd truly convinced herself over the past several months that being Henry's wife was what she wanted.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She would never be Mrs. Henry Whitworth. Now she needed to come up with a story as to the reason why.

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Chapter 14

A half an hour later, Esme was ready. Anger had fortified her, steeled her bones, grown a thick shield over her heart. She was going to speak with her brother and sister-in-law. Then she was going to find Camden McLeod and tell him exactly what she thought of him.

She trudged upstairs to the nursery, where she found Sarah and Trent, who was holding a sleeping Theo on his shoulder while he talked to his wife in low tones. Lukas and the governess were nowhere to be seen.

Sarah smiled at her and murmured, “What did Mr. Whitworth want?”

Esme blew out a breath through pursed lips. She could tell them here, now...but Trent might start yelling, and she didn’t want to wake her nephew. “Can we talk about it downstairs?”

“Of course,” her brother said. “I’ll put him down and join the two of you in the drawing room.”

Esme nodded, swiveled, and returned to the drawing room, walking like an automaton with Sarah beside her, the silence heavy with what needed to be said.

Trent joined them a few moments later. Esme had already poured herself a glass of claret for fortification and had drunk half of it. But perhaps she didn’t really need it. She was feeling strong. Maybe her anger at Cam had fortified her enough.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah asked, her brows knitted together as Trent sat beside her on one of the gilded green velvet sofas. Esme sat on the matching sofa across from them, though she didn’t think she’d be able to sit for long.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“What? Why?” Sarah asked. Trent just frowned.

She looked into the red liquid in her glass, then back up at her brother and sister-in-law. She took a deep breath. “Mr. Whitworth and I are no longer engaged.”

Trent straightened, his blue eyes—so different from her dark brown ones—suddenly seeming hyperfocused on her. “What happened?”

“He decided we wouldn’t be compatible.” Usually she would have withered at speaking such a sentence. But now she added, “Honestly, he was right.”

He had been right. She’d been the one lying to herself about their compatibility.

Both Trent and Sarah stared at her, mouths agape.

“I thought you were happy with the match,” Sarah murmured.

“Yes, I thought I was, too. But it was a mistake from the beginning. I only realized this today—just now.”

Trent shook his head. “It’s not like Whitworth to renege on something of this magnitude. He wouldn’t do so without good reason. There has to be more.” He leaned forward, deep furrows of worry carved into his forehead. “It wasn’t about the identity of your father, was it?”

Esme swallowed hard. “You’re right, there is more. But no, evidently he knows nothing about the real identity of my father.”

They looked at her expectantly. Sarah shifted on the sofa—her belly had grown larger over the past week and she now constantly needed to adjust herself to find more comfortable positions.

“He discovered something about me. Something I have been keeping a secret for a long time now. Something only Sam knows.” She didn’t want to talk to them about

Cam's knowledge of her secret—not right now. She'd tell them later, if it became necessary.

“And this secret...it is serious enough to end an engagement?” Trent asked.

“Yes, it is.”

Sarah and Trent exchanged a glance. When they returned their gazes to her, they looked wary. “Is it something we should know, Esme?” Sarah asked.

Esme sighed. “I honestly don't know, Sarah. I didn't tell you at first because I knew you wouldn't approve. Then I knew you'd be embarrassed, and God knows, I have already been a source of embarrassment for you far too many times.”

“Nonsense,” Trent muttered.

“And then...” Esme shook her head. “Oh, I just didn't want to disappoint you. Either of you.”

Sarah rose awkwardly from the sofa, Trent hurrying to help her up, and went to Esme. She sat beside her and wrapped her arms around her. “Esme,” she said quietly, “we love you. We're proud of you. You seem to think you're an embarrassment and a disappointment, but you've never been either.”

Trent remained standing. “She's right. You've always been too hard on yourself.”

“Well”—Esme's voice shook—“Henry believes I'd be a disappointment and an embarrassment if we were to marry.”

Trent frowned. “Whitworth's always been a bit of a prig. And sometimes he can be rather hypocritical about it.”

Both Esme and Sarah looked at Trent in surprise. He shrugged. “If the man doesn't think my sister equal to the task of being his wife, then he no longer deserves my respect.”

Lord, how she loved her brother. Esme smiled despite herself, then wondered at her feelings. How quickly she could go from deeply admiring someone to nearly despising him. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“Now,” Trent said, “what is this secret?”

“I’m truly not sure you want to know,” Esme said.

Trent folded his arms. “I must know,” he said quietly. “You live in my house, and I need to know what’s going on here.”

Esme nodded. She took a swallow of her claret. She’d prepared for this. When she’d been sitting alone earlier, she’d decided that she was done pretending. She wouldn’t blatantly lie to her brother and Sarah about the dissolution of her engagement. She didn’t want to tell the truth, either. But she would, if that was what Trent and Sarah wanted. And if they wanted her to give up her writing...well, then, that was exactly what she’d do. At least until such time as she could claim her earnings and live on her own. Then she’d make her own way. Until that time, she lived under Trent’s roof and would do as he said.

“I...have a profession, you see,” she said. “I...I am a lady novelist.”

They both stared blankly at her, as if they didn’t understand what she was saying.

“I write stories,” she said. Then she clarified. “Stories of men and women finding everlasting love.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. Trent’s mouth worked, but no words emerged.

“My stories have been published,” she said, and a touch of pride crept into her tone. “Three of them. I’m writing the fourth as we speak.”

“You’re...a writer?” Sarah breathed.

Esme nodded. “Yes. I’m a writer.” It was the first time she’d ever said that aloud, and she liked—no, *loved*—the sound of it. She was a *writer*.

Suddenly it seemed ridiculous that she should be ashamed of it. She should be proud. It had taken a great deal of hard work, study, and failed attempts for her to get to the point of publishing three novels.

“Oh, Esme.”

“I’m sorry if it disappoints you.” She spoke directly to Trent. “I know it’s not an acceptable activity for a duke’s sister. But writing...” She shook her head. “I am so awkward and awful in society. When I’m writing, I can be whoever I wish to be. I can be awkward or polished, ugly or beautiful, strong or weak, experienced or innocent.”

“That makes sense,” Sarah murmured.

“But if you order me to stop writing,” Esme told Trent, “I will. I won’t go against your wishes.” It hurt her to say those words, true as they were.

“You said your books have been published?” Trent asked. “Can I read them?”

Esme gulped. “No, Trent. Please don’t.”

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because...they are...they are very intimate.” Oh Lord, her cheeks were ablaze.

Trent frowned. “But...How do you...? How can you...?”

Oh dear. “I’m not experienced in such matters,” she said. Had she ever felt so uncomfortable? She didn’t think so. “I just write about them. From my imagination.”

Ugh, that didn’t sound quite right. But she couldn’t take the words back.

“I see.” Trent didn’t seem able to look her in the eye—he was as uncomfortable as she was. “Clearly you use another name in these writings?”

She nodded. “I do. No one has discovered my true identity...until now.” Thanks to Camden McLeod.

“I see,” Trent said.

“Henry promised he wouldn’t tell a soul, as long as I never besmirched his name.”

Trent nodded thoughtfully.

“Esme, you look terrified,” Sarah said. “Don’t be. Your brother isn’t going to ask you to stop writing. Clearly it is an activity that brings you happiness. We wouldn’t take such a thing away from you.” She looked up at her husband. “Would we, Simon?”

Trent’s brow furrowed. “It’s a complicated issue. I need to think it through.”

Well, Esme had already thought it through. “If the truth was widely discovered, it would bring scandal yet again upon our house,” she said quietly. “You know that’s the last thing I want to do.”

“But the deed is already done. You’ve written three books, and these books have been published,” Trent said.

Esme nodded. “Yes.”

“If you write more, it wouldn’t make much of a difference,” he said. “Your work is already in the world.”

“It is. I suppose the only way it would be more dangerous to our family would be if one of my books suddenly became very popular. But I don’t see that happening, really. My audience is somewhat small.”

Trent nodded.

“If you suddenly became famous, I’d only be more proud of you than I already am,” Sarah proclaimed.

Esme turned to her sister-in-law. “Are you sure? If the truth was discovered, people would mock me—mock us. We’d be fodder for horrible gossip, yet again.”

“I’m proud that you’re a published author,” Sarah said stubbornly. “That is nothing to sneer at. It is not easy to find a publisher who finds your work worthy of printing. You must be very talented. And I intend to read all three of your books, no matter how much you might blush.”

“Oh dear,” Esme murmured.

“Esme,” Trent said, “you seem to think that after all the scandal our family has suffered, I am susceptible to it. But I’m not. I’ve become hardened to it to the point of immunity.”

Sarah smiled lovingly at her husband. “And after all the scandal and gossip about us, your reputation is stronger than ever. I think you secretly wish for more scandal just to fortify your status as a paragon.”

Trent shook his head at her and rolled his eyes, but what Sarah said really was true. Esme had never thought of it in that light before. The Hawkins family had been through the rumor mill so many times they should have been ground to dust by now. But Trent’s reputation had reached the highest echelon. He was admired, respected, even revered by many.

Trent finally sat down on the sofa again, facing her and Sarah. He sighed. “I just don’t want to see you hurt by this.”

“The only thing that can hurt me is your displeasure.”

“You’re not sad about Henry? About your engagement?” Sarah asked.

Esme thought about it, then shook her head. “In a way I am, I suppose. But hearing how he spoke of my writings, and of the fact that I am a writer...I didn’t know he’d be so *disgusted* by it. He was right. We weren’t compatible.”

Sarah sighed. “I’m sad about it, I suppose. I so wanted to see you happily married, as Simon and I are.”

“My marriage to Henry would never have been as happy as your marriage,” she told Sarah. “Hearing him today made me finally realize the truth of that.” She set her claret aside, then squeezed her hands together in her lap. “I was lying to myself thinking that Henry and I could be as happy as you. I rationalized that we’ve known each other most of our lives, just like you and Trent. But there is so much more than that between the two of you. I hope...” She stopped speaking. She’d been about to say that she hoped someday to find a partner like Sarah had in Trent. But she shouldn’t hope for such things. Trent and Sarah’s partnership was a rare jewel. She knew of few other couples that were as strong.

Among those few were Sam and Élise...and their brother Luke and his wife, Emma. Yes, she knew what a strong marriage looked like now. But Trent, Sam, and Luke were wonderful men, and Sarah, Élise, and Emma were all strong, likable women. She’d never been strong or likable.

“I’m not displeased,” Trent said after a short silence. “Just worried that you might eventually be hurt by this.”

“I’m sorry to worry you.”

Trent sighed. “Don’t be sorry. We’ll take precautions to keep this confidential. I’m glad you’ve found something that brings you happiness. Please, don’t stop writing.”

She blinked against a sudden sting in her eyes. “Are... are you sure?”

“Yes. I am.”

“I’ll continue to be discreet. And if the truth is ever discovered, I’ll protect the House of Trent as much as I can.”

Sarah grasped her hand. “We will always support you, Esme. And if the truth is discovered, we will stand by

your side. We always will. You're family, and we love you very much."

Esme looked back and forth from her brother to her sister-in-law. She was so lucky to have been gifted with these people as her family.

"Thank you," she whispered.

She closed her eyes, and took in a deep breath of fortifying air. One of her tasks for the evening was done, and it had ended well. Far better than she could have ever hoped.

Now she needed to find Camden McLeod and give him a piece of her mind.

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Chapter 15

The only place Esme knew to look for Cam was Lord Pinfield's house. If Cam wasn't there, surely another of his Highland Knights colleagues was, and maybe they would tell her where to find him.

In any case, Lord Pinfield's house wasn't far, and if that avenue didn't work, she'd go to Sam's house in Belgrave Square and ask him if he knew where to find Cam.

She pulled on a plain brown pelisse and slipped out of the house unchaperoned as the warmth of the day began to cool into late afternoon. Usually when she left the house during the day she'd go in the company of a maid or footman, but this errand was of a sensitive nature. She'd left the house alone at night many times, but there was a different kind of danger in this escapade, because if someone she knew saw her, they'd question why she was on the streets alone.

So she kept her head down and her eyes focused on the pavement as she took the ten-minute walk to Lord Pinfield's townhouse. She'd been there only once, a few years ago with her mother to offer condolences on the death of his wife. He had one daughter, Esme remembered, who was a few years younger than her. She didn't remember her name, though, and had only seen her once or twice in the past several years. Did Lord Pinfield keep his daughter out of society for some reason?

As she wondered about it, she found herself staring at Pinfield's front door. It was painted black, with shiny brass fittings. She lifted the heavy knocker and rapped it firmly on the thick wood, three times.

She stood and waited until, a minute or so later, the door opened to reveal a tall, thin, and very proper-

looking butler. “May I help you?” he asked, looking down his long nose at her.

She drew herself up to her full height, still a good foot shorter than this man. But she was the Duke of Trent’s sister, she was an *author*, and she wouldn’t cower.

“I am Lady Esme Hawkins. I am here to see Mr. McLeod or one of the other men who’s charged with guarding Lord Pinfield.”

The butler was a quintessential English butler, and nary a hint of emotion crossed his face. “I see,” he said dryly. “I shall see if he is available.”

The door clicked shut in her face, and Esme clutched her hands at her front and waited, shifting from foot to foot, thinking of ways she’d refrain from slapping Cam’s face when she saw him.

A few moments later, the door opened. It wasn’t Cam. It was another man—clearly another Highland Knight, for he was wearing a kilt. He was blond and of average height—a handsome man with sharp, aristocratic features and shrewd blue eyes. He tilted his head at her. “Lady Esme? I am Sir Andrew Innes. McLeod isna here today. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Thank you, Sir Andrew. Do you know where I might find Mr. McLeod?”

Sir Andrew hesitated for the briefest of moments, his eyes narrowed as they assessed her. Then his face relaxed, and he smiled, his decision evidently made. “Of course.”

He gave her an address in Westminster and hailed a hackney for her, apologizing that he couldn’t accompany her, he needed to stay with Lord Pinfield. As he walked into the street to hail the hackney, she noted that he had a bit of a limp, favoring his right side slightly—perhaps from a wound he’d received at Waterloo.

“Thank you so much,” she told him as he opened the hackney door for her.

“You’re welcome, milady.” He inclined his head, then shut the door.

Evening traffic clogged the streets, and after the better part of an hour the cab arrived at the address Sir Andrew had given. Esme paid the driver and studied the well-kept townhouse of brown stone as traffic clattered behind her. The dark-brown-painted door was covered by a white lintel, with a large square-paned window beside it. There were two windows facing the street from the first and second floors, then a row of smaller windows on the attic level. The house was identical to the two other townhouses flanking it, and very similar to the rest of the houses on the street—all uniform and neat.

She knocked loudly, then waited a few moments and knocked again. Sir Andrew had seemed fairly certain that Cam would be here. She wouldn’t give up easily.

It took another five minutes, but finally she heard the lock clicking. The door opened.

Cam stood there, dressed in shirt and kilt, with no coat and bare legs. Dishabille became him. He looked ridiculously handsome this way, like he’d just risen from bed. He blinked at her. “Esme? How did you—?”

She couldn’t stop it. Her hand whipped out, and she slapped him, hard, across the cheek. His face whipped to the side with the force of her blow. Then he reached up to cup his cheek in his hand.

“Well,” he said quietly. “Come in, then.”

Fury swarmed in her chest, threatening to burst out of her, encouraging her to slap him again, but she held her fist clenched at her side. “Why should I?” she demanded.

He raised a brow and dropped his hand. Red blotches in the shapes of her fingers bloomed on his cheek. “You

came here for some purpose, I assume? Or was it just to slap me?”

“Slapping you wasn’t enough,” she snapped.

“Then, please. Come inside so you can slap me some more.” His voice was light, and it infuriated her. All residual traces of the mourning Cam who’d visited her the other night were gone. Only the cocky, overconfident man she’d first met at Mrs. Trickelbank’s establishment remained.

She glanced over his shoulder, and he looked back, following her gaze.

“No one’s home.” His gaze returned to hers. “It’s just you and me, lass. Trust me, you won’t be discovered. Though if you stand out here much longer, some passerby is sure to recognize you.”

That got her moving. She stepped in, and he closed the door behind her, immediately crowding her back against it and caging her in with his arms.

“Why are you here, Esme?”

“You...” Emotion crowded her throat, competing with her anger. “You...” She shook her head, looking down. It was all too much, all of a sudden.

He took her chin between his strong fingers and forced her to look at him. “I...what?”

She blinked. “You told him. You told Henry about my writing.”

“Yes, I did.”

She jerked her chin out of his grasp. “You are so unconcerned. Betraying me was nothing to you, was it? I shouldn’t have trusted you. I should have—”

“What?” he asked. “What should you have done?”

He must have bathed recently because he smelled of bergamot and soap. And his warmth nearly consumed

her.

“I...I thought you were a good man.”

“I’ve never claimed to be a good man, Esme. I’ve certainly implied the opposite. This is your naiveté showing.”

“No doubt,” she said bitterly. “I should have guessed you’d have no qualms about ruining my life.”

His blue eyes snapped with sudden electricity. He moved closer, up into her face, his body a hairsbreadth from hers. “Ruining your life? No, lass, I’ve *saved* your life.”

“You *interfered* with my life,” she countered.

“Only because no one else cared to stop you from destroying it,” he said, his voice hard. “Something had to be done.”

“Don’t pretend you know me, Camden McLeod. You don’t.”

“I do,” he said.

“You *don’t*. And you have no business making decisions about me and my life. You’re not my father, my brother, or my husband.”

“Your father’s dead,” he growled, and she remembered he still didn’t know the truth about her parentage. That was one important secret she’d kept from him, and thank goodness for that. “You have no husband,” he continued. “And your brother knows nothing of your secrets.”

“He does now!” she cried. “Thanks to you!”

Cam went still, his muscles tense, his expression dangerous. “What? Whitworth told him?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “I did. I had to—otherwise I’d have had to develop some intricate lie about the ending of my engagement, and I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t out-and-out lie to him like that.”

Cam relaxed, and the truth struck her like an anvil. “You!” she gasped.

He arched a brow.

“You’re the reason Henry promised not to tell anyone, aren’t you?” Her blood was fire in her veins—rushing and scorching hot. Anger mixed with his nearness, and this new revelation...

“I forbade him to tell anyone,” Cam said mildly. “’Tis no one’s business, after all. Just yours. And,” he added dryly, “your future husband’s. I had the distinct impression that if I didn’t threaten him with his neck, he’d ruin your reputation out of sheer pettiness.”

Cam’s impression was right—it was why she’d been so surprised when Henry had told her he intended to divulge her secret to no one. “But *why*?”

“I told you,” Cam said patiently. “The purpose of telling him was to save your life, not ruin it.”

“But...”

“Admit it. I was right. Henry Whitworth is wrong for you.”

“I...” She shook her head, clamping her mouth shut stubbornly. He moved closer, until his lower body pressed against hers. Oh...Lord.

“Admit it,” he said huskily.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “You had no right.”

He ground his teeth. “Do you think I’m a man who’d just stand by and watch someone I care about be dragged into a miserable marriage?”

Cam’s breath whispered across her cheek. The heat in her blood had reduced to a low simmer, and her skin prickled, drawn to his skin, aching to feel it pressed against her.

She closed her eyes. Cam had overstepped his bounds. He had betrayed her trust. He had done something she never would have agreed to.

But he'd saved her from marrying Henry Whitworth. And now that she was freed of the engagement, she realized what folly it would have been to marry that man.

She was confused. She hated Cam. Or she *should* hate him, but she couldn't quite bring herself to.

Because...ultimately, he was right. She had been so blind. She might have never seen the truth clearly until it was too late and she'd committed herself to a man who would never accept her for who she really was.

"I dinna want your hatred." Cam's voice was soft now. "I kent I might have it, after talking to Whitworth. But..." He faltered for a second, and his dark eyelashes fluttered as he looked down, then up again. "I couldna stand by and watch you marry that bastard. It would've killed me."

Her body jerked in response to the raw honesty in his words, and she pressed herself closer to him, finally letting go and allowing herself to slip her arms around him.

"He wasna good enough for you," he whispered. "Not nearly good enough."

She closed her eyes and sighed as his lips touched hers. The kiss started soft, then became stronger. He pushed her lips open, swept the inside of her mouth with his tongue, and she responded in turn, tasting him, trying to go deeper. She wanted all of him.

And yet...a part of her was still angry. He'd betrayed her. He could kiss her a thousand times and that bitter truth would never disappear. She let the anger flow through her body, felt her movements grow stronger, her fingers curl into his shirt, digging into the muscles of his back.

“Oh Christ,” he groaned, pulling back and looking at her with such blazing intensity she shivered. “You’re driving me mad.”

He kissed her again, his lips hot and hungry.

Desire flared within her like a wildfire. Now that she was no longer promised to anyone, the walls of her inhibitions crumbled to dust. She wanted him as fervently as any of the heroines in her novels wanted their heroes. More, perhaps.

“I want you,” she said boldly, between frantic kisses to his stubble-roughened jaw, running her hands over his body, exploring him as much as she could over his clothes. “I can do what I wish now. I’m free.”

“Thanks to me,” he gritted out, then his teeth closed gently over her ear, and she gasped.

“Thanks to you. And I still hate you for it.” She shuddered, a bone-deep shake that originated in her core and radiated outward. “I hate you so much, Cam. But I also want you. Is that crazy?”

“Nay, I dinna think so. Because you’re fragile and upset, and I’m going to take direct advantage of your state and take you to bed. What do you think about that?”

“Do it.”

“I told you I wasna a good man,” he murmured, dragging his lips over her jaw. She tilted her head up to give him better access. “A better man would send you home.”

“I don’t want a better man. I want you.”

He pulled back again, his gaze suddenly deadly serious, his grip hard on her shoulders. “I didna tell Whitworth so I could trick you into my bed. You ken that, right?”

“I don’t care about that right now, Cam. I really, *really* don’t.”

He stared at her for a long moment, then heat replaced the concern in his expression, and he dragged her against him, bending down to whisper into her ear, “I intend to make you scream, lass. With pleasure... although this first time, it might be from pain. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She shuddered at the realization he planned to do this more than once.

He kissed her eyebrow, his lips soft as he nuzzled her forehead. “Say you want it. Say, ‘Take me to your bed, Cam.’”

She obeyed but took it a step further. “Take me to your bed, Cam. I want it. I want *you*. Take me as you see fit. Show me *everything*.”

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Chapter 16

Cam pulled back, surprise freezing him for a second, then he scooped her into his arms. Truly, there was no woman in the world like Esme Hawkins.

She laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck as he carried her down the corridor and up a narrow set of stairs. He took her into his functional bedchamber, the plain bed and bureau shadowed in the dimming early evening sunlight, and laid her on the quilt.

As he turned to lock the door, he heard her sigh as she stretched out on the bed. After he'd secured the bolt, he turned back to face her and just stood there for a long moment, studying her.

"Bonny Esme," he murmured. He wanted to ravish her, show her *everything*, just as she'd requested. But some stranger had piped up, a voice inside himself that told him to be gentle. That she was a virgin and he didn't want to hurt her. That he cared for this woman, and he wanted to make it special for her.

In fact, with a woman like Esme, it told him, he should probably marry her first.

He blinked hard at that one. Clearly he'd lost his sense. Marriage would be a mistake for him. One he had no intention of making.

But that voice inside mocked him. He might have never wanted to marry, but this woman...he could marry her. She would make him happy.

Too bad he didn't have the capability to make her happy in return.

He stalked toward her. She stared up at him with shining dark eyes. She didn't look at him with trust, though. There was a wariness there, lurking on the fringes of her expression.

She didn't trust him. She shouldn't trust him. It was no surprise, after what he'd done, but for some reason one of the fissures on his heart cracked wide open.

He climbed onto his bed and drew her into his arms. He didn't want to think about trust or marriage, and those disturbing thoughts quickly vanished as he took little sips of her mouth, then moved over her so he could kiss her more thoroughly. He kissed her jaw and the soft, slender column of her neck. She lifted her chin to give him more access, her fingers making long swipes over his shoulders, her eyes closed as she hummed her approval.

He propped himself on one hand so he could unbutton her pelisse, then he urged her up to a seated position so he could slip it off her arms and toss it away. He arranged her on his lap while he worked on the tapes of her dress, moving slowly down her back, taking his time with each one.

He loved her taste. He loved how she kissed him back with eager, inexperienced, hungry kisses. He could kiss her all day...all night.

Kissing her all night, every night, having her lie beside him, her warmth and heat and sweetness...That would be bliss.

Stop. He needed to stop these intruding thoughts of the future. He didn't need to be thinking about anything but this moment right now, and the soft, pliable woman in his arms.

He slipped her dress from her shoulders, and she pulled back and looked at him. "Cam..."

"Hmm?" He looked into her eyes, and a potent mixture of affection and awe spread through him.

"You really don't care about my writing?"

"Your writing?"

“Are you sure that it doesn’t make you think less of me?”

He drew her close to him, pressing his lips into her hair. “I already told you, lass. It makes me think more of you. It is a part of you I canna help but respect. I ken what your life has been like, Esme. My sister was raised in a similar environment, though it was probably less demanding and stringent than yours, as you were raised the daughter of a duke and she was only the daughter of a Scottish earl. What you have done with your passion, despite the obstacles you faced and continue to face, shows braveness and commitment.”

“No one else thinks like you do,” she whispered.

He grinned. “Aye, well, that’s true. Now kiss me again.”

She did, dragging him in for a long, erotic kiss. When she pulled away, they were both panting, and his cock was as hard as an iron spike.

He laid her back down, dragging her dress over her hips, peppering kisses across her body on his way. She possessed feminine curves in all the right places. He had to rid her of her chemise and stays as quickly as possible. He wanted to touch all her hidden spots, cup her breasts in his hands, run his palms along the dips in her waist.

Once her dress was off, he unlaced her stays and pulled them free, then tugged her chemise up over her head. Now she was naked except for her stockings, shoes, and her ribbon garters tied just below her knees.

Cam reared up to look at her. She lay on the bed, staring at him with shining eyes as he moved his hands over her chest, testing the weight of her breasts. Set free from the confines of her clothes, they spilled over his palms, heavy and warm and soft. His mouth watered with the need to taste them, but instead, he moved downward, stroking the curves of her waist and her

flared hips. A dark vee of hair hid her womanhood, and he pressed his palm to it.

She jerked in his hands, but he kept going, stroking over her smooth thighs and knees to the ribbon garters. “We’ll leave these on,” he said softly. “We wouldna want you to feel naked.”

“You’re right,” she gasped. “Removing those would make me feel utterly exposed.”

He glanced up at her face to see her smiling at him.

“Are you nervous?” he whispered.

“I’m always nervous,” she said shakily. “But this...I feel as if...as if I’m going to explode.”

“Do you like showing me your body?”

She seemed to consider this for a moment, then she said, “I like the way you look at it.”

That made his smile broaden. “You have a bonny form, Esme. I could look at it all night long. There are so many things I want to do to it, but that will take days. Years, mayhap.”

“There’s always tomorrow,” she said breathily.

He laughed. “Aye, and the day after.”

“And the day after that...”

He pulled off his shirt and tossed it to the floor. Then, as she watched, he worked on the buckles of his kilt. “Fair’s fair,” he murmured. “If I were wearing my stockings, I’d keep them, but alas, you’ll be seeing all of me, I’m afraid.”

“Good,” she said firmly.

On his knees over her thighs, he unbuckled his kilt and drew it away. His cock fell heavily, jutting out, still painfully hard.

Esme gasped, staring at it with wide eyes. “Goodness... I...it’s...”

“Touch it,” he commanded.

She reached out and wrapped her palm around it as if she knew what she was doing. She stroked him, and Cam closed his eyes on a groan. “How’d you learn how to do this so well?”

She chuckled, so low it sounded like a purr. “The ladies at Mrs. Trickelbank’s establishment insisted I practice on cucumbers.”

Cam choked out a laugh that she strangled immediately by squeezing harder.

“Does it feel good?”

He opened his eyes to see her gazing at him, her expression curious. “Too good.”

Damn it, he didn’t want her to let go, but he needed to prepare her. He wanted her to enjoy this, at least a little.

There was that unfamiliar voice again. He felt different somehow. Changed. But he couldn’t analyze it right now, not with a beautiful naked woman lying under him, stroking his cock and looking at him with big brown eyes that he could drown in.

He curled his own hand over his cock and guided her in three strong jerks that nearly made his eyes roll back in his head. Then he peeled her hand away. “My turn,” he murmured as he lowered his mouth to her nipple.

Oh Christ. He could bury himself in the soft mounds of her breasts. He could dedicate his life to suckling her, to teasing the taut peak of her nipple. He closed his eyes and feasted on her, swirling around the tip with his tongue, moaning when her fingers dove into his hair and held him pressed against her.

Cupping her breast, he moved to the other one, flicking one nipple with his thumb and the other with his

tongue. Above his head, she made sweet gasping sounds, her fingers digging into his scalp.

He loved women's breasts. They were feminine and foreign, soft and supple, so different from anything on his own body. And Esme's breasts were the most beautiful he'd ever seen. Large, ripe, and dark-nippled, with peaks that drew out easily as he suckled them. And sensitive, if her gasps of pleasure were any indication.

He lost track of time, trailing his lips and tongue over her mounds. He went from one to the other and back again, until she writhed beneath him, each of her breaths emerging in short, sharp gasps.

But there was more, so much more for him to discover. Eventually he moved downward, over her stomach and her hip bones, until he reached the triangle of hair that hid her womanhood.

"Let me kiss you here," he murmured.

"Yes," she gasped, and she said it like she knew that was exactly what she wanted, not like a virgin who'd never heard of such a thing. She even gave him an encouraging push.

He adjusted himself so he was no longer straddling her body; instead, he pushed her legs apart at the knees and settled himself between them.

He started by touching her, learning her. Studying what made her shiver and moan. He stroked her thoroughly, from the top of her and downward, to the place he'd sink into her—soon, if his cock had anything to say about it.

But for now, this was about her. Watching her, learning that she liked it better when he stroked around the nubbin at the top of her slit than when he touched it directly. She was sensitive everywhere he touched, though, and when he pushed a single finger into her

sheath, she moaned, long and low, her passage tight around him.

She was a virgin. He'd known that, but her tightness confirmed it. God, how would he fit? He lowered his head, kissing the small space above his finger as he withdrew it then slid inside her again.

"Oh God," she murmured. "Oh. God."

And he'd discovered yet another thing that would be able to consume him all night. Kissing her mouth, her breasts, her sex. All of those activities would keep him happily occupied for the rest of his days.

She had a sweet taste, like honeysuckle, and she was so responsive, wetness eased his way. He crooked his finger, slid it along her inner wall, and she shuddered around him.

"Cam," she whispered. "Ohhhh..." Her thighs tightened around his shoulders.

He closed his eyes. God help him. He was thrusting his hips into the mattress in a fruitless attempt at soothing his raging need.

Keeping his finger firmly lodged inside her, he looked up. "I need you, Esme."

"Yes," she said.

"It's going to hurt," he warned.

"I'm not afraid of pain."

That made him blink in surprise. The duke's sister had a surprise for him at every turn, it seemed.

He kissed his way up her body, resuming the stroke of his finger inside her, keeping his finger crooked the way she seemed to like.

He hovered over her, watching carefully as he pulled his finger out then pushed in again, caressing her inner walls.

“Does it feel good?”

“So...so good.”

He smiled and settled into watching her as he moved his finger inside her, eventually squeezing in a second finger even though she was so tight he worried he might hurt her.

“Oh, Cam. Yes...there!” she gasped.

The corner of his lips quirked up. “You’ve done this to yourself before, haven’t you?”

She just smiled at him, her expression knowing. Vixen and virgin. God...he’d never witnessed such appealing reactions from a woman in his life.

He realized he was thrusting his pelvis against her hip, so focused on his ministrations on her body he’d almost forgotten his own needs. But his cock was near to bursting. He needed relief...soon, or this would be over before it had even started.

He kissed her, letting her taste herself on his lips before sliding down her body once again and putting his lips to that sensitive nubbin above his finger. He kissed her deeply there, then closed his eyes and sank into playing with her body, responding to the subtle shifts of tension in her legs and in her channel as his fingers continued to surge in and out of her.

She grew tighter on his fingers, and her legs tightened over his shoulders. Her nub grew taut, and above him, her pants grew louder until she let out a low keen with every breath. She clutched the bedcovers on either side of her body.

Again, he curled his fingers, touching that sensitive spot just inside her channel. Her hips would have bucked off the bed if he hadn’t been holding her down.

And then she came. In glorious pulses that he could feel shuddering through her entire body. She throbbed

around his fingers and under his tongue, where he could feel the blood rushing through this most sensitive part of her. She sobbed, her hand clutched his shoulder, clawlike, and her nails pressed into his flesh.

He licked and stroked her through the orgasm, and finally, when her muscles had relaxed, he slipped his fingers out of her and once again moved up her body, this time kissing her sweat-slicked skin softly, because she jumped when he touched her, as if every inch of her had become oversensitive.

Finally, he was hovering above her, poised at her entrance. Still panting from her orgasm, she blinked her eyes open to look at him.

“Yes, Cam,” she said. “Don’t ask. Just...please. I need you inside me now.”

“Well, who’m I to disagree with that?” he asked, his voice tempered by a sharp mixture of arousal and humor.

His cock didn’t need adjusting. It was in the perfect place—the notch at the outside of her sex, as if it knew exactly where it needed to be to find its pleasure and ultimate peace.

He pushed into her. He didn’t thrust in, tearing his way through her virginity, but he pushed slowly and steadily. She was tight as hell, and pleasure ran up his cock, sparking throughout his entire body.

Finally, he was all the way in, buried to the hilt inside her.

He opened his eyes to look at her. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her mouth open in a tiny *O*.

“Look at me, lass,” he told her. He wanted to see those bonny brown eyes on him as he moved inside her.

Her eyes fluttered open, at first unfocused, then finding his.

“Does it hurt?” he whispered.

“A bit. Less now.”

Their gazes locked, he pulled out slowly, feeling the squeeze of her from his base to his tip. It was like nothing he'd ever experienced.

Why? A voice inside him asked. He'd been with many women. Why was this different? Why was this *more*?

As soon as those thoughts came, they disappeared, pushed away by the intense pleasure coursing through his body. Everything disappeared but Esme. Cam didn't care where he was—even who he was. All that existed was this bonny woman and the pleasure she was bringing him. The pleasure reflected in her expression. She gasped, arched into him, ran her hands over his skin, encouraged him with whispers. She was loving this as much as he was.

He wanted to do it all day. All night. The rest of his life. What pleasure they could bring each other, if only...

“Cam,” Esme whispered. “Oh...Cam.”

She slid her hands up his neck, circling it for a moment, adding the slightest pressure, then sliding behind his head and digging the tips of her fingers into his hair.

His arse flexed then relaxed each time he sank into her then pulled out, feeling the slide of the pressure all around his cock from top to bottom.

“Kiss me, Cam.” Esme's body trembled beneath him as she pulled him downward. “Please. Kiss me.”

He bent lower and kissed her, drinking deep of her, tangling tongues with her, sinking inside her and becoming one with her in every way he possibly could.

Damn it. He wanted this to go on forever. But it couldn't. He couldn't last. He was going to come, soon. Tension coiled at the base of his spine, and then...it

simply detonated. He thrust into her, hard, and froze, pleasure so fierce exploding through him, spots burst in his eyes. His whole body undulated, like a leaf caught in the grip of a fierce gale. He'd never come so hard.

It seemed to go on and on, seed gushing from him in near painful bursts, until all the strength seeped from him at once, and he sagged onto the mattress.

No, not onto the mattress. Onto the woman beneath him. He was probably crushing her. With a final burst of effort, he managed to roll off her to the side and drag her into his arms, resting his chin on the top of her head as they wrapped their limbs around each other.

He might have fallen asleep. He had a vague awareness of the world falling into darkness, of Esme's chest moving against his body, of how her breaths and his came in a soothing sort of unison.

He thought of happy things. Childhood moments. His mother's gentle voice. Anna's laugh. Tossing a ball with Alastair. Esme's sweet smile. Her lovely body. Her intriguing mix of vulnerability and strength. How good she made him feel. Not only physically good, but gratified, content, *happy*.

If only he could feel this way forever.

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Chapter 17

When Cam came fully awake, it was as dark as pitch in his bedchamber. Esme was curled into him, her breaths slow and steady in sleep. It took several minutes to extricate himself from their tangle of limbs without waking her.

He'd wake her soon, but not yet. He needed a moment alone to think this through.

He slipped out of bed, found his kilt on the floor and felt around until he found the single straight chair. He sat in front of the desk and placed his elbows on its surface, his head in his hands.

What had he been thinking?

He hadn't. He'd been so seduced by her, so overcome by being inside her that he hadn't thought.

He'd come inside her. His whole life, he'd been careful to never come inside a woman, to never risk a pregnancy. He didn't want children, and he definitely had no intention of fathering bastards. His father had two bastards that Cam knew of—the first by a maid and the second by Anna's governess, and Cam's gut had twisted every time he'd seen his mother lay eyes on one of those boys. Those lads' existence had torn his mother to shreds inside.

And now...he'd been stupid. He could have given Esme a child.

Stupid...just like his father was stupid. Crass and thoughtless and uncaring, like his father had been.

Having a child out of wedlock would ruin Esme. He wouldn't be able to protect her from the names that would be slung in her direction.

Unless... He looked back at the bed, hardly making out the shape of it and the figure of the woman lying upon it.

Unless you marry her.

He closed his eyes.

He couldn't marry her. She deserved far better than him. But could he let her suffer the stigma of having a bastard? Could he allow the child to suffer that stigma?

He turned back to the desk, pushing his fingers into his hair.

Fear welled up and twisted in his gut. He was suddenly more afraid than he'd ever been in his life. More afraid than he'd felt facing the entire French Army on the field at Waterloo.

He'd been so thoughtless, only caring about his own pleasure, not thinking of the repercussions to Esme. He'd ruined her. What had he been thinking when he'd thought Whitworth would make her unhappy? That was pure arrogance. The truth was, Whitworth would probably do a far better job of being a husband to her than he could.

He curled his hands into fists, pulling his hair taut between his fingers.

Bloody hell.

He knew what he had to do. There was no question of it, not now. He wouldn't let Whitworth be the cause of her unhappiness. He wouldn't let the vultures rip her apart.

He'd do it himself. Make her unhappy. Rip her apart. His sister's words resonated through him yet again: *"This sounds like something our da would do—"*

Yes, this was exactly what his father would have done. *Had* done, more than once.

God, he hated himself.

The last thing he wanted was to make Esme miserable. He wanted her to be happy, as content as he'd felt when she'd lain in his arms moments ago. But how? He hadn't the faintest idea how to make a woman happy. He'd never known a happy woman.

He stood and lit a lamp and set it upon the bedside table, watching as her eyes flickered, responding to the introduction of the light, then opened in a squint.

Esme blinked, and her eyes widened in panic as she realized she wasn't in her own bed. She surged to a seated position, pulling up the covers to cover her naked breasts and saw Cam standing beside the bed, looking down at her, the lighted lamp on the side table casting a flickering golden light over his body, which was clad in his kilt and nothing else. "What...what time is it?" she asked.

"Still early," he reassured her. He climbed into bed and drew her back into his arms. "I'll take you home in a while."

He kissed her head, and she sighed and relaxed in his arms.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

She flexed her limbs experimentally. "A bit sore," she admitted. "But in a good way."

"Did it hurt very much?"

"Not as much as I expected. And it faded quickly, and then all I felt was..."

"Pleasure?"

"Yes." She snuggled deeper into his embrace.

He took a deep breath. "I didn't leave your body in time, Esme. I came inside you. You ken what that means, right?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I do."

“I might have got you with child.”

“Yes. But the chances of that are low, aren’t they?” She didn’t want to think about that possibility right now. She just wanted to be with Cam before it was time to go home.

“I’m not sure,” Cam said. “But we need to make plans.”

“Plans?” A heavy lump formed in her gut. She didn’t want to make plans. She was finally free of them. She just wanted to enjoy the moment with Cam.

“We should marry,” Cam said flatly.

She froze.

“I’ll go to your brother tomorrow. We could have the ceremony as early as next week,” he continued, his voice toneless.

“Wait.” She pulled back from him. “Cam, what are you doing?”

“Planning,” he said. His eyes were a dark, fathomless blue in the dim light.

“But we don’t even know if I’m with child. We should at least be sure before taking drastic measures.”

“I need to ensure you’re taken care of.”

“Cam...” She shook her head. “I don’t think you want to marry me. You don’t strike me as the marrying kind of man. And I...” Her voice dwindled. In truth, she wasn’t sure if she could marry a man like Cam, a man who’d sabotage her engagement without giving thought to how she’d feel about it. “I’m not sure I want to marry you,” she admitted.

He stared at her for a moment, then his lips went tight. “I dinna wish to father a bastard.”

“I don’t want that, either,” she said softly. “But let’s just...let’s wait. There’s no point in planning for something that might never happen.”

She saw a muscle work in his jaw. “Aye,” he said gruffly. He sat up. “We should go.”

They dressed in silence. He helped her with her laces and tapes, and she tried to redo her hair into something that looked presentable.

They went downstairs. There was a light under the door to one of the rooms, and she heard voices from within, but Cam didn’t volunteer any information about who might be in the room. And he didn’t pause there, either—he just walked past. She was grateful for that, because what would she say to another one of the Highland Knights if they were to meet now? She’d be embarrassed and tongue-tied beyond measure.

Once they were outside, Cam hailed a hackney. He helped her into the carriage then sat beside her silently as they rattled along.

When they were a few minutes away from Trent House, Esme turned to him. “Will I see you again?”

“Aye, of course.”

“Soon?”

He nodded, then leaned forward to kiss her cheek, but he seemed preoccupied with something. Had she hurt him with her honest words about her hesitance to marry him? Surely not. Perhaps she had just damaged his tender male ego. She hadn’t agreed immediately and thanked him for making such a selfless, noble offer.

That seemed the more likely scenario.

The carriage drew up to the gate, and Cam helped her out. Then he paid the driver and sent him on his way, telling Esme that he preferred to walk home. He stood before Esme and bowed, saying, “I’d kiss you right now, if I could. But who kens who might be lurking about, awaiting something gossip-worthy to spread on the House of Trent.”

She nodded in understanding. “Goodbye, Cam.”

“Goodbye, bonny Lady Esme.”

She slipped through the gate and down the drive. At the turn, she glanced back to see him watching her, a tall, dark figure in a kilt, the expression on his face unreadable in the dark.

She hoped she’d see him soon.

—

A week passed. Esme didn’t hear from Cam, but she knew he was busy with his duties for the Highland Knights. And she was busy, too, helping Sarah as she prepared for the new baby, setting up another bed in the nursery and sewing winter clothes for the infant.

Toward the end of the week, Sam and his wife, Élise, along with their two-year-old daughter, Marie, came to spend the afternoon. As Sarah and Élise played with the children, Esme asked Sam to go for a walk with her.

Sam was the oldest of the Hawkins children and Esme was the youngest. There was a twelve-year age difference between the two of them, but even so, they’d always shared a special bond. That bond had been strengthened three years ago when they’d discovered that they shared both a mother and a father after having spent their whole lives thinking they were half-siblings.

Sam was Steven Lowell’s natural son. After the gypsy’s brief affair with their mother, the duchess, already pregnant with Sam, had married the Duke of Trent. Everyone knew that Sam was the bastard son of the House of Trent, and he’d been raised as such by all except his mother, who had treated him as she did all her children—as if he were the most important person in the world.

Years after her separation from Steven Lowell, the duchess had found her circus-performing gypsy again, and they’d had another tryst. Esme was the result of that

encounter. She had been raised to believe she was a true lady, the legitimate daughter of the Duke of Trent, and the reality that she wasn't had come as no small shock—to her as well as to all her siblings.

Nevertheless, her brothers had been there for her from the start, their support unwavering, rigid in their conviction that she still belonged to the House of Trent and that she was their full sister. They'd protected the true knowledge of her parentage, none of them wanting her to endure the brutality of the gossip that would ensue if the truth came out, all of them wanting to shelter her from the vultures of the *ton*.

As they walked through the small garden, arm in arm, Sam asked after her writing, and she told him about her current book. Then she spoke tentatively. "One of the Highland Knights came to our dinner party last month."

Sam nodded. "I know."

"Are you acquainted with him?"

"It was Camden McLeod, right? Son of the Earl of Sutton? I know him."

It was so easy to forget that Cam was the son of an earl. He never reminded anyone of his position. He was an arrogant man, for certain, but his arrogance was definitely born of something other than his parentage.

"Do you like him?" she asked her brother.

Sam slanted a glance in her direction. "He is competent at what he does. And loyal to the Knights."

"But what is he like as a person?"

Sam's lips twisted. "He is generally overconfident, and a troublemaker."

"Is he?"

"He is. He likes to test, to put others on the defensive."

She nodded. Yes, that was exactly how he'd been on that first night in Mrs. Trickelbank's establishment. Challenging her. Teasing.

"Why do you ask?" Sam said.

She shrugged.

"You have seen him since the party?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Be careful with him, Esme. The Knights lead dangerous lives. And McLeod brims with insouciance. I don't think he'll ever settle down."

She wondered what Sam would say if she told him that a few days ago, Cam had been planning their wedding. But though it had been strangely emotionless, it had still been a private moment between her and Cam. She didn't want to share it with anyone, perhaps ever.

And what would Sam say if he knew Cam had been the catalyst to end her engagement?

That would make him angry. She wouldn't share that, either.

It felt strange, keeping secrets from her brother. Since he'd found out about her writing three years ago, he'd been her one confidant.

Lately, it seemed that position had been taken by Cam. How odd that was. She'd only known him for a few weeks, and yet he had become so much to her.

"I understand," she told her brother. "I'll be careful. I promise."

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Chapter 18

A few nights later, Cam, Stirling, and Ross had Pinfield duty together. Pinfield and his daughter, Lady Emilia, had been invited to Vauxhall Gardens by Lord Merrington and his wife, longtime family friends. Merrington had ten children ranging in age from five to twenty-five, and it seemed all of them were in attendance this evening, swarming about the Knights' charge and his daughter so they could hardly see Pinfield half the time.

The Knights had sent three men tonight since Vauxhall was dimly lit and had a variety of paths and niches perfect for trysting—or more nefarious activities—and with three men, one of them could be patrolling the gardens while the others stayed close to Pinfield.

Cam was growing more and more disillusioned with this job. The men Pinfield believed were after him had seemingly vanished from the face of the earth. No one dangerous had ever approached Pinfield, and the Knights' attempts to track down the traitors had resulted in nothing but dead ends.

They were wasting time dealing with this pompous, snobbish waste of air when they could be finding and stopping the real enemies of the Crown. Or they could be using the time to find Fraser's killer. They'd made no progress on the case, and Cam was growing restless and irritable. He had a feeling that the other Knights were on the verge of giving up, too. The murderer had seemingly disappeared into thin air without a trace.

Cam could find him, if he was just given the opportunity to investigate more deeply. But no, he had to spend his days and nights watching Pinfield and his gluttony instead.

Now Pinfield, Lady Emilia, and Merrington and his family had just sat down to eat in one of the dinner

boxes, and Ross sighed. "I'll check the footpaths," he said as serving lasses began to pass Vauxhall's famous thinly sliced ham to the diners. "If I stay I might be stealing that ham from Pinfield's plate."

"You should." Stirling gazed over at Pinfield, seemingly impassive. Only a trained observer could see the dislike he held in his eyes for the man. "He's getting so fat we'll soon be rolling him from event to event."

"You could use it more than he could, that's for certain," Cam told Ross, who must weigh a good five stone less than Pinfield.

Shaking his head so hard his mass of red curls bounced, Ross left on his patrol of the footpaths while Cam and Stirling kept an eye on the pavilion.

Cam hated being in the presence of Lady Emilia and Pinfield at the same time. Emilia looked to be in her late teens or early twenties, and she was a bonny lass but so browbeaten by her father, her shoulders seemed to bow from the weight of it.

When Pinfield glanced at Emilia with a sneer, Cam had to turn away.

He was done with this. Let the damn traitors have at Pinfield. It would be no loss to Cam, and England would be better off without the bastard, as far as he was concerned.

Stirling leaned over to speak to him above the din of music and people chattering. "Who was the woman you had in the house last week?"

Cam cocked a brow at his friend. "You spying on me, man?"

"Come, now. If I'd no inkling of what was going on under my nose at my own house, I wouldn't be making a very good Highland Knight, now, would I?"

"I suppose not."

“So who was it?”

“It wouldn’t be kind to the lady if I blabbed her name about town,” Cam said.

“True. But we’re brothers, aye? It’s no’ like I’m going to be running the information straight to the *Times*.”

“I didna think you’d go that far.”

“So was it a one-time assignation or will she be returning to the house? If you’ll be bringing her back, perhaps you should be warning the rest of the lads, so we dinna accidentally shoot her on the spot. And you’d best warn Mackenzie’s and the major’s wives. If they saw a lass slipping into your bedchamber they’d probably interrogate you for days on end.”

Well, that was probably true. “I dinna think she’ll be returning. Unless—” He broke off all of a sudden.

Now it was Stirling’s turn to cock a brow. “Unless?”

Cam pushed out a breath. “Well...I’m thinking I’ll be marrying her. Soon.”

Stirling’s other brow popped up. “What?”

“Aye.” Cam crossed his arms over his chest, glanced at Pinfield, who was still berating his daughter, then let his gaze scan the perimeter.

Stirling grasped his shoulder. “You’re *marrying* this lass?”

“I think so.”

He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about marrying Esme since he’d left her at her brother’s house five nights ago. In fact, he’d gone so far as visiting the jeweler’s and procuring a wedding ring of scrolled gold, inset with tiny diamonds. Buying it had brought out all sorts of emotions Cam had not known he’d been capable of feeling. Anxiety and worry. Would she like it? Would she accept it?

Was she, at this moment, growing his child in her belly?

He needed to marry her. But as the days progressed, he was starting to realize that not only did he need to marry her, he *wanted* to marry her.

Esme was a beautiful, fascinating woman. Being with her brought him a peace he'd never known. The thoughts he had of waking up beside her every morning felt so *right*.

He wanted Esme. He'd pushed all thoughts aside of not being good enough for her. Marrying her was the right thing for him to do. It was what he wanted.

He'd worry about all the rest of it later.

"McLeod?"

Jerked from his thoughts, Cam turned to Stirling. "What?"

"Well, if you're going to be marrying the lass, shouldn't we ken who she is?"

"She hasna agreed to marry me." Not yet. He was still working out how to change her mind. He didn't want to wait a month or two to see if she was with child. What if she wasn't?

He no longer felt the need to marry her because there might be a child. The worry over a pregnancy was simply the catalyst that had opened the door for him to see what he really wanted.

"For God's sake, man. Just tell me if I know her."

"I'm not sure. She's Sam Hawkins's sister."

Stirling's mouth gaped. "Lady Esme?"

Oh, hell. Stirling knew her. "Aye," he said on a sigh.

"I heard her engagement to Henry Whitworth fell through." Stirling narrowed his eyes at Cam. "Dinna tell

me that was because of you.”

Cam looked away, shrugging.

“Holy hell,” Stirling mused. “Are you certain you wish to be involved with the House of Trent? You dinna like being in the public eye, and that family has always been in the center of it.”

“Aye, I ken. But not by their choice.”

“Doesn’t change the fact, though.”

“I suppose not.”

“Lady Esme Hawkins, eh?” Stirling mused. “She’s a bonny lass. And she seems pleasant enough, if a little sheltered.”

Cam smiled. “Sheltered, eh? How do you know her?”

“I met her at a ball a few years ago. She had just come out in society, but she didna seem at all comfortable to be out. The rumor was that she was rushed into it, but if they’d waited till she was ready, she’d have been in her forties before she came out.”

“Hmm,” Cam said. “Aye, I suppose she’s sheltered in some ways, and she doesna like crowds.”

“Not surprising, after what happened at that ball.”

“What happened?”

“Poor wee thing caused quite a spectacle.”

“How?” Cam demanded.

“Well, ’twas nothing to me. But the English *ton* is full of harpies and rumormongers.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

“Aye, well, Lady Esme fell. That’s all it was. She tripped over her hem. Such things happen from time to time. But she was the sister of the Duke of Trent, it was in the middle of the ballroom, in the middle of a dance, and her dress ripped apart at the seams. Two men and

three other unfortunate ladies stumbled over her, and they created quite a heap of silk and satin and flailing limbs on the dance floor.”

Cam winced. “Jesus.”

“Aye,” Stirling mused. “Exactly who I invoked as I watched it happen. I kent what they’d do to her.”

“And did they?”

“Oh, aye. I heard she was rushed back to the duke’s country seat in disgrace, and the scene was the subject of gossip in London for weeks.”

Cam ground his teeth. If he heard anyone speak of or to Esme in any condescending manner, they wouldn’t *have* teeth. “She’s more worldly-wise than you’d guess, Stirling, you may trust me on that.”

Worldly enough to explore the underbelly of London at night. The night he’d snuck into her room, she’d told him about how she’d gone to gaming hells and whorehouses and had even once slipped into a gentlemen’s club. And she wrote romantic fiction. That fact alone probably made her the least sheltered of any society miss in London. Of course, he would tell Stirling none of that.

Stirling cocked his head, studying Cam’s expression. “You’re fond of her, aren’t you?”

“Aye, I am.” Cam’s voice was gruff. The orchestra started playing a Scotch reel, and immediately dozens of people rose to dance, abandoning their half-eaten bowls of fresh strawberries with clotted cream.

Merrington’s eldest son whispered in Lady Emilia’s ear, and she nodded, taking his hand. As the two walked by, Emilia cast a shy smile in Stirling’s direction, then immediately looked away.

“I think she fancies you,” Cam chuckled, watching Stirling gaze after the lass. “Mayhap you’ll be next to marry.”

“God,” Stirling groaned. “Can you imagine it? She’s a sweet, bonny lass, but Pinfield as a father-in-law?” He shuddered as they watched Pinfield saunter by with one of Merrington’s slender, angular daughters on his arm, the pair looking rather like Jack Sprat and his wife.

“You take the north side,” Stirling said in Cam’s ear. “I’ll be watching the south.”

“Aye,” Cam agreed, and moved to one end of the dance while Stirling went to the other. Cam clasped his hands behind his back and watched the reel, wondering if Esme liked to dance...because he’d love to dance with her. He’d have to trade her off with other men in a reel like this one. The more intimate setting of a waltz—that would be ideal. He could hold her, lead her through the moves, feel the soft press of her curves against his body...

A sharp scream from behind him snapped him out of his reverie.

He spun around, as did several of the other people standing nearby. The sound seemed to have come from the footpath to his left, and he couldn’t see anything, as the path veered straight off into a thick copse of trees, and the lighting was intermittent and dim.

He glanced over his shoulder. No sign of Stirling. On the opposite side of the dancers, he’d be too far away to have heard the scream, most likely.

Then, a woman shouted, “Help! Please, help!” and Cam set off running toward the noise, pushing past the milling people.

He turned the bend in the path. Up ahead, he could see a small group of ladies bent over something off to the side. Not knowing what kind of danger might be lurking about, he slipped his pistol from his coat but held it against his leg, hidden by a pleat in his kilt so he didn’t frighten the women as he approached. He could hear the

footsteps of several more people behind him hurrying to help.

The ladies parted for him, a quick glance at their faces revealing them to be pale with horror and shock.

Cam looked down at what their skirts had been hiding from view.

Ross lay on the ground, his limbs akimbo, bathing in a pool of blood. Cam sank down to his friend's side and put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Ross?"

Ross's head rolled toward Cam. His eyes were closed, his face glowing pale in the dim light. He was either unconscious...or dead.

A scream welled in Cam's throat. *No. No, no, no.*

He pressed his ear to Ross's chest, and then he heard it. The faintest heartbeat, the tiniest rasp of a breath. He rose, his cheek sticking briefly to the blood welling on Ross's coat, pressed his hand to the open wound on Ross's chest, and roared for a doctor.

Another Highland Knight had been attacked. And Cam would be damned if he was going to let this one die.

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Chapter 19

Two nights later, Esme was sound asleep when a movement in her bed awakened her.

“Cam?” She started to roll over to face him, but he wrapped his arm around her, holding her in place.

“Aye, ’tis me.” He pressed his front to her back, moving her braid aside to pepper kisses over her neck.

She sighed and snuggled against him, feeling drowsy and comfortable and content.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I’ve been busy.”

“With Lord Pinfield?”

He sighed. “Aye.” They lay in silence for a moment, then he added, “I’ve been counting the moments until I could be with you again, Esme.”

“Me, too,” she admitted, “but I didn’t know how high the count would go.”

“We dinna have to live in anticipation,” he murmured. “We could be together every night, if...”

She squeezed her eyes shut. She still wasn’t ready for any talk of something permanent with Cam. She’d promised herself she’d be more prepared, more honest with herself the next time she dove into a commitment. And her feelings about Cam were so tangled she didn’t know how to begin to unravel them.

Time was what she needed. Time with Cam to learn more about him, and without him to learn more about herself.

“What have you been doing while I’ve been away?” he said.

She hummed. “The duchess has gone into confinement, so I have taken over many of her duties, which are simple for her, because she is lovely and charming, but wretched for me.”

He squeezed her tighter and shuddered behind her. “They’d be wretched for me as well. You’re a strong woman.”

She gave a self-deprecating laugh. “Or weak, depending on how you choose to look at it. But something good did happen.”

“What’s that?”

“I finished my book yesterday.”

“Did you?”

“I did,” she said proudly. Every time she finished a book, she felt an inordinate amount of pride in her accomplishment—which she could never share with anyone. Until now.

Cam turned her in his arms so they were facing each other. “Well done,” he said softly, his blue eyes sparkling. He kissed her on the tip of her nose, and she smiled.

“Thank you.”

“Now then, there’s another book for me to be reading. I canna wait until it is in print.”

She froze, tension tightening every muscle in her body. “Wait...are you...Are you saying you’ve read my books?”

“Aye,” he said, smiling, “of course.”

“Wh-why?”

“Because they’re an important part of your life. So they’re an important part of mine as well.”

“Did you...?” She bit her lip, too afraid to finish the question. What if he had hated her stories and thought her a fool for writing them?

“I did,” he said. She looked up at him in confusion, and he nodded. “You’re asking if I liked them?”

She winced, and he laughed. “I liked them, aye. I loved them. Each and every word reminded me of you. They were sweet and brave and romantic. I loved them almost as much as I—” He broke off all of a sudden.

“As much as you what?”

“Never mind. The important thing is that there will be another one. I canna wait. When will it be published?”

“It’ll be several months yet. It’s only a first draft. I need to revise and edit it and then it will need to be printed. The whole process takes quite a long time.”

“I’ll await my copy with bated breath.”

“Don’t bate your breath too much,” she teased. She gave him a wicked, suggestive look. “You’ll be needing to keep your strength.”

He smiled, and it was then that she noticed the darkness in his expression, the lines of strain at the edges of his eyes. “I’ll keep up my strength,” he said. “Dinna worry about that.”

“Cam?”

“Aye?”

“Has...something happened?”

“What makes you say that?”

She touched his forehead between his brows. “There’s a groove that appears just here when something’s bothering you.”

He closed his eyes, sighing.

“What is it?”

“Another Knight was attacked, night before last.”

“Oh...no,” she breathed. “Is he...Was he murdered?” She waited, holding her breath. *Please, please, let him be*

all right...

“He’s alive. Barely.”

“Oh, Cam. I’m so sorry. Who was it?”

“Sir Ewan Ross. He was an officer of the Gordon Highlanders, knighted by the Regent for valor in battle. I’ve known him since he was an ensign. He is a good man. My brother. One of my best friends.”

“Will he be all right?” she asked through the tightness in her throat.

“I dinna ken. Maybe.” He gazed at her hopelessly. “He was stabbed in the chest, near his lung. It’s a terrible wound and he lost almost all his blood. He’s suffering.” Cam swallowed. “He’s suffering and there’s naught I can do for him.”

She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his chest. “There is something you can do,” she said. “Find who did it and make him pay.”

“Aye,” Cam said roughly. “That’s what I intend to do. But Ross didna see his attacker, so he canna give us any sort of description. It happened in Vauxhall Gardens. The man came from behind, and it was dark. A group of ladies was walking along the footpath, and they came upon the scene before the killer could finish the job. They didna see the man’s face at all—they can only tell us he was of average height and wearing a dark cloak, and when they screamed, he stumbled into the bushes and disappeared.”

“He stumbled? Did Sir Ewan injure him somehow?”

“We dinna ken. Ross doesna recall injuring him, but it’s possible. He’s feverish, and his memories of the incident are muddled.”

She held on to him tighter. “You’ll find him. I’m sure of it.”

“Aye. I wilna rest until I do.” Cam was silent for a moment, then said, “We’re no longer to be outside alone. We’re to stay in pairs when we’re out and about in London, or anywhere else. But I...” He gazed hard at her, as if he wanted to dive inside and take up residence in her soul. “I needed to see you. You calm my spirit, Esmé. You soften all my hard edges. I need—” He cut himself off abruptly.

She touched the lines of strain at the edge of his eye, then smoothed her fingers down the side of his whisker-roughened face. He was so handsome. Such a bewildering, fascinating mix of hard and soft, imperviousness and vulnerability. She loved that he felt she could soften his hard edges. Loved that he’d come to her for comfort tonight.

She kissed him softly, slowly, as if they had all the time in the world to share this intimate touch. He’d already removed his jacket, stockings, shoes, and kilt, and was only wearing his long linen shirt. She tugged it up and ran her hand along the back of his thigh as she kissed him but stopped abruptly when her hand touched a lump of flesh just below his hip, an area of his body she hadn’t yet seen or explored. “What’s this?”

He pressed her hand over it, and she could feel the raised lines of flesh.

“Injury from Waterloo. A bullet skimmed me. ’Twas nothing. Not enough for the surgeons to pay any attention. The major’s wife wrapped it and I hardly noticed it a bit as it healed. It left a bit of a scar, though.”

“A bit?” she asked in astonishment. “It feels like it cut through half your body.”

“Aye, well. Many men suffered far worse,” he said.

“You were lucky,” she said, thinking of all the soldiers killed at Waterloo, all the men who’d returned maimed. Cam didn’t even have a limp—just this ragged mass of

flesh to remember the battle by. “I’m so glad you were one of the lucky ones.”

He nuzzled the shell of her ear, nibbling kisses all around it, and her eyes sank shut in pleasure.

“You’re fond of me,” he murmured. “Admit it.”

“I’d hardly let you into my bed if I wasn’t fond of you,” she said archly.

“You like how I make you feel. I give you pleasure.”

“I think that’s obvious.” She moved her braid aside, revealing more skin on the side of her neck for him to kiss.

“Aye, but I like to hear you say it,” he said, peppering kisses down her neck. He drew back and untied the ribbon at the top of her nightgown, pulling one side away and kissing the side of her breast.

“I’m fond of you, Cam.” She pushed her hands in his hair, loving the feel of its softness against her fingers. “I don’t like how you make me feel—I love it.”

“Good.” He raised his head so their eyes met. “I was gentle with you last time, Esme. It was your first time, and I didna wish to hurt you any more than I had to. But I want you to know—I’m not a gentle lover.”

“What kind of a lover are you?” she asked him, anticipation of his answer already making her heart pound a quick staccato.

“The kind who takes his pleasure ruthlessly.”

She shuddered, and a wicked smile curled his lips. “Do you like the sound of that?” he asked.

“I do,” she admitted, struggling against the shyness threatening to overtake her. “I want that. I want you to be ruthless. I want you to take your pleasure from me.”

“Why?” His eyes were narrowed, deep blue in the dimness of the room, lit only by the residue of a shadowy

moon outside.

She thought about that for a moment. “Because...I think I’ll take pleasure from it as well.”

He nodded in approval. “Good. I like to be rough. I like to be hard. But it is better for me when my partner wants it as well.”

She nodded shakily.

“You’re a gentle lady, Esme. But I’ve read your books. They made me think that we just might possess similar carnal desires.”

Her breath caught. “I...think we might.”

“If anything I do hurts you or goes too far, you tell me, aye?”

She nodded.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Good lass.” He pulled all the way back from her. “Will you give me what I need tonight?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I need...to forget.” And though his words and his voice were hard, there was a plea in his eyes.

“Tell me how to help.”

“Aye. Take off your night rail.”

She did, and as she pulled the muslin gown over her head, he removed his shirt. She stayed on her knees, waiting for his next instruction, and he lay on his back on the bed. “Come here, lass. Straddle my face.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and her breaths shaky, she did as he’d instructed. “Brace yourself on the bed frame,” he said. When she’d done so, he grasped her thighs and brought her sex toward his face. She gasped loudly when the lips of her sex touched his mouth. His tongue flicked

out, licking her most intimate area, and she closed her eyes, leaning forward to rest her upper body on the wooden headboard.

He feasted on her—that was the only way to describe it. He licked and sucked, and these were no tentative motions. His tongue speared her, and his suction over her sensitive bud was so intense she saw stars. A deep shudder began in her core and spread upward through her chest and down her legs. He must have felt it, but he didn't relent. His fingers dug almost painfully into the tops of her thighs.

She began moving against him, over him, and he redoubled his efforts until she nearly sobbed with every breath. Lust spiraled in her, tightening from her core out to her limbs, wrapping all her muscles, her entire body, in its tight bonds.

She couldn't do this. It was too much. She began a low chant. "No, no, no..." Her muscles grew tighter and tighter.

And then, every strand that had tightened around her snapped all at once. Pleasure rushed through her with such force, she jerked with it like a rag doll. She cried out, frightened for a split second that she would literally fall apart, but then she understood she wouldn't. She couldn't, because Cam was holding her, licking her, sucking her through the excruciating, brilliant pulses of ecstasy.

When the throbbing slowed, she realized Cam had slid out from under her and now knelt behind her. "I need to fuck you now," he said. Pressing her forehead against the headboard, she whimpered at the harsh language. The wetness of her arousal trickled down the inside of her thigh.

"I can't hold back tonight, Esme," he said gruffly. "It's going to be hard."

“Yes, Cam. Please.”

His hand snaked around her body and his fingers pressed hard on her center, nearly sending her leaping off the bed. She made a sound of pain...or pleasure. She wasn't sure which.

“Too much?”

“Yes. No!” she corrected. “Too much, but also not enough,” she gasped. “I need more. I need you.”

He made a low, very Scottish sound of approval. His hardness rubbed through the crack of her buttocks as he pressed his body against hers, pelvis to bottom, stomach to back. He adjusted himself so that his tip pressed against her opening, then grasped her waist with both hands and thrust inside.

They released a harsh breath as one. She didn't have time to catch hers, because he was moving in long strokes, reaching her deepest parts, his body warm against her back. His thrusts were so hard, she had to brace herself with her hands on the headboard so she didn't slam her head into it every time he surged deep.

“God,” he bit out. “You feel so good, Esme. So tight and hot wrapped around my cock.”

Oh...my. She shuddered, and her sex contracted at his words. She realized with a shock that she liked his crass words—no, *loved* them. They made her hotter and wetter and brought her a notch closer to her peak.

“I love fucking you,” he said in her ear. “I love this. I could fuck you for the rest of my life and die a happy man.”

Another shudder. Another notch higher.

One of his hands moved from her hip to her neck. He wrapped his hand around her neck, squeezing gently. If he wanted, he could squeeze the life right out of her. She

was in his hands, but she trusted him. He wouldn't hurt her, only bring her pleasure.

He kept his hand there, his fingers tight but not squeezing, as he pushed himself deep inside her, over and over again, subtly shifting position every few minutes to find another angle that inevitably made her shiver in delight at the exquisite feel of him pressing against her inner walls.

Suddenly, he pulled out. Without preamble, he flipped her over so she lay on her back and he moved on top of her. "Keep your eyes open," he said. "Wrap your legs around me and watch me come."

She arched up as he pressed into her this time, gasping at the invasion into her sensitive flesh. She watched him, the muscles in his arms working, his jaw tight as he stared down at her. Under her legs, she could feel the muscles in his buttocks contracting with every thrust.

"Put...your hand between your legs," he said. "Touch yourself. Stroke yourself on the outside while I stroke you inside."

She did as she was told, venturing two fingers between her legs, touching the area just above where he entered her body. She was well practiced in this, having taught herself how to find her own pleasure years ago, long before she'd started writing about such things. So it didn't take more than a minute or two of her touch combined with Cam's before she was panting, once again close to her own release.

"Tell me when you're going to come," he ordered.

"Yes."

In another two minutes, she was ready. "I'm...I'm going...to...to..."

"Aye," he said, his voice rough as gravel, "come. Come for me now."

She did, her body arching and undulating as she rubbed herself through the climax. It shuddered through her, streams of glorious pleasure, loosening all her muscles until she felt like her entire body glowed from the inside out.

“Good lass,” he murmured. He’d slowed his thrusts while she’d come but now he pushed hard inside her. “Open your eyes now, and watch me, like I watched you.”

She opened her eyes and watched him. His eyes were mere slits now, the tension radiating off his skin. She rubbed her hands up his arms, glorying in the contours of hard male muscle under her fingertips.

He thrust again and again, harder and harder, his body tightening until he threw his head back, his face tight with pain or pleasure, or perhaps a combination of the two. He burrowed deep and held, his body shuddering as he pulsed inside her, releasing his seed into her body.

When he’d finished, he slumped on top of her, then, seeming to remember himself and realizing that he was crushing her, he slipped out of her and rolled to his side, bringing her along with him and tucking her against his body.

This time, Esme didn’t drift off to sleep straightaway. She assessed each sore, sated part of her body, and wondered that he’d come inside her again after all his worry over last time. Perhaps he’d decided it didn’t matter now that it had happened once, and either way they’d be taking their chances. Or perhaps it had slipped his mind again.

Either way, she decided, she needed to discuss this with him. He shouldn’t come inside her anymore. If she wasn’t with child, they needed to prevent it from happening.

She thought of what their child would look like. Dark hair, for certain. But would she have Cam’s snapping

blue eyes or her sober, dark ones? Would she have pale skin like Cam's or olive skin like her own?

With these thoughts drifting around in her head, she finally fell asleep.

Only to be awakened, what felt like moments later, to a crashing noise. Her eyes popped open as she jerked up into a sitting position, her gaze snapping to her bedroom door.

Trent stood in her doorway, a look of utter fury on his face.

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Chapter 20

When it registered in her sleep-fogged brain that her brother was glaring—not directly at her but at the space beside her in her bed—Esme scrambled to cover her bare breasts with the blankets before mortification froze her solid.

Sarah, dressed in a white robe, hurried up to stand behind her husband, her face falling when she saw the scene on Esme’s bed.

Slowly, Esme turned her head. Oh God.

Cam lay unmoving beside her. He sat up carefully, the blanket falling away to reveal his strong, pale chest. Leaving no doubt as to what, exactly, he was doing in her bed.

Heat like she’d never before experienced burned in her cheeks.

Her brother drew up to his full height in the doorway, imposing even in his slippers and nightshirt. “What the *hell* is going on here?”

“Your Grace,” Cam said. No, he *drawled* the words, as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

“Who is that?” Trent demanded, stalking forward.

Spots swam in Esme’s vision. She clutched the blanket in her fists, struggling to keep herself covered.

“Trent...I...” What on earth could she say? Nothing. There was nothing she could say, nothing she could do. She glanced again at Cam. He was a dead man.

“Camden McLeod, Your Grace,” Cam volunteered.

Trent crossed his arms over his chest, glowering. “Get out of that bed and face me like a man.”

“Could you give us a moment?” Cam asked mildly. “We aren’t exactly presentable.”

“Give you—?” Trent’s cheeks went pink. It looked like his head was a bomb that was about to explode.

“Yes.” Cam’s hand pressed comfortingly against the small of her back, and she couldn’t for the life of her comprehend how it actually calmed her enough that her vision cleared. “We’ll meet you in the drawing room in a few minutes.”

Trent stared at him, unmoving. Seconds ticked by, each one seeming to last forever. Finally, Sarah stepped forward, her body unwieldy in advanced pregnancy, and put a hand on Trent’s shoulder. “Come, dear.”

She tugged him back, then stepped into the doorway to close the door, studiously keeping her eyes off Cam and Esme.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Esme sagged, dropping her head into her hands. “Oh God,” she panted. “Oh God. Oh my God.”

“Shh,” Cam said. “Dinna fash yourself, lass. It’s going to be all right.”

“No, it’s not,” she said between fast, panicked breaths. “It’s not. This is...disastrous.” She yanked her head out of her hands to stare at Cam. “He’s going to kill you.”

“Nonsense. Dueling is illegal. And the Duke of Trent is a stickler for the law, I hear.”

“We have to get you out of here,” she said, rising. Quickly, she found her nightgown and threw it on over her head. She went to the window. “Do you think you can climb down the side of the house? The heroine climbs out in *The Devil’s Pearl*, but that house had a trellis—”

“I’m not leaving you to this, Esme.”

“But—”

“Shh. Everything will be all right.”

“No, it won’t. How could it?” Tears leaked out of her eyes, and she swept them away with the back of her hand, shaking so hard she almost missed her face.

He drew her into his arms, holding her in the tight circle of his embrace.

“We have to go. You have to leave...Cam, please...Oh, I’ve ruined everything—”

“Esme, stop.”

“You don’t understand. He’s my brother. What we’ve done—he’ll never forgive me.”

“Of course he will. You’re his sister and he loves you. He’ll forgive you.”

“No. He won’t. He won’t...” Her breath caught on a sob.

“He will, lass. He will...” He rubbed her back, speaking in low tones, in Gaelic, she realized belatedly.

She slipped her arms around him and held him tight. “I’m so scared, Cam. I don’t want him to hate you. I don’t want him to hate me. Trent has always been in control of my life—my happiness.”

“It’s going to work out.”

She drew in a shuddering breath. “Don’t let him kill you.”

“I won’t.” His voice held no small measure of amusement.

Of course. Cam was the one with the extensive combat experience. In a fight, he’d surely be the victor. “And don’t hurt him, either. Promise me.”

“I’ve no intention of hurting your brother, lass.”

She nodded against his chest.

“Now, let’s go downstairs and talk to him. I’ll be by your side. We’ll get through this together.”

Of all the things he’d said to this point, those words calmed her the most. “All right,” she whispered. She found her robe and slipped it on while Cam buckled his kilt.

When they’d finished, he took her hand and squeezed, drawing her to him. “We’ll be all right. I promise you.”

Looking up at him, at the sincerity in his blue eyes, she nodded. Some of her panic had faded, but it was still there, bubbling under the lid Cam had placed firmly over it.

He kissed her softly on the lips. “Come.”

He held her hand all the way down the corridor, down the stairs, and into the drawing room. Both Trent and Sarah were standing when they entered, both turning to face them as the door opened.

Cam tugged her inside and closed the door. She tried to extricate her hand from his, but he held it tight. Trent looked from their hands to Cam’s face, his own face twisted in righteous fury.

“Unhand my sister, McLeod,” he said in a deadly calm voice that sent a shudder through Esme.

Again, Esme tried to let go, but Cam squeezed her hand and held steady.

“Your Grace,” Cam said. “I owe you an apology. I ken the circumstances aren’t ideal—”

“Ideal?” Trent sputtered. “I-deal? Are you crazy? You’re under my roof—the same roof where my family innocently sleeps, and you’re in my innocent sister’s bed, both of you naked as the day you were—”

“As I said,” Cam interjected, “not ideal.”

“I’d say not!” Trent’s voice had risen in volume to a near yell, and Sarah laid a hand on his arm, attempting to comfort him, Esme could tell, though she looked nearly as upset as her husband was.

“Simon,” Sarah said softly. “We don’t want to rouse the house.”

Trent took three heavy breaths, face red and shining with a sheen of sweat, though it wasn’t at all hot this evening.

“You have disrespected and offended me, McLeod. You have entered my house uninvited. You have touched my young sister, who is under my care.”

Esme shook her head at that. “I’m not so young,” she reminded him. “I’m three and twenty.”

“But an innocent yet,” he countered.

“Well...” Her blush deepened, and she looked down at her bare toes poking from the hem of her nightgown. “Not anymore.”

Trent groaned. Sarah joined him. “Oh, Esme,” she whispered.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t bed each other out of wedlock,” Esme snapped, suddenly exhausted by all this posturing. “I do believe Lukas was born rather short of nine months after your wedding date.”

“That’s different—” Trent began.

“Why?” Good Lord, she didn’t know what had come over her. She never challenged Trent in anything, ever. “Don’t argue that Sarah was older and more experienced, because I believe she was my age, or maybe just a year older, and she was a virgin as well, wasn’t she?”

Trent flinched at this.

“Yes,” Sarah whispered, her features relaxing a bit. “She’s right, Simon. But, Esme, we’d known each other

for many years. You and Mr. McLeod are hardly acquainted.”

Esme glanced at Cam, and a tiny smile quirked the edge of her lips. “He knows me better than anyone. And he’s...well, he’s read my books.” She gazed at her brother and sister-in-law, hoping they’d understand the significance of this. Neither of them responded, so maybe they did understand, at least a little.

“The worst thing,” Esme said, “was that it happened under your roof. I am sorry for that, Trent, sorrier than you’ll ever know. I hope that one day you will forgive me. It was thoughtless of me, and a terrible thing to abuse your trust in such a way.”

She glanced at Cam, who was gazing at her, no small amount of surprise—and appreciation—in his expression.

“It *was* thoughtless,” Trent said.

“Aye, it was,” Cam said, “but you canna blame Esme. ’Twas my fault.”

Sarah shook her head. “How many times has this happened?”

Cam and Esme glanced at each other. “Twice,” Esme admitted.

“Lady Esme had no idea I was coming either time,” Cam said.

“Yet she didn’t scream the house down when you appeared in her room,” Trent said dryly.

“No, I didn’t,” Esme said. “I might not have known he was coming, but once he arrived, I wanted him here.”

Trent pushed a frustrated hand through his hair. “I can’t have this, Esme. I can’t have men sneaking into my house and into your bed.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry—”

He raised his hand to stop her words. “It cannot happen again.” He turned his gaze to Cam, his expression hardening. “And you...you won’t be welcome here in the future. You have ruined my sister.”

Sarah suddenly gasped. “Is this why you didn’t seem terribly upset about the end of your engagement? You’d developed a tendre for Mr. McLeod?”

Esme winced. “I don’t know, truly. But meeting him did...bring home the fact that I never really loved Henry.”

Trent blew out a breath. He hadn’t taken his gaze from Cam. Cam gazed steadily back at him.

“I intend to make this right,” Cam announced, his voice firm.

“What do you mean by that?” Trent asked.

“I will do right by her.”

“Meaning?” Trent pressed.

Cam seemed to straighten, grow taller, beside her. “I will marry her. As soon as possible.”

Finally, Esme managed to tear her hand from his. “What? Cam, we already talked—”

“I had no intention of ruining your sister. I care for her, and I promise I will do my best to make her a good husband. I’m asking you, as her guardian, formally, for her hand.”

Esme gaped at him. Oh God.

“I will be able to provide for her,” Cam continued. “As you know, I am the heir to the Earl of Sutton—not only his title, but his entailed lands. There are two estates in England and one in Scotland, with a combined income of fifteen thousand a year.”

“I know you’re wealthy enough for her,” Trent snapped. “That’s not my concern.”

“What is your concern?” Cam asked.

“Will you make her happy?”

Esme felt a desperate sort of panic welling within her. They were speaking of her as if she weren't there.

On the other hand, she didn't know what to say. She thought of the way she felt when she was with Cam. How safe she felt in his arms. The way he'd made love to her tonight—how it would feel for him to bring her that kind of pleasure every night.

But...none of that changed the fact that he'd betrayed her by telling Henry about her writing.

Even though she could admit to herself that it had been for the best. Could she really blame him for knowing what was best for her even when she hadn't?

“I will do everything in my power to make her happy,” Cam said.

Watching him, his steady gaze on her brother, standing beside her...She was falling in love with him.

No, not falling. She'd already fallen. She loved this man. This cocksure, overconfident Scottish man with the dark past, whose loyalty to his sister and his brother Knights ranked above everything else. Would he feel that same kind of loyalty to her? She believed he would.

Trent turned to her. “Is this what you want, Esme? Can you be happy with this man?”

“I...I think so.”

“It appears he wants to marry you,” Trent said. “Do you wish to marry him as well?”

She and Cam turned toward each other. She studied his handsome face for a long moment. From his expression, she could see that this was what he really desired. He *wanted* her. He wanted to be hers. For the rest of their lives.

“There’s still so much I don’t know about you,” she whispered.

“You ken all that matters.” Cam gazed at her, the blue of his eyes so deep she felt like she was drowning in them.

“But there are still things you don’t know about me,” she said. “Things that might change your mind.”

“I don’t care about any—”

She raised her hand to stop his words. “I’m not the Duke of Trent’s daughter,” she blurted out. It wasn’t the first time she’d said words to Cam she’d never in her life spoken aloud before.

“Esme!” Trent said sharply, but she turned her hand to him, silently asking him not to interfere. After the debacle with Henry she knew that she’d never agree to a marriage when untruths still lingered. She would never again agree to go into a contract so important as a marriage without her partner knowing every one of her secrets.

Cam blinked in confusion and pulled away a bit, glancing at Trent and Sarah before looking back to her. “What do you mean?”

She took a shaky breath. “The old Duke of Trent wasn’t my father. I am...I am illegitimate.” There was another word she’d never spoken in reference to herself. She plunged on. “The duchess had an affair with another man when the duke was on his deathbed. That man is my true father.”

“But you...He...” Cam gestured at Trent.

“Trent is my half-brother,” Esme explained. “We share a mother but not a father. My real father is a gypsy—a traveling circus performer. My mother first met him when she was very young and engaged to the old Duke of Trent. Years later, he came back to her, and I was the product of that reunion. My mother waited many years

before she decided she no longer wished to live without him, and they are now finally married. His name is Steven Lowell. I am *his* daughter, not the old duke's."

Cam turned to Trent. "You've guarded this secret?"

"Yes," Trent said flatly. "Of course."

"Why?"

"To protect Esme and my brothers," Trent said. "To protect our family."

"Because he is a good man," Esme whispered. "All my brothers are good men."

There was a long silence, and alarm began to grow in Esme's chest. Cam's face was utterly blank. After all his proclamations against society and its ridiculous ideals, she thought he wouldn't care that no ducal blood ran in her veins. But maybe she'd been wrong.

"Why," he finally asked, "are you telling me this now?"

"Because I am not who I pretend to be," she whispered. "I am not a lady. I am no one."

"Esme," Sarah exclaimed, "that's nonsense! Of course you're a lady."

She ignored her sister-in-law and stared at Cam. "I am a half-gypsy illegitimate commoner, Cam. I'm not what anyone thinks I am. My entire life has been a lie."

He cupped her cheeks in his hands. "Really?" he asked, his eyes searching hers. She tried not to flinch at the anger she saw in his expression.

"Yes, really—" she began, but he cut her off as he continued, "Did you *really* think I'd give a damn who the hell your father is?"

"I—you must understand. He's a *gypsy*, Cam. He not only lacks a title, but many commoners wouldn't consider him their equal."

“I *don't care.*” His expression was fiercer than she'd ever seen it. “Your parentage means less than nothing to me. I don't give a damn if your father was the King of England or a slave boy from Barbados.”

“Are you sure?” she breathed.

“Esme. It's *you* I want to marry, not your damned bloodline. I've told you, I am not part of this society we live in. I reject it and its ideals. How the hell could you expect me to react like one of them?”

“Watch the way you speak to my sister, McLeod,” Trent growled, but Cam ignored him and continued, “Did you really think I'd toss you aside for something that you had no control over, that has naught to do with what you are to me?”

She gazed at him, and in his clear blue eyes, she could see truth. And hurt, that she'd truly think this would make a difference in his desire to marry her.

The knowledge welled from deep in her soul: She could be happy with this man. He accepted her for who she was. He was a rake and a Scot, and he made her smile and brought her pleasure and peace...and she felt comfortable with him like she had with no one else in her life—not Henry, not Trent or Sarah, or even Sam.

“I want you,” he murmured. “You. Not a duke's daughter, not an English lady, not a perfect society miss. *You.* Marry me, Esme.”

With Cam, she could be herself. And he accepted her for who she really was. He was the first person in her entire life who'd done so. Yes, this was rushed and impetuous, and she could scarcely trust herself after her poor decision in agreeing to marry Henry, but in the end, how could she say no?

She nodded. “Yes.” She turned to Trent. “Yes,” she told him. “I want to marry him.”

Trent gave a sharp nod, but his lips were tight and his blue eyes were as hard as sapphires. “Very well, then. We’ll acquire a license and you’ll be wed as soon as possible.”

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Chapter 21

Time moved forward in a slow march. Cam's days were filled with the seemingly fruitless and endlessly frustrating search for Fraser's murderer and Ross's attacker, and with the dull task of guarding Pinfield. The Duke of Trent hadn't allowed Esme and Cam to see each other for eight days so far, and missing her made the hours tick by at an even slower crawl.

The knowledge that he couldn't see Esme, couldn't talk to her, made Cam feel like an essential part of him was missing. And this feeling drove home the fact that he was doing the right thing.

Marrying Lady Esme Hawkins was what he needed. What he wanted. What would make him happy. She was the perfect woman for him.

Four days before the scheduled date of the wedding, Cam visited Ross, as he did every afternoon, at the man's family home in Kensington. The Rosses were a rich family, having made their fortune in the East India trade, and it was decided early on that their quiet, roomy estate would be the best place for Ross to recover.

Ross smiled at him from his bed, his good humor having made a quick return once the fever had broken. His wound had been serious—deep and very near his lung—but he was strong, and his physician was now quite certain he'd recover. He'd still be confined to his bed for at least another week or two, but the Knights were all looking forward to his return.

“What mischief are you up to today, McLeod? I told you, you canna be looking for my would-be killer. I want to be there when we catch the bastard.”

Cam scowled at his friend. The man well knew that they were hunting for that bastard every spare moment they had. “You canna be cross with us if we kill him

without you present. But I promise you, we'll share every detail of the encounter with you."

Ross grumbled good-naturedly, but both of them knew that as much as they'd tried, the Knights had made little progress in the investigation. Still, the man was clearly after all of them. He'd show up again, and this time, they would be ready.

"But you'll be happy to hear," Cam added, "that I'll not be chasing your man today. The esteemed Duke of Trent is finally allowing me to see my betrothed this afternoon."

"Is he?" Ross asked.

"Aye, but evidently we are to walk in Hyde Park, publicly, with a chaperone."

Ross smirked. "Ah...you wilna be allowed to meet alone in her bedchamber, then? My condolences."

"I'll survive, I expect." Cam grinned. "Barely."

It was true he couldn't wait to have her again. At night he lay in his cold, lonely bed and couldn't stop thinking of her lying naked beside him. His only relief had been in his own hand, but that couldn't compare to having the real Esme bring him to satisfaction.

But as much as he wanted to throw her into his bed and have his wicked way with her over and over again, he still looked forward to seeing her. He liked talking to her. Being with her. Just the sound of her voice brought him peace.

An hour later, he approached Esme at the statue of Achilles in Hyde Park Corner. She was flanked by a very pretty, petite blond woman and a dark-haired, curvaceous lady, both of whom smiled at him, and the slight blond woman took his hands into her own when he reached them.

“So this is the much-talked-about Mr. Camden McLeod.” Her voice was accented lightly in French.

“It is.” Esme grinned. This must be someone Esme knew quite well—he could tell by her level of relaxation. “Cam, this is my sister-in-law, Mrs. Élise Hawkins. She’s Sam’s wife.”

“Mrs. Hawkins. A pleasure.” Cam thought of the tall, burly Sam Hawkins, who would completely dwarf this woman. Sam was rough and dark and common-looking, and everything about this woman was light and airy, and her features were aristocratic in the extreme, from her blue eyes to her narrow face to her patrician nose.

And how interesting that Sam’s wife was French. Sam, he knew, had spent much time during the war rooting out French spies and traitors. He wondered how the man had found this woman, how he had ended up marrying someone who’d once belonged to the enemy.

“*Non!*” she exclaimed. “You must not call me Mrs. Hawkins. We will be family soon, so you must call me Élise.”

Cam smiled at her and tilted his head in acknowledgment. “I will, thank you. And you must call me Cam.”

“Good.” She patted his hand.

“And this...is Emma, my brother Luke’s wife.”

“Milady.”

She smiled at him, her dark eyes sparkling. “Emma, I think.”

“I don’t have the pleasure of knowing your husband.” Though Esme had told him about Luke. She’d said of all her brothers, Cam reminded her of Luke the most. Like Cam, Luke had been through difficult times as a younger man, and like Cam, evidently, those experiences had shaped who he was. Esme had said that Luke’s marriage

had softened him and turned him into a happy man for the first time in his life. If that was true, Cam hoped their similarities continued.

“You will shortly,” Emma said. “Be careful—he’s very protective of Esme.”

“He’ll have no reason to be a grouch about Cam, once he gets to know him,” Esme said. “I’m certain they’ll be the best of friends.”

“I’m sure they will.” Emma patted Cam’s arm. “He’s thrilled Esme has found someone like you, and so am I.”

Cam raised his brows. “Someone like me?”

“I mean that in the best possible way.” Emma leaned forward and spoke in Cam’s ear so no one would overhear. “I meant not a terrible prude like Henry Whitworth.”

“Ah, I see.” Cam agreed with that, anyhow. “Then I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“You should.” Emma flashed him a smile.

“So we are to be your chaperones today whilst you stroll in the park,” Élise announced.

Esme rolled her eyes heavenward. “Trent’s orders. Sarah’s in her confinement so he recruited my sisters-in-law for the task.”

“We do not mind at all,” Élise said. “We are very happy we were able to meet you before your wedding day.”

“And we know you haven’t seen each other in several days, so we won’t intrude any further. You two walk ahead, and we’ll meander along behind you,” Emma said.

“Just, you must not hide, or do any other such scandalous thing,” Élise said. “I do not take the duke’s orders lightly.”

Esme sighed. “He’d never know if...”

“Hush!” Élise commanded raising her hand in the universal gesture to halt. “I will not hear any ideas of breaking your brother’s rules.” She gave Esme a stern look. “You know he has been very kind to both of you. He could have made it much worse for you.”

Cam nodded. “Aye, she’s right, lass.” He hadn’t really expected the duke to do anything but demand marriage, but if he were a different man, he could have made it very difficult for both Cam and Esme. Cam knew that from experience with his ass of a father, who wouldn’t have been anywhere near as fair.

With a final smile of thanks toward Élise and Emma, he threaded Esme’s arm through his and led her deeper into the park. He didn’t choose the route deliberately, just headed in the direction of the first path he encountered.

“I missed you,” she sighed. “I wish we could be alone.”

He chuckled. “I think I’m going to have an insatiable wife on my hands.”

“I think you might,” she admitted. “But I have a feeling you’re just as insatiable.”

“Mayhap I am. But I can control myself. For today, anyhow.”

“I suppose I’ll have to do that, too.”

They grinned at each other. “How’s your book coming along?” Cam asked her in a low voice.

“I delivered it to my editor. Oh, Cam, I think it’s my best story yet.”

“Do you? Why?”

She shrugged, bit her bottom lip, and gave him a sideways glance. “Real-life inspiration, perhaps?” she said in a low voice.

He felt unbelievably gratified by those words. “I am happy to be your real-life inspiration, anytime.”

“Even if I decide to model one of my villains after you?”

He laughed—the first time he’d done so in days. “Especially then.”

They talked about her writing a bit more, then about her ideas for her next book. Then Esme asked whether there had been any progress on finding the men responsible for Fraser’s murder and Ross’s attack.

“There’s been little progress,” Cam said. “But we think the person who killed Fraser is the same man who tried to kill Ross.”

“Why?” she asked.

“One person at the gaming hell saw someone rushing from the scene. He was moving so quickly, he tripped over a curb and fell, but he rose and limped away before the witness could get a good look at him. Although he said he thought that the man was blond and of average height. His description matches the one the ladies who saw him at Vauxhall Gardens gave. Including the description of his black cloak.”

“That’s good news, right? You know you’re looking for one man now.”

Cam grimaced. “Their descriptions only eliminate about half of London’s male population.”

Her brow furrowed. “What did his cloak look like? Was it tattered?”

“It has been described to us as a black woolen greatcoat with cloth-covered buttons, and a hooded cape attached to it.”

“It sounds like an expensive item of clothing.”

“Probably.”

“So that means he isn’t poor, which would eliminate another large portion of the population.”

“Is this how we do it?” he asked contemplatively. “Eliminate thousands at a time until only one remains?”

“Perhaps it’s the only way to do it,” she said.

“Perhaps.”

They now walked along the banks of the Serpentine, the wind rippling its surface, the late afternoon sun sparkling off the water. Nearby, a group of small children frolicked at the water’s edge, screeching with delight, their governesses watching them with sharp eyes. Traffic passed by frequently—mostly others strolling as they were. If Cam and Esme were paying attention, he knew they would have recognized several of the people they were passing. But he was happy for his focus to remain entirely on Esme, and he was glad no one had accosted them.

Occasionally, a couple on horseback might ride by, or a gentleman or pair in a phaeton or curricule. As if from a great distance, he could hear an acquaintance calling to another, and lively conversations taking place on the side of the path. He paid attention to none of it, though.

“We’ve been spotted,” Esme murmured, drawing closer to him.

He shrugged. “I suppose that was the goal.”

She laughed softly. “He probably wanted us to be seen out and about before our wedding.”

That made sense. People seeing them “courting” before their wedding would reduce—though not completely negate—the gossip surrounding their hasty marriage.

Esme sighed in relief. “It was the Duchess of Dunsberg. She’s been distracted by someone. Thank

God.” She shuddered, and quickened her step. Cam kept pace with her easily.

“You’re not fond of this duchess, I wager.”

“Not at all. She is a terrible brat. She was engaged to Trent at one time, you know.”

“Nay.”

She laughed out a breath. “I always forget you’ve kept yourself so distant from society. Lucky you. It’s a long story, but yes, they were engaged; however, poor Trent and Sarah were falling in love. My dear brother was torn in half. In the end, though, true love prevailed, and Georgina found another duke to marry.”

“Ah, I see,” Cam said. “So her goal was to snag a duke. Any duke would do.”

Esme laughed. “Exactly.”

“And I see why you write the particular stories you do.”

“You do? Why?”

“You are surrounded by love matches. Trent and the duchess. Élise and Sam. Your mother and father...”

“You’re right.” Esme sighed. “Emma and Luke’s match was a love match as well.”

“You only have two brothers who remain unmarried,” he observed. “The two youngest ones.”

“They’re both older than me, though. Mark by six years and Theo by five. Mark is currently in India, and Theo is still at Cambridge with his nose in a book. I daresay his nose is eternally fixed to the books of Cambridge and he’ll never be permanently separated from the place.”

“It’ll be difficult for him to find a love match if his nose is eternally attached to a book.”

“Very true,” Esme agreed.

“Why is Mark in India?”

She laughed. “Because he thought it would be a fun adventure, I daresay. Mark is always looking for fun.”

Just then, a curricule drew up alongside them. Their peace had finally been broken. With a sigh, Cam looked over to see if he recognized the person.

He did. It was his father.

Every muscle in his body contracted until he felt like a band about to snap. Esme must have sensed his emotion because her arm tightened in his.

What to do? Trent didn’t want to encourage gossip, and if he kept walking, ignoring the driver of the carriage—his own father—a scandal would surely result.

He drew to a halt and pasted on what he hoped was a neutral expression. His father was looking at them coolly, assessing Esme. Cam wanted to stand in front of her—block her from this man’s probing gaze.

“My lord,” Cam acknowledged tightly.

“Camden,” the earl said. “And...” He gave the smallest hint of a tight smile in Esme’s direction. “Lady Esme Hawkins. It is very nice to see you again.”

She curtsied. “And you, Lord Sutton.”

Go away. Go away. Cam’s chest thrummed out the message, but his father clearly wasn’t receiving it.

The earl’s cold gaze returned to Cam. “Well, son, I see you’ve finally chosen the woman who will bear your heir.” He flicked a dismissive gesture to Esme, just as he’d dismissed Cam’s mother and Anna so often when Cam was a lad. “This one certainly comes with her share of rumor and gossip, and the fact that she was engaged to someone else not a month hence doesn’t bode well, but she is a duke’s daughter. Well done.”

Stay calm. Stay polite. Cam ground his teeth, hating how his father was speaking of Esme like she wasn’t standing right here. And how did one respond to words

like the ones his father had just spoken? “Thank you,” he pushed out, unable to come up with anything else polite.

“So,” the earl said, turning his attention to Esme, “you’re to be my daughter-in-law.”

“Yes, my lord,” Esme said demurely.

His eyes narrowed. “Are you certain you’re up to the task of adequately performing the duties of the Countess of Sutton one day?”

“Er...yes, my lord,” Esme said, her gaze flickering to Cam then back to rest on the earl.

“I must say, I am not convinced by your retiring demeanor,” Sutton said haughtily. “But I am certain Camden will keep you in line.” He turned back to Cam, effectively dismissing Esme. “And the wedding is to take place soon?”

Cam didn’t answer. He didn’t have the ability to speak with so many dark emotions punching their way into his chest.

“Yes, on Friday,” Esme finally said. Cam was thankful she’d answered for him.

The earl’s eyes narrowed on Cam. “I suppose I am not invited.”

That snide comment loosened Cam’s tongue. “You are welcome to come, my lord. However, Anna will be there. Anna—you remember her, of course. Your daughter?”

“I have no daughter,” the earl said, his nose twitching as if he’d just inhaled skunk.

“Well, if you dinna wish to see your *daughter*, then it might be a good idea to stay away.”

The earl stared coldly at Cam then gave him sharp nod. “I will, then.” He inclined his head at Esme, but his expression remained frosty. “Good afternoon, my lady.”

“Good after—”

But he had raised his whip to his horses, and he was gone, sending up a flurry of dust in his wake.

Esme and Cam stared after him for a long minute, then Cam exhaled, releasing the tension in his muscles as he did so.

He heard footsteps, and he and Esme turned to see Élise and Emma approaching from behind them.

“Who was that?” Emma asked, her brows raised at the carriage that was speeding away.

“I was tempted to eavesdrop, but since we said you weren’t allowed to break rules, I decided we weren’t able to either,” Élise said.

“That was...” Esme hesitated, looking to Cam.

“My father,” Cam finished for her.

“Oh.” Emma and Élise exchanged a glance. “Oh, well, I thought...The conversation didn’t appear to be a pleasant one.”

“It wasna.”

“I see,” Emma said. Then her expression softened. “I am sorry, Cam.”

He managed a light shrug. “You never ken who you’ll be meeting in Hyde Park.”

“That’s certainly the truth,” Esme said. Then to her sisters-in-law, “Would you mind if we walked a bit longer?”

“Not at all,” Élise said. She waved toward the path. “Go on, then. We’ll linger behind, as we did before.”

“Thank you.” Esme pulled him forward. When they were out of hearing range of the other ladies, she said, “What happened between your sister and your father?”

Cam sighed. “It wasn’t just what happened with Anna. It began long before that. When we were bairns. Our

mother died when I was fourteen. Anna was only nine years old, still a wee lass. Alastair was not yet sixteen, and the moment Mum died, my da decided he would go out and carouse every night and that Alastair should take on responsibility for the estate.”

“He was only a boy.”

“Aye, he was,” Cam said. “And he was never completely healthy. He was born with a weak heart.”

“Oh dear.”

“The estate immediately started careening to failure, and our da blamed Alastair for everything that went wrong. Every day, he screamed at my brother, telling him he was a fool and a worthless idiot, and not fit to follow in his footsteps as the Earl of Sutton.”

Cam winced, and Esme leaned toward him, an action that brought him some comfort in the midst of this dark memory. “I did nothing, Esme,” he said quietly. “I never stood up for my brother.”

“You were a lad, too,” she murmured. “Younger than he was.”

“Aye, but I was stronger. I was always stronger than Alastair. I could have faced my father, told him to stop. I saw how he was slowly killing my brother, and I didna do a thing.”

“But he was your father,” Esme said. “It probably wasn’t in your nature to argue with him.”

He gave her a half smile. “’Tis sweet how you defend me, lass.” He sighed. “Anyhow, the earl grew worse as the years went on. More tyrannical. It was the kind of abuse no one would ever speak of, but abuse was what it was. I ken he beat my brother, even when Alastair was a man full grown. He was always smaller than my da, always weaker.”

“Oh no,” Esme whispered. “That’s terrible.”

“I left as soon as I was old enough to join the army. I couldna stand being at home.”

Esme nodded. “I don’t blame you. I would have wanted to leave that environment, too.”

“Things grew even worse for Alastair after I left. My father drove him like a slave. The doctors said if he wasna under so much strain, his heart would have held out longer.” As always, the guilt felt like it was suffocating him, and he struggled to breathe against it.

“I’m so sorry, Cam,” Esme murmured.

“If I’d never joined the army—if I’d stayed with him, helped him—he might still be alive.”

“Guilt won’t bring him back,” Esme said. “There’s no way you could have known that.”

“Aye. Well...I returned home to bury my brother. And I found Anna. She had just turned seventeen at the time. But...” He broke off and shook his head.

“She’d been hurt,” Esme whispered. Suddenly, it all came together.

“Aye,” Cam bit out. “She’d been hurt. Badly. More than once. I went to my father, who’d mostly ignored Anna while we were children, as she was a lass and not worthy of his notice. But when I told him...”

“He didn’t help her?”

“Help?” He gave a bitter laugh. “Nay. He blamed her. He named her a whore and publicly disowned her.”

“Oh no,” Esme breathed.

“She’d nowhere to go but the streets. I took her in, and my da said if I took care of her, then I was no son to him.” Cam’s lips twisted. “But he canna stop me from inheriting the title and the entailed properties. So I cut all ties to him, set my sister up in a house, and returned to the army. Whenever I came to London, I avoided

society, who had turned their backs on my innocent sister when the word about her disinheritance became public. I also avoided my father. I hadna seen him again until today.”

“Oh, Cam. That is a horrible story. No wonder you...”

“No wonder I what?”

Esme took a deep breath. “No wonder you dislike London society so much. If they supported your father’s cruelty, no wonder you want nothing to do with the *ton*.”

“Is that going to be a problem for us?” he asked softly.

“No,” she said firmly. “Not at all. I bear no love for society, either. I would not mind if we didn’t attend another ball or party or social event for the rest of our lives.”

He remembered the story Stirling had told him of the ball where she’d tripped on her skirt and the *ton*’s glee over it. Society hadn’t been kind to her, either. He nodded. “Thank you.”

“No, don’t thank me. I understand how malicious people can be...and your father...” She shook her head. “I hope we don’t see him again.”

“Aye. As do I.” He forced a smile. “But I do want you to meet Anna. She needs friends. And she’s only a year older than you are.”

“I hope to be her friend. But you must know that despite my best intentions, I have trouble making friends. I can only seem to make the connection of friendship with my family, and perhaps they only agree because they *are* family.”

“Anna will love you,” he said stubbornly. But he had a feeling he wasn’t just being stubborn. There was something intrinsically similar about Esme and Anna. If they gave it a chance, he was certain they could be friends.

“What about you?” Esme asked after a long silence.

He looked at her, raising his brows in question.

“Your father,” she clarified. “He was cruel to Alastair, and he ignored Anna then was horrible to her when she was suffering. How did he treat you?”

Cam looked straight ahead. That was the worst of it. The one thing that made it unbearable. “He treated me well,” he admitted, though he felt like he was speaking through glass cutting into his throat.

“Really?”

“Aye. Too well. He would...stand me up in front of Alastair and compare us—all my strengths contrasted with Alastair’s faults. He said I reminded him of himself. He told my brother over and over again that I was his true son, the strong one, the intelligent one. He told us that I should be his heir, not Alastair. That I would be an Earl of Sutton to make him proud, while Alastair simply disgusted him.”

Esme stopped in the middle of the path. “Cam.” She looked up at him, her big brown eyes full of despair. “That’s not treating you well. That’s terrible. That’s surely a form of abuse in itself.”

Cam shook his head. “Nay. ’Twas nothing. I was the golden boy. The favored son. And sometimes...” His mouth went dry, and he rasped out one of his greatest shames, curling his fingers into fists at his sides. “I enjoyed it. I wanted to hear how good I was. How special and strong, how much better I was than my brother.”

“You were a child. All children desire praise. You couldn’t have understood at the time how damaging it was to your brother.”

Cam shrugged, not really believing her. All one had to do was watch Alastair to see how their father’s words and actions had slowly torn him apart. How they had killed him, just like they’d killed their mother.

Cam had stood by, basking in his father's evil praise, and he'd let his mother and brother die. He'd been *complicit* in their deaths. And Anna...well, he'd come to his senses in time to save her body, but even now he feared he'd been too late to save her spirit.

"It was long ago," Cam murmured. "I try to forget it. I do what I can for Anna, and..." He shook his head. "I just...*try*."

I try to be a better man than him, he wanted tell her. I try...but I fail more often than I succeed.

"You are nothing like him," Esme said, her voice throbbing with certainty. "*Nothing*."

He loved her so much for saying that. No one had ever said that to him. People who knew them both—even his own sister—only ever told him how like his father he was.

He wished he could believe Esme's words. But he couldn't quite bring himself to.

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Chapter 22

“You seem happier,” Duncan Mackenzie observed, grinning at Cam.

“Well, I ken you know how that feels,” Cam said. Mackenzie had scarcely stopped grinning since he’d married Lady Grace. Except, of course, since Fraser had been killed.

Their failure to find the culprit was eating the Knights alive. They’d been discussing laying a trap for the man, and that would be their next step, but not until after the wedding.

For now, Cam was trying to focus on his upcoming nuptials. Sarah, even though she had gone into her confinement, had arranged for a wedding breakfast to be held at Trent House, so Esme had sent Cam a list of invitees, which Cam had approved and added to. Their announcement had been posted in the papers, and Esme wrote to him about visiting well-wishers. He’d been thankful that not many people knew where he lived. He had no interest in people visiting him and wishing him felicitations on his upcoming nuptials.

Which would take place the day after tomorrow.

He couldn’t wait to bed Esme again. There was so much more he could teach her about the pleasures of the flesh, and just thinking about how responsive she’d been last time—even though he’d been so rough with her—made him hard.

Bailey, the Knights’ man-of-all-work, opened the drawing room door, and Cam looked up from the newspaper he hadn’t been reading.

“Mr. McLeod, there is a lady here to see you.”

Cam shoved the paper aside and rose. “Lady Esme?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mackenzie grinned at him. “D’you wager she came against her brother’s wishes?”

Cam shrugged. He didn’t care. What mattered was that she was here.

“I canna wait to meet her.”

“She’s shy,” Cam warned, already halfway out the door. “Dinna scare her.”

Mackenzie laughed. “If she isna scared of you, then she’ll think me a mere pup.”

Cam frowned as he left the study and went to the entry hall to meet Esme. Was she afraid of him? She’d been shy at first—apparently frightened, but in retrospect he thought that was more fear of him discovering her identity and the contents of her notebook than actual fear of him.

Esme turned, smiling as he approached. He held out his hands to her, needing to touch her but managing to stop himself from dragging her into his arms and kissing her until they were both out of breath. There were only two days until his wedding. A bit of propriety was in order.

“You came,” he said, beaming at her.

“I begged and begged Trent. He’s being ridiculous and old-fashioned about this, and it’s driving me mad.”

“He’s just wanting to take advantage of his position of elder brother before you leave his household.”

She rolled her eyes. “I suppose.”

“But he allowed you to come today?”

“Yes. He said if you were here, there were sure to be a few other Highland Knights, and they wouldn’t allow anything untoward to happen.”

Cam couldn't help but smirk. "Of course they wilna. Come, let me introduce you to the others. Innes is with Lord Pinfield tonight, but I ken you've already met him. All the other men are here, as well as Lady Grace and Lady Claire."

She nodded, and he saw the subtle straightening of her shoulders, the determination hardening her features. He couldn't blame her trepidation. In two days, these women and men she didn't know at all would become her new family. They were all up to the task, but she couldn't know that.

Taking her hand and squeezing it in reassurance, he led her down the corridor to the office, where Mackenzie rose the second he opened the door.

—

Esme's heart was about to beat out of her chest. This was a good thing—she knew—better to meet the Highland Knights now rather than on her wedding day, when she'd be overwhelmed for about a thousand different reasons. After the wedding, she'd be living here with the Knights—and Lady Claire and Lady Grace, the wives of Major Campbell and Duncan Mackenzie.

Right now, she stared at the smiling man in front of her. He was a russet-haired hulking brute of a man, but his smile had to be about the kindest one she'd ever seen in her entire life, and it calmed her immediately. She liked this man on sight.

"Mackenzie, this is Lady Esme. Esme, this is Duncan Mackenzie, the youngest knight, but one you definitely want at your side in a battle."

"I can see that," she said, then immediately wondered whether that had been a gauche thing to say. But it must not have been, because the man's smile grew even stronger.

“Milady,” he said, his Scottish brogue deeper and heavier than Cam’s—perhaps he’d lived more of his life in the Highlands than Cam had. “’Tis good to finally meet you.”

She raised her brows. “Finally?”

“Aye.” He flashed a grin at Cam. “McLeod hasna stopped thinking about you since he met you at your brother’s dinner party.”

She smiled, glad that Cam hadn’t told him the truth about where they’d actually met.

“Thinking?” Cam asked in mock annoyance. “Are you a mind reader now, Mackenzie?”

Mackenzie snorted. “Aye, well, ’tisna so hard, when you’re lookin’ all moony-eyed all the time.”

If Esme wasn’t mistaken, Cam turned a little pink at that, and it made her like Duncan Mackenzie even more.

“My wife is upstairs with her sister.” Mackenzie turned back to Esme. “Come with me. I’ll introduce you to them.”

Mackenzie led her and Cam upstairs, where they entered a small bedchamber. They interrupted the animated discussion of two ladies seated side by side on a sofa, both of them blinking in surprise when Mackenzie threw the door open.

One of them, slender and petite, rose to her feet when she saw Esme. The other rose as well. The sisters looked very much alike—both blond and pretty, but the second sister towered a good six inches over her more petite counterpart.

The smaller woman’s face immediately brightened. “Oh my goodness! Lady Esme! It is so wonderful to see you again.”

Esme had met Lady Claire and Lady Grace at a social gathering once, but she hadn’t spoken with them very

much. She'd found Lady Claire, the shorter one, a bit overwhelming, with her engaging, animated demeanor. Lady Grace seemed more refined and reserved, which Esme found intimidating in a wholly different way.

Her heart was beating rapidly again, and her breaths were coming in short bursts, her fingers dripping sweat. Her poor gloves would probably be ruined.

Lady Grace stepped forward, and Mackenzie slipped an arm around her, beaming in pride as he faced Esme. "This is my wife, Grace. We've been married these six months, though she'll probably say it feels like forever and warn you to run as fast as your feet will carry you from this house of wild Scots."

Lady Grace laughed. "Nonsense."

Esme tried to plaster on a smile. "It is good to see you again, Lady Grace, Lady Claire."

"Please, call me Grace."

"And you must call me Claire," Lady Claire piped in. "You're to be a Highland Knight's wife now. All the Knights are brothers, which means we must all be sisters."

Esme flushed. "Thank you. That is very kind."

Lady Claire drew Esme into her arms. "I'll be so glad to have you here, Esme. We need more of the women's calming influence in this house."

"Thank you." Esme smiled, but her voice was emerging as if she were a shy fourteen-year-old, which made sweat beads burst on her temples and her breaths become even shorter thanks to embarrassment. "You are very...kind." She had just said that, hadn't she? Now she sounded like a repetitive fool. Heat rushed to her face.

"Nonsense." Claire laughed. "I am not kind at all. But I'm honest, and I'm honestly glad to have you here."

“The best part of it,” Grace interjected, her tone softer and smoother than her sister’s, “is that you make McLeod happy.”

“I do?” Esme asked—the words slipping out before she could think them through.

“Oh, definitely. I’ve never seen him so happy,” Claire said.

Cam cleared his throat. “You do realize I’m standing right here, aye?”

“Of course we do,” Claire said. “But we speak the truth, don’t we?” She winked at Esme. “As I’ve said, I’m honest.”

“Have you toured the house?” Grace said.

“Not entirely.”

“We’ll show you everything,” Claire said. With a wicked grin, she added, “Except Mr. McLeod’s bedroom, which I assume you’re already familiar with.”

“Claire!” Grace exclaimed, widening her eyes at her sister. She turned back to Esme and spoke apologetically. “You’ll have to forgive her. She’s always been rather embarrassingly forward.”

At that, Esme’s lips curved into a smile. “It’s quite all right,” she assured Grace.

“I think it’s time to leave you two to whatever you were discussing,” Cam said. “Before you embarrass Esme so thoroughly she’ll never want to return.”

Smirking, Claire went up on her tiptoes and spoke in an exaggerated whisper in Cam’s ear. “She’s lovely, McLeod. Well done!”

Esme couldn’t help it. Her smile grew wider.

Cam rolled his eyes. “Come, Esme. The others are in the drawing room.”

“See you soon, Esme, dear,” Claire called as she left. Esme couldn’t wipe the grin from her face. She was going to like these women. She could feel it.

They returned downstairs, where they parted with Mackenzie, who returned to the study. Cam led her in the opposite direction, and he knocked on the door at the end of a short corridor.

“Come,” said someone from inside, the voice low but stern.

Cam opened the door and stepped into the room, tugging her to stand beside him.

Two men rose as they entered. Both were dark-haired and handsome, but one looked a bit older, with gray streaking at his temples. These men didn’t have the light, easy smiles of Duncan Mackenzie. Seriousness cloaked both men, especially the younger of the two.

Cam moved forward, bringing her along with him. “Esme, this is Major Campbell. And Sir Colin Stirling, who was a captain of the Gordon Highlanders, like I was.”

She curtsied to both men. The major smiled at her. “Welcome, lass. Have you met my wife? She’s looking forward to your arrival.”

“Yes, thank you. We just spoke. I was so pleased to see her again.”

“You know each other?” he asked.

She nodded. “We met once or twice, years ago, during our first Seasons. But I’m sorry to say we haven’t seen each other much since.”

“Are you ready for your wedding?” Stirling asked. Her gaze went to his. There was a darkness lurking in the depths there, and she shuddered a bit, wondering at the cause. Then she remembered that this man had been a captain in Wellington’s army. From the shadows in his

eyes, it seemed like he was reliving the horrors of battle even now.

She shrugged, feeling she could be honest with him, for some reason. “Can one ever be ready for his or her wedding?”

“I am,” Cam declared. “Absolutely ready.”

At that, Sir Colin smiled. “You’ve changed him, lass,” he said quietly.

She returned his smile, knowing he meant that as a high compliment. “Thank you.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgment.

“You’re Sam Hawkins’s sister, aye?” the major asked.

“I am,” she said proudly. That was the thing about Sam. Even though he was widely known as the bastard of the Hawkins family—a label that should have brought great embarrassment and shame—she’d always been utterly proud of him. He was a hero of the realm. Brave and honest and strong. By the way the major had asked, it seemed he held great respect for Sam as well.

The major nodded. “And you’re aware of your brother’s connection to the Knights.”

“I am,” she said quietly.

“You ken that our positions at times lead us—and unfortunately our families—into great danger?”

She glanced quickly at Cam, who was giving her a rare serious look.

“Yes.”

“Then you understand what you’re getting yourself into?”

She couldn’t lie and say she did, exactly. Sam had never involved her in any of his missions, but even so, she’d been exposed to the danger.

“Three years ago I was kidnapped and held by one of Sam’s—and the Crown’s—enemies. I know what kind of danger you’re involved in. All too well.”

The major spoke to her, but turned his gaze to Cam. “Aye. Good. It isna a thing I’d drag a lass into unknowingly.”

Cam stared at her in disbelief. “Kidnapped?” he whispered in incredulity.

She shrugged and tried to smile it away. “It was years ago,” she said. “It’s all over now. Everything turned out for the best. Sam and the rest of my brothers came to my rescue.”

“Jesus,” Cam muttered. “There’s so much I still dinna ken about you.”

She nodded. “Yes. But those are details we have the rest of our lives to share. You might not know where I was on any given day or what I was doing, but you know me. The real me. You’re the only person who does.” And that was the truth. He’d barreled into her life and in a matter of moments had torn down all the barriers she held against the world.

His expression softened. “Aye,” he said gruffly, “I do.”

He glanced up, seeming to notice the other two men in the room for the first time. “We should be off, then,” he said, his voice still rough with some emotion Esme couldn’t name. “Come, lass.”

Even as Cam tugged on her arm, she gave the two other men a curtsey. “It was nice to meet you, Major, Sir Colin.”

The men murmured the appropriate responses, and then Cam and Esme were out of the room, heading back down the short corridor.

“Where now?” she asked.

“Somewhere we can be alone,” Cam said tersely. “I need to be inside you. Now.”

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Chapter 23

Cam tugged her into the mews behind the house, then into the stables. A horse whickered in surprise at their entrance, but Cam pulled her up a narrow flight of stairs at one end of the half-dozen or so stalls.

“Where are we...? Oh.”

Cam had led her inside a small but tidy room that contained a narrow bed, a row of cabinets, and a stove. “The stable master once lived here. But we dinna require a stable master, so the place is empty now.” He gave her one of his wickedest grins. “We wilna be interrupted here.”

She returned his grin with a wicked one of her own and threw her arms around him. It had only been a couple of days, but she’d missed him so much.

He deftly untied her bonnet then tossed it onto the tiny round table. Then he kissed her. Without breaking their lip-lock, they managed to undress each other, laughing and fumbling with ties and tapes and buttons and buckles. When Esme was down to her chemise and stays, Cam growled and turned her around so that her back was to his front, and pushed her between the shoulder blades until she was bent over the edge of the bed. He flipped up her skirts, rubbing her thighs above her garters, then yanked down her drawers, smacking her bottom lightly as he drew them off her. She gasped and wiggled, her sex contracting at the imprint of heat his hand left behind.

“You’ve such a bonny arse,” he gritted out, kissing her rounded cheek as he rose up behind her.

She braced herself as he moved into position and guided himself to her opening. Without hesitating, he thrust in hard, burying himself deep. Then he stopped,

holding still as she adjusted to his girth. “Oh, Cam,” she whispered. “Oh...”

Her body fluttered around him, so aroused it almost hurt her when he held himself still.

“Your cunt feels so good wrapped tight around me, lass.”

She whimpered in response. Even during her research, she’d only ever read that word, had never in her life heard it spoken aloud. It was deliciously dirty and wicked. She wiggled, trying to get him to move.

He obliged, starting a hard, firm rhythm that made Esme see stars. As he thrust he bent over her and pressed his hand to her cheek, forcing her to turn her head. He kissed her, wet and hot and thorough, as he moved within her. She arched her back, her body wanting more, harder. He seemed to read her desire, and he gave it to her, going deeper, kissing her fiercely, until she was moving with him, her pants quickly escalating to low moans as he brought her ever higher.

He reached beneath her, pinching her nipple between two fingers before gliding his hand lower to rub his fingers over the sensitive spot between her legs. She cried out, because the sensation was so strong she wasn’t sure she could endure it. But she had no choice. He held her trapped under his body, ramming himself into her so that she was pushed hard against the bed with every thrust.

He gave no quarter and, deep inside, she didn’t want it. He was ruling her, body and soul, and she wanted nothing else but to be ruled by this man.

In the most intrinsic sense of the word, it was freeing to be dominated like this. Giving up control of her body and mind was absolutely liberating. She could just *be*. She could just *feel*.

Pleasure surged through her body, and she released that last bit of control, letting it go free. The orgasm raced through her, pinpricks of ecstasy in every bit of her, deep in her core to the surface of her skin, making her gasp and shudder uncontrollably.

When it ran its course, she melted into a pool of pleasure, his movements inside her now causing frissons and sparks to detonate. She shivered, simply being here, with him, simply enjoying what Cam had done to her, what he still continued to do to her.

And then there was a noise downstairs. A slam of a door, then shuffling as a horse and man entered the stables.

Cam went still, covering her mouth with his hand. “Shh,” he whispered. “It’s just Innes returned from Pinfield duty. Be quiet.”

She was quiet, and he began to move again, slowly, as she heard the man below shuffling around, mumbling to the horse, probably brushing the animal down. It seemed to take forever before he finally took his leave. When the door clicked behind him, Cam’s hand instantly fisted in her hair, pulling near but not quite to the point of pain. And his thrusts turned hard again, forceful. She felt him growing inside her, impossibly hard, his body tensing as he let go of his restraint and pummeled her against the bed.

It didn’t take long. Soon, he was spitting out words in Gaelic, cursing, perhaps, and suddenly all went silent as he trembled over her, releasing his seed deep into her womb.

She gasped and breathed through it—he was so deep and she was so full, it was just on the edge of being painful.

“God help me,” he muttered when he’d finished. “Get on the bed, Esme.”

She scrambled up on the blanket and he climbed on after her, drawing her into his arms. She loved how he held her after they'd come together like this. His hold was possessive, but also loving. He nuzzled his lips into her hair, and she sighed in contentment.

They were silent for a long while. Then he pulled the blanket up over them. "What's this about being held hostage?"

"It happened three years ago. Sam was after a very bad man, who kidnapped me in order to get to him."

"Good God." He tugged her closer.

"He had me trussed and frightened out of my mind for four days before Sam and my other brothers—and Élise—found me."

Cam shuddered.

"Why are you shaking?"

"The thought of you...frightened. Trapped." He pulled back slightly, looking down at her. "I canna imagine it. Just the thought of you suffering...it *hurts*."

He sounded surprised by that revelation and she leaned forward to press her lips against his chest. "I'm all right. The men were arrested, and none of my brothers or my sister-in-law were injured."

"But the major was right. It could happen again. The men we encounter in our job...they wilna hesitate to use our loved ones against us."

She smiled. "Am I a loved one, then?"

"Of course you are. You'll be my wife."

That wasn't exactly the declaration that she'd yearned for, but it was enough. "As I told the major, I'm aware of the risk. It didn't stop me. Evidently, it didn't stop Lady Grace or Lady Claire, either."

He shuddered again. “Lady Grace...” He shook his head and closed his eyes, and alarm flared briefly in her chest.

“Whatever happened to her, Lady Grace is all right now, isn’t she? She seemed perfectly fine today.”

“She is. She’s a strong woman.”

“And so am I, Cam.”

“Aye. You are. But I’ve seen what can...happen to a woman.” He thrust his hand through his hair.

“Grace?”

“My sister.”

Something clenched in Esme’s chest. “I know,” she whispered. “I’ll be as careful as I possibly can.”

That would have to be enough.

—

On the night before her wedding, Esme couldn’t sit down, much less sleep. She was a bundle of anxiety and nerves.

She wanted to see Cam.

She fought that desire. Successfully, for most of the night.

The wedding was only a few hours away, and she’d see him then. She glanced over at the door to her closet, where her wedding dress hung.

She was getting married soon. She couldn’t quite believe it. And it wasn’t to Henry Whitworth...it was to Lord Camden McLeod. The heir to the Scottish Earl of Sutton.

She’d fallen in love with him. He accepted her as she truly was—her embarrassing flaws, her common parentage, and her writing. She could never have imagined a potential spouse—especially one of her class

—would approve of her engaging in such an activity as writing novels. But Cam was special. He did.

She had to see him. Had to cast eyes on him one last time before she faced him in the church.

She glanced at the clock, knowing there was no chance she'd be getting another wink of sleep. It was four o'clock—early, but the household would awaken early this morning to prepare for the wedding breakfast. They would begin to stir soon.

If she was going to slip out, this was her chance.

She managed to leave the still-quiet house without anyone seeing her, and she walked all the way to Westminster. Keeping a fast pace, it took her under twenty minutes. She picked the lock to the back door of the Knights' house—she knew how thanks to growing up in a household with five brothers, and it didn't take long before she slipped inside.

There were no lights on downstairs, and she walked down the corridor, running her hand along the wall and using her memory as a guide. She found the stairs and mounted them, then located the door to Cam's room.

A line of light glowed under his door—and low-pitched voices came from within.

Esme hesitated. This wasn't what she'd planned. She'd thought he'd be asleep, that she'd sneak into his bed and lie beside him. Now what?

"You didn't," said a voice from inside. She thought the voice might belong to Sir Colin Stirling.

"I did. I shouldn't've. But I did." That was Cam's voice.

What had he done that he shouldn't? Esme leaned toward the door, knowing she was eavesdropping, but not feeling as sorry as she probably should about it.

"Hell," Cam gritted out. "I had to do it. I *had* to."

“Why, man?” Disappointment rang in Sir Colin’s tone. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“She wouldna make up her mind. She said she needed time—”

Oh, God. Was Cam talking about her?

“Time for what?” Sir Colin asked.

“Time to recover from her failed engagement to Whitworth. But she didna need to recover. There was naught to recover from. They didna love each other.”

“Aye, but maybe it wasna right to do that.”

What wasn’t right? *What?* Esme pressed her ear against the door.

“I canna feel guilty about it. It gave me what I wanted.”

“Which was?”

“Esme.”

“And what about her?” Sir Colin asked softly.

“It gave her what she wanted, too.” Cam’s voice was hard and determined. “Me.”

“Aye...but...”

“But what?” Cam sounded annoyed.

“Wasn’t it uncomfortable to have her brother discover you in her bed?”

“I was prepared for it.”

Esme went still, holding her breath.

“Aye, but was she?”

“Nay. Not exactly.”

“I imagine she was appalled,” Sir Colin said. “Embarrassed. Mortified.”

“Aye.” Now a bit of guilt crept into Cam’s voice. Esme’s mind was roiling. What had he done? How had he been

prepared to see Trent catch them in bed? “But it all turned out for the best, and that’s what matters, isn’t it?” Cam asked his friend.

“If you want my absolution, man, you’ll not be getting it. You bribed a maid to inform the duke there was someone in his sister’s room. You kept the truth of it from your intended. Your conscience, and your conscience alone, will be needing to decide if that was the right thing to do.”

Wait...

Esme’s throat went so tight she couldn’t breathe.

Cam had essentially *told* Trent he was in her bed?

He’d *meant* for her brother to catch them there?

He’d planned the whole thing?

Yes. It seemed he’d planned the whole thing. He’d wanted Trent to find them in bed. Because she’d been wavering on committing herself to him, he’d forced the issue.

A sheet of ice sliced into her, the coldness spreading through her until her heart froze to a heavy lump. But her thoughts were clear and cold, her mind as frigid as a lake in midwinter.

No. Sir Colin was wrong. Cam’s conscience wouldn’t decide whether he’d done the right thing. *She* would. And she already had.

He’d manipulated her. Lied to her. Forced her into a decision she hadn’t believed she was ready for.

She was finished.

She hadn’t heard what the men had said for the last several seconds, but it didn’t matter.

She was done being controlled. Done being manipulated. Done having her life decided for her.

“My da would’ve...” Cam said, but she turned away, refusing to listen to any more.

She slipped out of the house and hurried back to Trent House as dawn began to lighten the sky to a deep gray. When she opened the door to the kitchen she saw movement in the pantry.

It was a servant she didn’t think she knew, but she could only see him from the back. He was walking toward the cabinets with a slight limp, and his hair looked light brown or perhaps blond—it was hard to see in the dim light. When she saw what he was carrying—a case of champagne—his presence here made sense. He was delivering the champagne for the wedding breakfast.

Champagne she certainly wouldn’t be drinking.

She walked past him without making eye contact. With her head down and her cloak pulled low over her forehead, he probably wouldn’t recognize her. “Pardon me,” she murmured as she brushed by. He didn’t say a word.

Esme rushed upstairs after that, thankfully making it to her bedchamber without anyone seeing her. She packed a valise, then paced her room for a good hour. At eight o’clock, when she was fairly certain Trent and Sarah would be awake, she knocked on her brother’s door.

“Come in!” Sarah’s voice was gay, which was a small miracle, considering the fact that she was so advanced in pregnancy that every move she made looked completely miserable.

Esme opened the door. When Sarah saw her face, her bright expression faded, turning to concern. She took two lumbering steps toward Esme. “Oh no, Esme. What’s wrong? What happened?”

Esme swallowed hard. “I’m leaving London, Sarah. Will you help me?”

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Chapter 24

Esme stepped out into the perfectly manicured grounds of Ironwood Park, her brother's ducal seat in the Cotswolds. The grounds were lovely this time of year, bright and fragrant with blooms.

She'd been here for a week. It had been quiet, with all the family in residence in London and just a skeleton staff remaining in the country. The silence had given Esme plenty of time to think, but her thinking hadn't resolved anything.

She missed Cam. She loved him so much. But the way he'd manipulated her life—more than once—was inexcusable. If there was one thing she'd learned since meeting the man, it was that she wanted to live her life on her terms. She'd thought, with his acceptance of her writing, that Cam might be a good partner for that. But she'd been wrong. He'd manipulated her as thoroughly as everyone else, if not more. She'd simply been so besotted with him she hadn't been able to see through his pretense.

She stopped at a bench on the banks of the river that wound through the back acres of the property. Sarah had told her that she and Trent had first found each other on that bench, which made it a special place to Esme. A place where magic had happened for Trent and Sarah. Esme had returned several times, but so far no magic had happened for her here.

She pulled out the letter from Sarah she'd received the day after she'd arrived at Ironwood Park.

Dearest Esme,

Mr. M_____ has been coming by every day requesting to see you, but since you asked us not to speak to him, we have refrained from

telling him where you are. I know you might not want to hear this, but I fear you will eventually have to face him, if for nothing else than to explain yourself. I believe he suspects that you're aware of his secret, but he isn't sure, and I can tell he is struggling greatly with not knowing for certain what caused your disappearance.

Perhaps it would be best to simply write him a letter. But of course I understand if you're not ready to do so.

All is well here at Trent House. No sign of the babe yet, but we are all growing anxious to meet Lukas and Theo's little brother or sister.

We love you dearly. Take as much time as you need, dear. We'll be here for you when you return.

All my love,

Sarah

Simply write him a letter.

Esme sighed. What would she say in a letter? Her words would sound angry and vindictive. She didn't know how she could possibly sound otherwise. How would anger and vindictiveness help the situation? It wouldn't.

Cam had twice proven himself to be manipulative and conniving. She wasn't sure how she could change her mind about him now. It was too late for him.

Yes, she'd eventually have to tell him why she'd left London. But not yet. The pain was too raw, too overwhelming. She needed time.

She continued her circuit of the grounds and wandered back toward the house, where she found Ironwood Park's housekeeper, Mrs. Hope, waiting for her on the back-

door landing. “Ah, there you are, my lady. You’ve a visitor.”

Esme stopped short with a gasp. No. She couldn’t face him now. She wasn’t ready. She hadn’t gathered her strength.

“It is a lady,” Mrs. Hope continued, and much of Esme’s tension melted away, but that was just a breath of relief before the housekeeper added, “She says her name is Miss Anna McLeod.”

Cam’s sister. What on earth was she doing here? Had he sent her?

“I...” She looked down at her simple day dress, smudged by loose dirt near the hem. She wasn’t ready for visitors. Especially strangers. And yet...if her appearance was too shocking to Anna McLeod, what did it matter?

Straightening her spine, she nodded. “All right. Take me to her.”

They walked in silence through the vast, tiled Stone Room at the back of the house, past the immense Greek statue of the Laocoön, and down a long corridor to the parlor.

A young woman, dark-haired and tall like her brother, rose as Esme opened the door. Esme stepped forward cautiously, unsure as usual in the presence of a stranger, her palms going clammy and her heart pumping anxiety through her veins. She realized her hands were clenched at her sides and forcibly unclenched them.

Breathe. Breathe.

“Thank you so much for seeing me, milady.” Anna’s voice was lightly accented with a Scottish lilt, less pronounced than Cam’s. Esme remembered Cam saying that she had spent very little time in Scotland.

“Of course, Miss McLeod,” she said. Then she recalled what she should say now. “Please do sit down. Would

you like some tea?”

“Thank you, no. I just...er...” Anna seemed to fumble about for a moment. The action reminded Esme of herself, casting about for something to say in the presence of a stranger. “Please, call me Anna.”

Esme nodded, and Anna sank into a chair. Esme sat stiffly in the chair across from her, squeezing her hands in her lap. The two women sized each other up. Anna was very pretty—slender and tall and graceful. She had light blue eyes—the same shade as Cam’s—and wore a simple yellow muslin that suited her coloring. But she had shadows behind her eyes and the slightest slump to her shoulders. She was a woman who might have been a great beauty had she been given the opportunity—and the confidence.

Finally, Anna swallowed. “I’m so sorry to bother you —”

Esme couldn’t bear the suspense any longer. “Did Cam send you?”

Anna jerked back as if Esme’s words were a slap to her chest. “Er...nay.”

Esme hadn’t expected that answer. “Oh. Does he know you’re here?”

“Nay.”

“Then why have you come?”

She was being impolite, she realized vaguely, but that didn’t seem to matter so much in this circumstance, with this woman.

Anna took a deep breath. “Last week, my brother came to my house as I was preparing to attend your nuptials. He said that you called off the wedding.”

Esme straightened, gazing evenly at Cam’s sister. Her nerves had dissipated, for some reason. It didn’t matter if this woman didn’t like her, or felt she was awkward or

impolite. None of it mattered. Esme could be herself, and it wouldn't make one whit of difference.

It was a freeing thought—one she'd never had before in the presence of a stranger of her class.

“That's right,” she said.

“I know why you did that. And...” Anna glanced down at her lap then up to Esme again. “I understand it. My brother is a fool.” She rose abruptly, wringing her hands. “I'm so sorry, I cannot sit. Not when Cam has botched up his life so terribly, and when I'm facing the only woman who has the power to bring him happiness or ruin. Yet, I don't know you, milady, and I don't know the depths of your anger and scorn for my brother. But I need to do something—I need to try, because Cam is so wretched, and he loves you so. He just doesn't know how to love—”

“Wait!” Esme held up her hand. “Stop. I'm confused.”

Anna, who'd been facing away from her, spun around and frowned at her. “What? Why?” She slapped a palm to her forehead. “Oh, I'm bungling this, aren't I? I'm just so nervous, and I ramble incessantly when I'm nervous. Please forgive me, milady, I—”

“Please,” Esme said, “just wait a moment.”

Anna stopped, her chest heaving, and waited.

“Did you say he loves me?”

Anna tilted her head, her brows drawing together in confusion. “Aye.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Aye, of course I am. I have never seen him like this. I have never seen any man so besotted, so heartsick—”

“Are you *absolutely* certain?”

Anna's face crumpled into lines of compassion. “Oh. Oh, milady. Please, don't believe for a moment that he is anything but madly, irrevocably in love with you.”

“Why would a man lie to and manipulate someone he loves?” Esme said. She should be melting at Anna’s words, and yet they twisted inside her, inciting not only confusion, but anger as well. “It makes no sense. He can’t love me.”

“That’s just it. Cam loves you, but he’s never experienced love before. He doesn’t have the faintest idea of how it works. He doesn’t know what it looks like, how it feels. He’s never been in love before now. He’s terribly frightened by these powerful feelings he has.”

“How can you know this?” Esme asked.

“He’s my brother,” Anna said. “We’ve always been close. We had to be, in our house. My brothers and I shared almost everything. Now Cam tells me most everything, and what he doesn’t tell me, I can deduce. For example, he wouldn’t tell me what he’d done to upset you so. I had to pull it from him, bit by bit, and work out the rest for myself.”

“So he’s aware I know the truth about his deception?”

“Aye, he knows it. Or, he realizes that’s what it must be.” Anna practically threw herself into the chair opposite Esme again. “Please, milady. Give my brother another chance.”

“Oh. Lord.” Esme lowered her head into her hands.

“He didn’t mean to hurt you. He doesn’t *think*, the addle-brained fool!”

“He didn’t mean to hurt me?” Aghast, Esme looked up. “How can that be? Surely he knew his actions would hurt me terribly.”

“He understands that now. At the time, he only had one goal in mind, and it was this: ‘Marry Esme.’ And the question for him was how expediently he could make that happen. Cam is impulsive. He doesn’t think things through. He manages to find ways to get what he wants,

but his methods aren't always the wisest, or the easiest on those close to him."

"His methods didn't take my feelings into account," Esme said softly. "How can I be married to someone who disregards my feelings?"

"You can be married to someone like that because you know he can be thoughtless, but he doesn't mean to be. That he'll move heaven and earth to make you happy."

Esme looked at the woman cynically. "Will he?"

"I promise you, he will."

"How can you know that?"

"Because...he did it for me. And he doesn't love me nearly as much as he loves you."

"Nonsense," Esme mumbled. "That cannot be true."

"But it is." Anna sighed heavily. "Trust me when I say I have never seen him so distraught."

"Then why hasn't he come to me? Told me all this?"

"He wants to. But he wants to respect you as well. You told the duke and duchess to turn him away, and they have. He could ignore their wishes, but in doing so, he feels he'll be disrespecting you yet again. He's in a quandary. If he comes to you, he loses you. If he stays away, he loses you."

"So he sent you."

"Nay. I told you, he didn't. He's no idea I'm here."

"Anna," Esme said the word on a groan, forgetting her discomfiture, forgetting everything but Cam and what had brought them to this point. "What am I to do? I love him so much, but every time I let him in, he betrayed me. I am frightened to do it again."

Anna's declarations had thawed Esme's heart toward Cam, but that frightened her. Letting Cam into her heart

made her so vulnerable. It gave him free rein to rip her to shreds. How many times could a woman survive that kind of pain?

Esme could see the understanding in Anna's eyes, and in her expression. "I know, milady. And I cannot promise he won't make more terrible mistakes with you. But maybe..." She shook her head sadly. "Maybe I am a naïve fool, but I believe that a powerful love will conquer most any obstacle in its path."

Esme loved Cam, and if she were to believe Anna, he loved her, too. But how powerful was that love? Was it enough?

"He loves you so much," Anna whispered. "Please," she said again. "Give him another chance. He'll prove his love to you, I know he will."

Esme squeezed her eyes shut, thinking of him going to Henry and telling him about her writing. She thought of him bribing one of the maids to wake her brother, then deliberately being in bed with Esme when Trent threw open the door.

He'd put her in a terrible position—twice. He'd torn apart her engagement. He'd forced knowledge of their affair on her brother. Both of those things had had to happen, but they could have been handled in a way that would have built her up, not cut her down. She'd been embarrassed, shamed, humiliated...and Cam had made it so.

He'd done it twice, and he would probably do it again.

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"He's an intelligent man, milady. He sees that what he's done to you is wrong, and my brother is better at learning from his mistakes than most men are."

"I need...time. I need to think about this."

Anna nodded, but her brow creased in worry. “Will you see him?”

“No.” Esme flinched at the harsh sound of the word. “Not yet.”

Anna leaned forward in her chair. “What can I do?”

“I...I’m not sure. Thank you for coming, though. You’ve given me much to think about.”

“I fear I haven’t done enough.”

Esme gazed at the other woman. She was right. It might not have been enough. But her chest felt heavy with emotion and her head was muzzy.

“You are hurting,” Anna said softly. “I am so sorry.”

“You said Cam moved heaven and earth for you.” Esme paused. She had a feeling she knew what that was about, but she’d only heard Cam’s side of the story—his anger and frustration with his father for not supporting Anna. She wanted to hear what Anna had to say about it.

“Yes. He did,” Anna said. “And he would for you, too.”

“Will you tell me about it? About what he did?”

Anna swallowed hard, and her face grew a shade paler. “Aye,” she whispered. “I’ll tell you everything.”

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Chapter 25

Again, Anna stood abruptly. She strode to the window then back, squeezing her hands into fists then relaxing them several times. She stopped in front of Esme and took a deep breath.

“I was seventeen. We’d come to London for the Season —my father and brother Alastair and I, as well as the rest of the household. I had nothing to do here. No friends, no female companionship. I was naïve to the dangers of London, and I had no chaperone.”

She huffed out a breath. “I was an ignorant child. I had been cloistered like a nun in our house in the country for most of my life. It was my first time in this enormous city. I found a group of lads my age at Hyde Park. I was drawn to them because they were Scots, and they felt like home, somehow, which was silly, because I’ve never lived in Scotland.”

She gave a cynical laugh. “Anyhow, they were kind to me. At first. And then...my brother died. I went to them for comfort, thinking them my three closest friends.” She turned to Esme, her face absolutely white, her expression flat. “They did comfort me...at first. But then their comfort turned...terrible. It turned into something evil and cruel.”

“They...raped you?” Esme had never said that word aloud before and hated the sound of it.

“Aye.”

“Oh...Anna.” To be raped while grieving her brother. Esme wondered who those boys had been, whether they’d suffered for their crime against this poor woman. She hoped they had been hanged.

Anna looked down at the floor, but her voice was steady. “They did it more than once, on more than one

occasion. I was hurt and confused.”

“Of course you were.”

“And then Cam came home to pay his respects to Alastair. He took one look at me and knew something horrible had happened. Something beyond Alastair’s death.” Now her voice finally started to wobble. “I...told him everything. Oh, Esme, it was the worst time of my life. Between what had happened to Alastair and what happened to me...I thought I might die of the grief and pain of it all. Simply wither away and die. But...Cam...”

“What?” Esme breathed. “What did he do then?” She knew how much Cam adored his sister. To see her brutalized thus—he must have been furious. No, *furious* was too weak a word.

Anna drew in a long, shaky breath. “He took me to my father. Told him about the three lads who’d hurt me. He said they deserved justice and that he and my father needed to do something. But...my da...he turned to me...and his face...”

Esme rose. She couldn’t sit there anymore. She went to Anna’s side and put a tentative hand on her shoulder, not sure how to comfort her, but wanting desperately to help her somehow. “I am so sorry this happened to you.”

Now Anna’s face wasn’t pale...it was blotchy with emotion, and her eyes shone. “My da said it was my fault. That I was a whore—that I had gone to those lads and spread my legs for them. He said I was no daughter of his and I was no longer welcome in his house. He said the sight of me sickened him and he never wanted to lay eyes on me again.

“That very night, Cam took me from my father’s house, and I haven’t been back since. I haven’t laid eyes on my father. I haven’t heard from him. Or anyone I associated with before. I am a pariah in his eyes, and in the eyes of society.”

“Oh God. That’s...” Esme wanted to say *terrible*, but truly it was beyond terrible. She squeezed Anna’s shoulder, feeling the show of sympathy was far too weak. But there was nothing to say that could make these horrible events disappear. They would always be part of Anna’s past.

“Cam has taken care of me since. He supports me. He visits me often when he’s in Town. He has been so good to me. Without him, I would certainly be dead.”

Esme nodded, hearing the certainty of the last in Anna’s voice. She was probably right—a penniless girl turned away by her father would have had nowhere to go. Thank God Anna had a brother who truly cared for her when no one else had.

“You are so strong to have overcome such adversity,” Esme said.

“I wouldn’t have, without my brother.”

Esme nodded. “What happened to those boys?” Because, seriously, if nothing had happened to those awful rapists, she intended to go after them herself.

Anna turned and walked away, back to the window. Esme’s hand fell to her side. Anna stared out the window for a long moment, then said, “Cam...took care of them.”

Esme’s eyes narrowed as she stared at Anna’s back. “How do you mean? What did he do?”

Anna’s shoulders rose and fell as she took a breath. “He killed them. He and some companions followed two of them into an alley one night. They were just lads, pursued by hardened Scottish warriors. Cam and his friends killed them.”

“And the third?” Esme breathed.

Anna looked away. “Cam never told me exactly what happened, and truthfully, I’m not sure I wish to know. But he was found dead in his bed the morning after the

other two were killed. The rumors suggested he died from ingesting bad meat.”

“That’s not what happened, was it?”

“If you’re asking whether I think it was an accident, no, I don’t.”

Esme suddenly felt dizzy. Thinking of Cam—her handsome Cam with his quicksilver smile and intelligent eyes—murdering three youths.

She could picture it, though. The rage, darkening those light blue eyes into something ice-cold and dangerous.

She shuddered, finding her way back to her seat and fumbling into it, her vision suddenly blurry.

She didn’t know how to feel about this. Cam was a murderer. But he’d killed men—many of them—in battle. She’d already known that. And those youths were probably more deserving of death than some of the men he’d killed in the war.

And she’d wanted those rapists dead—just minutes ago, she’d been thinking of seeking justice on them herself.

But it was still...somehow different.

Anna turned. “He did it for me,” she said quietly, her eyes meeting Esme’s. “Knowing that they were gone... that they couldn’t hurt me anymore...” She shook her head. “It...helped.”

Esme took a shaky breath and nodded. “Thank you. For telling me your story. That couldn’t have been easy.”

“You should know it,” Anna said. “Cam is loyal to those he loves. He has done stupid, hurtful things to me in my life, too. But I know he will always be there for me. When I have no one else, I know I will have my brother. He will never turn away from me.” She returned to her chair and sank into it. “He’ll never turn his back on you either. I promise you that.”

“Thank you,” Esme said again.

Anna rose, composed once more. She brushed her hands down her skirts. “I must go. I need to get back to the village if I’m to catch the post back to London.”

Esme’s brows rose. “Did you travel here alone?”

Anna nodded, then smiled. “I do just about everything alone these days.”

Esme fought a wince at the loneliness brimming in the other woman’s words. “Please. I beg you. Take my carriage back to London.”

“Oh, no, milady. It is too far.”

“Nonsense. I have made the journey a hundred times. The coachman will stop at the Angel Inn in Oxford tonight. We have permanent rooms there, and I insist you stay in them.”

“But—”

Esme raised her hand to stop her. “I’ll never forgive myself if you have to spend another night in a post chaise. Please take my carriage. My coachman is utterly bored here at Ironwood Park with nothing to do.”

Anna sighed. “I feel terrible taking advantage—”

“Please. Stop.” Esme smiled at her, suddenly wanting to spend more time with this woman. She realized with a shock that she actually *liked* her. Cam had been right. “Will you take luncheon with me before you go? I find myself lonely here in this big house all by myself.”

Anna’s smile reached her eyes, making them sparkle a clear blue. “Of course. Thank you.”

“I usually take my meals in the kitchen. You won’t mind, will you?” She had a feeling Anna wasn’t one to be a stickler for propriety.

The other woman laughed. “Of course not.”

Arm in arm, they left the drawing room. Throughout the light meal, they spoke of Ironwood Park and Esme's family and Scotland, the words flowing easily, even as Esme marveled at them.

She'd managed to do something she'd never accomplished before, being mired in the constrictions of society and never feeling comfortable within the whispers and giggling and judgments of the other aristocratic girls.

She'd made a friend.

—

Late the following morning, Esme was curled up in the big armchair by the window in her room trying to focus on a book of Shakespearean sonnets. A knock on the door heralded Mrs. Hope bearing a letter from Sarah.

She opened it, wondering if her sister-in-law had anything to tell her about Cam. Or perhaps she'd had the baby...

Dearest Esme,

I'm so sorry to bear this bad news to you, but I feel I must. There has been a terrible turn of events here at Trent House, and we are all devastated by it.

We have lost dear Maggie.

Esme blinked at the unexpected words on the page. Maggie was one of the housemaids at Trent House. Had she left her position? But that didn't seem worthy of the devastation Sarah spoke of...Esme continued reading.

She is dead—she died in convulsions on the floor of the servants' dining room late last night. The doctor is certain she was poisoned.

And here is the part that makes me sick to my stomach: I gave the servants leave last night to drink the champagne meant for your wedding festivities. The doctor was certain that it had been tampered with, that someone had poisoned it. Further, it was only one bottle—Maggie had just opened and poured the bottle meant for you and Mr. McLeod to share at the wedding breakfast.

Esme, dear, if you had drunk that champagne at your wedding, you would have suffered the same fate as poor Maggie.

We have spoken to Mr. McLeod and the Highland Knights about the incident, and we have learned that the Knights have been under attack and that one of them has been murdered. We believe the tainted champagne was meant for Mr. McLeod, but I shudder to think of how you would have also been affected.

So even though we think this was an attack on the Highland Knights, please do be careful, my dear sister-in-law. Do not go out without a companion. Lock the doors at night. And please inform Mrs. Hope and the staff about Maggie and what has happened.

Again, I'm sorry to bear such horrible news. I hope all is well with you—please write to me as soon as you receive this.

All my love,

Sarah

After Esme read the letter through, she read it once again. Then she stared at it a few moments longer. And the truth flooded in.

“Oh God,” she whispered. She snapped up out of her chair, the book of sonnets falling to the floor, its pages

fluttering open.

She *knew*. She knew the identity of the man who'd been trying to murder the Highland Knights.

He was a Highland Knight himself.

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Chapter 26

Esme rapped on the door to the Highland Knights' house, her heart pounding and her palms sweaty. She'd been traveling since yesterday afternoon, only stopping to change horses, and she was exhausted and covered in the grime of the road. But as she'd drawn closer to London, her desperation to reach the Knights as soon as possible grew within her, until it was a screaming need: *Find them. Tell them. Save them.*

As she knocked, she mumbled a prayer under her breath: "Please, Lord. Let him be here. Please..."

There was no answer.

She stepped back from the door. It was dark—past midnight, but there were lights on inside the Knights' house, coming from the drawing room window. They wouldn't leave fires burning inside the house if no one was at home. They wouldn't leave fires burning downstairs if they'd gone to bed. Whoever was there, they were ignoring her.

She hesitated, considering banging on the window. But what if *he* was there? What would happen?

The thought struck her immobile with terror. She couldn't risk it.

She'd pick the lock on the back door and sneak in, just as she had last time she was here. She could be stealthy. She'd simply see who was here, and if it was one of the Knights she trusted, she'd speak to him.

She crept down the street and slipped into the mews behind the houses. The night was quiet, with little traffic, and she felt very alone, suddenly wishing she'd gone to one of her brothers for help first. But she hadn't. It was up to her.

She found the Knights' back door and picked the lock. The back storerooms and kitchen were dark, which was to her advantage. She took her time, moving cautiously so as not to make a sound.

She slipped into the corridor and found the door to the drawing room, which had been left ajar. A dim light filtered through the doorway, illuminating part of the passageway in soft candlelight.

She hesitated outside, listening. No one was conversing inside. In fact, she could hear no sounds at all coming from within. She inched closer until she could peek into the room.

Cam sat alone on one of the chairs, his head bent down. He wore his kilt and shirt, but also a formal jacket and cravat, as if he was planning to go out to a soiree or ball. He cradled a nearly empty glass of amber liquid in his hands. Probably whisky.

She scanned the rest of the room, confirming that he was, indeed, alone. And moving, his thumbs rubbing circles on the sides of the glass.

Relief shot through her, and she closed her eyes for a second as something loosened inside her. Cam was all right. Thank God.

She moved into the room slowly, and when her skirts rustled against the edge of the door, Cam's head snapped up. At first his face was utterly blank, then recognition bled in, and he rose, holding his glass loosely in one hand.

"Esme?" His voice was hollow and cracked.

"Yes, it's me. Are you alone here?"

"Aye." He gave a bitter smile. "I shouldna be. The major, his wife, and Stirling are at a formal dinner, and they believe I'm with Innes at a gaming hell, watching Pinfield. Mackenzie and his wife are spending the evening with her father. He and Innes think I'm with the

major and Stirling. They havena left me alone in days—they wilna leave me alone, the damned fools—so I was happy enough to deceive the lot of 'em.” He downed the rest of the liquid in his glass, then set it with a *thunk* on the small walnut table beside his chair. His blue gaze met hers, and she could see that this wasn't the first glass of whisky he'd drunk tonight. His lips twisted in a cynical smile. “I'm verra good at deception, you see.”

Yes, he was. But that wasn't the issue at hand, not at this moment.

“So...no one is in the house with you right now?”

He shook his head. “Not a soul. 'Tis the servants' night off.”

She stepped deeper into the room. “Cam...I have to talk to you about something. It's very imp—”

“I'm sorry,” he broke in, gazing at her with shining blue eyes. “What I did was wrong, Esme. I shouldna have done what I did. I ken now how stupid it was. I am a fool. A bastard and an ass, and I—”

“I can't talk about that right now. There's something —”

“Please, Esme. Please forgive me.”

“Cam—”

“I want you.”

“Well, that much is clear,” she bit out. But she was getting sidetracked. Flinging away thoughts of what had driven her from London, she pleaded, “Cam, we can't talk about this. Not now. Please, listen—”

“I *need* you, lass. I was such a fool. I dinna ken how to make it up to you, but I will spend the rest of my life trying...”

He was drunk, which was going to make her task more difficult.

Changing her tack, she spoke in a soothing voice. “All right. We can talk about that later.”

He stepped—no, it was more of a lurch—toward her and yanked her against him, burying his face in her hair. “I’m so glad you came, lass. I’ve missed you so much.”

Lord. She’d missed him, too. So much.

“I dinna deserve you. I ken that. I’ve kent it from the beginning.”

“Cam. You need to listen to me right now.” The urgency of her message still thrummed through her. Though now it was tinged with trepidation. She’d never seen Cam drunk before and had no idea what he’d do once she told him the truth.

He pulled back, cupped her face in both his hands, and stared at her. “Sweet lass. Sweet, perfect Esme.”

He kissed her, long and drugging. He tasted like whisky and man and *Cam*. She tried to pull back, but it went on and on until it wiped away everything but him... Well, *almost* everything.

She jerked back, breathing hard, and pressed a hand to his chest. “Cam, please. I need—”

“Anything, love. I’ll give you anything,” he vowed.

“Then give me a moment to speak to you,” she said. “I’ve something important to tell you.”

He nodded gravely then stepped back, expectant.

She took a deep breath. “I know who murdered Fraser and attacked Ross.”

He took a moment to absorb this, as it was obviously the last thing he’d expected her to say, then his eyes widened. He took her upper arms in a tight grip. “What?”

“I know who killed them.”

“Who?” He shook her slightly. “Who, Esme?”

“It was...” She swallowed hard. Then took a deep breath. “Oh Cam, I’m so sorry I have to tell you this. It was one of your own brothers. One of the Highland Knights. It was Sir Andrew Innes.”

Cam dropped her arms as if she’d burned him. “Nay.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but I’m sure it was him.”

He shook his head in denial. “That’s impossible.”

“Listen to me. I saw him with the champagne at Trent House. He was bringing it in that morning...the morning we were supposed to marry. I was coming home from... here.” She looked into his face, hating the expression she saw there, so crowded with emotion she could hardly pick one out. “I saw him,” she whispered.

“Did you see his face?” Cam demanded.

“No. I saw his limp. He has a very discernible way of walking. I didn’t connect it to him at first. I was too focused on the problem at hand. All I took in was the servant, the limp, and the champagne. I didn’t think about it again until I received Sarah’s letter yesterday, telling me that one of the maids at Trent House had been poisoned by the tainted champagne we were supposed to drink at our wedding breakfast. I remember his blond hair now. His limp. The way he didn’t make eye contact with me, as if he didn’t want to face me or speak to me. And he was wearing a black coat with an attached cloak, just like the man who killed Mr. Fraser and attacked Sir Ewan.”

Cam shook his head, but acceptance was forming in his expression. “Nay. Nay.”

“It is he, Cam. I’m certain of it.”

“It canna be.”

“Sir Andrew fits the description you’ve received from all the witnesses, doesn’t he?”

Cam was starting to see the truth—she could see it in the devastation in his eyes. “Aye,” he rasped out.

“And his limp—isn’t it true that everyone who’s seen him has mentioned a limp, or stumbling, or has seen him trip over something?”

Despair crumpled Cam’s face. “Why? Why would he do such a thing to us? We’d do anything for him. *Anything.*”

And this was what betrayal felt like. Esme knew exactly how Cam was feeling. She had experienced that same emotion recently, thanks to the man standing across from her. But the betrayal he felt had been worse. Innes had been trying to *murder* his brother Knights. “I have no idea,” she said honestly.

Cam blinked hard, as if to clear away the liquor that had clouded his mind. “I must find him,” he said darkly.

“You said he’s with Lord Pinfield—”

“Aye, but mayhap...” He shook his head. “I dinna ken. I need answers. I need to find him. Now.”

“But you don’t know where he is—”

“He’s supposed to be at Lucifer’s Den with Pinfield.”

Her eyes went wide. That sounded like a horrible place. She reached for Cam, but he was already turning away. “What will you do? Please, Cam, be careful.”

“You needn’t worry about me. I’ll be handling myself just fine. You stay here until I get back. It’s safe here.” He took her hand in one of his own, the lamp in the other, and pulled her out of the room and toward the stairs. “Lock yourself in my room until I return.”

“But...” She didn’t know how to argue. There were so many options that sounded better to her than staying here. He could take her somewhere safe, among others. Any one of her brothers’ houses would do. Or he could take her with him. But he seemed determined.

He led her into his bedchamber and sat her on the edge of the bed before withdrawing a gun from the armoire.

The sight of it, silver and sleek, sent her pulse ratcheting up once again. “Cam, please. At least wait until the others return home...”

Cam’s lips were firm, resolute, his blue eyes hard as stones. He didn’t look at all drunk—not anymore. “I’m going to fetch them first. We’ll confront him at Lucifer’s Den.”

Well, at least it was some relief that he wasn’t going to barge into the gaming hell alone like some mad vigilante.

He shrugged into a large coat and shoved the gun into an interior pocket. Then he turned to her. “Stay here, Esme. If I return and don’t find you here...” He shook his head, then his voice gentled as he knelt before her. “Please. Be here when I return. I need you to be here.”

“All right,” she whispered. Because how could she deny him? She’d stay.

“Be safe,” she whispered. “All of you.”

“I will. We all will. Lock the door behind me.”

She nodded. He pulled her to him and kissed her soundly. Then he was gone, and she had nothing to do but wait.

After locking the door behind him, she sat on the bed wringing her hands in her lap for a very long time, it seemed, the temptation to leave the room strong, but she’d keep to her word. She’d wait until he came back.

She searched the room, looking for any kind of weapon...just in case. The best she could find was a silver candlestick. She removed the candle from it and lay in the bed, clutching it to her chest.

She’d hardly slept in the past two days, and finally exhaustion took over. She pulled Cam’s blanket over her

and fell into a fitful sleep, fully dressed, without even bothering to remove her shoes.

A scratching sound woke her. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but it was still dark outside. She cracked her eyes open, feeling heavy with sleep, just as the door opened.

She lurched up in the bed. "Cam?"

But it wasn't Cam at all who strode into the bedchamber. It was Sir Andrew Innes. He stopped short when he saw her, a confused expression passing over his face before it melted into an arrogant mask as her body, consumed by sudden, shocking fear, shrank back against the headboard.

"Lady Esme," he said smoothly, his gaze taking in her fully dressed figure and, no doubt, her shoes poking out from under the blanket. "Fancy meeting you here. Our friend McLeod has been pining over you. Where is he, by the way?"

He knew, she realized. He'd read the fear in her expression, in her body. He knew she'd seen him that day in the larder and had put two and two together.

"He's...not here," she managed through the panic clogging her throat.

Then she nearly kicked herself at the stupid statement. Now Innes knew that she was alone. Which meant she was at his mercy.

She began to tremble—uncontrollable tremors that began somewhere deep within her and radiated outward.

"I see." Innes stepped deeper into the room, closing the door behind him and bolting it. "Where did he go?"

"I...don't know," she lied.

"I think you do." He now stood at the edge of the bed, hovering over her. "I think you know too much," he added quietly.

“I know nothing,” she said. “What are you talking about? Why are you here?” Wasn’t he supposed to be at Lucifer’s Den watching Lord Pinfield?

“I’m here for McLeod,” he said silkily. “Since he’s not here, I suppose you’ll do. But first I need to know what you know. What you saw on the day of your doomed wedding.” He sat at the edge of the bed, putting a firm hand on her thigh, pressing her back into the bed, a clear warning that if she should try to run away, he’d stop her.

“I...I didn’t...” she stuttered, not knowing what to say, what would be wise to say at this point.

“You saw me,” he said, his voice lethally quiet, “at Trent House. I ken you did.”

“I—”

“Dinna lie to me.” He squeezed her thigh, hard enough she knew she’d sport bruises in the shapes of his fingers tomorrow. “This will be worse for you if you do.”

“I saw you,” she admitted. Immediately, the fingers on her thigh loosened.

“I thought so. But you said nothing.”

“I didn’t realize it was you. Until...later.”

“I see.” He paused, staring at the lantern, which Cam had placed on the bedside table, that still cast a weakly flickering golden light through the room. “Do you ken why I was there?”

“I do.” Esme’s voice had strengthened. She felt stronger, sitting here, watching this traitor who’d killed his own men, his own brothers. He was disgusting. “To try to kill Cam.”

“Aye,” he admitted softly, his voice holding nothing but the simple truth of it. “I have wanted Camden McLeod and his friends dead for a verra long time now.”

“Why?”

He laughed, but the sound held no humor. “He killed my brother.”

“He...what?”

“Aye, he did.” Innes’s voice held no sadness, no pain. He stated it as a simple fact. “Seven years ago. McLeod poisoned him.”

Seven years ago...That was right around when Cam’s brother had died. When poor Anna had endured...Oh, God. Esme shrank back in the bed. “Your brother was one of the men who hurt Lady Anna.”

Innes snorted. “That whore? She wasna hurt. She came to them. She begged for it. Then she went whining to her dear brother when we returned from the campaign. He told his friends about it—Ross and Fraser, and another man, a sergeant who died at Waterloo, conveniently saving a bit of work for me—and the four of them went after my brother and his friends. Both his friends were stabbed and killed in a back alley, but my brother had stayed home that night, so McLeod poisoned him instead.” Innes turned to Esme, and there was a smile on his face. She’d never seen anything more frightening.

“Cam must not have known he was your brother...” Esme began.

“Aye, he didna.” Innes shrugged carelessly. “He was my half-brother, my father’s bastard. Younger than me.” He leaned forward, his face far too close to hers for comfort. His whisky-laden breath whispered over her cheek. “But he was my *brother*. My *true* brother. ’Twas not some false brotherhood of false knights invented on a whim of a group of men with grand illusions of heroism and bravery. What kind of hero kills a man in cold blood? How is it brave to murder without allowing a man to defend himself? What kind of man forces poison down a lad’s throat?”

One who loves his sister, Esme thought. Who doesn't want her attackers to hurt her or anyone else ever again. But it would be fruitless to tell Innes this.

"You've had a vendetta against them for seven years," she whispered. That was a lot of time to allow rage to fester and grow, and evidently it had, even as he'd put on a false face to the Highland Knights.

"Aye, seven long years." Innes sighed. "And he didna even ken it. All those years, and he didna ken it was my brother he'd killed."

"You should have told him. You should have spoken—"

Innes laughed coldly. "And what would I have done? Hold a claymore to his neck and declare, 'You killed my brother, prepare to die?' That would have only effected my own death. Nay. I waited. Until the right time came. And it has come. They're at a loss. There are no clues. They'd never suspect me. The champagne was to be my perfect vengeance. To watch him suffer at his own wedding breakfast, his body racked by agony as the poison sucked the life from it..." He turned narrowed eyes on her once more. "But then you appeared, in the wrong place at the wrong time."

She swallowed hard, not liking the menace in his tone. He didn't seem to care that his tainted champagne had killed Maggie, an innocent girl who had nothing to do with any of this.

"Now the question is," he continued softly, "what to do with you."

"Don't do anything," she suggested. "Leave me alone. I haven't told him, and I won't—"

He squeezed her leg again, his fingers biting painfully enough into her flesh that she gasped. "Dinna lie to me. I ken you told him. That's why he isn't here, aye? Because he's looking for me. He'd no idea I was a step ahead of him. I kent he'd be home tonight. He lied about going to

the dinner with Stirling and the major. He hates those kinds of events, and because of his poor broken heart, the major and Stirling wouldn't've wanted his company there anyhow." He sighed. "Tonight was to be the night I finally destroyed Camden McLeod. But you're here, and he's not. So what to do with you?"

"Please don't—"

"This might be even better," Innes said thoughtfully. "Because the man loves you. I can hurt him through you far more deeply than I could ever hurt him alone, can't I?"

"No. He doesn't love me. You're wrong." But even as she said the words, she knew *she* was wrong. Cam did love her. And she loved him. If they could only get through tonight, she'd finally tell him the truth of it.

Maybe he and the other Knights were on their way. Maybe they'd break through the door in a minute or two, and it would all be over. For the first time since Innes had awakened her, she glanced at the clock on Cam's desk and nearly gasped in shock. It wasn't even one thirty yet. Cam had been gone for less than an hour. It would be at least another couple of hours before he returned. By then she might be dead.

Innes rose to his feet, smiling benevolently at her. "Well, then," he said. "Let's get started."

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Chapter 27

Halfway to the townhouse where Stirling and the major were dining this evening, Cam drew his horse to a halt.

Earlier tonight, he'd had nothing on his mind but drowning his sorrows in drink. He'd imbibed plenty of whisky, but it hadn't done anything to ease his pain. And then Esme had walked into the drawing room, and the joy of seeing her washed through him, making him realize once and for all that she, not whisky, had the power to bring him happiness and contentment.

Still, he'd been sotted. There was no denying it. Now, with every minute that passed, Cam felt as if he were exhaling whisky fumes with every breath and restoring himself to sobriety.

And it struck him, here in the middle of Curzon Street, that he'd made a fatal mistake.

He'd left Esme alone. Unprotected, except by a flimsy lock. In a place Innes had free access to.

He turned the horse and urged it to trot, his anxiety ratcheting upward with every stride the horse took. He'd been stupid to leave her there. A damned, bloody fool. If Innes was there...if she was hurt...

Long minutes later, he arrived at the house, the horse in a lather he didn't have time to address. Instead of taking his mount to the stable, he tied it to the hitching post at the front of the house. As quickly and as quietly as he could, he unlocked the front door and let himself inside, stealing up the stairs and heading directly to his room.

Halfway down the corridor, he heard sounds. The low sounds of a woman crying and then a man's voice, low and gloating.

Cam broke into a run, reeling to a halt in front of his door, grabbing the handle and yanking it, but it didn't budge. It was locked from the inside. God damn it all. Rage and fear bringing him untold amounts of strength, he kicked at the door, and it went flying inward, opening to a scene that made Cam freeze.

Innes stood in the bedchamber, holding a gun. But it wasn't pointed at Cam. It was pointed directly at Esme, who lay curled in a ball on the bed, whimpering, blood smeared across her temple.

Fury, as red and hot as that blood, pumped in Cam's veins.

"I'll shoot her," Innes said, as if Cam's dramatic entrance had come as no surprise. His voice was quiet, calm, in direct contrast to how Cam was feeling. "Right through the forehead. That'd be a pretty picture, now, wouldn't it?"

Cam wanted to scream, rage. Wring Innes's neck with his bare hands. But he did none of those things. Instead, he instantly raised his hands. "Dinna hurt her. Do whatever you wish to me, but dinna hurt her."

"Hurting her will be more satisfying," Innes argued. This was a side of the man Cam had never seen. A wicked, sinister side.

Cam shook his head. "It's me you want." Though he had no idea why. "It's me you want to make suffer. Not her. She's an innocent in this game."

"True enough," Innes conceded. "But an unimportant one. We've just been discussing how hurting her will be the coldest revenge I can serve upon you."

Cam couldn't deny that. Watching Innes hurt Esme would tear him to shreds.

He felt the weight of his gun in his pocket—it was useless now. If he reached for it, Innes wouldn't hesitate

to strike. Same with Cam's dirk, which hung from his belt, visible to Innes's eye.

"Please." He was begging. But he didn't care. He lowered himself to his knees, opening his palms in a gesture of supplication. "Hurt me. Torture me. I dinna care. Do what you will. Leave her out of it. Please."

Keeping the gun trained on Esme, Innes had turned to face Cam. He looked quite pleased with himself, smiling as he cocked the weapon.

"How does it feel?" he asked softly. "She'll be dead soon, and there's nothing you can do about it."

There had to be. There had to be *something*. Cam's mind was racing as fast as his heart.

"I beg you. Dinna hurt her," he pleaded.

Behind Innes, Cam saw movement, but he kept his gaze firmly focused on the man before him. Not wanting Innes to hear Esme move, he kept talking. "I dinna ken what this is about, Innes. Why're you betraying the Knights? What do you want from us?"

Innes's lips twisted. "Not the Knights, McLeod. Just you, Ross, and Fraser. That's all."

"But...why?"

More movement behind Innes.

"You dinna recall? Think hard. What sin did you, Ross, and Fraser commit?"

"A great many, to be sure." Cam had no idea what the man was talking about.

Innes took a step toward him. Good. The farther he was from Esme, the better.

"You dinna recall the brutal murder of three Scottish lads here in London?" Innes's voice was hard now, brittle and cold.

“Three Scottish la—” Cam broke off, realization slapping him in the face. Anna’s abusers. He narrowed his eyes. “Who were they to you?”

“One of them was my brother. The other two were his companions. His friends.”

“That’s impossible. You’ve no brothers.”

“Oh, but I do. Thomas was my da’s bastard, which is why no one makes the connection between us. But he was my flesh and blood, raised as such, and you...” Innes took another step closer. He hadn’t glanced at Esme in several seconds—a good thing, since Cam could tell Esme had changed positions. What was she doing? Whatever it was, she was risking too much. He wished she’d stop.

“...you killed him,” Innes finished. “He was just a lad, and you *murdered* him.”

“I’m sorry.” Cam didn’t sound at all sorry. He’d kill those rapist bastards a hundred times more if he could. “I didna ken he was your brother.”

Innes snorted. “You speak as if that fact would have made a difference. But it wouldn’t’ve, would it?”

No, it wouldn’t have. Cam hadn’t cared whose families those lads had come from. He’d probably have done the same if it were his own damn brother.

“It might’ve,” he lied.

Innes scoffed, and as he did, Cam saw a flash of something behind him.

Several things happened at once. Something silver whistled through the air, directed at Innes’s head. Innes’s finger tightened on the trigger, and the weapon fired with a sound so loud it reverberated inside Cam’s skull. And, roaring in fury, Cam flung himself at Innes, now just a little more than arm’s length from him. As the silver stick connected to Innes’s head with a *crack*, Cam tackled him, and the pistol skittered across the wooden

surface of the floor, coming to rest far out of both men's reaches.

Innes screeched in pain as Cam landed on top of him, punching his face with all his strength, making the other man's head whip from side to side. But Innes was no green lad—he'd served in the army almost as long as Cam and had fought in just as many battles. Innes punched Cam in the kidneys, first one side then the other, each blow so hard, Cam saw stars. Innes rolled him over, now atop him, as they continued to exchange fierce blows.

Innes reared up on his knees, dodging a wide upper cut meant for his cheek. He grabbed Cam by the cravat, holding him steady. Cam had just enough time to think *Bloody hell* before the blow landed on his own cheek with a resounding crack. Cam grunted in pain, but rage rushed through him, and he bucked wildly, tossing Innes off him.

Innes was a persistent bastard. He wouldn't let go; only twisted his cravat, cutting off all air from Cam's windpipe, making him choke and sputter. They were both on their knees now, and Cam yanked at Innes's arm, to no avail.

Jesus, the man was going to strangle him. Right here in front of Esme.

Darkness crept at the fringes of his vision. He whined and wheezed, trying to get in the smallest amount of air, trying to tear Innes's hand away from his cravat, but it was no good.

The darkness crept further in...and he could barely see anything now but the twisted, vengeful face of Sir Andrew Innes, the man whose brother had raped Cam's sister. His eyes were narrow, his lips pursed in strain, sweat beaded on his forehead, his blond hair hanging limply on either side of his face.

The man who'd killed Fraser and an innocent maid. Who'd tried to kill Ross. Who'd intended to kill Esme tonight.

Esme.

She'd come back to him tonight. She loved him—she *must* love him. As much as he loved her.

Love surged into him, bringing with it a clarity and strength he'd never felt before. He knew what he had to do.

He dropped Innes's arm. Instantly, Innes's fingers tightened the cravat at his neck. Fighting desperately to hold on to consciousness, Cam fumbled at his belt, feeling the carved hilt of his dirk. His fingers wrapped around it. Strong and sure, he yanked it from its sheath, drew back, and plunged it forward—right into Innes's gut.

Innes released Cam's cravat. His mouth dropped open, and he gasped. Cam drew back, yanking out the dirk with a wet, sucking noise, and plunged it into Innes again, this time higher, in the general location of his heart.

Innes blinked at Cam in surprise, then swayed on his knees for a moment. Cam pulled his dirk out again, and Innes fell heavily on his side, his breaths now bubbling gasps, as ineffective as Cam's own breaths had been moments before.

Cam dropped his arm to his side, blood dripping from his dirk's tip, his lungs gasping air as Innes gurgled in one final breath.

Innes went still, and Cam stared down at him, a great sadness making him heavy. Only days ago, he would've given his own life to protect this man lying before him.

He heard a noise and turned his head slowly. Esme stood by the side of the bed. She held the gun up and aimed at Innes, her hand trembling so hard the gun shook wildly in her grasp. Her other arm hung limp at

her side, and red striped the side of her face. Her dress was torn raggedly at the shoulder, and her skin there was painted with blood.

“Put the gun down, lass,” Cam said quietly. “It’s over.”

She looked at him with wild eyes then back down to Innes. “Is he...is he...?”

“Aye. He is.”

Slowly, she lowered the gun. He rose and strode to her, gently leading her to the edge of the bed. She was as pale as the parchment she wrote upon, and shivering so hard her teeth chattered. He uncurled her fingers from the gun and set it aside.

He covered her with a plaid, murmuring soothing words to her. He moved a thick lock of dark hair aside, pulling it gently from the blood that was sticking it to her skin, and studied the laceration on the side of her forehead.

“What happened?”

“He...hit me. I think he was wearing a ring.”

Cam glanced over at Innes’s prone form, glad he couldn’t see the man’s eyes from this angle. He could, however, see that his left hand bore a thick gold ring.

He drew out his dirk. “I need to cut off your sleeve to see your shoulder better.”

She nodded, her eyes glassy, and he sliced the fabric of dress down her arm, peeling it away from her shoulder to reveal the wound.

He hissed out a breath. “It’s still bleeding but it’s just a nick.” Thank God. Either Esme’s blow with the candlestick or Cam’s tackle had thrown off Innes’s aim.

“I can’t feel it at all,” she whispered through chattering teeth. “I’m just cold. I need...”

She stopped, but the way she was looking at him, he knew just what she needed. Him. His body and his comfort and his heat. He'd give her anything right now. He wished he could give her even more, but that was what she wanted and needed. So, after wrapping her arm quickly with a piece of linen torn from his sheet, he moved Innes's body out of his room. Then Cam stripped off his coat and got into bed, drawing her beside him and holding her tight in his arms.

They remained that way until hours later, when the major and Stirling arrived home and found them.

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Chapter 28

Esme fidgeted while watching her nephews play, hardly noticing their shrieks of laughter as they rolled wooden balls at carved figurines, attempting to knock them over. Lukas would set up another scene, give a ball to Theo, and they'd knock the figures down all over again, screeching with the fun of it, their cheeks pink and their eyes bright. Sarah sat silently beside Esme, a calming presence, but Esme's heart still raced. She couldn't stop looking at the mantel clock. It was two minutes to four o'clock.

Cam would be here in two minutes. Or...he might be late. He might not come.

Nonsense. Of course he'd come. He'd sent her a note early in the day saying he wished to talk to her and asking if he could call at four. She'd responded in the affirmative. If he'd changed his mind, he would have canceled, wouldn't he?

Her shoulder spiked with pain. She'd been twisting her hands hard enough to make her gunshot wound, which now sported a thick scab, complain about the motion.

She flexed her fingers and relaxed them, glancing at the clock again. One minute to four. Why did time move so slowly sometimes?

There was a knock at the door that sent her bolting out of her chair. A footman entered and said, "Mr. McLeod has arrived, my lady."

"Thank you. Please show him in."

The man bowed and retreated. Sarah rose from her chair, her hand on her stomach as if she were worried it might pop open any second. She was absolutely enormous.

“I will take this as our cue to go,” she told Esme, smiling. “Good luck, Esme. I hope everything turns out just the way you want it.” She kissed Esme on the cheek, gathered her boys clumsily, and exited the room. A moment later, Cam walked in, handsome in his blue-and-green tartan, jacket, and cravat, with his dark hair and shocking blue eyes. He’d dressed up for the occasion, though that was hardly necessary. She’d find him handsome in rags...even more handsome in nothing.

He closed the door behind himself, then stepped deeper into the room, staring at her.

“Esme.” His voice was gruff. “How are your injuries?”

“Fine.” She touched the scab at her hairline. “They’re nearly healed.”

“Good.” He took a step closer to her. “I missed you.”

They’d been torn away from each other on the night he’d killed Innes. Her brothers had come for her, and she hadn’t seen Cam since. She’d tried to bide her time waiting for him, but as each day passed, she’d grown more anxious.

It had only been a few days, but they had been the longest days of her life. Sam had told her that the Knights had been busy handling the repercussions of Innes’s death and all that he’d done, and to give Cam time. She’d tried, but she felt like she couldn’t do anything, couldn’t move forward at all, until she confronted him.

She swallowed hard and told him the truth. “I missed you, too.”

He smiled, stepping closer to her. “You came back to London for me.”

She shook her head. “No. I came back to London to tell you about Innes. To hopefully prevent him from taking more lives. From taking *your* life.” She looked into his eyes. “I stayed for you, though. I hoped...”

Her voice dwindled, and she bit her lower lip, looking away. She straightened her shoulders, wondering exactly what she hoped. The anger and disappointment at his actions still simmered within her. Would it ever go away? He had made it clear over and over that he wanted her, but it had been on his terms. If her relationship with him didn't happen on *her* terms, then she might as well roll over and simply submit to everyone's whims.

But she was done with that.

"You manipulated me, Cam." She sank into her chair. "*Again.*"

His expression sobered. "I ken," he said softly. Sighing, he pulled a chair near hers and sat, pushing a rough hand through his hair. Clutching a handful of dark hair at his nape, he turned to face her. "I'm sorry for it." He licked his lips and looked down, dropping his arm. "Sorrier than you'll ever know."

"Why couldn't you just trust that things would work out as they were meant to?"

"I've never been a patient man, Esme."

Her lips twisted. "Do I not deserve your patience?"

"Aye, you do," he admitted. "But it was frustrating, knowing how much I wanted you and that you wanted me equally as much. I couldna see why it was necessary to wait."

"So you thought you'd expedite matters—"

"Aye," he agreed.

"—by having my brother walk in on us in bed together. By forcing the issue and causing my family terrible consternation and me untold amounts of embarrassment?"

Cam's lips went tight. "Aye," he agreed softly. "'Twas wrong of me."

“Oh Cam.” She shook her head in frustration. “Do you see the problem? You’ve taken my life into your hands and manipulated it to your pleasure more than once, without thinking of me and what I wanted.”

“That’s not true,” he said darkly. “I was thinking of what I wanted, but I was thinking equally of you. You must believe that, Esme. I kent Whitworth wasn’t worth a second glance from you, that you’d never have been happy with him. I kent you wanted to marry me, but you were having doubts, thanks again to Whitworth. I would never have done anything to hurt you.

“Aye, there was scandal when your engagement ended, and aye, the duke was none too happy with me for overstepping my bounds with you, but both those are temporary things. Marriage...that is forever.”

He was right, but he was missing the most important facet of this. “But what about me? About how both of your decisions completely disregarded what I wished for at the time? You started by reading my story without my consent. And it’s true that Henry wasn’t right for me, and deep inside, I did wish to marry you the very first time you asked.” She flushed at her words but forged ahead. “But I needed to discover those things on my own time, in my own way. You forced the issue, and that showed a great amount of disrespect for me and my ability to learn things for myself.”

Cam nodded slowly. “Aye. You’re right.” He closed his eyes. “The last thing I want to do is disrespect you, Esme. I respect you more than anyone I’ve ever known, man or woman.”

“Your actions haven’t shown that.” Her voice was a near whisper.

He nodded. “There’s no excuse for it...except the feelings I was having for you. Both times, they were so strong, and I was desperate, panicked. I usually dinna wait for people to cut my path for me. I do it myself,

hacking and pushing my way through. 'Tis the way I've always approached life."

She knew that; his sister had told her something similar.

"Before now—before the Knights—and besides my siblings, the people who formed my world were self-serving, arrogant idiots. Those were the first traits I learned as a boy. And being self-serving and arrogant served me well for a long while."

"Those traits still serve you rather well, methinks."

"But not with you."

"Even with me," she admitted, thinking of his arrogant aggressiveness when they'd first met—how it had made her breathless and insatiably curious about him, "to some extent. But not when you make my decisions for me. Not when you take control of my life away from me."

"I understand." He swallowed hard and reached over to her, taking her hand from her knee and holding it firmly between both of his. "I vow I'll never do it again."

"Do you?" She tilted her head at him, seeing the sincerity in his eyes. She knew he wasn't a man to take a vow lightly.

"I do," he said gravely. "From now on, your life is yours to control."

"I need that. Perhaps I need it more than most..."

"Aye. Those who dinna know you like I do may think differently, but you took control of your life when you decided to become a writer, knowing how the choice would be looked down upon, but choosing to do it anyhow, and becoming successful at it."

She nodded.

"I saw that and I admired it in you. But then I took it away." He drew in a shaky breath. "I vow I will do

everything in my power to always show you the respect I should have shown you from the beginning.”

Suddenly, his eyes grew intensely vulnerable, with a sheen over them she’d never seen before.

“And I take it a step further,” he said, his voice so low and tremulous she could hardly recognize it as his. “I’ll give you all the power, right here, right now. I will do as you wish. If you tell me to leave you alone and in peace once and for all, I will go. I will leave you with the knowledge that I failed you in the worst way—and I failed myself.

“Or if you tell me to stay, I will stay and do my damndest to make you the happiest authoress in the world. Tell me what to do, Esme. I am offering you control not only of your own destiny, but mine as well.”

She stared at him, suddenly overwhelmed. To be offered this much control by a man who never relinquished it to anyone seemed like too much.

“The stupid things I’ve done were because my feelings for you were so damn strong I didna ken how to manage them. I was certain I was an ass and that I’d hurt you, and I feared being with you because I didna want to hurt you like my da hurt my mum.”

Esme gasped. “Cam, you’d never hurt me in that way —”

“I might not have done what he did, but I still hurt you. I kent I was doing it, too, and it convinced me I was just like him and even less deserving of having you.”

He lowered his head and pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I was desperate for you. I was afraid and confused, and I was also stupid. I didna ken how to love someone properly. I still don’t—not entirely. But I’m learning. I *will* learn.” He looked up at her, his expression ravaged, and spoke in a near whisper. “I dinna want to be like my da. I want to be a good man. I

want to prove to you that I *can* be that man. Please give me a chance. Please be with me. I..." His voice broke, and he swallowed hard. "I canna imagine a life without you, Esme."

She tried to imagine a life, a future, without him. She couldn't.

And then he said it, those three sweet words that for so long she'd wondered if she'd ever hear. "I love you." He took her hand again and squeezed tight. "I love you so damn much." His voice shook with conviction. "I'd do anything for you, anything to be with you, to marry you. I'm so sorry, Esme. So. Damn. Sorry."

"I...I forgive you," she said, blinking hard. "And...I don't want you to go away."

"Oh, thank *God*," he said in a rushed exhalation, shaking harder now, perhaps out of sheer relief.

"But I need time."

He sucked in a breath. "How much time?"

"I always thought a June wedding would be nice..." she whispered.

"Does that mean yes? You'll marry me? In June?"

"I think so. Yes."

His lips curled into a huge grin. "June is a year from now," he mused.

"We'll marry next summer. Can you wait that long? Do you have the patience?"

He nodded, deadly serious, looking her directly in the eye. "Aye. I can, and I do."

"You won't take control from me again?"

"Never," he agreed, but then he frowned. "Well, that's not entirely true."

She froze, alarm flaring in her chest.

“There’s one place above all I require absolute control,” he said. “And one place I believe you are more than happy to relinquish it.”

She shook her head in confusion. “Where’s that?”

He stood and stepped forward, looming over her. “In our bedchamber.”

A deep shudder ran through her at those three words, the alarm dissolving into heat. *In our bedchamber.*

“Oh,” she murmured.

Oh, yes. She’d gladly give him control—all the control he wanted—when they were in the bedchamber.

He bent down and framed her cheeks with his hands, his fingertips gentle on her scab as he tilted her head up so she gazed at him. “I love you, Esme Hawkins. I’m going to love you for the rest of my life. You’ll never regret this choice.”

He kissed her then, his lips soft and seductive, and like always, he became her universe in that moment—her whole being, body and soul, straining toward him. She let him lift her up and wrap her into his arms, and she shuddered with the deliciousness of being surrounded by him like this.

She pulled back and looked up at him, smiling. “I love you, too, Cam,” she whispered.

And at that moment, she knew he was right: She and Cam would be together for the rest of their lives, and she would never, ever regret it.

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Epilogue

TWO WEEKS LATER

Colin Stirling sat with the Knights, along with Lady Grace, Lady Claire, Lady Esme, and Sam Hawkins, in the drawing room of the house, discussing possible additions to their depleted ranks. Thanks to Andrew Innes, their numbers had dwindled from seven to five.

Hawkins had just suggested a youth he'd trained, Laurent Dupré, as a possible candidate. The Knights had frowned at that—a French lad with a group of five hardened Scottish warriors? But they agreed to consider him.

“I can vouch for Laurent as well,” Lady Esme said. “I think he'd make a wonderful Highland Knight.”

“The Highland Knights and a Parisian Chevalier?” McLeod said. “Mayhap we'll have to change our name.”

Lady Esme laughed. “Laurent was raised here in England. I think he'd be offended if you labeled him a Parisian Chevalier.”

Colin watched her share a grin with her fiancé. Since their engagement announcement two weeks ago, Lady Esme and McLeod had rarely stopped gazing into each other's eyes. They were deeply in love, that much was certain. And in lust as well, if the constant touches they shared were any indication.

They made a good match. So good, something told him that their engagement wouldn't last until next June. If he had to put money on it, he'd have them shackled by the end of the year.

“And,” Hawkins added, “Laurent has the way of the chameleon about him. He could pass as a Highlander as much as a Frenchman. I daresay it comes from the necessity of hiding his Frenchness for so many years.”

Colin's lips twitched in a smile. "We'll convert him to a Highlander, then."

"I imagine you will," Hawkins said mildly.

"I have a suggestion."

Everyone turned to Ross, who grinned at them from his perch on the edge of one of the walnut side tables. Ross had finally recovered from his ordeal and was back among them, a fact for which Colin would forever be grateful. He loved the exuberant redhead like a brother.

"Maxwell White."

They looked at Ross blankly, and Ross tilted his head, frowning. "You dinna know him?"

"Never heard of him," the major said.

"I went to school with him in Aberdeen before we purchased our commissions, but we've kept up a correspondence since. He was an officer of the Scots Greys."

Colin nodded speculatively. The Scots Greys were an elite cavalry regiment that had proven their mettle in the Peninsular Wars, again and again.

"What's he done since Waterloo?" the major asked.

Ross shrugged. "He told me he's been on the Continent doing mercenary work. From what I can gather, he's ready to move on."

"Will he make a good Highland Knight, though?" Colin asked Ross. "Be honest, now."

Ross nodded vigorously, his red curls bouncing. "Aye. He will."

"You seem convinced," McLeod mused.

"I am. White is intelligent, a powerful warrior, and loyal to a fault."

The men exchanged glances, and the major nodded. "Let's meet with him, too, then."

There was a short knock on the door before it opened to Bailey bearing his silver salver. "Excuse me," he said in his most English-butler-ish tone. "A letter has just arrived for Lady Esme."

He went to Esme and held the silver tray in her direction. Her brows raised, the lass plucked the note from the tray and opened it. Her eyes scanned it quickly, and she jumped to her feet so abruptly, Bailey had to take a step backward. "It's twins!" she exclaimed. "Sarah has given birth to healthy twin boys this afternoon!"

"Twin boys?" Hawkins asked, as if he'd never heard of such a thing.

"No wonder she was so enormous!" Esme exclaimed. "Oh my goodness. I have to see her. Immediately."

Two seconds later, she was out the door. Another two seconds, and McLeod had followed her. Within the next ten seconds, the room had completely drained of its occupants, leaving Colin alone.

He hated being by himself, but lately he'd been managing it better. He sat still, listening to the excited voices outside, the opening and closing of doors, the rap of boots on the floorboards. Eventually the sounds died down, and he wondered if, in fact, the entire household had gone to welcome the duchess's new arrivals.

Which, in turn, would mean he was well and truly alone.

Don't think about that. Don't think about it.

Beads of sweat breaking out over his forehead, he rose abruptly. He'd go out, that's what he'd do. London was good, because there was always a soul nearby. It wasn't guaranteed, but usually surrounding himself with strangers was enough to chase the demons away.

He tried not to think of the dead silence of the house as he strode upstairs to fetch his coat and hat. God, he couldn't even hear the cook or Bailey. Mayhap they'd gone to celebrate the newborns as well.

Why hadn't he gone? Perhaps he should have. But he didn't know the Duke and Duchess of Trent, not like the others. And he hadn't even had a chance to think twice about it before they'd all banged out of the house.

He went into his room and leaned back against the wall, breathing hard. Why was he breathing hard? He was losing his mind, that was why. He hadn't previously known that breathlessness was part of the process of losing one's mind, but he'd learned in the past year that it definitely was.

Come on, man, he told himself. Stop. Breathe. Don't lose your wits—not here, not now.

He hated it when that happened. When his throat constricted so tight he couldn't get in a breath, until he felt his pulse beating frantically, his heart nearly bursting from his chest. Until he was absolutely certain he was going to die.

He hadn't died, not yet. Once, though, he had lost consciousness, only to wake on his floor with bright sunlight streaming over his face, wondering what the hell had happened.

He lunged forward, managing to open his wardrobe and pull out his coat and shove his arms through the armholes. He left the room, forgetting his hat, then remembering it and staggering back and grabbing it. Hurrying down the stairs, he clutched the handrail with a trembling hand, then lurched down the corridor and opened the door to the unseasonably cool day.

Miraculously, he managed to lock the front door behind him, even though his hand shook like a leaf in the wind.

There were several people close, thank God, walking up and down both sides of the street, as well as an endless stream of carriages, horses, and carts rattling over the cobblestones. He looked to the right and to the left, and then decided to turn left. His walks often took him in this direction lately, toward Mayfair and Viscount Pinfield's house.

His tendency to find himself pulled in this direction was somewhat a mystery. Pinfield had definitely earned his position at the bottom of the list of people Colin wished to see, ever.

Not Pinfield's daughter, though. She was a light in a world of darkness, a sweet, kind angel...

He hadn't seen Emilia since that night at Vauxhall Gardens when Ross had been attacked. He hadn't had Pinfield duty since then—and Colin missed those rare glimpses he'd had of her.

He strode down the street, trying to appear in control, but it was no use. Even the crowds weren't helping. His breaths were getting shorter, raspier, more panicky.

Dinna do this. You can breathe. It's all in your mind. Your mad, addled mind...

But the monsters had him, their talons digging into his chest.

He walked for several minutes—maybe ten, maybe more—until his vision blurred and he had no clear idea where he was. He felt the demons inside him, trying to take him over, body and soul.

He wouldn't let them. He couldn't. He continued to walk. It didn't matter where. As long as he kept walking, he maintained some semblance of control.

“Sir Colin? Sir Colin!”

He stopped, blinking, his chest heaving, and looked around. A young blond woman in a straw bonnet and

pink dress stood nearby. It was her who was speaking... maybe. Her lips were moving, but he seemed to catch her words long moments after she spoke them.

“I thought that was you.” A look of concern passed over her face, and Colin recognized her, finally. It was Lady Emilia Pinfield. “Is...is something wrong?” she asked him.

“Wrong?” Colin managed, still gasping for breath. “Er...nay.”

Her frown deepened. “But you’re breathing very hard.”

“I’ve...uh...been walking. Quickly.” That was hardly an acceptable explanation, but he couldn’t think of anything better.

“You must sit down and rest for a moment, then. There’s a bench right over there. Come.” She gestured for him to follow her, and turned. He realized they were in a square—though for the life of him he couldn’t remember which one. Berkeley Square, mayhap? Anyhow, she walked down a path flanked by trees, and moments later, a bench appeared, just as promised.

She stood by it, waiting for him. “Sit, Sir Colin, and catch your breath.”

He did as he was told, clutching his knees and bending his head, taking in deep gulps of air. It seemed he *could* actually breathe again, and he gorged his deprived lungs.

Finally, he looked up at her. “Thank you, milady.”

“Are you going to be all right?”

“Aye,” he said.

She eyed him warily. “Are you certain?”

“Aye.”

After studying him for another prolonged moment, she seemed satisfied. “You’re welcome, then.” She lowered herself on the bench beside him. “I’ll sit with you for a

minute to make sure you're all right, but I must go soon. My father will be home any minute now."

Colin stiffened at the mention of Pinfield—he'd seen firsthand how sternly the man treated his daughter. "You should go, then," he told her. "I dinna want you to get into any trouble."

She shrugged, surprising him. "Ah, well, trouble is all I seem to get into lately. You could hardly make it worse."

He frowned. "What d'you mean by that?"

"Oh, it is nothing." She waved her hand in dismissal, but he recognized the dark shadows in her eyes. Something was wrong in Emilia Pinfield's world, and he had a sudden, desperate need to make it right.

She laughed, but the sound was high and false. "Trouble seems to follow me wherever I go. It's always been like that, though. I do believe I'm a bit of a magnet for it."

Colin had never seen this version of Emilia Pinfield before—for he'd never seen her without her father. When Pinfield was near, she was quiet and shy and seemed to try to make herself smaller, but this young woman seemed simply *larger* in just about every way. She'd spoken to him more, and more animatedly, in the last thirty seconds than she had in their entire acquaintance.

"If you're in any trouble, milady," Colin said slowly, "you can come to the Highland Knights. You ken that, aye?"

"Come to you?" She raised a skeptical brow. "The men who guard my father?"

"Aye. Come to us. We can protect you from..." *From your father. From anyone.*

"Can you?" she asked softly, finally seeming to consider him seriously with intelligent gray-blue eyes.

He nodded. "Anytime."

“Like...knights in shining armor.”

“Aye, exactly.”

She smiled again, but this time it was a sad smile. “Oh, Sir Colin. I wish I could believe you. But I fear it’s too late for anyone—knights in shining armor included—to rescue me.”

Alarm shot through him. What did she mean by that? “Nay, you’re wrong, milad—”

She rose abruptly. He’d thought she was very young before, perhaps nineteen or twenty, and she did have the delicate features of a younger lass, but now her expression appeared much older and he wondered how old she really was.

“I must go,” she said. “I’m so glad you’re feeling better, Sir Colin.”

He rose and held out his hand, grasping her arm just as she turned away. “Dinna underestimate the Knights, milady. If you ever need our services, find us. We will help.”

He was back to himself, he realized, the demons banished, his breaths slow and even, his voice serious and earnest.

She gazed at him with sorrowful eyes for a moment, then lowered her lashes. “Thank you, Sir Colin,” she said, ever so politely.

She gently extricated herself from his grasp, then walked away.

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BY JENNIFER HAYMORE

The Highland Knights

A Highlander's Heart

Highland Heat

Highland Awakening

Highland Temptation (coming soon)

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BOWEN

USA Today bestselling author JENNIFER HAYMORE is the author of sexy historical and contemporary romance. Her books have been nominated for numerous awards, including five RT Book Reviews Reviewers' Choice awards and the prestigious RITA[®] award for best historical romance. You can find Jennifer Haymore in Southern California trying to talk her husband into yet another trip to England, helping her three children with homework while brainstorming a new five-minute dinner menu, or crouched in a corner of the local bookstore writing her next novel.

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The Editor's Corner

March into romance this month with Loveswept—snuggle up with your e-reader and our new books to escape the chill of those cold winter nights.

Who doesn't love naked men? In Christi Barth's *Risking It All*, friends bonded by tragedy fight for their future with strong and sassy women. In *New York Times* bestselling author Tracy Wolff's *Lovegame*, a damaged starlet bares her soul—and falls for the one man who cares enough to listen. Speaking of games, *New York Times* bestselling author Violet Duke kicks off her sizzling-hot new Fourth Down series with a friends-to-lovers romance between a no-strings-attached sports analyst and the hottest damn tomboy he's ever met, in *Jackson's Trust*. As Sawyer Bennett's *New York Times* bestselling Cold Fury series continues with *Hawke*, the league's most notorious party animal gets blindsided by the one that got away. The world of extreme sports just got a little steamier in Zoe Dawson's *Ramping Up*. Second chances are sweeter than ever for a reformed bully who's more than just a jock in Charlotte Stein's next installment of the steamy Dark Obsession series, *Never Sweeter*. And Shana Gray's provocative new novel features a resilient fighter going round for tantalizing round with the one that got away in *After the Hurt*.

For history fans, the Highland Knights series continues with a tight-knit band of Scottish mercenaries in *USA Today* bestselling author Jennifer Haymore's *Highland Awakening*. Don't miss the first book in *USA Today* bestselling author Ashlyn Macnamara's charming new regency romance trilogy, *To Lure a Proper Lady*.

And for those contemporary romance fans, there's a new voice in romance you won't want to miss—A. M. Madden—who cleans up the city streets in the first book in her new True Heroes series, *Stone Walls*, featuring hot

alpha men on the NYPD force. *New York Times* bestselling author Marquita Valentine ratchets up the tension as new beginnings lead to undeniable passion in *After We Fall*. And in *Resist*, a sizzling novel from *New York Times* bestselling author Missy Johnson, a young journalist goes undercover in a world of desire.

I'm sad to say it's over...but it's not *over* over, as there is a bouquet of beautiful romances awaiting you in April!

Until next month—Happy
Romance!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gina". The letter "G" is large and loops around, while "ina" is written in a smaller, more fluid cursive.

Gina Wachtel

Associate Publisher

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Read on for an excerpt from

Highland Temptation

by Jennifer Haymore

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Chapter 1

“There’ve been whispers in Town,” Major Campbell, the leader of the Highland Knights, said. “Rumors we’ll be needing to pay attention to.”

It was late—after midnight—and everyone in the household but the major and Sir Colin Stirling had already gone to bed. Colin and the major sat in the drawing room of the Knights’ Westminster townhouse, the room that in the past year and a half had become the place where they gathered almost every day to converse, speak of business, or simply relax together. It had become the one place where Colin could almost feel safe.

Colin leaned back in his chair, his thumb running over the cool lip of his whisky glass. “Aye, I ken.”

“Have you heard anything?”

“Nay. But...” Colin shook his head. Born and raised in the Scottish Highlands, he was somewhat of a superstitious man, and he simply *felt* things sometimes. He had sensed these rumors, these angry, inflaming whispers, growing in intensity over the last month or two, at various events he’d attended in London. He didn’t know the source of them, or even the topic, but...“I’ve felt them,” he finished.

The major was never one to question Colin—and thank God for that, because if he did he would have sent Colin off to Bedlam months ago. He tapped speculative fingers on his knee. “I havena spoken to the others because we havena enough information, or an inkling of what to do about all this talk—or even if anything needs to be done. But I dinna like it.” Major Campbell pushed a rough hand through his thick russet-brown hair.

“Neither do I,” Colin agreed. “What, exactly, have you been hearing?”

“Rumblings about the Regent and his lack of decency. Complaints that he’s an embarrassment to the populace.”

Colin pressed his lips together. The Prince Regent would never be his favorite royal, but he would be king someday, and Colin wasn’t one to criticize a man who’d someday be his liege lord.

“Whispers that the entire House of Hanover possesses the same flaw that caused King George III’s madness, and the entire family is soon to go the way of the king, frothing at the mouth and speaking nonsense.” The major’s lips twisted. “ ’Tis being said we’re all doomed if we continue to hail the Hanovers as our monarchs.”

Colin ground his teeth. This felt like a subtle, insidious attempt to undermine the monarchy. “Feels to me like a tumor on the general unrest and massive demand for parliamentary reform. Little lies like this can only fester and grow.”

The major sighed.

“Someone is responsible for starting these rumors, and for disseminating them. Who is it?” Colin asked.

“That’s what we dinna ken. And I think we need to find out,” the major said.

“Laurent would be the one for that, don’t you think?”

Laurent Dupré was the youngest and newest member of the Highland Knights. The dark-haired French lad was the only one of them who wasn’t a Highlander and who didn’t have a background in the army. After losing two men—one to murder and one to treachery—the Highland Knights’ membership was back up to seven. A good number, in Colin’s opinion. But they were continuing to grow in other ways, too—four of the knights were now married.

While the Highland Knights were becoming known throughout the kingdom as defenders of the Crown, they’d kept Laurent Dupré’s membership a closely

guarded secret for the past few months. Trained as an English spy since he was a wee lad, Laurent had perfected the art of slipping in and out of conversations and collecting peoples' secrets without being suspected. His ability to pass without notice was in direct contrast to the rest of the Knights—all large and intimidating kilt-wearing Highland warriors who couldn't enter a building without everyone inside immediately noting their presence.

The major nodded thoughtfully. "Aye, you're right. Mayhap Laurent's first major assignment should be to investigate the source of these grumblings." He took a deep swallow of his whisky. "I could be wrong," he said after a moment. "It could be nothing. Just malicious whispers, aye? People never stop complaining, even in the best of times."

"Aye," Colin agreed mildly. But his gut told him otherwise.

The major sighed and set down his glass. "Well, Claire is waiting. I'm to bed."

Colin swallowed down the instant panic that overtook him and nodded. "Me, too."

The two men rose, Colin clenching his fists at his sides. The major would go to his room, where his wife, Lady Claire, awaited him. A warm body. Comfort. Love. Colin was headed to his own bed, where he'd find nothing but coldness and darkness, and his demons. This was the time of day he dreaded the most—when he'd be left alone to fend for himself. To fight off the demons that haunted him every single damn night.

The major had been forced to chase away Colin's demons a few times, which was a few times more than Colin liked. It was humiliating, what they did to him. How they reduced him to something less than a man.

Taking up the lantern, the major opened the door, and the two of them stepped into the corridor and turned toward the stairway that led to the first floor and their bedchambers. But just then, a sound drew them both to a sudden halt. A pounding on the front door.

The major looked back over his shoulder at Colin, his brows raised. “What the hell?”

It wasn’t right that Colin should be relieved by this—something that, at this hour, couldn’t mean anything good. But it would delay him from his bed awhile longer, and therefore he was grateful for it.

He and the major swiveled and strode quickly to the front door. The knocking was louder now; it was as if someone was pounding with two hands flat on the smooth wood surface. Colin reached the door first. He gripped the handle and wrenched it open.

It was a woman—that much was apparent immediately by her flowing garments. It took a second for Colin’s eyes to adjust to the dimness, but then the lantern the major held splashed a beam of yellow light over her.

Colin took in wild curls, a roundish face, big blue eyes. And blood streaked across the fabric of her white dress. Smearred across her cheek.

He knew this lass. His heart began to beat painfully against his breastbone. “Lady Emilia?”

The woman released a great sob and threw herself at him. He stumbled back a foot before he regained his balance, his arm coming around her to hold her steady. “Oh, Sir Colin, thank God.” She wept into his chest, her fingers curling tightly into his shirt. “Please help me. Please!”

The major had stepped outside and scanned the street as Colin awkwardly patted Lady Emilia’s back, cursing his body at its flare of awareness of her body pressed against his. He’d admired Lady Emilia from afar for a

long time now, ever since the Highland Knights had been assigned the task of guarding her father, Lord Pinfield. Who, as it happened, was a complete bastard, and Colin had been more than a little relieved when that assignment had ended.

Evidently finding nothing of consequence, the major returned and closed the door behind him.

“Come,” Colin said, as gently as he could to the sobbing woman in his arms. “We’ll go to the drawing room, and you can tell us what happened.”

She pulled back slightly and seemed to try to gather herself, but her breaths were coming in great heaves, and tears streamed incessantly down her cheeks, streaking through the blood that made Colin’s own blood run cold.

“Yes,” she managed. “All right.”

Keeping his arm around her to hold her trembling frame steady, Colin led her back down the corridor to the drawing room, noticing her halting steps and her grimaces of pain as she walked. What the hell had happened to the poor lass?

Colin directed her to sit on the sofa when they entered the drawing room, and she complied, gingerly sitting on the edge. Colin sat beside her.

“Are you injured, milady?” the major asked.

Lady Emilia just stared down at her lap, her shoulders heaving. The major’s lips tightened. “I’ll fetch Claire,” he said, and Colin nodded, sensing another woman’s presence might help. Plus, if Emilia was hurt, Claire could assess her injuries and treat them.

The door closed softly behind the major, and Colin sat, chewing his lip. He didn’t know what to do. He’d never encountered a woman in this state, and seeing this particular woman in distress made something dark and angry swirl within him. He wanted to go find the person who’d done this to her and kill him. Slowly and painfully.

Gently, he grasped a wild curl that had fallen over her face between two fingers and tucked it behind her ear. Then he took her hand— Goddamn, it was cold, like a small block of ice. He chafed it, trying to infuse some warmth into it. Emilia allowed him to touch her, to move her hand, but she didn't look at him; she kept staring down at her lap. He knew she was still crying, because her shoulders heaved and tears dripped with hot splashes onto his hands.

“Shh, lass,” he murmured. “You're safe now. I promise. You're safe.”

She didn't respond. She seemed frozen in her misery. Still chafing her hands—first one, then the other—he looked her over, trying to find the source of the blood.

It wasn't difficult to find. Her lower back was soaked with red, the color shocking in its brightness against the stark white of her dress. Colin ground his teeth. She was still bleeding.

He couldn't help himself. “Damn it, Emilia,” he said, his voice so raw it ached. “Who did this to you?”

For the first time since he'd opened the front door, she looked at him, her eyes wide, their gray-blue depths fathomless. A tear crested at one of the bottom lids and slid down her blotchy face.

“It was my father,” she whispered.

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