

KILTY  PLEASURES

KILTY
AS
Queen

CAROLINE
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LEE

KILTY AS SIN



CAROLINE LEE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

SNEAK PEEK

ABOUT THIS BOOK

He's a rake, a rogue, and a charmer...until one mission changes it all.

As one of the King's Hunters—an elite group of Highland lawmen charged with keeping the peace—Barclay is used to lasses throwing themselves at him, despite the helmet he wears on all missions. He doesn't mind the attention in the least... until he's assigned to track down the runaway daughter of one of His Majesty's supporters and meets a woman who shouldn't be charmed.

Lady Grace MacDonald is determined *not* to marry the man her father has chosen for her. She may look fragile and sweet, but she has reserves of strength Barclay is about to discover...right after he pulls her out of the bog she's landed in. Nay, not a metaphor; an actual bog has just stolen her left shoe!

Grace might be livid the mysterious, helmed Hunter is planning to return her home, but she still has a few more days to savor her freedom...and Barclay is just the one to teach her about the world. The problem? For the first time ever, Barclay is uncertain he *should* be seducing a lady like her! But why, even when he's dragging her back to marry another man, does she make him feel like a hero?

Warning: Utterly ridiculous! Another fun start to a spicy, laugh-out-loud medieval series from USA Today Bestseller Caroline Lee!

PROLOGUE



BARCLAY CURSED HIS BAD LUCK.

Two days ago, he'd had a clear trail from the lass and had been confident he'd catch up with her soon.

Then, yesterday, her tracks had been obscured by the prints from a group of horsemen, and he'd known he wasn't the only one following her. He could no longer see her prints, but he didn't have to; he just needed to follow her pursuers.

Bad luck, indeed, and not just for him.

He'd picked up his pace.

Last night the new moon had made it impossible to track, but he'd continued on by instinct. He *had* to find the lass before the men on horseback did...

But judging from the sounds of revelry coming from ahead, he was too late.

Cursing again, under his breath, Barclay slid from the saddle and led his mount toward a hollow.

It wasn't unusual for him to be assigned to track someone and he prided himself on being the best of the King's Hunters for this sort of job. But this was his first time being told to track down a lassie—a wayward daughter, at that—and he knew her father would be livid if harm came to her.

“Stay here,” he murmured to Horse. “There's plenty of grass to keep ye occupied.”

But when he turned to go, the blasted animal nudged him between his shoulder blades.

“Nay,” hissed Barclay, reaching for the gelding’s bridle. “*Nay*, Horse. Ye stay here. I cannae sneak up on them with ye following me, clopping about with enough noise to wake the dead.”

Was it his imagination, or did the horse look hurt?

“Och, dinnae give me such a long face.”

The gelding bobbed its head and Barclay’s own face split into a grin. Even with the bad luck following the lass he could appreciate a bit of fun.

Clucking his tongue, he pushed his elbow against the horse’s side. “I promise I’ll whistle for ye soon enough, eh? Just let me suss out the situation, aye?”

It didn’t seem to mollify the animal, and Barclay shook his head.

“Ye’re a stubborn beast. Stay here, and stay quiet, eh? That’s an order.”

And ye’d better hope he takes orders better than ye do.

This time Horse didn’t respond but turned away from Barclay as if pouting. But in doing so, the helmet—hanging from its hook on the saddle—knocked against the man’s shoulder.

“And thank ye kindly for this.” He used his sweetest tone, knowing it would irritate the animal.

Judging from the way Horse stomped a hoof, it worked.

As he crept away from the hollow toward the sound of men’s voices, Barclay slid the helm over his dark hair. He had some brothers-in-arms who wore the thing constantly, but the King’s Hunters’ only rule was that it must be worn while on assignment.

Barclay might not like this assignment—to track down the wayward daughter of one of His Majesty’s supporters—but he’d taken it. And he’d see it through.

Assuming he got to the lass before any evil befell her.

The glen was rocky enough that he didn't worry about being seen as he crept closer, listening for a woman's voice. Half hoping, half dreading he'd hear it.

If St. Pancras is merciful, they willnae have caught up with her yet, and ye can creep around them to go after her.

But Barclay's bad luck continued.

Lying on his belly, he dug his elbows into the soft peat and slowly lifted his head over the rise before him. And cursed. *Again.*

There were four horses in the hollow below, tied to the scraggly bushes which were the largest thing this glen could support. Three of the four men who'd ridden them were crouched around a pile of sticks they were clearly trying to light, arguing and insulting one another.

The fourth man...

The fourth man had just pulled a woman from his horse and seemed unconcerned by the way she was beating his back with her bound fists.

Barclay's eyes narrowed behind the helm.

They'd caught the MacDonald lass, after all.

Caught her, bound her hands and feet, and gagged her. But she wasn't making any noise. Just fighting for all she was worth...

Without taking his eyes from the enemy, Barclay reached down to loosen his sword in the scabbard. At moments like this, he wished he had his friend Drummond's skill with a bow. Being able to hit these men from a distance would even the odds a bit.

Briefly, Barclay considered whistling for Horse, but knew that would give away his location too quickly.

Damnation! Ye need some kind of distraction afore ye charge down at four armed men!

The three men around the attempted fire had noticed they were no longer alone, and now stood, cheering and calling praise, even as the man carrying the lass swatted her arse. She didn't cease her struggles, however, and Barclay had to admire that.

Had to admire *her*.

Then the bastard holding her swung her off his shoulder, holding her upright before him, and her golden hair swung from in front of her face.

Barclay sucked in a breath.

Admire her?

Holy mother of St. Pancras and all that was good and holy in this world...

He could worship this woman.

She was *stunning*.

Her build was delicate, her features refined. MacDonald's daughter was soft and gentle and everything Barclay had ever imagined a lady to be.

Even from this distance, he could see her blue eyes above the gag, wide and full of an emotion he assumed was fear.

Dinnae fash, lassie, he wanted to yell. He wanted to assure her she'd be safe.

But he still needed a distraction.

"Why'd ye tie her ankles," one of the men whined loudly, even as he squatted at her side, reaching for his knife.

The first man responded something too low for Barclay to hear, but a third kicked the squatting one. "Untie her feet, Rab. How else can we spread her legs, eh?"

Even from his spot on the hill, Barclay heard her whimper, and his heart clenched.

Bad luck? Hell, this was the worst. Even as he'd followed the trail, he'd half-hoped these men had also been sent by

Laird MacDonald to find and rescue the wayward daughter. But Barclay's worst fears had been realized.

They meant to rape her.

As the first man held her shoulders, the third began to scrabble at her skirts. The lass tipped her head back toward the noon sun, her dark blonde hair spilling down her back, and Barclay imagined he could see her tears.

Distraction, distraction, distraction. He searched about madly, even as he pushed himself up to his knees. Could he sneak down upon them? Or just hurl himself madly down the slope and hope he was fast enough to throw them into confusion?

Distraction, St. Pancras, a distraction! Aught at all!

If only the sweetly refined MacDonald lass would faint! Suddenly forced to deal with her deadweight would absolutely distract the men, and Barclay couldn't imagine such a gentle lass could do aught except faint...

But she did something better.

The man squatting at her feet had finished cutting them loose and risen to join his companions. The first man released her in order to reach for the belt of his kilt, while the third man turned to say something to the man still trying to get the fire going.

And the MacDonald lass, bless her, whipped one knee into the groin of the knife-holder, pulled the blade from his weakened hand as he fell, spun about and—holding the hilt with both bound hands—plunged it into the chest of the man who'd been holding her.

Gentle? Refined?

Grinning inside his helmet, Barclay pushed himself to his feet.

Aye lass, that'll do.

“Run!” he bellowed as he threw himself down the slope, lips curling grimly in anticipation of the battle ahead. “*Run!*”

CHAPTER 1



WELL, Grace's luck had just gone from bad to worse, hadn't it?

Cursing under her breath, she tried once more to pull her foot from the mud where 'twas stuck, and yet again froze when the movement pushed her other leg in deeper. The situation would be difficult with both hands free, but with them bound in front of her, she felt out of balance.

Anxiously she peered over her shoulder, listening for sounds of pursuit.

Naught.

'Twas disconcerting. She'd stabbed one of her captors and kned the other man in a place where Sister Mary Titania had said would severely inconvenience any male with amorous thoughts.

Why weren't they cresting the hill, calling for Grace's blood?

...or worse.

Damnation! These stupid slippers hadn't been made for running across rocks and brambles, and when she'd put one foot into the bog and felt it sink, she was too late to prevent the other from coming down hard as well. And now she was well and truly stuck.

To be fair, ye hadnae expected a kidnapping when ye'd offered to go to market for the sisters.

If she had, she would've worn sturdier footwear.

Grace felt hysterical laughter starting to build in her chest. If she'd known she'd be grabbed by men sent by her father today, *footwear* wouldn't have been the only thing she'd have changed! She would currently be carrying several days' provisions, a sturdy plaid to protect her from the constant mist, and a double-headed ax.

For protection.

Groaning, Grace bent double, not caring that her hair fell around her face and dangled toward the muck as she wrapped both hands below her knee and pulled.

Whoops. Nay, no' like that.

She could feel her own ankle trying to dislocate.

Grace peeked over her shoulder once more. Still no pursuit.

Why? What had happened back there?

As soon as her feet had been freed, she'd used what she'd learned from the Mother Superior and taken down as many of her captors as possible. Grace hadn't stopped to see the outcome, but had hiked up her skirts with her bound hands and run as if the very hounds of hell snapped at her feet.

Behind her, she'd thought she'd heard another man's voice. One urging someone to run? That wouldn't have been her captors though, would it? She might've been hearing things.

As if ye could hear aught over the pounding of fear in yer head?

Well, that was certainly defeatist thinking, wasn't it?

Straightening, Grace frowned in determination and peered at her surroundings. There were no handy trees or vines she could use to climb out of this mess—of course not. It would be too convenient, wouldn't it?

The landscape in this part of the Highlands was rocky and inhospitable, with its constant mist and distant roaring of waterfalls and troublesome surprise-attack bogs.

So. No trees. No vines. Did that bush look like it could hold her weight?

Grace stretched her back and forced herself to exhale slowly. Aright. She could do this. *Calm*. She needed her heart to slow, and her mind to focus.

There was no one after her for now. She could do this.

Holding her breath, she leaned to one side, feeling her knee pop as her other foot was shoved deeper into the muck. Her fingers stretched as far as possible—stretched—stretched—
—

“*Shite.*”

Her hands dropped and she straightened with a defeated sigh. Had her wrists not been bound, she *knew* she’d be able to reach that bush with her left hand. ‘Twas just her inconvenient right arm—stupid shoulder!—which was holding it back.

Aright. So. She’d need to find a way to cut the bindings around her wrists, and then she could—

“Hello.”

Grace shrieked at the surprising voice and spun about, simultaneously wrenching her ankle, knee, and hip while pulling a muscle in her neck.

“*Shite! Ow,*” she murmured, staring wide-eyed.

The pain faded as she took in the sight of the warrior, and fear spiked up her throat once more.

He wore the King’s colors, and a massive sword hung from his belt. His arms were crossed in front of his chest, and he leaned a hip against a boulder, his stance announcing his complete ease with the situation.

None of that should be terrifying.

‘Twas the full-face helmet he wore which made it difficult for Grace to draw in a full breath.

Every child in the Highlands and the Lowlands combined knew of the King’s Hunters. No mercenaries these warriors; they did the monarch’s bidding, and only his. A sort of royal

law enforcement combined with bounty hunters, they were feared—and respected—across Scotland.

And this man was wearing the helmet of one. It obscured his features, and she couldn't read him.

Grace's bound hands rose to her mouth as she stared at the man. Hunters were rumored to wear their helmets *everywhere*. She'd heard that once they put them on, they weren't allowed to remove them in the presence of another human. It lent to their terrifying reputation.

Except...

Had this Hunter come to help her? Was it possible Sister Mary Titania had sent him after Grace?

Was *his* the voice she'd heard calling after her to run?

Had he...saved her?

“Are ye hurt, lass?”

This was uncomfortable, twisting in this position, but Grace frowned. “Why?”

And she could *hear* the amusement in his tone when he said, “Because ye cursed and said *ow*. People usually dinnae say *ow* unless they're hurt.”

There was something about the way he was completely at ease—and the smile in his voice—which made her bristle. “Mayhap I was just stating sounds. Mayhap I was calling for someone named *ow*. Mayhap *ow* is my name!”

Without pushing himself away from the boulder, the Hunter inclined his head. “Well, Mistress Shite-Ow, are ye otherwise hurt? Did those men harm ye?”

Grace's jaw hardened. So, he *had* seen her escape? Had he helped?

“I'm—I'm fine.” She wasn't fine. She didn't think she'd ever forget the way the leader of the group of men—men her father had sent!—had touched her. But she wasn't going to admit that to the Hunter.

“Really? Ye dinnae look fine. Ye look stuck in a bog.”

“Och, thank ye,” she snapped. “I hadnae noticed.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment, but she could *feel* his stare behind the empty eyes of his helmet. Finally, one shoulder twitched.

“Ye’re naught like I expected ye to be.”

Well, *that* was a bit alarming. “What...did ye expect?”

“Ye are beautiful, lass. Ye must ken that. Beautiful and sweet-looking and refined. Like a lady.”

The muck had reached her knees, and she scowled at the man, who seemed determined to rub it in. “Do I now?”

“Well, nay, no’ right *now*.” She could hear his grin again. “And no’ before, when ye kneed that bastard in the cock.”

Cock.

Despite her determination to appear strong and brave, Grace felt her cheeks heat at his brashness. “Well, apparently my stature—lady or nay—has nae effect on yer language.”

A sound very much like a chuckle echoed from inside the helmet. “I thought we were dispensing with formalities, milady. What with ye being dragged to yer death by a bog, and whatnot.”

Oh dear. Grace turned back around so she could glance down at herself. She *had* sunk further, hadn’t she? At least this position gave her back a bit of relief.

“I dinnae believe I’m in *imminent* danger,” she murmured, more to reassure herself than him.

As if to mock her, there was a sucking noise beneath her right foot, which was followed by a distant roll of thunder.

Behind her, the man clucked his tongue. “Opinions may vary, milady, but I suspect ye could use some help getting out of that bog.”

She twisted around again to meet his eyes. Or where his eyes *would* be, if she could see through the darkness of that helmet. “And are ye here to help me, Sir Hunter?”

“Ye ken who I am?”

He sounded surprised. “Aye, of course. Anyone could recognize one of the King’s Hunters. Were ye sent to save me?”

He hesitated.

Grace didn’t realize she was holding her breath until he inclined his chin slightly, and she exhaled in relief.

To cover her vulnerability, she gave him her back once more. “Excellent,” she announced primly. “Kindly begin. I seem to be stuck.”

‘Twas galling that she couldn’t see his expressions, couldn’t read his thoughts and reactions. His stance seemed easy-going, but she’d learned enough of men in the last months to know it would be folly to try to guess what was hidden by that helm.

Still, the King’s Hunters were known to be honorable men. She could trust him.

Couldn’t she?

Grace shuddered, and pulled her bound hands against her chest, to try to hide the evidence of her helplessness.

Thunder rumbled again, closer this time.

Curse this unforgiving country! And curse her for leaving the safety of the convent—double curses on her stupidity of not heading right back into the arms of the sisters when she’d learned her father’s men had tracked her to the tiny town on the shores of the loch.

But she hadn’t wanted those good women to come to harm, so she’d run. And look where it had gotten her.

Chilled through, thanks to this mist, with rain on the way. Up to her thighs now in muck, and still very uncertain about her future!

“Do ye have particular affection for yer shoes, lass?”

She didn’t have to twist to look at the warrior any longer, for he was carefully picking his way around the edge of the

soggy ground. Grace couldn't help but admire the way he carried himself, as if certain he wouldn't put a booted foot in the wrong place.

"I...what?"

"Yer shoes. The ones on yer feet." His voice was very patient, wasn't it? Appealing, almost.

Dear heavens, ye're going into shock, are ye no'? 'Tis the only explanation.

She could only blink at him.

The Hunter had stopped, and now faced her with his feet planted on two different boulders and his hands on his hips. She wondered if he was mocking her.

"I'm going to get ye out of the bog, lass, but 'twill likely involve losing yer shoes. And possibly yer stockings."

"And my feet?" Damn the quaver in her voice.

"I have nae reason to assume they wouldnae stay attached to yer legs."

"Verra well." She sucked in a deep breath and tried to straighten her spine. "Ye may begin."

Instead of replying, the man turned and gave a sharp whistle, then a second, longer one, then another short one. The sudden sound pierced what Grace now realized was the silence of the rocky glen, and she winced.

"Should we no' be more circumspect, Sir Hunter?"

"The men who were after ye are dead, milady," he announced bluntly, without turning back to look at her. "They'll no' bother ye again."

As if to emphasize the claim, thunder cracked closer this time.

Grace found herself shuddering again. Had she killed that man? Could she regret it?

When they'd caught her, her father's men had passed her from one horse to another, as if she were merely a sack of

grain, or a wineskin to be shared. They'd touched her, they'd said lewd things to her...but Father had sent them.

They wouldn't *hurt* her.

At least, that was what she'd believed up until the leader had pulled her from the horse and ordered her bindings cut so he could spread her legs. *That's* when Grace knew she'd have to fight.

What father had planned for her was terrible, but at least that was only one man to worry about.

The sound of hoofbeats pulled her from her horrible thoughts and she jerked her gaze up to see a magnificent white horse crest the hill above them. It reared, pawing the air the same moment lightning flashed behind it, and Grace sucked in an awed breath.

"Fooking prat," muttered the Hunter, shaking his head with a sigh. "Cannae resist showing off."

As the animal galloped toward them, Grace weakly asked, "'Tis *yer* horse?"

He didn't have to respond because the answer was immediately obvious. The animal slowed in a sudden shower of pebbles and bumped against the man, then bobbed its head with a prideful toss of his flowing mane.

"Aye, aye," the Hunter muttered, shoving at the horse with an open palm. "Ye're magnificent, whatever. Give me the rope."

The horse stepped sideways almost delicately, presenting the saddle to the man. He reached into one of the bags and pulled out a coil of rope.

"Dinnae trot off, Yer Magnificence." Even Grace could hear the sarcasm in his voice. "I'll have need of yer stupendous strength."

As he spoke, he'd tied one end of the rope to the saddle, and now he turned to her.

"Ready, lass?"

Ready for what? But she didn't have to ask, because before she could open her mouth, the coil of rope splatted into the muck by her side, and she scrambled to pick it up.

"Ye're going to just pull me out?" That seemed... idiotically simple.

"Nay." The man patted the animal's shoulder. "Horse is going to do it."

She eyed the rope doubtfully. "Using his magnificent strength? What about my feet? I want to keep them."

"And I have nae interest in listening to that bullshite about why ye said *ow*." By the Virgin, she could *hear* his smile! "I'll make sure ye're no' hurt, lass."

There was something about the way he said it... Still gripping the rope, Grace tipped her head back to look up at the Hunter.

"Ye promise?"

He nodded. "I swear. Now"—his tone turned brisk, as the first big plops of rain began. "Wrap the rope around yer forearm and rock back and forth—nay, no' like that." He demonstrated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Slowly. Like this."

Grace hated how helpless she felt, stuck here at a man's mercy. But he *was* trying to help, and the rain was beginning to come harder. So, she concentrated on shifting her weight slowly, until—

"Can ye feel water seeping in around yer feet?" he asked.

She nodded. "I think so. There seems to be more around my left foot."

"Aright, then begin to wriggle yer right foot a bit, eh? We're trying to create space around yer feet and legs."

Now that he'd explained it, Grace understood. As she rocked, she bit her lip in concentration, wriggling her toes and making circles with her feet, trying to loosen the mud. "*We* are, are we?" she muttered.

The Hunter didn't respond but tipped his head slightly as if looking up at the raindrops.

"Fine, fine," she muttered, rocking faster. "I think I'm loose—*oooh!*" She'd tried to pull out her right foot, but the movement had pressed her left foot deeper into the mud.

The man made a noise like a snort, then nodded. "Aright. That rope's tight around yer forearm? Dinnae help at all, lass, ye understand? Just let Horse drag ye out."

Before she could respond, he slapped the horse's side, and the animal stepped backward. Grace's shoulders wrenched in their sockets as the rope pulled.

"Relax!" the Hunter called.

When she allowed herself to go limp, she was surprised at the results. Aye, she fell face-forward into the muck, but the horse pulled her from the quagmire with relative ease. She felt her shoes slide from her feet, and there were tugs at her stockings, although she thought they remained on her feet.

Wet peat caked the front of her as she was dragged over the bog to firm land, but the rain had begun to pelt her back, as well, so it seemed to even out. She was miserable.

But she was free!

...until the Hunter reached out and grabbed her bound wrists.

Between one heartbeat and the next, she'd gone from being dragged prone across a peat bog to being lifted bodily and slammed against a chest almost as hard as armor. The collision knocked out what little breath she had left in her lungs and panic spiked.

But then he murmured, "I've got ye, lass," and she realized that as hard as his chest was, he really was quite warm, which was helpful, what with how cold things had become.

Aye, the cold. That was why she was shivering, wasn't it? Cold.

With firm, confident movements, the Hunter pulled the rope out of her hands, then cut through her bindings and stood,

lifting her in his arms. Grace told herself she was light-headed from the lack of sustenance that day—and the cold, of course—and not because she was in danger of swooning.

Rain pelted the top of the man's helm, causing an awful racket, as he strode toward the patiently waiting horse. "Let's find some shelter, eh?" he murmured, intent on his task. "And get ye dry, now ye're safe."

Safe.

Was she?

Safe, with him?

Grace's fingers rose of their own accord and found the jaw beneath the helmet. None of his skin showed, but her fingertips brushed against stubble. He'd frozen at her motion, and now she traced his jaw toward his mouth, and brushed her fingers across his lips.

Safe.

She couldn't see him, couldn't see his expression, couldn't see his eyes. But she could feel him.

And she had to admit that she *did* feel safe with this man. This warm, strong, kind man who'd teased her when she'd been so frightened. As the rain beat down around them, the tip of her longest finger rubbed along his lower lip, and she felt it curl beneath her touch.

He was smiling. And she was safe.

CHAPTER 2



IT WASN'T A CASTLE. It wasn't even an inn. But the little hollow would do them well enough as protection from the storm. Protected on three sides by natural rockfall, with a low, scraggly, wind-whipped oak to block most of the rain, it would be comfortable enough.

Barclay swung out of the saddle with the MacDonald lass still huddled in his arms.

She hadn't spoken again, but he could feel her shivering. It seemed...wrong.

His first impression of her—one of weakness and delicacy—had been incorrect. She'd stabbed a man, she'd run even with her hands tied, she'd faced Barclay with strength and bravery he couldn't help but admire.

Her biting tone, when they'd sparred, hadn't quite hidden her fear.

But she'd *tried*, and that's what he admired.

So, to feel her so tiny and subdued in his arms...it didn't feel right. He wanted her angry again. He wanted to see those beautiful blue eyes snap with irritation, wanted to watch her plump lips spit fire at him.

"Dinnae fash, lass," he murmured as he gently rested her against the oak's base. "I'll have ye warm in a moment."

She didn't respond.

From the blankness in her eyes as she stared up at him, teeth chattering and her arms wrapped tightly around her

middle, he doubted she'd even heard him. Was she going into shock?

Fook.

Barclay clucked his tongue to Horse, who obligingly shuffled closer, then whinnied softly as Barclay removed the saddle. "Aye, aye, ye big dobber. Be useful. Lie down and keep her warm, eh?"

The animal knelt, then flopped over to one side, and Barclay had to admit it was impressively close to where the lass huddled.

Not *the lass*, he reminded himself. *Grace*. That was her name, was it not? Grace MacDonald. At the King's urging—after a letter from her father—Barclay had tracked her to the convent where he'd learned of her disappearance.

Grace.

The deadfall from the tree was still relatively dry, and he had the wood gathered in short order. He set the fire as far from the tree trunk as he dared. The leaf cover here was far broader and would keep the steady rain from bothering them too much. When the flames caught, he rested on his heels and tipped his head back, examining their little haven. Thanks to the elements, the tree barely poked over the rocks which formed their little nook, and thus they were safe from lightning and relatively dry.

At least, he was.

Poor lass, she looked miserable.

Barclay opened his arms. "Come here, Grace."

To his surprise, she didn't argue, but levered herself sideways and half-crawled, half-fell toward him. "H-How d-d-do ye ken m-m—"

He took pity on her and brushed her wet hair back from her face. "Hush. How do I ken yer name? There's only so many bonnie lasses running across Glencoe. I was sent to rescue ye."

Her gaze still seemed hazy. "Who...?"

Barclay chose to guess she was asking *his* identity, rather than who sent him. “I’m Barclay, one of the King’s Hunters, and ye’re safe with me,” he repeated his vow.

Her lips formed the word *safe*, and despite the chill, despite the inappropriateness of the situation, Barclay felt his cock stir beneath his kilt.

By St. Pancras’s left nostril, those lips were made to be tasted. Made to make a man want things he couldn’t wish for.

In an effort to distract himself—and his cock—Barclay bustled about, pulling out supplies and food. By the time he settled himself beside the fire—and her—once more, he’d given his manly bits a stern lecture on propriety, worthiness, and honor.

It almost worked.

“Here lass.” He handed her a waterskin filled with whisky. “This will warm yer insides, but sip slowly, eh?”

To his surprise, she didn’t sputter and cough when she took a taste of the potent brew. Mayhap she *had* merely sipped it. Or mayhap she was used to *uisge-beatha*, the water of life.

Grinning, Barclay began to mix the bannock batter. Grace MacDonald continued to surprise him.

In no time, the oat cakes were grilling on a flat stone, and he’d pulled some dried meat from one of the other pouches. ‘Twas a simple meal, but one which—

When he turned back to her, the lass was still shivering.

“Och, I’m an arsehole,” he muttered, reaching for the spare plaid he’d pulled from his saddlebag. “Ye cannae get warm when ye’re soaked through, eh?”

She didn’t object as he tugged her closer and gathered her hair to one side, and that was alarming enough. He expected her wicked tongue to flay him for daring to touch her with such intimacy. The fact she didn’t told him either she didn’t mind, or something was very wrong.

Her hair felt like silk.

He shouldn't be touching it, not like this. She was a *lady*, and 'twas likely only her mother or nurse had stroked her soft tresses. Later, 'twould be her husband who touched her like this.

As Barclay unlaced her blue gown, he tried not to think of that husband. The husband Laird MacDonald had already chosen.

Whoever that husband was, the lass had objected. She'd claimed sanctuary in the convent, according to the Mother Superior Barclay had questioned, and she was a lass who knew her own mind.

She only *appeared* weak and delicate he reminded himself.

But when he pulled her gown from her shoulders to reveal her delicate limbs wrapped in a whisper-thin chemise, 'twas hard to remember. Every instinct in his body told him this was a woman he needed to protect, no matter how brave, no matter how strong she might be.

The wool gown slid down her body, and when he lifted her legs out of the way, she curled against his chest in what felt like instinct.

And as he wrapped the warm plaid about her shoulders, lifting her wet hair out of the way gently so it wouldn't be trapped against her skin, he had to fight the almost overwhelming urge to hold her.

She wasn't his.

She'd never be his.

The bannock cakes cooled quickly in the chilly mountain air, and Grace took one with a murmured "Thank ye."

They sipped whisky and ate the meat and cakes in silence as the occasional drop of water collected on the leaves above and hissed into the fire.

Barclay squatted across from the lass and studied her. She was no longer shivering, but still wasn't meeting his eyes.

And her hair was still wet.

The poor lass was never going to dry out, was she?

Swallowing the last of the oat cake, Barclay stood in one fluid motion and reached for her wet gown. It wasn't going to dry completely, but at least he could hang it over a branch. As he did so, Horse gave a curious whinny.

"Aye, ye and yer empty stomach may be excused." He nudged the animal with the toe of his boot. "Dinnae go far."

The gelding bobbed his head as if he understood, then rolled to his feet. Grace watched the horse pick his way carefully across the hollow and into the drizzle to investigate the patch of grass growing up against the largest boulder.

"'Tis almost as if he understands ye," she murmured.

"Aye, of course he does." Barclay sank to his haunches at her side. "He's stubborn, spiteful, and 'tis impossible to keep him fed, but he's smart, I'll give him that."

Her lips curled slightly and she met his gaze. "Does he have a name?"

By St. Pancras's elbow, she had the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. "A-a name? Aye, of course he has a name. How else would I call him?"

Now she was definitely smiling. "And what is it?"

Had he seen her smile before? If he had, it was nothing compared to this vision. Her wet hair was curling about her shoulders, which were wrapped in *his* plaid, her bare toes sticking out from beneath her linen chemise. She looked both innocent and incredibly wanton.

Christ, he wanted her.

"What is what?" he finally murmured.

"Yer horse's name." She was laughing at him.

"Horse," he blurted. "Ye need to plait yer hair, else it'll soak through the wool."

"Ye named yer horse *Horse*?" Grace lifted her hands to her hair, but in doing so, the plaid fell away from her chest.

Barclay's gaze dropped. Because *of course* it did; he was a mere mortal, was he not?

That glimpse of pink nipple through the sheer linen would haunt him to his grave, he was certain.

For fook's sake, 'tis no' as if ye havenae seen hundreds of nipples! Two hundred and thirty-seven, if ye count Three-Tit Margy from Inverness when ye were a lad. What is it about this nipple?

She scrambled to grab the plaid once more, to pull it across her chest. To shield herself from his gaze.

Mayhap *that's* why he was so enamored with said nipple. It was forbidden?

St. Pancras help him, he was pitiful.

Grateful she couldn't see his scowl beneath the helm's faceplate, he shifted around until he was at her back. "Do ye mind if I touch ye, lass?"

After only a moment's hesitation, she shook her head, and he reached for her hair again.

He hadn't asked permission before, but now that he'd seen that nipple—now that he was having trouble controlling his body's response to her—he remembered what she'd just been through and cursed himself.

Again.

As he gathered the silky strands in one callused, coarse palm, he cleared his throat, casting about for a topic. "What would ye have me name him—the horse, I mean. If no' Horse?"

"I dinnae ken." Her tone was strained, even as she shrugged. "Lightning. Shadowbane. Stephanie. Milky. Ignatius. Mayo."

Barclay grunted, dividing her tresses into three strands, then beginning to plait. "He's a white horse. Shadowbane wouldnae work."

To his surprise, a sharp bark of laughter burst from her lips. “*That’s* what ye took from that list? No’ Ignatius?”

Reluctantly, his lips curled into a smile. Barclay was known as the good-natured one among the Hunters, the one who was always cheerful...and it seemed even the current situation couldn’t suppress his good humor for long.

“Milky would be acceptable, I suppose.” He tried not to stare down at the curve of her neck as he tied off the end of her braid. “Although ‘tis a bit insulting to a warrior’s steed.”

“Really?” She twisted to take the plait from his hand, and peeked up at him, humor dancing in her eyes. “I’m no’ so certain. Ye couldnae see yerself riding *Milky* into battle against the King’s enemies?”

“’Tis better than *Ignatius*. And where do ye get Mayo?”

She shrugged. “Because... *Mayo neighs*.” She blinked hopefully up at him. “Get it? Like mayonnaise?”

“*What?*” That made no sense. “Is that French?”

She sighed. “’Tis a brilliant joke and a better name.”

Thank Christ she was no longer cold and afraid. Barclay would do anything to encourage that.

“Let’s ask *him*, eh? Hey, Horse!”

At his call, the animal looked up from where he was munching grass, ignoring the raindrops which had slowed considerably. “How would ye like to be Milky?”

Horse snorted derisively.

“How about Mayo?”

The animal stomped his front foot twice.

“There ye have it—”

“Dinnae be silly,” she interrupted. “’Twas equine for *I think ‘tis a fine moniker*.”

Barclay was grinning now. “Och, really? I had nae idea ye were so skilled an interpreter. Ignatius, then, Horse?”

This time, the horse shook his head.

“No’ Ignatius, then,” she murmured.

“No’ Milky either.”

Grace switched her attention back to him, and twisted the end of her braid as she studied him. “Hmmm. I’ll stick with Mayo, then. How did ye get to be so good at this?”

Beneath his helm, Barclay’s brows rose and he sat back on his haunches. “So good at what? Naming horses? Putting scared lasses at ease?”

She snorted, and he saw the sparkle in her blue eyes, put there by his humor. “Plaiting women’s hair. Dinnae tell me ye have a half-dozen sisters, and became skilled at hair arrangements thanks to helping raise them?”

Ah.

“Nay. I’m...” Barclay’s chin dropped, his good humor gone. “I have nae siblings.”

“Cousins, then?”

She was going to push this? He pushed himself to his feet. “My father wanted naught to do with me, and my mother died when I was young.” Stepping out from under the leaf cover, he pretended to study the sky. “I do have a cousin I’m quite fond of—he’s the Commander of the Oliphants, up north of Inverness.”

“And I assume *he* doesnae allow ye to braid his hair?”

Reluctantly, Barclay’s lips curled and he snorted quietly. “Doughall would rather knock me in the mud during sparring, lass.”

“I have nae trouble believing that.” When he turned back to her, a teasing grin traced her lips. “I’ve kenned ye all of an hour and I’ve wanted to knock ye in the mud a time or two.”

Aaaaaannnd there went his cock again, wanting things it couldn’t have.

Grace flipped the braid back over her shoulder. “Well, Sir Hunter, if ye didnae learn to plait lassies’ hair from yer sisters

or cousins, I have nae choice but to believe ye're a womanizer, a charmer."

Pretending offense, he straightened his shoulders. "*What?*"

"A flirt? A *gallant*? A muttonmonger, a smell-smock? A manwhore, a Don Juan, a Cassanova?"

Barclay's mouth dropped open. "*First* of all, half of those words are references to people who havenae been born yet. And secondly, ye shouldnae even *ken* the rest of them."

"Why?" She shrugged too nonchalantly, even as she gathered the blanket more closely about her shoulders and planted one palm in the damp dirt. "I have ears, do I no'? I can recognize a dangerous man when I see one."

As she pushed herself to her feet, her legs became tangled in the blanket. She clutched it tighter, and he leapt forward to steady her elbow. Holding her sent a spark of heat up his arm and into his chest.

"I would never hurt ye, milady," he murmured roughly. "Nor any other woman."

"Mayhap no' physically, Sir Charmer." Tipping her head back, Grace studied him, those blue eyes suddenly serious. "But I suspect nae woman's heart is safe around ye, however ye may look beneath that helmet."

Barclay knew he was handsome. Had *always* known he was handsome, truthfully. Without the helm, he'd never had trouble gaining women's attention. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to rip the helmet from his head, to show her his true self.

But he was on a mission.

And a Hunter wasn't supposed to remove his helm while on a mission.

It wouldnae help, lad. Ye dinnae want to charm her, remember.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. He wanted to charm her more than he'd ever wanted to charm another woman in his

life, which was strange as hell. But he had to remember that she *was* his mission. He had to return her to her father.

Since she was still staring up at him expectantly, he said the only thing he *could* say. “I swear, lass, ye’re safe with me.”

“Aye, ye said...” Her gaze flicked between his eyes. “But why? And for how long?”

“I dinnae—what?” He shook his head, even as she pulled her arm from his hold.

St. Pancras’s pancreas! How could a woman, standing in her stocking feet in the mud, holding a blanket around her shoulders, manage to look so damnably *regal*?

“I asked, Sir Hunter, what yer plan is for me? I claimed sanctuary at the convent of St. Dorcas the Ever-Petulant, and when I left it to go to market for the sisters, those men chased me from safety. I want to return there. Are ye going to return me?”

Hedging, Barclay watched her face. “Are ye planning on taking holy vows then, lass? Is that why ye want to return to the convent?”

There was no way she could see him behind the helm, but she still managed to hold his gaze. Bravely. Boldly.

“I have nae intention of taking vows. But the Mother Superior offered me safety from my father, who is determined to marry me to one of his neighbors.”

Aye, Barclay knew all this. *This* is why he couldn’t touch her. Couldn’t claim her.

She wasn’t his, and never would be.

Grace MacDonald was meant for a laird, no’ a bastard hired sword like himself.

So mayhap ‘twas why he made his voice harsh when he told her the truth.

“I’m no’ going to return ye to the Abbey, milady. I’ve been tasked by the King himself with fetching ye home to yer

father. The wedding will continue, nae matter yer feelings.” *Or mine.* “Get on the horse.”

CHAPTER 3



GRACE WASN'T POUTING.

She *wasn't*.

She was just...mustering her strength and considering her options. With her mouth pinched shut.

It wasn't as if she had much to say to the man sitting in front of her, anyhow.

The Hunter—*Barclay*, she reminded herself—had been nothing but courteous and polite since he'd swung her up onto his steed. He'd taken the time to pack up the food and her almost-dry gown before swinging up in front of her.

Briefly, she'd considered taking up the reins and galloping away before he had a chance to rejoin her, but several things halted the impulse:

1. She had no idea where she was, truth be told, and could be riding for days before she recognized anything.
2. She wasn't cruel enough to leave the Hunter out here alone without a mount or a way to reach civilization.
3. She really had no idea how to ride a horse.

To someone else, that last point might've seemed the most relevant, but Grace was *certain* her decision was based on the Christian charity of not wanting to abandon Barclay. Yes. That was it.

Sighing, she shifted position on Horse's rump. Her thighs ached from holding herself upright, and everything *itched*. She'd dried out—as much as 'twas possible in the constant mist, at least—but now she was just blasted uncomfortable.

The muck from the bog seemed to have gotten everywhere then dried into itchy little bits that were *everywhere*. Even the plaid he'd given her felt dirty. With her riding behind him, she didn't feel wrong about allowing the plaid to fall around her waist, baring her chemise-clad shoulders to the world. Even so, she was vastly uncomfortable.

She longed for a bath.

“Lass, the path is about to get rocky.”

“*About to get?*” she snapped before she remembered she wasn't speaking to her captor-slash-rescuer.

To her irritation, the man chuckled. “Aye, well, 'tis about to get *rockier*. I ken ye're angry with me, but 'twould be best if ye held onto me for this next bit.”

Grace sniffed and twined her fingers together in her lap. “I'm certain I shall be quite safe holding onto the saddle.”

After all, she'd spent the last few hours trying her hardest to keep from touching him. Or relying on him.

“Suit yerself,” the man muttered, just as he lurched to the side. The horse stepped delicately up a scree-covered slope, alongside a burbling brook, and each footfall seemed to toss Grace in a different direction.

With a muffled squeak, she reached for Barclay's belt, and stiffened when she realized what she'd done.

If he'd made a comment, if he'd crowed that he'd *won* by her grabbing for him...well, Grace wasn't certain what she'd do. She wasn't strong enough to throw him off the horse, but she'd bloody well think about it for a moment or two.

But he didn't.

Mayhap he's focused on the journey. This path does seem perilous.

Or mayhap it hadn't been a competition at all and he just wanted her to be safe.

The horse missed its footing, and she sucked in a breath as they slid down the slope a stride or two. Instinctually, she pressed closer to the man before her, her shoulders hunching forward and her forehead dropping to his broad back.

She wasn't *afraid*, not exactly.

Grace hadn't allowed herself to *be* afraid, through this entire mess. Since the moment she'd discovered Father's plans, and *could* have fallen to pieces, she'd kept her chin up and her gaze toward the future.

Instead of weeping and pleading, she'd explained her feelings reasonably. When that hadn't helped, and Father had been determined to sell her to an evil man, Grace had begun to plan. She'd written letters, she'd set her steps toward her freedom, and she hadn't looked back.

And she hadn't let herself be afraid. Not then. Not now.

It was just...Barclay had promised he'd keep her safe.

He'd *vowed* it.

And she did feel safe with him, despite the fact he was heading south, toward Father's holdings.

Why did he have to turn out to be on a mission?

She'd prayed the Hunter had heard of her from the Mother Superior and had come to rescue her. Instead...

He did rescue ye.

Well, aye, not just from the bog, but from those men.

But he'd rescued her to return her to her father. Her father and Laird MacGill.

Just the thought of the man—with his cruel gaze and his harsh slaps—made her shiver. Mayhap 'twould have been better to allow those men to take her.

What are ye saying?

If it came down to spending the rest of her days living with a man like MacGill, having to watch him hurt innocent people and being able to do naught...mayhap 'twould be better to be dead.

She shuddered again.

To her surprise, Barclay's hand—his large, callused hand—came back to rest on her knee.

That was it. It just rested there, its weight comfortable and warm.

And he began to sing.

It wasn't loud, and it wasn't vulgar. In fact, he sang almost under his breath, the sound echoing strangely in his confines of his helmet, a ballad she recognized as one her old nurse used to sing.

Was he doing it to calm the unimaginatively named horse? Or calm her?

It worked.

Horse paused, then seemed to pick a new route up the mountain, each step deliberate and solid. And Grace...Grace exhaled and lifted her head from Barclay's strong back.

But she didn't go far.

When the song ended, she hummed softly. "Ye have a beautiful voice, Sir Hunter."

"Dinnae think to flatter me, lass," he warned, although there was no malice in his tone. "I'll no' be swayed by your sweet words."

She snorted. "If I was flattering ye, I'd speak of the strength in yer arms and the breadth of yer shoulders and the handsomeness of yer face."

"Ye think me handsome?"

Oh hell, had she admitted that?

"I havenae seen yer face," she was quick to point out. "How could I ken that?"

His shoulders twitched as if in laughter. Or mayhap he was attempting to keep from falling off the horse. “Ye said I was a charmer. Is it so hard to believe I’ve wooed dozens of women with my handsome face?”

“*Dozens?*”

Good heavens, was he the sort of man who had women throwing themselves at him?

His hand tightened momentarily around her knee, a brief squeeze before he relaxed again. “Aye, and I’ve left each one satisfied, lass.”

Now he was *bragging*.

Irritated at allowing herself his comfort, Grace dropped her hold on his belt long enough to flick his hand from her knee. “I dinnae pretend to ken what ye’re speaking of.”

As the horse picked his way toward the lip above them, where the stream tumbled over the edge, Barclay made a noise suspiciously like a chuckle.

“Ye dinnae ken of pleasure, lass? Ye’re that innocent?” His voice dropped. “Ye dinnae ken of the pleasure to be had between a man and a woman, the way a man can use his fingers and his tongue to bring his lover to—”

“*Stop.*” Her voice was much squeakier than intended. “I dinnae need to hear—”

“About my talented tongue? And the way I could make ye scream—”

Oh, God in heaven! “Cease!” She swallowed, then whispered, “Please.”

Because *aye*, she knew about the pleasure to be shared between a man and a woman. She might be a virgin, but she wasn’t innocent. Laird MacGill had taken great pleasure in explaining how he would plow her belly night after night, until she’d birthed him a half dozen sons, and how he’d ignore her tears and pleas and pain.

She’d thought the marriage bed held naught but horror, until Sister Mary Titania had explained *pleasure*. Aye, of

course Grace had experimented in the darkness of her own chamber, but she hadn't realized a *man* could make her feel that way, not until the nun had told some rather vivid stories.

It wasn't the memory of those stories which had Grace squirming against the horse's back now.

Nay, it was the thought of *Barclay* being the one to bring that sort of pleasure.

His fingers.

His *tongue*.

With a groan, she dropped her forehead to his back once more, squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to block out the thoughts.

Horse jerked sideways and put one foot down in a hurry to keep from falling. Grace decided she was happier with her eyes closed and wrapped both hands around Barclay's belt once more. She *knew* he was taking the shorter vertical route in order to join the path above, but 'twould be easier for her if she couldn't see—

This time the horse gave a shrill whinny when the scree shifted below his left rear leg, causing it to buckle. Of course, Grace didn't know the reason at the time. All she knew was one moment she was safe atop the animal, and the next, she was toppling sideways.

She kept her hold on Barclay, causing him to twist in the saddle.

“*Grace!*”

Instead of catching her, though, Grace's frantic scrabbling for purchase merely took him over as well.

They both tumbled off the horse, who suddenly seemed impossibly tall.

Barclay curled around her as they fell, so that he was the one to hit the ground first. Nay—his *head* hit the ground first, with a sickening crunch, and they began to roll.

They might've rolled to the bottom, had Grace—one arm now around his waist—not dug in her heels and flattened her palm against the scree, desperate to keep them in one place. It worked, and she dropped her head back to stare up the slope to where Horse now was staring down at them.

“Blessed Virgin,” she whispered, although she wasn't sure if it was a prayer or a curse.

Her heart was pounding too fast and her hand burned. Now she knew they weren't going to go sliding down the slope, she lifted her palm and was surprised to see a few drops of blood from the abrasions. What would her feet look like, since she'd lost her shoes in the bog?

This has been a hell of a day.

A groan at her side had her whipping her head about, guilt spiking hard and clear through her chest. Barclay! He'd fallen on his head!

Now he lay supine, his arm flung out to his side and his legs spread. She rolled to hover over him.

“Sir Hunter?” No response. “*Barclay.*”

He wasn't dead. She could feel his heart beneath her damaged palm, hear his breathing. Was he unconscious, then? He'd landed on his helmet.

“Barclay?” she whispered again, her fingers going to his jaw. She was getting blood on his chest, but it seemed irrelevant, somehow. “*Barclay, answer me!*”

He groaned.

Not good enough.

Frantic now, Grace reached for the edges of his helmet and pulled upward, being careful to catch the back of his head with her uninjured hand so it wouldn't slam against the rocks. As much as she wanted to toss away the helm, she knew it had special meaning, and thus tucked it up against his side.

Only then did she turn her attention back to him.

And sucked in a breath of—of surprise? Joy? Pleasure?

He was *beautiful*.

He was perfectly formed, exquisitely constructed.

Dark hair cut short but tending to curl around his ears from the sweat.

A chiseled jaw, shaded with stubble.

High cheekbones, dark brows, perfect lips.

His lips...

Grace's fingers hovered above them, even as she levered herself over him. "Barclay," she whispered, her breath seeming to caress his face. "Open yer eyes, Barclay."

Her fingertips lowered to his lips, marveling at their feel... and his eyelids fluttered.

"Grace?" he whispered against her fingers.

"Aye, 'tis me. I'm safe, Barclay. Ye're safe. Wake up."

"No' sleeping," he murmured, as his other arm snaked around her waist to anchor her to him. "Enjoying the nursing."

Her fingers dug into his hair and she wasn't certain if it was to hold him in place, or to keep *herself* from falling.

Falling off him.

Falling *into* him.

"Ye hit yer head. I dinnae see any blood, but ye could be concussed."

"No' concussed." His lips curled under her touch. "Just... resting."

It was amazing that, no matter how exasperating he could be, he still made her smile. "Well, could ye rest with yer eyes open? So I can be certain ye're no' dying?"

It worked. Barclay opened his eyes...

And Grace fell. She fell *hard*.

His eyes were the most beautiful shade of green, bordering on gray. They were the color of Glencoe in the rain. The color of leaves in the mist.

And they were looking into her soul.

The world narrowed, every mote of her being focused on those eyes, on *him*. The edges of her vision were going black, a tunnel leading her right into—

“Breathe, Grace.”

Och, aye.

She sucked in a breath, and the blackness faded. Under her fingers, his lips curled into a smirk.

“Are ye well, lass?”

Her entire body ached and her palm burned. But aye, she was well.

As well as she’d ever been.

“I should be asking ye that,” she whispered. “Does yer head hurt?”

“With ye cradling it so gently?” His free hand—the one not holding her against him—gently closed around hers. “Thank ye for caring for me, lass.”

She should have blushed. She couldn’t, not while holding his gaze. “Thank ye for keeping me safe.”

When he squeezed her hand gently, she couldn’t help her wince. Without pausing, he lifted her hand so he could see her palm, then tsked.

“By St. Pancras’s left ballock, lass, ye did this to save me?”

“I did it to save—” Well, actually, she *had* been thinking of him when she’d dug in and held on. Flushing, she dropped her gaze to his lips.

As if he heard her unspoken words, he brought her palm to his lips then brushed a kiss across the abraded skin.

“Thank ye, Grace,” he whispered, and the words reached through her ears and down her throat and into her chest.

Into her heart.

His lips...his lips were parted and she wanted to touch them again. Not with her injured palm. Not even with her fingertips.

She wanted to taste them. To lick them. To claim them as her own.

Just one kiss.

Breathless, Grace felt herself leaning forward. Yearning. Hopeful.

Just one kiss. One experience of pleasure before she consigned herself to a lifetime of pain.

...The pleasure to be had between a man and a woman.

He'd said that. She'd begged him to stop teasing her with such words, but she wanted it. She wanted him.

The first brush of her lips against his was hesitant, delicate. She pulled back and stared down at him.

Barclay gave her no indication of what he was thinking. His arm was still locked like a band around her middle and he still held her free hand in his. But his gaze was...warm. *Hot*, even.

He wasn't going to say aught? He wasn't going to chastise her, or take what she was offering? Fine, then.

She swallowed then leaned forward once more. This was her moment, and she wouldn't allow herself to be afraid. Not now, not ever.

This time the kiss lasted longer. He held himself still as her lips roamed across his. She nipped at his lower lip, then dragged her tongue across it, marveling at how the skin could be so rough and still feel so perfect.

Finally—*finally!*—his lips parted on a groan of surrender.

She felt a grin blooming, and then before she could blink, he'd rolled. Suddenly she was pressed against the scree, with Barclay hovering over her. And he was taking control of the kiss.

This kiss...

This kiss...

Well, it was quite an instructive few minutes, Grace had to admit.

He taught her how to tease, how to caress, how to stroke. His tongue played with hers, and she was an eager learner.

Pleasure!

This is what he'd meant! The pleasure between a man and a woman! It was truly remarkable how a series of actions between two sets of lips—and a pair of tongues—could be tied directly to her chest, her stomach, and...lower.

Liquid heat pooled between her thighs, and she shifted beneath him, uncertain what it was she needed. One of his thighs slipped between hers, which should have felt like an invasion.

But when he caught her lower lip between his teeth, her muffled gasp turned into a moan, and she arched against him, pressing her hips into his.

Into his *hardness*.

She was not so innocent as to not know what that hardness meant, and the thought increased her arousal even more.

Barclay was the one to end the kiss, to pull away with a deep groan, to freeze, staring down at her as he panted heavily.

She wanted to speak, but her lips—her *mind*—couldn't form words. What to say? How to thank someone for such an amazing experience?

And then, as she watched, his expression shuttered.

Before, he'd looked at her as if she was someone special. Someone to cherish. Now...?

Now there was a hardness in those green eyes. Anger.

At her?

Barclay reached sideways to grab his helmet, then rolled off her with a hiss. They were still lying on the slope, but now

he glared up at his mount. The animal was perched on an absurdly small ledge.

“Horse! Dinnae stand there uselessly!”

Ah. So, they were going to pretend that kiss hadn't happened? Grace pulled her braid out from beneath her—*Even dirtier now, I suppose*—and scowled. “What do ye expect Mayo to do?”

Barclay ignored her. “Throw us the damnable rope, ye dobber!”

Scoffing, Grace struggled to sit up. “How can ye possibly expect a hooved animal to—”

The rope hit her in the back of her head.

With a sound halfway between a yelp and a curse, Grace scrambled to turn uphill. The white gelding stood serenely, looking for all the world as if he was *proud*...with the rope tied to the saddle and running down the slope.

“Thank ye,” muttered Barclay, grabbing for it. When he turned to her, there was none of the warmth in his gaze she'd seen earlier. “I'll anchor it down here. Is yer palm well enough to make the climb?”

He was treating her as a captive again.

He was going to take her back to her father, even after that kiss.

Grace tightened her jaw, knowing that even if her hand fell off, she bloody well wasn't going to complain to *him*. “I'll survive.”

And she did.

She always did.

As she fought her way up the slope toward the animal which would take her to her prison, she fought the tears in her eyes.

She would survive.

CHAPTER 4



BARCLAY DESERVED A SAINTHOOD. Or the worst tortures of Hell.

He couldn't decide.

Ye dinnae need the worst tortures of hell. Ye have them right here on Earth, ye dumb fooker.

The woman in his arms murmured softly in her sleep and rolled over to face him.

Had he still been wearing his helmet, he wouldn't feel the softness of her curls against his cheek. He wouldn't be able to feel her breath on his skin.

His commander, Drummond Kennedy, preferred the Hunters wear their helms when they were on missions. It was a badge of office, an announcement to the public not to cross the Hunters...and the stories told about them would keep criminals afraid.

But once Grace had pulled it from him, had seen his face... 'twould serve no purpose to put it back on again. Besides, if he did, he'd be missing *this*.

'Twas the middle of the night. The fire was heading toward embers, and the darkness was alive with the sound of nocturnal creatures and the wind.

And Barclay?

Barclay was wide awake, torturing himself.

Aye, 'twas torture to hold her—warm and soft and sweet-smelling somehow, even after the day they'd had—and know he couldn't have her. 'Twas torture, the way she turned to him so trustingly, knowing he'd comfort her and keep her safe no matter what the future brought.

'Twas torture to be strong and resist touching her.

To resist what she'd offered.

Sighing, he stared down at the top of her head where it pressed so trustingly against his shoulder, remembering that kiss.

Remembering it? He doubted he'd forget it.

Aye, he was a charmer, a rogue. He'd had more than his share of lovers and had something of a reputation at Court for leaving his women satisfied. He might be a penniless bastard, but he had the King's trust, and that—and his reputation with the ladies—had always been enough.

Until Grace.

She'd kissed him, and he'd kissed her back. It had been wrong...but damnation, had felt so right!

St. Pancras have mercy on him! This was a fine mess; a bonny lass wanted *him*, and he was the one turning her down? Being strong? *Jesu Christo*, what was wrong with him?

Can this feeling between the pair of ye really be so wrong?

A month ago, Barclay would've said nay; lust could *never* be wrong.

But this...*this* he felt for Grace... 'Twas more than lust. At least, it felt different. Aye, he wanted her—riding with a cockstand was not a comfortable experience—but 'twas more than that.

The fact he was dragging her to her wedding didn't help.

He squeezed his eyes shut. She belonged to her betrothed, the man her father chose for her. Not to Barclay.

Grace, with impeccable timing even in her sleep, chose that moment to smack her lips and throw her leg across his.

Her thigh rubbed where his cock throbbed against his kilt, and he sighed again.

Aye, this was torture of the worst kind.

But there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

Unable to resist, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head and forced himself to close his eyes. Tomorrow would be a long day and he needed his strength to resist her charms.

HIS MIDNIGHT PREMONITION had been correct: the next day *was* long. Long and hard.

'Tis what she said.

Barclay didn't push Horse to hurry south to the MacDonald holding. He *told* himself 'twas because the poor animal was carrying double and didn't deserve to be rushed on top of it. But he *suspected* 'twas because Barclay was in no hurry to return Grace.

If he'd been alone, he might've made the journey in a day.

As 'twas, he was going to stretch this out as long as possible.

Even if she was angry with him.

Even if having her pressed against his back made him uncomfortably aroused.

Even if every whiff of her hair and brush of her hand made him acutely aware of what he couldn't have.

Barclay had never loved silence, even while traveling alone; hence his tendency to sing to Horse, who didn't mind. So, despite her irritation, he asked her questions, and he coaxed her from her sulk with stories of his own past.

She told him about her time at the convent and how 'twas her first time doing manual labor. It had been difficult, but she seemed to revel in the challenge. She told him of the time she'd visited Court with her mother as a young lassie, and how

she still remembered the overwhelming grandeur of the buildings.

He told her of some of his missions, and he sang for her when she asked, and he told her some of the less ribald jokes his fellow Hunter, Evander, had shared with him over the years. Barclay steered the conversation away from his childhood, and the miserable bastard who'd sired him, but did his best to answer her questions about his life.

At midday, they stopped for a simple meal, and Grace's nose wrinkled when he handed her the bannock cake, although she said naught. He vowed to stop even earlier than planned that evening, so he might set a few snares and catch some meat for her stomach.

He knew he shouldn't be surprised that the lass nibbled on the oat cake without complaint, but he *was*. She just looked so damnably soft and delicate...but she didn't act that way, for certes!

Her hand was wrapped in a strip he'd cut from her chemise after he'd washed her abraded palm. Her feet weren't as bad, but he still hadn't allowed her to walk very far on her own, and she hadn't objected to him lifting and carrying her about.

Torture indeed.

As he went about caring for Horse, he watched her from the corner of his eye. When she sighed and dropped her cake to her lap, he shook his head. Mayhap he *had* been pushing her too hard.

“What is it, lass?” he asked softly, dropping to his haunches beside the boulder where she sat. “Yer hand is painin' ye? Ye want something else to eat?”

Her lips twitched ruefully, and she picked at the oat cake with her good hand. “I'll no' deny the bargains I might make for a fresh piece of fruit, but nay, 'tis nae great hardship to eat oat cakes.”

Then why did she look so uneasy? “Grace, I ken ye have nae great liking for this task I've been set.” And neither did he. “But I'll make ye as comfortable as I'm able, if ye'll tell me

what's wrong." Mayhap there was a crofter he could buy fruit from.

She hesitated, then sighed again. "I..." She shook her head, shrugging. "I ken ye'll think me a spoiled lady. It's just...I am used to washing regularly. Mayhap not hot baths daily, like some of yer Court ladies, but..." She shifted on the boulder. "I dinnae like that I am still so dirty."

The chuckle burst from Barclay's lips before he could stop himself. "Well, 'tis easy enough to fix." As he pushed himself to his feet again, his hand landed—almost unconsciously—on her upper back, and he had to stop himself from caressing her. "Tomorrow evening we'll camp beside the loch, eh? Yer father's holding is just to the south of it, so ye can get as clean as ye'd like afore ye return to him."

He thought he'd been offering her a boon, a prize—the chance to bathe. But as soon as he saw her scowl, he realized he'd been wrong. Reminding her of her return to her father—and her imminent wedding vows—had been the wrong thing to do.

Sighing, he scooped her into his arms and deposited her on Horse's back once more.

The first hour dragged on in silence, until Barclay could no longer stand it. He softly hummed a favorite tune, his lips curling at the way Horse seemed to step in beat, then he began to sing. Grace's forehead dropped to the center of his back, and he wondered if she was sleepy.

'Tis a good thing ye decided to stop early today.

When they passed another hollow—protected on three sides by rock fall—he clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth, and Horse obligingly stopped.

"Ye ken, *some* warriors use their reins," Grace roused herself to point out from behind him.

She was tired and likely sore. He *knew* this, and knew 'twas responsible for her sour mood. Still, he couldn't help his grin as he swung down; she was just so damned *adorable*.

“I only use the reins when ‘tis necessary,” he explained as he carried her to a fallen log. “Horse understands my voice well enough. How would *ye* like it if, every time I wanted *ye* to go left or right, I tugged on one side of yer mouth?”

When his gaze dropped to her lips, the reminder of yesterday’s kiss made his cock stir.

Again.

“If *ye* tried it,” she snapped, slapping away his hands as he tried to help her settle, “I’d likely punch *ye*.”

Barclay rocked back on his heels, his thumbs hooked in his sword belt, and smiled down at her. “Ye ken, I believe *ye* would, lass. Do *ye* need me to carry *ye* to one of the bushes?”

St. Pancras’s right kneecap, she was even more appealing when she blushed like that!

“I can bloody well hobble to a bush, Sir Hunter. If *ye*’d just leave me in peace for longer than a moment—”

“Aye, aye, lass, I understand.” Chuckling, he held up his hands and backed away. “Stay near the hollow, eh, and I’ll be back after I’ve caught us some meat.”

In truth, it took longer than he expected to catch the pair of plump rabbits, and when he returned, ‘twas to find Horse kneeling in a patch of grass...and Grace curled up against his belly, genteelly snoring.

The late afternoon sunlight made her hair seem to glow, and she wore the dirty, wrinkled gown as if ‘twere the finest dress at Court. Her bare feet, still healing, peeked out from under the hem of her chemise, and Barclay had to resist the urge to tuck them in, to keep them warm.

She’s no’ yers to coddle. No’ yers to protect.

Soon she’d belong to her husband, some faceless laird who could give her the life she deserved.

Turning away, Barclay began to prepare the meat.

He knew the moment she woke, but he pretended not to hear her, so she could have some privacy. When she joined

him beside the fire, she seemed...shy. Embarrassed? Because she'd napped?

“Are ye hungry, lass?”

“Famished,” she admitted.

Using his dagger, he sliced a piece of haunch for her, and couldn't help his smile as she shifted it from one hand to the other and blew on it to cool. “I'm sorry 'tis no' a piece of fruit —”

She looked up, still chewing, and interrupted him. “It's delicious. Thank ye.”

Grease from the rabbit was smeared around her mouth, and when she finished the slice, she licked each of her fingertips clean.

Grace MacDonald might look like a lady, but she hadn't once complained about this journey—other than wishing to wash—or about the accommodations. She was as tough as Coira Oliphant, his cousin Doughall's wife, who was the leader of their clan.

What kind of leader would Grace be? Strong, aye, but proper. Refined. Polite. Her future husband would not just be getting a beautiful and witty wife, but one who would stand beside him and lead their clan into a bright future.

And it willnae be ye.

Aye, aye, he didn't need his stupid brain reminding him of *that*. He only thought of it every ten minutes as 'twas! Scowling, Barclay tossed another log onto the fire.

“Ye dinnae eat rabbit?”

“Nay, I dinnae like thinking of ye—”

He cut himself off before he said something stupid. *Stupider.*

Instead, he sliced off another piece of the roasting meat for her, then served himself. They ate in uncomfortable silence for a while, and he did his best not to watch the way her lips moved around her fingers.

How would they feel around yer cock?

Barclay groaned and tossed the leg bone he'd been gnawing on into the fire, causing sparks to fly up.

St. Pancras protect him! Even his own inner monologue was sabotaging him!

Beside him, she shifted, pulling her knees to her chest and propping her chin atop them. "Ye ken, my father will likely reward ye when ye return me?"

Frowning, Barclay shot a glance at her. Her gaze was fixed on the fire, her eyes sad. "Why would I want that?"

She shrugged without looking at him. "I just thought mayhap 'twould improve yer mood. Ye'll be doing the King's business, like all those other missions ye told me about, and my father will be pleased as well."

Bah. Barclay hid his response to such nonsense by leaning forward to pull the last of the meat from the spit. "I dinnae want his reward, lass," he admitted gruffly. "And this mission—ye—are naught like the robbers and murderers I've been set to track down afore."

"Aye, yer stories were..." She shivered. "Have ye ever considered giving it up? I ken 'tis a fine honor, to be chosen as one of the King's Hunters, but surely there's something safer ye could be doing?"

He snorted softly. "There's dangers all around us, Grace, no matter our role. My mother died, huddled and starving, in the snow one winter."

Gasping, she swung on him. "Barclay! 'Tis..." She shook her head and rested her hand atop his forearm. "I'm sorry. 'Tis horrible. Were ye with her?"

Fook. He hadn't meant to tell her of his past. To buy time, he bit into the meat and chewed. "Nay," he finally admitted. "I was eight, and warm enough beside the hearth of the tavern where she'd left me when she'd gone to beg our laird for more than a crust of bread. Instead, he beat her yet again."

His stomach soured at the memory of finding her frozen body after the snow had ceased. Of the fresh bruises and the broken arm, courtesy of the man who had sworn to protect them all.

Who should've had reason to want to protect Barclay and his mother.

The meat stuck in his throat, and he forced himself to swallow.

"I'm sorry," whispered Grace, her hand still on his arm. "She sounds like a good mother. The kind of parent who would give up everything to protect her child."

"She was," he rasped.

She was.

"Ye are right, though." With a sigh, she wrapped her arms around her knees once more. "There is danger everywhere. I ken most women in my position have to worry about the dangers of the childbed, or disease, but the man my father has picked to be my husband..."

She shook her head again, sounding so—so *broken* that Barclay forgot his own uncomfortable musings and turned to her.

"He cannae be so bad, lass. Yer father would want what's best for ye."

"My father wants what's best for *him*. And for the clan, I suppose I can admit. The laird he's chosen is a close friend of his, whose holdings are no' so far away from ours. I ken 'twould be good for the MacDonalds if we were joined by marriage."

His palms itched to reach for her, to comfort her. "Then why are ye so against it, Grace?" he whispered.

"Because he's been married thrice before, and his wives have all died afore they could birth his bairns. He's a cruel man, one who neglects his people and hurts those he's supposed to protect."

Aye, Barclay knew all about men like that. The man who'd sired him—who'd beaten his mother near to death when she'd gone to beg for help—had been one such man.

But *surely* Grace was overreacting? Surely her father—who had worried enough, cared enough, to send to the King for help when she'd gone missing—wouldn't marry her to someone who would hurt her?

He blew out a breath, knowing 'twould do no good to remind her of her father's love, not if she was scared of her betrothed. Barclay had promised to keep her safe, and even though he believed this truly was the best course of action for her, he hated her fear.

Tossing the last of the rabbit meat into the fire, he wiped his hands on his plaid and moved closer to her. "Ye ken, lass," he offered gently, putting one arm around her shoulders, "if ye ever need help, ye have only to send for me."

In the twilight, he couldn't see the color of her eyes. But when she swung her gaze to him, they were wide and full of hope. "Really?"

Swallowing, Barclay nodded. The thought of seeing her again, after her marriage, was almost as painful as the thought of never seeing her again. "Really. Whenever. Whatever. Ye call for me, and I'll be there."

Her gaze caressed his face—his cheeks, his jaw, his lips. He could *feel* it, as surely as he'd felt her fingertips on his skin yesterday. 'Twas a good thing he'd left the helmet off, after all.

He held his breath, waiting for her response...but finally, she sighed and looked back to the fire.

"Thank ye, Barclay, but...this is my future, what little of it is left. I'll no' drag ye into my hell."

Hell? Was she being melodramatic?

Barclay thought of the delicately beautiful lass he'd watched stab her captor, and pull herself from a bog, and cause herself harm in order to save *him* from rolling down a mountain... And had the uncomfortable thought that mayhap she *wasn't*.

They sat in silence a bit longer, until her head drooped sideways to rest on his shoulder. He didn't know if 'twas for comfort or support, but he was happy to give her what he could.

"Ye ken the worst of it?" she finally murmured as the last of the fire fell to embers. "This is my body. I should have a choice of what to do with it, aye? I mean, I ken my duty as a laird's daughter is to create an alliance, and I suppose I'll have to do that...but until I'm married, my body belongs to *me*."

He wasn't certain what she was saying. "Aye?" he ventured.

"Yesterday..." She shifted closer, one arm falling from around her knees to rest against his thigh. "I've never been kissed. I've never been touched, nor *charmed*." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Never been *pleasured*."

Good.

Christ.

Almighty.

Barclay groaned silently and dropped his head back to stare up at the clear stars above.

Aye, he understood now what she was saying.

And as much as he wanted to offer, he couldn't. "Lass..." he groaned.

She didn't stir, but her voice sounded sad when she interrupted him. "I ken. Ye're an honorable man, Barclay, and I'll no' take that from ye. Nae matter how much I wish..."

He shouldn't ask.

He wasn't going to ask.

He did.

"Wish?" he croaked.

"Wish I could experience pleasure," she whispered. "Before I resign myself to a lifetime of pain, I wish I could

have been with a man who would really cherish me for—for *me.*”

A sainthood? Barclay deserved *three* sainthoods for this.

For not giving her what she wanted.

For not pressing her down in the soft grass and kissing her lips, her throat, her smooth belly...and lower.

For not stroking her, licking her, plunging into her.

For not giving her all the pleasure she deserved, and more.

A sainthood? Nay. This was hell.

Barclay squeezed his eyes shut, and knew he had a long night of torture ahead of him once more.

CHAPTER 5



“AND HIS MAJESTY SAID, ‘*What the hell am I supposed to do with a head?*’ and Payton said, ‘*’Twas easier than bringing ye the body as well!*’”

Grace stifled her laughter against Barclay’s shoulder as they rode, and noticed the way a shudder ran down his spine when her mouth touched his skin. Grinning, she shook her head. “’Tis disgusting.”

“Aye, but he was right. The King gives us authority to pass judgment on a mission. That’s what the helm is all about.” Barclay patted the helmet, currently tied to the saddle. “It—and we—are symbols of his power. Payton was sent after an outlaw, caught him, passed judgment, and executed him.”

It was a fact of life, and Grace couldn’t deny the King’s Hunters made the Highlands—all of Scotland, really—safer for the people.

Except for ye.

Aye, but her father was a laird, who’d written to his King for help. Of course His Majesty had sent one of his best...

“So ye’ve met him? The King?”

Barclay shrugged, a delicious movement which made his muscles ripple in exciting ways. “Of course. My commander is the one who most usually interacts with Their Majesties, but the rest of us have reported to him.”

“Yer commander is...” She rested her chin on his shoulder as she frowned, trying to remember. “Drummond somebody-

or-other, aye?”

Barclay twisted just far enough to raise a brow at her, although she wasn't sure if he was surprised or impressed she remembered. “Aye, lass, Drummond Kennedy. He's aulder than the rest of us and has seen more in his time with the King than the rest of us can imagine.”

“And the rest of ye are...Payton and Craig?”

“Well, the four of us work most closely together. There used to be more of us, but 'tis customary for a Hunter to retire when he marries, assuming he has someplace to go. Evander Oliphant was a bastard like me, and part of our team until last winter when he was sent after a lady who was accused of reiving to support her people. He proved her innocent, married her, and is now ruling at her side at Castle Watshesed.”

Well, *that* was interesting, wasn't it? Grace straightened and moved her hold to Barclay's hips. Funny how only two days ago she hadn't wanted to touch him, and now she couldn't seem to stop. Last night, he'd held her oh-so-gently as she'd fallen asleep, apparently unmoved by her not-at-all-subtle hints about experiencing pleasure.

Oh well. 'Twas likely the man just wasn't interested in her. Or that he thought her merely a mission.

He kissed ye back.

Aye, well, he was a charmer. Mayhap he kissed all the women who threw themselves at him. Mayhap he was just so good at giving pleasure that *all* women experienced this throbbing in their cores, and aching in their breasts when he touched them...

She needed a distraction or 'twas going to become uncomfortable to sit astride

“Evander Oliphant? Did ye no' say yer cousin was married to an Oliphant?”

“Aye.” He paused to click his tongue twice, and Mayo obligingly took the left path. “Last year the Hunters lost our share of men to the Oliphant clan.”

She sucked in a breath. “That’s terrible! I had nae idea they were so warlike—”

His chuckle cut her off. “No’ like that, lass. Mad auld Laird Oliphant had six daughters. One of our men went missing, and when the signs pointed to him as the evildoer, Kenneth McClure—who was ready to hang up his helmet anyhow—took one of his men to investigate. They determined the clan was innocent, but both ended up marrying daughters of the laird.”

“Really?” How...*romantic*. Grace sighed. “I’m happy for them.”

“I am too. Kenneth is a laird and his wife rules at his side. Brodie, his man, had nae place to return to—like me—but he and his wife have made a fine place for themselves at Castle Oliphant. One of the other sisters found and married the missing Hunter, Ramsay McIlvain, and now that his father has stepped down as laird, they’re ruling his clan.”

All the Hunters had found their places as they’d retired. From what little Barclay had hinted about his childhood, she knew him to be an orphan without a clan. He’d made a place for himself among the Hunters...but if he retired, he’d have no place of his own, would he?

Unaware of her musings, Barclay had continued. “But the Hunters are always on the lookout for more men. When I attended Doughall’s wedding to the last Oliphant sister, I agreed to sponsor her cousin. Craig Oliphant is the newest member of our team; he used to be a blacksmith and is the approximate size of an ox. Sometimes I worry he’s got the brains of one too.”

Grace found herself smiling. “And that leaves...Payton?”

“Aye, he’s a McIntyre. Quiet. Thoughtful, but as ribald as the rest if I give him an opening. See that? Right there? Payton could make ‘*Give him an opening*’ last for days of sexual innuendos.”

Surprised she actually got the joke, Grace hid her snort of laughter. “Do ye all have such naughty senses of humor?”

“Och, lass, what else do ye expect from men forced to work together in tight quarters? We’re no’ learning embroidery. But Payton’s a good man. Close-lipped, aye, but good to have at yer side in a battle. Drummond has paired us up more often than no’; he says Payton’s the only one who can put up with my chatter. Thinks he doesnae have much to offer the ladies, what with that scarred face of his, but more than a few of my bedma—well, more than a few ladies I’ve met have asked about *him* instead.”

Hiding her smile at what he’d almost admitted, she thought of more questions for him. Grace didn’t think Barclay talked too much because she was infinitely curious about his life. “So, there’s only the four of ye left now?”

Barclay patted the horse’s neck and the animal carefully picked his way up an incline. “Och, nay. There’s different teams of men, I assume. I just dinnae ken them as well as the ones I’ve fought beside.”

“I thought ye normally were sent off on missions alone.”

“Or in pairs.” He shrugged. “But I’ve fought beside them all a time or two.” He turned his head slightly so she could see his smile curve. “I’ve fought *with* them a time or two, as well. Craig has a punch like an oak door.”

“I feel as if I should say something about the idiocy of the male of the species, but ye might take offense.”

His grin grew. “Ye’d likely be right. And now, lass...”

As they crested the hill, Barclay made a gesture with his free hand, as if presenting the landscape to her. And Grace, despite his teasing tone, sucked in a breath of wonder.

“Oh *my*.”

She knew this was the loch which bordered her family’s holding, south of here. She knew she should be worried and angry about being so close to home, so close to losing her freedom and her future.

But how could she focus on such fears when *this* was presented to her?

This finger of the loch was ringed by evergreens, and the rocky shore cradled a small sandy beach. Mist shrouded the mountains, and made the little paradise feel secluded and private.

Suddenly excited, she placed her hands on Barclay's shoulders and pressed herself up a bit, as if she could get a better view. "It's *beautiful*. Is it deep enough to bathe?"

At another series of clicks, Mayo began down the slope.

"Aye, lass, and no' so frigid, either. I'll have a fire waiting for ye when ye're through."

'Twas a thoughtful gesture, and Grace couldn't wait to be clean. When Mayo halted, she pushed herself off the animal's back too eagerly, and hit the ground with enough force on her abraded bare feet that she hissed.

"Grace!" He'd swung down from the saddle and was beside her before she had time to straighten. "Dinnae be so rash, lass. I'm here."

And he was.

He scooped her up and carried her to the shore, where he knelt and gently lowered her to the sand. In the last two days, she'd become used to him carrying her, and while she once would've thought such a thing would be frustrating, embarrassing, and not a little humiliating...now Grace blushed.

Because this was as close as she'd ever feel to his arms being around her, and she loved it.

"There ye are," he murmured. And before she knew what he was doing, he'd pushed the hem of her gown up far enough to untie her ruined stockings.

She barely had time to squeak—although she'd never know if 'twas an objection or just in surprise—before he'd tossed them into a pile and was reaching for the ties of her gown. "Let me help ye with this, aye? The bandage on yer hand will make it difficult."

That was right. He was right.

Was that the only reason he was helping her undress?

Trying to be nonchalant, she did her best to help him. “And are ye going to carry me into the water too, or will ye admit I can manage that on my own?”

Mayhap he didnae realize she was teasing him, because—frowning, he looked from her feet to the water and back again. “‘Tis sand all the way, so I suppose ye’ll be right enough.”

“Och, thank ye. And where will *ye* be as I’m hobbling out into the no’-quite-frigid water to bathe?”

At least, that’s what she’d *meant* to say. ‘Twas a perfectly good mockery, and completely ruined when he pulled her to her feet to tug her gown off her, and her words became lost in a jumble of dirty wool.

He was grinning when she emerged. “Why, I’ll be on the bank right here, scrubbing yer gown.”

That was... Grace stared at him, not sure how to respond.

His smile faded until it was more rueful than teasing, and he shrugged one shoulder. “‘Twould be cruel to expect ye to slip back into a dirty gown, if ye value cleanliness. We stopped early enough to let it dry afore...”

Afore I return ye to yer father.

She was certain that’s what he’d intended to say. He wanted her to look her best when he deposited her with her father.

Well...

Grace raised her chin. *Fine*. She’d bathe, she’d look like the perfect lady once more...and as soon as Father’s back was turned, she’d slip away again. Why did she have to resign herself to a lifetime of fear and pain? She’d run away once, and she’d do it again.

She *wouldn’t* marry Laird MacGill.

She *would* experience joy and pleasure.

Perhaps she would start today.

Barclay bundled up her gown and moved down the shore a bit, presumably to give her some privacy. But Grace was feeling...bold. Daring.

And so, she waited until the water had only reached her knees before she pulled the chemise over her head in one defiant move. There! 'Twas the action of a woman who had just decided to defy her father again. The action of a woman who, last night, had all-but-asked her escort to make love to her.

Hell and damnation, mayhap she *would* outright ask!

The feeling of indignation kept her warm as she sank to her knees in the deeper water, submerging herself up to her chin as she scrubbed at the soiled chemise with a handful of sand. Without soap, she wasn't sure how clean the linen actually would become, but she would manage.

The water wasn't frigid, as Barclay had promised, and the setting really was quite beautiful. She'd grown up on this loch but had never seen it from this angle. Had never been *allowed* to see it from this angle.

Father had "protected" her by keeping her a virtual prisoner in her own home. The only way she'd managed to escape to the convent was because he'd never expected her to actually try. Would she be able to do it again?

Dinnae second-guess yerself. Ye've made up yer mind, and ye'll find a way to make it happen.

Grimacing, she dunked her head under to scrub at her scalp.

The MacGill holding was north of here, near Glencoe, where she'd been captured by those men and Barclay had saved her. If she married Laird MacGill, would she pass this lovely, secluded spot again?

Ye're no' marrying him. Ye're running to Sister Mary Titania, remember?

Right.

Right.

Using the sand from the bed of the loch, she scrubbed her skin maybe a bit harder than necessary. She was determined. She would do this.

She would escape MacGill and live the life she wanted.

Risking a glance to the shore, 'twas to see Barclay wrapping himself back in his plaid. He must've bathed as well. He gathered up her gown and was strolling back toward where Mayo placidly munched on a blueberry bush when Grace made her decision.

Pretending great interest in wringing out her chemise, she stood and began to wade back to shore, desperately willing herself not to blush.

If ye start blushing now when ye're naked, lass, ye'll look like a giant berry.

A blueberry?

No' a blueberry, ye ninny. Something red. A strawberry? This analogy needs work.

It wasn't an analogy, 'twas an insult.

Luckily, the argument with herself kept her from focusing on the fact she was walking—completely naked—toward a man who was staring at her.

That, and the fact the water seemed to have become colder the longer she stayed in it.

“Och, lass, are ye mad?”

Barclay—who'd been hanging her gown over the blueberry bushes near the horse, now pulled the extra plaid from the saddlebags and came jogging toward her. He didn't stop when he reached the edge of the loch but splashed right out to meet her.

He yanked the chemise from her hands and bundled her up in the plaid as he lifted her. Vaguely, she tried to see where her undergown had gone to, but she had to admit, the plaid was *quite* warm.

Her teeth started to chatter when he placed her near a fallen tree beside the bushes. Muttering under his breath, Barclay stalked back out to the water, scooped up her chemise, and wrung it out again before hanging it beside her gown. He looked adorably disheveled, with that dark hair drying shaggily around his brow, and his lips pulled into a frown.

“I c-can take care of m-myself,” she managed around chattering teeth.

To her surprise, Barclay didn’t deny it. “Aye, I ken it, Grace. It’s just...”

Shaking his head, he broke off with a curse and squatted to pull together some driftwood for a fire.

Curious, she prompted, “J-just what?”

With a sigh, he sat back on his heels and looked up at her. The silence lasted longer than necessary, with her shifting her weight from foot to foot to try to stay warm, and him just watching.

Finally, he shook his head again. “I just wanted to take care of ye. If only for a little while.”

Oh.

She wasn’t certain how to reply to that, so she didn’t. Instead, she watched him light the fire, and fetch the water pouch she knew contained whisky.

“Here, lass,” he muttered, holding it out without meeting her eyes. “To warm ye up.”

“Th-thank ye.” She was still shivering, and even a sip of the warm brew didn’t seem to help. “I dinnae ken w-why I’m n-no’ warming—”

She bit her words off with a gasp when he tugged her toward him.

One moment she was standing, wrapped in his plaid...and the next, she was in his lap beside the fire, wrapped in *him*.

And her mind went blank. “Oh. Hello.”

He really had the most adorable smile, didn't he? "Hello." His voice was low and sensual. It made her tingle, made her core throb.

"Are y-ye..."

"Shhh, Grace," he prompted, and tucked her head under his chin as he wrapped his arms around her. "I'm warming ye."

Oh.

Well, it was working, for certes.

With her knees tucked up against him and her cheek pressed to his chest, she could hear his steady heartbeat. Before her, the fire crackled merrily, and behind that she could see the late afternoon mists flirting with the still waters of the loch.

His arms kept her safe and warm, and made her think all sorts of delicious would-be-inappropriate-if-she-hadn't-already-made-up-her-mind-about-this thoughts.

Against his chest, she smiled.

He had a sprinkling of hair across his muscles which tickled her skin. She lifted a hand beneath the blanket to brush at it, then decided that wasn't enough. Her fingertips lightly skimmed across his chest, exploring.

When they found his nipple, he shuddered.

"What are ye doing, lass?" he rasped.

Might as well be truthful. "I'm learning. If I'm to be married, I want to understand a man's body."

He might have groaned, or that might have been her imagination. He didn't object, however, when her touch skimmed across his shoulder, then found his collarbone and his throat. She stroked him there, fascinated by the rough skin and how different he felt.

She thought she could spend the next several days just touching him. Days? Nay, years.

The rest of her life.

When she sighed, he echoed it.

Sneaking a peek up at his face, she was surprised to see his beautiful green eyes closed, his features screwed into an expression of pain. Pain? Because she was touching him?

She didn't want to *hurt* him.

Her hand still on his skin, she shifted in his lap, a little disconcerted.

The movement did two things: rub her thighs together in such a way that sparks shot through her core at the same moment she realized how very wet the whole area was... and bring her arse in firm contact with something long and hard beneath his kilt.

They both sucked in a gasp at the same time.

Slowly, Grace straightened. She knew what that was, beneath Barclay's kilt. Knew what it meant.

She might be sheltered, aye, but she'd spent a lifetime speaking with maids and serving lasses, and then a very *open-minded* Mother Superior at St. Dorcas the Ever-Petulant. What had she called it? A man's member...something to do with chickens...?

Och, aye. A *cock*.

Grinning now, Grace shifted again, dragging her arse along his *cock*, and was gratified to hear him groan aloud this time.

Her fingers were still pressed against his throat, and now she dragged them to his jaw.

"Barclay," she whispered.

When he tipped his head to meet her eyes, she took advantage of the position, and raised her lips to his.

Another groan from him, this time one she felt in his chest...it sounded like surrender.

His arms were tightening around her, dragging her closer, even as his tongue flirted with hers.

Had she been aroused before? That was nothing compared to the way this man's kisses could make her feel!

One of his hands went to the back of her head, massaging her wet scalp. Then, as she became adventurous with her kisses and her lips found his jaw, his touch moved to her neck, her throat...lower.

When his hand closed around her breast, she hissed, "*Aye!*" and arched into his hold.

This precipitous movement caused the plaid to fall from one of her shoulders, baring her skin to his gaze. His *touch*.

"Grace," he rasped, even as his fingertips dragged along her bare skin...as if he couldn't help himself.

"Aye, Barclay. *Please.*"

When she lifted herself in his lap and pushed forward, her breast pressed into his palm, and he groaned in surrender once more.

"Grace, we cannae—"

"Just tonight, Barclay," she panted, because he was rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "Please. I—I need to understand."

His mouth was pressed against her temple. "Understand," he repeated.

"Pleasure. Please, Barclay. Pleasure me."

"I cannae." He was hesitating, but his hand wasn't. Even as he spoke, he was touching her, fondling her. His lips were brushing small kisses toward her ear. "I have a duty to my king."

He sounded as if he were trying to convince himself.

"And I..." She turned in his lap so she could capture his mouth with hers. "I have a duty to myself. To my body," she whispered against his lips.

For one excruciating moment, he froze, and she could *feel* his indecision.

And then—miracle of miracles!—he exhaled, his hand finding her breast once more, and his lips claiming hers.

Before she had time to rejoice, his mouth was moving down her body, to her neck. She arched into his hold, and he fondled and licked and nipped until she was panting and squirming in his lap.

“Barclay!” she moaned, as he bent almost double to fit her nipple into his mouth. The plaid was spread across his lap now, and she was completely naked.

As he suckled, he used his free hand to nudge her knees apart, and one thigh gladly spread for him. His fingers went to her core, and at that first stroke, she almost came off his lap.

“Be easy,” he murmured, straightening once more. “That’s a good lass.” He moved the hand which had been supporting her back up to her neck, pressing her against his chest once more as he stroked her.

Grace’s eyes were wide, her breathing heavy, as every piece of her focused on the wet, throbbing place between her thighs. He held her in his lap and played her like an instrument.

And then his fingers found the pearl of her pleasure, nestled in her curls, and she jerked against him.

“Aye, like that. That’s a good lass,” he crooned, his touches featherlight, even as another finger rested against her opening.

She wanted—*needed*—more.

Arching her hips as much as she could, she tried to tell him without words what she needed. When he grinned, she felt it against her temple.

“Show me, lass,” he whispered in command. “Show me what ye like.”

So, she did. Breathless with need, she dropped one hand atop his, showing him how to press against her bud, how to circle it. None of his teasing strokes; she needed pressure!

He chuckled, then mimicked her, and with a sound very much like a kitten's mewl, Grace's hand fell away.

One of his fingers poised at the entrance to her core, and when she shifted up into his touch, he used that chance to slide inside of her.

'Twas not the first time she'd experimented like this, but his finger felt so much *different* than hers had; rough and thick and perfect. He stroked her from the inside, and when she gasped, "*More!*" he groaned and slid another within her.

His thumb found her bud and he circled it, the way she'd shown him, even as his fingers stroked her from the inside, touching places she didn't think she'd be able to ever replicate on her own. The pressure inside her built higher and higher, harder and harder, until she felt as if she was on the edge of a precipice.

Then Barclay wrapped his fingers through her hair and tugged her head back until she was looking up at him, hazy-eyed with pleasure.

"Come for me, lass," he commanded, before claiming her lips with his.

Pleasure exploded through her body even as his teeth pulled at her lower lip.

With a startled sound, she slammed her thighs together, trapping his hand inside her, as she bucked in his lap, trying to hold onto this incredible feeling of release. She heard him groan again, felt his hips rocking beneath her arse, but nothing could compare to the intense sensations coursing through her.

Pleasure.

He'd shown her such pleasure.

And she wanted more.

More.

As the tremors softened, Grace felt her heartbeat—and her breathing—slow. She dropped her forehead to his shoulder, reveling in the feel of his skin pressed against hers. Of her *body* pressed against his.

Aye, she wanted more, and she'd tell him that, just as soon as she could form coherent thought.

His fingers slid from her, and she felt almost bereft until he wrapped her in both arms, pulling her close against him.

He said naught, but pressed a kiss to her temple.

More. So much more. He'd shown her pleasure, but it wasn't enough. Tomorrow he'd return her to Father, and before Father could send for MacGill, she'd run away again.

This time, she'd run right to Barclay.

Yawning, she snuggled closer to him, not minding when he lifted the plaid to wrap her in it once more. She'd tell him. She'd tell him she wanted more. Wanted *him*.

Forever.

She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

CHAPTER 6



TORTURES OF HELL? Nay, Barclay deserved even worse.

Although what could be worse than the tortures of Hell, he couldn't quite articulate at this time. Being licked to death by anteaters? Being forced to spend the rest of his life listening to mediocre poetry and having to come up with compliments about it?

Celibacy?

Groaning, he dropped his forehead against his saddle, his Hunter's helmet dangling from one hand.

He was a worm.

Nay, worse than a worm.

A-a *proto*-worm. The dirt the worm crawled through. Worm shite—aye, that was it, he was worm shite.

Because last night had been the best of his life.

And today, he was going to betray the woman he suspected he was coming to love.

If someone had asked him a fortnight ago what he might've guessed the best night of his life would be, he damned well wouldn't have guessed "sitting cross-legged on the hard ground, pleasuring a lass with an aching, unfulfilled cock."

But that had been exactly what happened.

Grace had been so perfect, so trusting. She'd needed what he could give her. What he could *teach* her. Christ Almighty,

she had been so tempting! He could've lifted his kilt and shifted her in his arms, then plunged into her weeping cunny.

But even then, even in the midst of the most intense yearning he'd ever experienced, he'd known how foolish that would be. How much he'd regret it.

Because he had to return her to her father. To her *bridegroom*.

“*Fooooook.*”

“What was that, Barclay?”

He twisted around so quickly he almost wrenched a muscle in his neck. “Naught!” he blurted, then winced.

St. Pancras's pinkie finger, she was beautiful in the early morning sunshine! Her golden hair had dried into a riot of curls, her eyes sparkled, and there was a breathless sort of anticipation about her as she smiled up at him.

And now he was going to have to betray her.

He swallowed. “Are ye ready to go, lass?” he rasped.

“I thought we might break our fasts in a more leisurely manner.” Wait, was she blushing? She was meeting his gaze boldly, but *aye*, she was blushing! “Mayhap there are some other lessons ye might teach me?”

Christ. *Christ.*

Lessons.

He couldn't meet her eyes. Couldn't see the *hope* in them. Instead, he locked his gaze on the loch behind her. “Nay, Grace. Nae time to dally this morning. We can eat oatcakes in the saddle if ye're hungry.”

When she made a little sound of disappointment, he couldn't stop himself from darting a glance at her. Forget blushing; her cheeks were red with embarrassment now.

“I...see. Ye are so anxious to be on our way?”

“Aye,” he choked out. “We can be at yer father's keep by noon if we hurry.”

And there ‘twas.

The admission he had betrayed her.

Last night, he’d taught her about pleasure, shown her how miraculous her body could be...and today, he was consigning her to a marriage she didn’t want.

Well, if ‘twere up to him, she wouldn’t be marrying the nameless laird her father had picked out for her! She’d be marrying *him*.

Wait, what?

Aye, in all his years, he’d had no interest in marriage. Mainly because he had naught to offer a wife, except life at Court and a lifetime of pleasure when he was between missions.

Hunters usually retire when they marry.

Aye, but he had nowhere to retire *to*.

No one to retire *with*.

But now...now he’d found her. The woman who could convince him to give up all other women. The woman who made him yearn for a place of his own, if only to offer to share it with her.

Lady Grace MacDonald.

The woman whose cheeks had gone alarmingly pale.

“I...see. Well.” When she took a deep breath, her tits—those glorious tits, which he’d cupped and tasted last night as she’d squirmed naked in his lap!—pressed against the neckline of the gown he’d washed. “I cannae say I’m completely surprised by yer decision.”

“Nay,” he announced gruffly. “I’ve never lied to ye, Grace. My duty is to the King.”

She shrugged, the movement far too nonchalant to be believable, especially with the hurt in her expression. “I might’ve said yer duty is to yer own heart, but ‘tis clear that particular organ hasnae been engaged.”

He opened his mouth to protest—oh, his heart *was* engaged!—but she held up a hand to forestall him.

“Never mind, Barclay. I didnae mean to sound manipulative. Ye’re right; ye’ve never made it a secret ye would be taking me back to my father. But last night...”

Last night changed everything.

He *knew* that’s what she was going to say.

Which is why he was surprised as hell when she said something different. “Last night, I made a decision too. I’ll go back to my father’s keep, aye, but I willnae stay there. I willnae marry the disgusting man Father has chosen for me. I am *more* than a bargaining chip, and I deserve happiness in my life.”

Och, by St. Pancras’s left elbow, she did!

Barclay’s palms itched to reach for her, to comfort her. Only by tightening his grip on his helmet, the steel digging into his palm, could he control the impulse.

His other hand curled around the hilt of his sword, as if he could attack whatever was causing her this pain.

‘Twould be fooking idiotic, considering ye’re the dobber causing it!

If falling on his sword could ease her misery, he’d do it.

Aye, yer heart is most definitely involved, ye pair bastard.

Since she was still looking up at him, her jaw mulishly set, and since he’d been gaping at her like a fish, Barclay forced himself to focus. He nodded.

“Aye, lass. Ye *do* deserve happiness.” *And pleasure, even if I cannae be the man to give it to ye.* “My obligation to my King ends when ye are back with yer father, and whatever yer plans after that...” He swallowed, and made himself grin, although he suspected ‘twas far from his usual charm. “I wish ye well.”

St. Pancras help him, he sounded so dishonorable! Dragging her back to face her fear, then saying she was on her

own!

But to his surprise—and really, he shouldn't be surprised that anything she did surprised him, not when he was becoming used to her surprises!

Wait, what had he been thinking?

Dinnae ask me, I got confused around the second surprise back there.

Och, aye. To his surprise, his words hadn't seemed to hurt her. Instead, if anything...she seemed relieved?

Grace's shoulders straightened, and her chin rose. "I ken ye have a duty, Barclay, but I would beg a favor."

"*Anything*," he vowed, even knowing how impossible 'twould be to make such a promise.

With her hands folded demurely in front of her like that, she looked like a queen. *Or a martyr going to her death.* Och, dinnae be dramatic, marriage wasn't *that* bad.

"I want yer vow that, once ye have left me with my father, ye will go to the convent of St. Dorcas the Ever-Petulant." She waited for his hesitant nod, before continuing. "I want ye to tell the Mother Superior that I have been returned to the MacDonalds, but I have nae intention of staying."

"Grace, dinnae be rash—"

"I am *no*' being rash." Her words whipped out, slapping his mouth closed. She was a woman used to being heard, and he loved it. He loved her power, her determination, all wrapped up in a delicate beauty he knew men underestimated. "I have considered this. I escaped once afore, and I will do it again. I will *no*' be married to a man who will do naught but hurt me until I am dead."

Oh, Christ Almighty. "I dinnae want that either," he rasped, light-headed at the thought.

"Good. Then ye'll tell Sister Mary Titania about my plan?"

Barclay dragged the helmet in front of him, holding it as a shield. "Aye, Grace," he reluctantly agreed. "I'll tell her."

Although if she cares aught for ye, she'll no' want ye in danger, either."

Blue eyes narrowed. "Is that why ye dinnae want me in danger? Because ye care for me?"

How could she doubt it?

Because ye havenae let her see it. Ye're no' worthy of caring for her.

Tamping down the frustrated growl rising in his throat, Barclay swung the helmet up. The abrupt movement caused her to step back, but he slammed the helm atop his head with a finality that reminded him of his role in life.

His place in *her* life.

Barclay was one of the King's Hunters, first and foremost. He could never be aught more and didn't deserve to wish for things he couldn't have.

"We're wasting time. Let's get ye to yer father's keep, Lady Grace."

DESPITE HAVING BEEN RAISED under the close and watchful eye of her father and dozens of servants, Grace began to recognize the land as they approached her father's holding. The loch beside which they'd camped last night stretched to her left, and the mountain in the distance had a familiar shape.

She was almost home.

"How much farther?" she asked dully, holding tightly to Barclay's belt. She wasn't certain if she did so to keep from falling from Mayo's back...or to keep from throwing her arms around Barclay and begging he turn the horse around and ride to safety.

He shifted. "No' much longer. Ye can see the smoke from the hearths of the village."

He sounded...different. More subdued.

She was no fool; she had seen how little he liked this duty of his. Grace wondered if she began to scream and sob and reveal how truly terrified she was, how he might respond.

Nay, ye'll no' humiliate yerself that way. Ye have a plan. Stick to it.

Aye. Aye. She didn't need to marry Laird MacGill. No matter if Father locked her in the tower, she'd find a way to escape again! She'd be gone, back to the convent, before Laird MacGill could be summoned from his failing estate to claim her as his.

Just rehashing the plan made her feel better. Grace forced herself to breathe deeply.

Unfortunately—or mayhap fortunately?—this brought Barclay's scent into her lungs. Into her *heart*. Thanks to the swim in the loch last night, he smelled of the crisp Highland air and pine and perfection. Stifling a groan of frustration, she dropped her forehead to his broad back, cursing her weaknesses.

“Grace?” Barclay placed his broad palm atop her knee. “Are ye aright? Do ye need me to pull over?”

“Pull over what?” she mumbled against his back.

“Pull over the reins to get to the side of the path, so ye might hop down and puke in the bushes.”

Och, well, since he'd put it so eloquently... “Ye dinnae use the reins.”

He chuckled at that, although she wasn't certain if 'twas her words, or how pitiful she'd sounded. “Nay, but if ye need to puke—”

“I dinnae need to puke! Stop saying that!”

“Why? 'Tis a perfectly natural—”

She jerked her head up, irritated now. “Because if ye keep nattering on about it, I *will* have to puke!”

When he turned far enough in the saddle that she could see his profile, he was grinning. “But ye're feeling better now,

aye?”

He squeezed her knee and she couldn't be mad at his charm.

Instead, she sighed and gave into the temptation to pull her arms around his waist. Hugging him, she pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

“Just keep riding,” she murmured. “Hear that, Mayo?” Grace raised her voice. “Just keep going. I want to get this over and done with.”

“His name is Horse,” Barclay said mildly, even as he urged the animal forward.

“’Tis a stupid name for a horse.”

“’Tis a *perfect* name for a horse,” he corrected.

The damned horse bobbed its head, as if agreeing.

“Och, what do *ye* ken?” she muttered irritably at the animal.

The horse tossed its head this time and whinnied in what sounded remarkably like indignation.

Barclay chuckled, and even Grace found her lips curling into a smile.

They said naught else, but he didn't remove his hand from her leg, either.

It felt...comforting. *Comfortable*.

It felt right.

As they rode through the village surrounding the walls of Father's keep, Grace was recognized. A cry went up, and she saw people running for the castle. Resigning herself to the coming confrontation, Grace lifted her chin and met everyone's stares as regally as possible.

Sure enough, as they reached the courtyard, Father came hurrying down the steps, shrugging into his finest robe. A squire hurried behind him, balancing cups on a platter.

Frowning, Grace studied him, even as Barclay swung down from the saddle and reached up to lift her as well. Father seemed...*happy?*

“My dear, my dear, thank the Good Lord ye are safe!” he effused as he hurtled to a stop before her, his arms still wide. “I have worried and prayed for weeks!”

Grace allowed him to embrace her, holding herself stiffly in surprise. When had he ever embraced her?

His hands were clamped to her shoulders, holding her at arm’s length as if he couldn’t bear not to touch her as he studied her. “Ye are well, child? Whole? Hearty?”

She caught his glance at Barclay, wearing the King’s colors and be-helmeted.

“Aye,” she managed. “Nae thanks to the men who ye sent after me, Father.”

When he began to sputter, Barclay stepped forward. “Milord, what Lady Grace means is that the men had caught her, aye, but had opted to break yer trust, and were attempting to...attack her.”

“Attack her?” Father’s eyes went wide in genuine concern. “Ye mean—are ye no’ a virgin any longer, lass?”

‘Twas a crude question, especially asked out in the middle of the courtyard with so many of his people gathered around. Grace blushed, and even Barclay’s tone was harsher when he responded.

“Milord, I was able to stop them in time. Yer daughter was fighting valiantly, but I dispatched them, and brought her back home immediately. To ye.”

Father looked unaccountably relieved. “Good, good. I had promised— This could have ruined my plans.”

Frowning in confusion, Grace sent a glance to Barclay, but of course couldn’t read his expression beneath the steel.

Apparently realizing he wasn’t making sense, Father turned from her, gesturing the squire forward. “Come, ye must

drink with me! A toast in appreciation to the brave Hunter who returned my precious daughter to me!”

He held a flagon to Barclay, who took it almost reluctantly. Father’s hand hesitated only a moment over the tray before choosing a cup for Grace, then one for himself.

He raised his flagon. “To His Majesty, and His Majesty’s Hunters! May they continue to do good for the people of Scotland and bring peace!”

Well, shite.

She *had* to drink to that, did she not?

Barclay lifted his cup in toast but didn’t sip. She realized he likely couldn’t beneath the helmet. But Father was drinking, and watching her over the lip of his cup, so Grace sighed and sipped from hers.

The mead was really quite good; much better than anything she’d had in recent weeks. ‘Twas thick and sweet and made her tongue tingle a bit, so she took a second drink, then a third.

The languid warmth stealing through her limbs was exactly what she needed to keep herself calm.

Hold yerself together. As soon as ye’re in yer chambers, ye can begin to make yer plans!

“Sir Hunter, what did ye say yer name was?” Father asked abruptly.

“I didnae.” Barclay inclined his head. “And now I must return to Scone for my next assignment.”

Father was frowning thoughtfully at his rude response, but at hearing Barclay would soon be gone—the subtle reminder about the King’s pleasure was smart—his expression cleared.

“Och, aye, anonymity must be helpful in yer line of work, eh? Send the King my regards, and I will write him my thanks immediately.” He shifted just enough to bring Grace into his line of sight, his expression once more too jovial to be believed. “I owe him—and ye, Sir Hunter—for returning my precious daughter safe and sound.”

Precious daughter?

Father had never shown her this much care. Was it possible that her disappearance had made him genuinely worried for her? Or was he more concerned with his *precious* alliance?

Grace wasn't fooled.

Her only use to her father was as a bargaining chip.

What had he almost admitted earlier?

Barclay turned to her and offered a bow—this one neither brief nor mocking. The warmth in Grace's veins made it difficult to smile, but she tried anyhow.

"Ye'll no' forget yer promise to me, will ye?" Her tongue felt heavy. "The convent?"

"Aye, milady." His voice was low, his tone almost reluctant. "Fare thee well."

Her words stuck in her throat. "A-and ye."

'Twas all she could manage. Likely because her heart felt as if 'twas beating double-time. Her chest was tight, her eyelids could barely stay open.

Blessed Virgin, saying goodbye to Barclay was breaking her!

Dinnae fash. Ye'll be with the Mother Superior soon enough, and she'll help ye reach Barclay.

There might not be a future for them, but Grace *had* to keep hope alive!

So, she said naught as Barclay swung back up onto Mayo, who dipped his head to her, as if waiting for a farewell. She wanted to pet his nose but couldn't seem to make her arm work. Instead, she sipped the sweet mead and tried not to cry.

Barclay nodded once to her father, then paused, his gaze lingering on her. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but eventually shook his head, clucked his tongue to the horse, and they both turned toward the gate.

Grace watched him go, knowing part of her heart was leaving with him.

Dear God, why was it so difficult to breathe?

She startled when Father's heavy hand landed on her shoulder.

"'Tis glad I am to hear ye fought off those bastards," he announced. "Yer virginity is key to this arrangement."

Arrangement?

Frowning, she turned to her sire, although the courtyard seemed to continue spinning long after she'd completed the motion. She opened her mouth to ask but couldn't seem to make her tongue work.

Father's smile seemed pleased, as if things were going according to some plan. "Now that I have ye back, I'll be sending word to yer bridegroom. Ye can be married within the sennight."

A sennight. She had seven days to make her escape.

Except...

All she wanted to do right now was sleep.

"I...willnae..." she managed, despite wanting to rail against his tyranny.

He tsked his tongue. "So like yer mother. Grace, ye are headstrong, aye, which I could forgive. But even now, ye're scheming how to put yer own interests before that of the clan, are ye no'?" He sighed hugely and shook his head. "I vowed to Laird MacGill he'd have ye as another wife, and he is a powerful man. He'll be a powerful ally. Yer son will be laird of both clans!"

Why couldn't she take a full breath? Why was there darkness at the corners of her vision.

"...Run," she managed.

"Nay, ye'll no'." Father patted her hand gently, leading her toward the steps. "Ye're going to yer room to sleep for a good long while. A sennight at least. 'Twas MacGill's suggestion,

and a good one. I'll keep ye drugged until yer bridegroom arrives, and ye can stay that way through the ceremony!"

Blinking, Grace dropped her gaze to the cup she still held as she stumbled along beside Father. The mead had been drugged?

Of course, 'twas, ye idiot! The rest of us picked up on the foreshadowing!

But... She lifted her gaze. "Father?" she slurred.

He grinned, proud in the knowledge of his victory as the flagon fell from her fingers.

That was the last thing she saw as the world went black and she slipped into oblivion.

CHAPTER 7



THE CONVENT of St. Dorcas the Ever-Petulant sat on an island off the coast of a loch and brought back some uncomfortable memories for Barclay. Before her death, his mother had once considered taking holy vows, before deciding to throw herself on the mercy of her laird—and former lover.

Barclay had always regretted that the nuns had allowed them to leave in the dead of winter.

Later, he'd spent an instructive sennight in a nunnery in the company of an absolutely delightful double-jointed usury expert, while he collected evidence against her and her tax-evasion scheme.

But *this* convent was...different.

For one thing, the position of Mother Superior used to be passed among the nuns, until one wrested control from the others. At least, that's what the cheerful nun was explaining as she led him toward her solar at one end of the convent.

"To tell ye the truth, I doubt they minded," she was saying over her shoulder. "'Tis a pain in all of our arses, all this paperwork, and they decided I was likely the best one for the position, anyhow."

Barclay nodded numbly, a bit dazed by the nun's firm greeting. She had a handshake any man would envy, and had almost knocked him unconscious when she'd pulled him in for a hug. Even now, he was doing his best to avert his gaze from her chest. The woman had tits you could serve dinner from!

“We’re no’ formal around here,” she announced as she ushered him inside. “Ye can call me Sister Mary Titania. Back in the world, my name was Titania of Clan McGee, but dinnae think ye’re clever calling me Tits McGee, I’ve heard it afore.”

Barclay, his gaze firmly locked on the high window behind her desk, made a noise he hoped sounded like respectful agreement.

Of course, he still wore his helm, so there was no way she’d be able to follow his gaze, but ‘twas the *principal* of the thing. She didn’t deserve his ogling. No matter the size of her —

“So, ye said Grace sent ye?” The nun settled behind her desk. “Please, sit down. We’ve been worried sick over her, since she disappeared from here last week.”

Well, he supposed he could set her mind at ease about that, at least.

Blowing out a breath, Barclay sat, taking a moment to arrange his sword out of the way of the stool, and gathering his thoughts.

Three days ago, he’d ridden away from Grace, hardening his heart against the hurt and betrayal in her eyes. She’d asked this of him, and he knew this, at least, was something he could do for her.

St. Pancras’s uvula! Would that he could save her from it *all*.

The only thing which had kept him sane during the last three days as he left her behind, was the knowledge her father wouldn’t actually *hurt* her. She wouldn’t be the first woman married to a man her father had chosen, and he had to trust the man wanted what was best for her.

Grace swore to escape.

Aye, and if the King sent him after her again, he’d decline the mission. She might appear delicate and innocent, but he knew exactly how strong and capable she was. If she said she was going to escape and make her way here to this convent, he had to believe her.

“Sir Hunter?” prompted Sister Mary Titania.

He swallowed. “Aye, my apologies,” he managed, then took another deep breath. “Lady Grace’s father sent men out looking for her. As I understand it, a group of them saw her in the village when she went to market. She decided to run instead of leading them back here.”

The nun was nodding. “She’s a sweet lass, but has a temper.”

Aye, she does. Barclay felt his lips curling beneath the helmet.

“She gave them a good run, but they caught up with her eventually. The men...” He hesitated, uncertain how to spare the sensibilities of the nun.

But Sister Mary Titania folded her hands on the desk before her. “I may wear a habit now, Sir Hunter, but I came to holy vows late in life.” Her expression was solemn. “I am no stranger to what passes between a man and a woman, nor—unfortunately—what men can do when a woman is unwilling.”

Grateful, Barclay nodded once, firmly. “Aye, well, she was doing a grand job of defending herself. When she ran, I swooped down and ensured the men wouldnae follow her again. Then I went and pulled her from the bog she’d managed to fall into.”

The nun’s plump face pulled into a smile, which seemed far more natural to her than the grimness of earlier. “I’ll wager she hated that!”

“We had...some words.”

She chuckled. “And I’m supposing that’s putting it mildly. After ye rescued her, ye dinnae bring her back here, as she would’ve demanded. I have to wonder why no’?”

The attack had come so swiftly, so nonchalantly, Barclay winced. The nun was smiling like an innocent, jolly dictator who’d just cornered an opponent’s queen.

“Mother, ye must understand...” Nay, that was the wrong approach. Barclay straightened on the stool. “I was sent by the

King to track down Grace MacDonald. Her father petitioned His Majesty for help, and my mission—my duty to the crown—entailed returning her to her father.”

“For marriage.”

The woman’s tone was bland, but Barclay wasn’t going to fall into another trap. He said naught.

After a long moment—the nun trying to stare him into submission, and Barclay holding onto the certain knowledge she couldn’t actually see his expression behind the helmet—she broke eye contact.

When she sighed and rolled her shoulders, Barclay did his best to ignore the way the movement sent her tits jiggling. St. Pancras protect him, the things were the size of his head!

She’s a nun. Ye shouldnae be looking.

There was a point in his life when he *would’ve* looked... but Grace MacDonald had ruined him. Barclay knew, for the rest of his life, he’d be comparing every woman—every smile, every laugh, every curve—to her.

The woman he’d loved. And lost.

“Would ye like some food, Sir Hunter? Drink?” Before he could politely decline, Sister Mary Titania planted an elbow on the desk. “How do ye eat and drink in that helmet, anyhow?”

“I dinnae wear it at all times. When I’m on a mission, ‘tis handy to wear when I’m around others. It keeps my identity a secret.”

“And the intimidation aspect is handy too, eh?” The nun winked. “Are ye trying to intimidate me, Sir Hunter?”

He smiled beneath the helm. “Is it working?”

“No’ even a little.” She propped her chin on her hand. “So ye dinnae have to wear it all the time? When ye go home to yer family, ye take it off. I cannae imagine ye trying to kiss yer wife wearing it.”

“I’m...” He shifted on the stool. “I am no’ married. Few Hunters are.”

‘Twas a dangerous job, and there were enough widows in the world already.

“But ye’d take it off afore ye kissed the woman ye love?”

She was staring at him with an intense expression, for certes. Barclay resisted the urge to squirm.

“Apparently,” he murmured.

Her palm hit the desk hard enough to cause him to jump. “So ye love her?”

Barclay blinked.

“Grace MacDonald. Ye love her, Sir Hunter?”

Holy St. Pancras’s right ballock, *how* had she guessed? Barclay just stared at her.

Sister Mary Titania’s gaze softened. “Ye were with her for some time. She’s a remarkable lass, is she no’?”

“Aye,” he managed to choke out. “But she’s a laird’s daughter. Destined to marry another laird.”

“Ah.”

He shouldn’t speak of this. ‘Twas against the code, to speak of a mission to an outsider, especially this beaming nun. But Barclay couldn’t seem to halt the words spilling out.

“Aye, I love her. I think I fell in love with her that first moment she kneed that bastard in the—” He caught the word in time. “In the breadbasket.”

“Oh dear. I can understand defending herself, but the man *also* had to lose his lunch?”

Barclay hesitated. “What?”

“I assumed that’s what he was carrying in his breadbasket?”

“Nay, I mean—” How to explain? “She kneed him in the most uncomfortable place.”

“Och, aye, ye should have said so. For me, the most uncomfortable place is the little nook behind the chimney in the kitchen. Supposedly it’s to keep food warm, but all I ken is

that it's verra difficult to get in there. And once ye're in there, it's damned impossible to clean."

There was a twinkle in her eyes which made Barclay think she was poking fun at him.

Still, he cleared his throat. "The point is, I looked at Grace, and thought she looked so sweet and delicate and ladylike." She'd been the epitome of everything he'd ever thought of as *gentility*. "But she continued to surprise me. She has a strength that rivals the bravest warrior's, and bravery?" He snorted. "She's remarkable."

Sister Mary Titania was watching him thoughtfully. "She is, for certes."

"I love her. I love her, and I cannae be with her." He shook his head in disgust at his own pitifulness. "Ye ken why I'm here? Because she made me vow to tell ye what happened. I had to come here and tattle on myself, like an errant lad, that I deposited the woman I love back in the arms of another man."

"Did ye?" the nun murmured.

"Her father has plans to marry her to another laird. Grace says he's horrible, but *surely* that's just nerves, aye? Her father wouldnae..."

He lifted his hand from the hilt of his sword to run through his hair...and forgot he was wearing the bloody helmet. His fingers cracked against the steel and he cursed himself.

"Ye care for her wellbeing?" the nun asked quietly. Intently.

"Aye, of course." He dropped his elbows to his knees and leaned forward. "Of course," he repeated more quietly. "And 'tis better for her to live her life as the cherished wife of a laird than with a man like me."

"Ye think ye cannae give her the life she deserves? Even kening of her bravery and strength?"

He hung his head. "Aye," he whispered. "What do I have to offer her but the intrigues of Court, and sitting in a rented

room while she waits my return from a mission? ‘Tis nae place for a lady.”

“Ye can offer her safety. Security. Love.”

“But no’ comfort.”

When the nun’s palm slammed against the desk again, he jumped in surprise and lifted his gaze.

“Good Lord, man, ye’re maudlin. Being married to ye would be far better than married to the man her father chose!”

“*How?*” he demanded.

Sister Mary Titania’s eyes widened. “Did she truly no’ tell ye about him?”

“She told me he was a monster who’d murdered his first wives. But surely all women fear the marriage bed?”

“The marriage bed?” she snorted. “A knife across the throat, and a fall down the stairs from the tower? His wives dinnae die in the marriage bed. They died because they couldnae give him sons. And now he’s about to take another young wife.”

The nun glared at him, her expression simultaneously fierce and pitying.

But Barclay barely noticed. Behind the helm, his eyes opened wide as her words triggered memories.

Memories of her words, aye, but more than that. Memories of his mother’s stories. Of Highland rumors...

“Dear God,” he whispered.

“Aye!” She jumped to her feet and hustled around the desk. “Come along,” she announced as she grabbed his shoulders. “There’s still time.”

“What?” Barclay was confused, aye, but also lost in the past. Was it possible Grace was marrying the same bastard who’d ruined his life?

Now the nun was trying to lift him to his feet. “Ye can stop the wedding if ye leave now. Grace *thinks* she’s strong enough

to escape her father, but she'll need yer help. Ye *must* get back there and—" She froze. "Unless Laird MacGill was already at the MacDonald holding? Say 'tisnae so? If he was there, then it's too late; they're already married and likely consummated, puir Grace."

Barclay had frozen, half off the stool.

MacGill.

She *was* marrying a monster. "MacGill?" he rasped. "She's marrying Laird MacGill?"

"Aye, aye!" Sister Mary Titania was nudging him toward the door. "I'll fetch ye a sack of food for yer journey so ye dinnae have to stop. Ye *must* save her from this marriage, even if it means marrying her yerself!"

Grace—*his* Grace—was marrying Laird MacGill.

His boots felt heavier than normal as he tripped down the corridors, the nun chattering at his side. But he heard none of it.

His pulse was pounding in his ears, and he kept hearing Grace telling him about her betrothed. He hadn't believed it at the time, but now her words made so much more sense.

He'd only known one man to be so heartless, so brutal. To take pleasure in another's pain. To beat a broken woman to death in the snow. To abandon his bastard son because the mother had been a whore.

Laird MacGill.

His father.

When he stumbled into the sunlight and saw Horse waiting for him, 'twas as if a spark had been laid to kindling. Suddenly, Barclay *knew* what he had to do.

There was no way he could allow Grace to marry a man like Laird MacGill. His father was a horrible monster, the last man on earth who deserved a treasure like her.

Barclay whirled on the Mother Superior and snatched the sack of food one of the other nuns had handed her. "I must

ride.”

“Aye, ye must!” When she made little shooing motions, it set her whole habit to jiggling...but she was smiling. “Save her, Sir Hunter, and when ye have married her, send word to me, so I can switch my prayers to someone more deserving.”

He swung into the saddle and grinned down at the short nun. “There’s no woman more deserving of yer prayers.”

“God works in mysterious ways, Sir Hunter. He sent ye to her, did He no’? Now, get out of here.”

With her blessing ringing in his ears, Barclay whirled his horse about and headed for the ferry.

It had been three days since he’d left her at the MacDonald holding. As far as he knew, his father hadn’t been present, which means Laird MacDonald would have to send for him. Barclay figured—*hoped*—he still had a few days to reach her in time.

He *had* to.

He had to stop this wedding.

He had to save her from certain hell.

CHAPTER 8



THE BLACKNESS WAS NEVER-ENDING. Grace felt it clawing at her throat, her stomach. She *knew* she was dead, and this was her punishment.

Surely, she hadn't been so wicked in her life. Surely, she hadn't earned eternal damnation for defying her father and wanting to be happy—had she?

If she had, Eternity had a lot to answer for, that was for certes!

But...

After days—weeks? Years?—in suffocating darkness, there were sounds. Then sensations. Then, very occasionally, bursts of light.

Words.

Grace MacDonald, do ye...

To have and to hold.

Honor and obey.

Someone else said the words, but she was there. Her hand...someone was holding her hand and answered for her. Father?

A voice—so dry it sounded as if it might crumble to dust—declared her wed.

Married? She was married?

Barclay.

Nay, nay, not Barclay. Barclay had left her. The darkness had claimed her after he'd left. He was gone.

She was married?

Her head hurt from trying to understand what was happening. Or perhaps that was the wine.

Wine? Nay, poison. She'd been poisoned, hadn't she?

The darkness enveloped her once more and she sank gratefully into oblivion.

The next thing she was aware of was gentle hands and a soft voice. It reminded her of her nurse who'd become her lady's maid. Grace felt her head being lifted, heard someone coaxing her to drink.

The liquid was cool and soothing, not at all like the wine her father had tricked her into drinking, and Grace eagerly drank it all. The gentle hands laid her head back on the pillow, and the darkness...

Somehow, the darkness became a little less black.

Grace could hear movement and murmured voices. A few words.

Wake soon.

Married.

Milady.

Fetch the bridegroom.

Laird MacGill.

Grace struggled to understand, to lift herself from the darkness...and to her surprise, it was less difficult than it had been.

She became aware of the feeling of soft linen against her palms and she knew she was lying in bed, trying to sit. Instead, she curled her fingers around the bedclothes, concentrating on her breathing.

Aye.

Aye, she could do this. She would beat the darkness.

Gradually, the sounds ceased as she heard the people leaving the room. She *wanted* to call out to them, to beg them to return.

But since she couldn't, Grace knew she had to pull herself awake on her own.

When she was able to open her eyes, the darkness faded to a sort of gray and she thought she recognized her old room. Her eyelids were less heavy now, and she forced them open for longer.

Then...footsteps. Heavy footsteps.

The door slammed open, and she heard a man stomping across the room. Her heart began to beat harder.

Barclay?

“Wake up, ye stupid bitch.”

If she'd needed proof 'twas not Barclay, the sharp pain from the blow to her cheek would have confirmed it. Grace sucked in a startled breath.

He'd *hit* her?

The pain gave her something to focus on. Rather than whimpering and falling back into the black obscurity, she struggled upward again, angry beyond words.

“*Wife!* Ye *will* be awake!” His second blow—to her other cheek—slammed her head back into the pillow. “I will no' fook a drugged woman! Wake up, so I can claim ye!”

The sharp bite of the anger pushed her eyes open and she glared at the vague silhouette above the bed.

That's when the water hit her square in the face.

Sputtering, she struggled to breathe past the water—he'd *tossed water* at her?—and the fierce ire burning in her gut.

“How—*dare*—” she sputtered.

As she blinked water from her eyes, she could clearly see the man standing at her bedside.

MacGill.

He was more than twice her age, but as evidenced by his actions, he'd lost none of his strength. When she'd first met him, she'd thought him handsome, with his dark hair shot through with silver, and his even teeth. Aye, Grace could imagine him turning many a lass's head...

Until she looked at his eyes.

His eyes, a gray-green which reminded her of Barclay's, were as cold as ice. His cruelty was reflected in that gaze and had always made her shiver with dread.

Handsome, aye, but terrifying as well.

"Good. Ye're finally awake." MacGill reached for his belt, and when he unclasped it, his tunic sagged open. "When we return to my keep, I'll no' allow ye to laze the day away as ye've been doing."

Laze? She'd been *drugged*. By her own father!

Grace struggled upright, her cheek throbbing and her horrified gaze focused on the fact MacGill was undressing.

"What are—"

"I told ye," he snapped, kicking off his boots. "We're married. Now I'm consummating the marriage. Nae need to unclothe, wife. I'll just throw up yer skirts."

Grace glanced down. She was wearing one of her nicest gowns, a blue silk she'd always thought made her look lovely. Today she felt dirty.

MacGill planned to—to *fook* her. Here and now? With no loving words, no gentle touches? They hadn't even *kissed*.

Why are ye surprised? He told ye he cared naught for yer pleasure, only his. He told ye he planned to fook ye until ye gave him a son, and continue after, nae matter yer feelings.

Naught at all like Barclay.

Barclay had held her on his lap, had cradled her against him, had shown her the most incredible pleasure...using only his fingers and his tongue.

He'd given her pleasure without taking any of his own.

He'd shown her the world, exactly the way she'd asked him, even if it conflicted with his mission.

He'd put her before his mission, if only for a few moments. To show her pleasure.

Grace's eyes filled with tears. He was a good man. The best of men.

How could she not love him?

She loved Barclay.

Blinking, she glared up at MacGill. "I dinnae want to be married to ye."

His laughter was as cruel as his eyes. "Ye think that matters to me? Lie back down, so I can claim that cunny. If ye fight me, I'll enjoy it even more."

Her mind, so recently bogged down by the drugs, tried to find a way to stop him. Barclay would stop this horror if he were here.

Barclay wasn't here. But she would escape. She would escape this nightmare and go to him!

"I'm no' a virgin!" she blurted, even as she cringed away from the man looming above her.

He paused. "What?" MacGill hissed. "Yer father swore..."

"I ran away weeks ago. I've been living away from my father, have I no'?" She struggled toward the opposite side of the bed, trying to swing her legs away from him. "I met a man—a kind, wonderful, honorable man who would *never* hurt me!"

That part at least was true.

She hadn't lain with Barclay the way a husband and wife might, but the lie of not being a virgin...it had given MacGill pause. Grace was able to plant her feet on the floor, to push herself upright.

After all this time lying in bed, her knees threatened to give out. She was weak and woozy, but angry as hell. She *would* run from MacGill. Right to Barclay.

The laird's brows had lowered. "Ye...*slut*. Ye gave yerself to this man? Ye thought 'twould keep me from wanting ye?"

Trembling, Grace couldn't answer.

MacGill leaned across the bed. "I want ye still. Och, aye, even more now that I ken ye've spread yer legs for every bastard from here to Inverness. But I'll no' *marry* a whore like ye!"

As he straightened, Grace blinked. "Is it no' too late for that, milord?"

"Ye think to placate me with sweet words now, whore?"

He thought those words *sweet*?

MacGill whirled toward the door. "Yer father will ken of yer shame!"

As he stomped away, pausing only to wrench his sword belt from the post on the wall, Grace stumbled around the bed after him.

"What are ye doing?"

Without turning, he snarled, "Climb back into that bed, slut. The priest will annul our marriage! And I will be back to fook ye into submission soon enough."

Her stomach churned, bile rising now that she was upright. But Grace forced her legs to move, to follow him into the landing. He began to trot down the spiral staircase which led from her tower room to the main area of Father's castle.

"But...annulment?" she managed.

"Aye!" MacGill whirled, glaring up at her. "I'll still have ye, Grace MacDonald MacGill. But no' in marriage! Ye've been tainted—ye're likely now even carrying a bastard whelp, aye? Well, I'll no' fook ye under the blessing of the church, because 'twould be consummation."

Her eyes had widened as she'd understood. "Ye think if ye petition for an annulment before consummation—"

"Dinnae look so hopeful, slut. I'll still fook ye bloody, but ye'll no' have my name in protection. And yer father will pay

for this subterfuge.” The fury in his expression was chilling. “’Twas likely why he kept ye drugged for the last week, and all through the ceremony. So ye wouldnae tell me the truth of yer whorish ways!”

With that, he wrenched the scabbard from the sword in one violent move.

Breathless, Grace leaned against the stone wall of the staircase, one hand unconsciously rising to rest against her bruised cheek. “What are...?”

“I’m going to kill yer father for his lies.”

Father...dead? Nay! “Ye cannae—”

“I can, and I will!”

MacGill whirled and stomped down the stairs, leaving Grace staring numbly after him.

Her father had drugged her and locked her in her room. Her father had married her to a man against her will. But she didn’t want him *dead*.

There’d always been a part of her which had prayed he would come to accept her dreams. She wanted a return to the years when Father had lifted her, laughing, to his shoulders. Before he’d come to see her as merely a bargaining piece.

“Ye cannae...” She whispered, even as she stumbled down the steps after the armed madman. “Please...”

Father didn’t deserve to die for her lies.

Fantastic. Now ye no’ only have to find a way to escape MacGill and run to Barclay, ye also have to find a way to thwart MacGill’s plans for yer father!

But she’d do it. She *had* to.

From below came the sound of raised voices, then the clash of steel upon steel. She forced her exhausted legs to move faster.

When she reached the bottom of the spiral staircase, she was practically running, and burst into the great hall and spun a full circle, unable to stop herself.

She fell against a trunk and grabbed for the oak gratefully, forcing the room to stop spinning before turning toward the two men fighting among the tables and benches. She *had* to find a way to save her father!

But ‘twas not her father MacGill fought.

Grace blinked, certain her mind had conjured him. Mayhap she was going mad. He shouldn’t be here...

But the sun glinting in through the high windows caught the steel of the Hunter’s helm, and she knew the truth.

Barclay had come for her.

BARCLAY HAD SPENT enough time at Court to have heard his share of war stories. There was one thing everyone agreed upon: if besieging a castle, the attacking army should be well-provisioned and in good spirits.

Also, you know, the whole *army* thing.

No one ever told stories about glorious sieges resulting in one man rushing at a castle, brandishing a sword. That man was likely to be swatted away like an annoying gnat, likely by a man with a bow on the castle walls.

He was *not* likely to make it through the open portcullis, tear through the lingering revelers from the wedding banquet, and up into the great hall completely unchecked.

But that’s exactly what happened to Barclay, who reached the center of the hall and hopped up onto a still-laid table, looking for his enemy.

His *father*.

“MacGill!” he roared, the sound echoing in his helmet. “Where are ye?”

St. Pancras protect him! If the wedding had taken place—and the banquet around him seemed a celebratory one—then he was too late!

A portly figure in a fine fur cloak was hurrying toward him, and it took a moment to recognize Grace's father.

"Sir Hunter! What is the meaning of this?"

"This?" Feeling light-headed from the days in the saddle—poor Horse had likely collapsed out in the courtyard or found himself a nice trough to dig into—Barclay kicked a goblet of wine, so it went flying. "Where is the whoreson ye're trying to marry yer daughter to?"

"Trying?" MacDonald pulled himself up with dignity. "They were married this morning. In her chambers, since the sleeping draught was slow to wear off."

"*Ye poisoned her?*" Barclay roared, because it was easier than lingering on the knowledge Grace was already married. He jumped from the table and landed with his blade against MacDonald's neck. "*Ye poisoned* Grace in order to make her biddable to this marriage?"

The laird sputtered but didn't move. "'Twas the only way to keep her from running off. *Ye* should ken that—ye were the one who had to bring her back last time! She is headstrong, otherwise."

He'd drugged Grace.

Everything he'd said about trusting her father not to do anything which would harm her...Barclay shook his head, disgusted. How could anyone treat their child so?

"Ye deserve to rot in hell for this!"

To his surprise, her father actually defended himself. "She's my child, and her future is in my hands! With this marriage to MacGill, her son will rule both clans someday. Why would she fight me on that?"

Barclay yanked the man close, his blade still steady across MacDonald's shoulder.

"*Because* MacGill is a sadistic son of a bitch who abuses his people and his power. He'll hurt Grace until she's dead, and then he'll find another wife."

For the first time, something like fear entered the older man's expression. "Hurt...her?"

"Aye," Barclay growled, shaking the man's collar. "Ask me how I ken."

"How—"

"Because he did the same to my mother!"

With that, he tossed MacDonald away and turned toward the stairs. "Is her chamber this way?"

The laird *should* have scrambled to safety. Instead, he hustled after Barclay. "Aye, and MacGill is up there with her, consummating the wedding vows as we speak."

The thought made Barclay sick, but he told himself it mattered naught. Grace would still be Grace, and his love wasn't so weak 'twould turn away from her. Besides, she'd be a widow soon enough.

If even the tiniest hair on her head had been hurt, Barclay couldn't allow his father to live.

"Sir Hunter!" MacDonald was saying, "is MacGill really so cruel?"

Barclay whirled on him, his naked sword causing the laird to lean away. "Grace tried to tell ye—tell us *both*. Aye, MacGill is an evil man, and will take pleasure in hurting yer daughter again and again. She might give him a son—give ye a grandson...but she'll no' live to see the lad grow!"

The shock and horror on the man's face might have redeemed him, but Barclay cared not. He turned back to the staircase, just in time for a man—his sword already bared—to hurtle into the main hall.

"There ye are!" the figure cried, and Barclay wasn't sure if he spoke to MacDonald or himself.

But then MacGill raised his sword, lowered his head, and barreled across the room. "Prepare to meet yer death!" the man screamed.

Barclay exchanged a shocked glance with MacDonald, who was already backing away nervously, then stepped in front of the charging man with his own blade raised.

If MacGill wanted a fight, he'd found one.

When they slammed together, sparks flew from their blades.

CHAPTER 9



“GRACE!”

At her father’s cry, Grace pulled her attention away from the combatants to see the older man flying toward her, his arms open.

She glanced behind her, wondering if perhaps Father’s favorite hound was behind her, or even a mutton leg. But nay, *she* was the one he seemed so intent on embracing.

Why?

“Grace, ye are safe? Unhurt?” he asked as he enveloped her in his arms.

It felt...strange. The way he used to hug her when she was a little girl. “Aye,” she attempted to say, although the word was first stuck in her throat, then muffled against his fur cloak.

He pulled away, his hands on her shoulders, as he examined her. “Yer cheek...” There seemed to be genuine concern in his eyes. “What did ye do to yerself, Grace?”

Ah. *That* felt more normal. She bristled, rolling a shoulder to throw off one of his hands. “What *I* did to myself? Ye honestly think I slapped myself this hard?”

Father’s eyes widened, and his free hand rose, his fingertips brushing against her cheekbone. “I—nay, of course no’. He...MacGill hurt ye?”

There was something like remorse in his expression, and while Grace would have once welcomed her father’s change of

heart, today it just frustrated her. She was woozy, she was angry, and aye, she hurt.

And the man she loved was currently fighting for his life.

So mayhap she was a bit impatient when she brushed off her father's touch. "Aye, he hurt me. Just as I've been telling ye all along. I didnae object to this marriage because I was a selfish, spoiled brat, Father, but because Laird MacGill took great pleasure in telling me of my future with him."

"I'm sorry, lass." Father's eyes were teary as he pulled her to him. "So sorry. I should've listened."

"Aye, ye should've," she harumphed. But there wasn't much heat to it, considering she was being hugged by the man she'd been praying would see things her way.

Behind Father, there was a particularly loud clash of steel, and MacGill screamed, "I'll kill ye for what ye did to my wife!"

Grace squirmed free of her father in time to see Barclay shake his head, even as he blocked a series of frantic blows from MacGill. "Yer *wife*? She's no' yer wife yet, ye monster."

"The vows...have been said..." The older laird wasn't tiring exactly, but he *was* moving a bit slower. "Naught ye can do..."

"Said by *her*?" Barclay danced out of the way of the other man's blade, his movements almost mocking. "Or did ye and her father conspire against her? Did she say the words?"

Unable to contain herself, Grace screamed, "I didnae!"

Barclay shot a glance her way, and despite the helmet, she swore she could feel his smile.

"Grace, come away," Father murmured, reaching for her shoulders once more.

"Nay," she declared, pulling away from him. "Ye're as much to fault for my state as he is."

Her father moaned. "I ken it, and I am sorry. I will spend a lifetime apologizing, if that's what it will take. Grace, I had

nae idea he was as bad as ye said. I thought ye were making up lies in order to keep from marrying a man ye didnae care for.”

Her gaze was glued to the two men now circling one another before the great hearth. “Aye, I didnae care for him, Father. But my words were true.”

Father had seen evidence of MacGill’s rages, now. MacGill had threatened *Father*. Surely the man understood.

“Aye, lass,” he admitted in a soft voice. “I see that now, and I am sorry for my part in this horror. Please forgive an auld man?”

Without pulling her gaze away from Barclay, Grace absentmindedly reached out and patted Father’s shoulder. “I forgive ye. Now go stand somewhere safe, eh?”

Instead, her father snorted and moved to stand beside her. “That’s what I was trying to get ye to do. So instead, the two of us will just stand here in the middle of it all like ninnies.”

Barclay had hopped up onto the main table, where Grace could imagine the wedding feast had been laid—*her* wedding feast, despite the fact she’d been unconscious during it—and danced between the platters while MacGill’s desperate slashes spilled leftover delicacies to the rushes on the floor.

“Father?” she murmured, eyes intently following Barclay.

“Aye, daughter?”

“Shut up.”

He made a choked sound, but Grace ignored him, because at that moment, MacGill swung his sword sideways, prompting Barclay to jump out of the way. Nimbly, he hopped to the bench, placed a booted foot on his combatant’s hip, and pushed MacGill backward.

The older man stumbled back, his sword flailing, as he screamed, “Ye bastard!”

To her surprise, Barclay began to laugh. ‘Twas not *nice* laughter, and there was quite a bit of mocking in it.

“Aye, bastard indeed!” he declared, reaching for his helmet.

When he wrenched it off, his green eyes were cold, his jaw set.

Staring at his face, MacGill inhaled sharply.

Barclay jumped down, landing lightly, and began to stalk forward. His blade pointed at the floor, but his shoulders were held tightly, and only a fool would think him unprepared.

“Do ye recognize me, devil? Aye, ‘tis how I’ve thought of ye for years, as the devil. *Bastard* or *Arsehole*—those names are too kind.”

MacGill was scrambling away from Barclay’s steady march. “Who—who are ye? I swear to the heavens, I’ve never seen ye afore, but ye look as I did decades ago.”

“Aye, I do,” Barclay laughed. “My mother told me I was yer verra copy in appearance. I like to think I turned out a better human, though,” he added, slashing his sword once through the air in what seemed an impatient gesture.

“We are related?” MacGill hazarded.

Grace’s gaze was flying between the two men. They didn’t look so similar, other than the dark hair and gray-green eyes—although she’d always thought Barclay’s were warmer, full of laughter. But MacGill had said Barclay looked like him as a younger man?

MacGill was handsome, aye, but could *never* have been as handsome as her Barclay!

Barclay was grinning, aye, but the same way a shark might grin. No one could suppose this show of teeth was anything other than a threat.

“I am hurt, Father, that ye still cannae see the truth.”

“Father?” MacGill repeated in a choked voice, still backing toward where Grace stood. “A...son?”

Barclay was MacGill’s son?

Grace sucked in a gasp. Suddenly, the few stories he'd told her about his childhood made sense. "His son," she repeated softly.

Mayhap not *too* softly, because MacGill's gaze landed on her. "I need a son." His tone was near frantic, as if he couldn't process what was happening. "I married for one. Although I dinnae want to be married to a whore."

When Barclay roared, Grace stepped forward instinctively.

"He didnae touch—" she began, only to bite off her defense with a yelp when MacGill grabbed her, first by her hair, then by her shoulder.

Before she could react, he'd pulled her against him and held his blade across her body, making his intentions clear. Barclay froze, his own sword half-raised, his expression dark.

Grace met his eyes and tried to project calmness. "I'm unhurt," she murmured.

"For now," MacGill snarled. "Tell yer lover to cease his attack!"

"Ye were the one who attacked him," she pointed out primly. "And how do ye ken he's my lover? Mayhap 'twas another finely made young man who swept me off my feet on my journey back to my father's home?"

As MacGill growled, Barclay shook his head, something like exasperation—and affection—creeping into his expression.

"Grace, dinnae antagonize the bastard."

Inexplicably, Grace felt herself grinning. "Besides," she said, holding Barclay's gaze, but speaking to MacGill, "he's *yer* son. *Ye* talk to him."

"He's no' my son," MacGill rasped from behind her.

"He certainly looks like yer son."

"If I had a son, I'd no' need to put up with whining, needy wives like ye!"

Whining? Needy? The pair women were likely just crying over the way he hurt them, and he killed them for it?

Grace's stomach churned with disgust, but she didn't allow herself to shudder. Barclay had come back for her, and that alone meant she was walking on air. She was invincible.

Usually, that was the sort of thing a character in a story would say or think right before the bad guy swooped in and did something truly horrible...but Grace just smiled. She knew this was just moments away from her happy ending.

"I'm devastated, *Father*, that ye refuse to claim me." Barclay's eyes glittered, his tone bland. "Or at least, I would be, had I no' years to think ye the verra devil for the way ye hurt my mother."

"Yer mother..." MacGill shook his head. "Who was yer mother?"

"Nae one important." Barclay began to stalk forward once more. "The daughter of one of yer crofters. Ye took her against her will, got her with child, then refused to help her. Her father tossed her out, and she did what was needed to survive."

MacGill stepped backward, taking Grace with him. "So, she was a whore," he spat. "Just say the truth."

"She was one of yer people!" Barclay barked. "One of yer clan! The people ye're supposed to care for!"

Attempting to be helpful, Grace spoke up. "She went to ye for help, Laird MacGill. Remember?"

"Ye beat her to death." Barclay's voice had gone quiet, his sword held before him in both hands. "She went to ye to beg for help, and ye beat her to death."

MacGill's sword rose until the tip pressed against Grace's neck. "I dinnae remember her."

Barclay stopped, his eyes hard. "I'm no' certain if that makes it better or worse."

"I've beaten many women in my life," MacGill pointed out.

“Worse,” Grace opined.

“Definitely worse.” Barclay’s blade rose. “Stop hiding behind another innocent lass, *Father*, and face me as a man.”

“Why should I? I could slit her throat now, rid myself of another wife, and cause ye even more pain afore I run ye through.”

Barclay’s hard gaze switched to her. “Grace? Ye remember those ruffians who held ye?”

Her throat had gone dry, and she was no longer quite as certain about her future. “Aye?” she croaked.

“It works backwards, as well.”

It works backwards?

He’s talking about when ye kneed that man in the crotch.

Oh. Well.

Barclay has far too much confidence in yer athletic ability if he thinks ye can kick up with yer heel—in this gown—and hit a man’s ballocks when he’s so much taller than ye.

Aye, well, there was something else she could try...

Holding Barclay’s gaze, and knowing he would let naught happen to her, Grace reached up and wrapped her hands around MacGill’s where they gripped the sword hilt. She wrenched them away from her torso, while at the same time, she slammed the heel of her foot against the toe of his boot.

It should’ve caused pain to shoot up her leg. Damnation, it *did* cause pain to shoot up her leg. But it also caused him to curse and jerk away from her. Grace used that distraction to slip from his arms and scurry to the side, at the same moment that Barclay raised his blade and attacked.

MacGill barely had time to get his own sword into the blocking position before Barclay slammed into him. The grunts and huffs of the two men were agonizing to hear. Grace scrambled to her feet and was surprised to feel her father’s hands on her shoulders.

Not holding her back, but holding her close.

The fight was furious, MacGill sneering and hurling insults—mainly about Grace and Barclay’s mother—while Barclay himself was deadly and silent.

It couldn’t last much longer. MacGill was faltering, and for certes, each block was slower and slower.

The older man swung his blade wide, and Barclay darted in for the opening, slashing MacGill across the chest. The laird screamed and grabbed for his wound, his sword dragging along the ground.

Barclay paused, sweat beading his forehead and his breathing steady.

“As a King’s Hunter, ‘tis my duty to pass judgement on those who break His Majesty’s trust. On a mission, I am the arm of the law, and I am entrusted to enact punishment.”

“Ye *cut* me!” MacGill screeched.

“Aye, and I’ll do more than that, if ye dinnae surrender. Laird John MacGill, I accuse ye no’ only of the mistreatment of yer people, those whom ye’re supposed to protect, but also the murder of yer wives, and the attempted murder of Lady Grace MacDonald.”

Grace shifted in her father’s arms. “And yer mother,” she called softly.

Barclay still glared at his father. “And the murder of my mother,” he repeated. “Surrender, so I may take ye to Scone.”

For a moment, it seemed as if MacGill would do the intelligent thing. But something in his expression changed a heartbeat before he swung his sword around and screamed, “*Never!*”

Barclay ignored the attack and thrust his blade through MacGill’s chest.

In the sudden silence, MacGill stared down at the sword extending from his body, uncomprehending, and Barclay released his hold on the hilt, stepping back. The laird stumbled, falling backward into a chair beside the hearth.

“Ye’ve...killed me,” he rasped.

Before Barclay could respond—if he was going to—Grace wrenched away from her father.

“Barclay!” she called, throwing herself into his arms. “Ye came!”

He wrapped himself around her. “Of course I did.” He pressed his lips to her temple. “I am so sorry. So sorry for leaving ye here with him!”

She squeezed him tightly, desperate to remind herself that he was safe, and so was she. “Ye came back, ‘tis what matters.”

“I doubted ye, and I’ll never forgive myself for that. ‘Twas no’ until the Mother Superior told me yer bridegroom’s name that I kenned ye’d no’ exaggerated.”

“I forgive ye,” she murmured, even as she pushed herself up on her toes to reach his mouth.

As their lips touched, a cackling sound came from behind, causing them both to swing about.

“I *kenned* he was the bastard who’d had ye!” MacGill rasped, thrusting himself from the chair to stumble toward the mantle, gesturing broadly. “I was right!”

“Aye...” Grace cocked her head as she studied the man, who had a sword extending from his chest. “Ye were right. I love Barclay, and I would happily give myself to him again and again.”

“Cheated out of the chance to deflower my wife!” MacGill groaned dramatically, sinking down to a bench.

“Deflower?” Grace repeated doubtfully, raising a brow. “What does that mean?”

“A metaphor!” the older man moaned, holding the sword which stuck out from his chest. “Plucking a rose so no one else may sniff it.”

Grace frowned. “Ye want to *smell* me?”

“Should ye no’ be dead?” Barclay pointed out.

“I’m getting there.” MacGill toppled to lie along the bench. “Just bemoaning the unfairness of life.

“Unfairness?” Barclay snorted. “Ye had power, riches, beauty.”

“I just like to compla—*urk*.”

With that, MacGill jerked once, his eyes closing.

Grace blew out a breath.

“Well, that’s over. What a truly dislikable human.”

Barclay’s fingertips rested atop her cheek. “He hurt ye.” It wasn’t a question, and his eyes blazed with something fierce. “I wasnae in time to stop him from hurting ye.”

“Yer timing was perfect.” She captured his hand and brought it to her lips. “And I love ye for it.”

I love ye.

Slowly, his lips curled into a grin. A *dazzling* grin, one of pure joy. “Ye mean it, Grace?” he whispered. “Truly? I never thought ye would feel the same for me that I feel for ye—”

“*Love?*” shrieked a voice behind them. “What’s love got to do with it?”

Sighing, Barclay and Grace both turned to glare at MacGill, who was struggling upright.

“How can ye speak of *love* in a moment like this?” he demanded, even as his awkward flops pushed him to his knees on the floor.

Barclay’s arm tightened around her. “How can I speak of aught else? I love Grace, and never dreamed—”

“Love is for fools!” MacGill gasped. “Furthermore—*urrrrrrgggghhh*.”

It was an impressive death scene, ending on a little rattle. Grace and Barclay watched for a moment longer, just in case the corpse had anything else to add.

Then they turned back to one another. Grace took a breath and opened her mouth.

“*Furthermore!*” screeched MacGill from behind her, and they both let out huge sighs.

To her surprise, her father stomped up to the dying laird and grasped the sword hilt. “Oh, for fook’s sake, ye bastard, just die already!” he announced, shoving the blade deeper.

MacGill’s eyes widened and his mouth opened—likely to complain—but his breath hissed out of him and he froze. His eyes were wide with fear when he finally died.

Father nudged him, and the corpse—for real this time—toppled sideways.

Barclay nodded. “Where were we?”

Her father gestured imperiously. “The *I love ye* part, I believe.”

“Och, aye.” Barclay turned back to Grace and pulled her closer. “Lady Grace MacDonald, I am but a puir Hunter, so I’ll understand if ye’ll no’ accept my proposal. But ye’ll own my heart until I’m dead.”

She smiled up at him. “Barclay, I would love ye if ye were as puir as a church mouse and will gladly—*joyfully*—consent to be yer wife!”

“Are church mice puirer than regular mice? I didnae ken rodents had a particularly healthy monetary system—”

“Kiss me, ye brave, braw man.”

Grinning, Barclay lowered his lips to hers.

CHAPTER 10



WHEN THEIR MAJESTIES had conceived the idea of the Hunters—an elite band of warriors and lawmen who would carry with them the King’s Justice and fooking big swords—they set aside a little antechamber behind their throne room.

‘Twas here that the Hunters met, received their assignments, and debriefed after missions.

Today was no exception.

“I never thought I’d see it,” drawled normally staid Payton, his fingers linked behind his head and his chair tipped back against the wall behind him. “Barclay’s gone and fallen in love.”

Craig, the hulking ex-blacksmith with the shoulders—and the brains—of a bull, gave Grace a little bow. “Ye’re pretty enough to tempt Barclay away from all the other lasses, milady.”

As Barclay rolled his eyes, Grace grinned impishly and presented Craig with a curtsy. “I like to think, Sir Hunter, ‘twas my gentle personality and quiet dignity which won me Barclay’s affections.”

Barclay leaned in. “First time I saw her, she smashed a bastard’s ballocks with her knee.”

Craig’s eyes went wide, and Payton began to chortle. “That would win me Barclay’s affections as well, I think.”

“The smashing tits help a bit,” Craig offered.

Thank goodness Grace took this as teasing and began to giggle.

Truthfully, he'd expected worse.

After years of earning a reputation as a charmer at court, he'd thought his friends would mock him mercilessly for finally losing his heart, but he'd been prepared to take it. To find Craig and Payton so level-headed about the whole situation was a relief.

Of course, if ye'd been in their positions, ye would've mocked yerself to next Michaelmas and back again.

True. He had a reputation to maintain, after all.

And ye still have to hear what Drum has to say.

The reminder sent Barclay's heart back into his stomach again, and as Grace and Craig shot quips at one another, he stole his friend's ale and took a swig.

Drummond Kennedy was the leader of the Hunters, appointed by Their Majesties to oversee the law-keeping force. He was stern, somber, and scary as hell at times.

And right now, he was giving Barclay's report to the King.

The thought was nerve-wracking.

After MacGill's *eventual* death, Barclay had given Grace a few days to recover from her ordeal and to reconnect with her father. Their relationship was tenuous at best, but the older man was genuinely sorry for his role in manipulating Grace's future, and she seemed willing to forgive him.

Or at least, to consider it, which was more than the old man deserved, and he knew it.

Then, knowing his role as a Hunter, Barclay had taken his father's body home to MacGill land. Grace had insisted on going with him, and to his surprise, Horse—whom she still called Mayo—had insisted on carrying her.

As much as a horse can insist, Barclay supposed.

Being on MacGill land had been...strange. His mother had been born there and had died there, but he had few memories

of the place. ‘Twas really quite beautiful, in a haunting sort of way. The mists rolled down from the mountains and sat in the glens in a sort of dream which had made Barclay curious to explore more of the place.

Instead, however, they’d stayed in the castle and helped the clan prepare the funeral feast. It shouldn’t have been surprising that ‘twas an actual celebration, as the news spread among the MacGills that they were free of their laird’s cruelty.

But with no clear heir, no clear laird, the future of the clan was in jeopardy.

They’d stayed with the MacGills for a sennight, helping the steward and housekeeper straighten out the immediate future, and clean up the old laird’s messes where they could. Barclay wasn’t sure how it happened, but somehow the story got around that he was MacGill’s natural son, and soon the servants and the rest of the clan were nodding respectfully to him and calling him *milord*.

He suspected Grace had something to do with it.

Ah, Grace.

A sennight alone with her had been miraculous.

He’d vowed to himself not to disrespect her before they were married, but she had other plans. Each night at Castle MacGill, she’d climbed into his bed wearing the thinnest, most enticing chemise, and his resolve had cracked.

He hadn’t fooked her the way he wanted—the way he’d been aching to for weeks—but he wasn’t strong enough to turn her away.

Instead, he’d shown her pleasure. Introduced her to the ways of making love. Allowed her to explore his body as he’d explored hers. They’d both found pleasure in one another’s touches, but as each night drew to a close, Barclay knew he was only torturing himself.

To be so close to the object of his desire and unable to make her his...aye, ‘twas torture.

But soon ‘twould be over.

Drummond had taken Barclay's report—and his request to be permitted to wed the lady Grace MacDonald—to the King. Soon, he'd return, and—

“Ye lucky bastard,” Drum announced as he pushed open the door and stomped in.

Ah, speak of the devil.

“Lucky?” Payton asked, dropping all four of the chair's legs to the ground. “Does that mean His Majesty approved Barclay's petition?”

“It means the King isnae going to have yer head removed for killing one of his lairds.”

Barclay swallowed.

‘Twas Grace who came to his defense. “*Surely* His Majesty understands what a vile man Laird MacGill was? Surely, he understands that Barclay was merely defending my father—whom the King had ordered to help, by sending Barclay after me?”

“I got lost there,” muttered Craig.

Payton snorted. “Aye, but ye got lost on yer way to the privy yesterday.”

“‘Twas dark and I was half-asleep,” the ox defended.

“More like half-drunk.”

Drummond's growl and slash of his hand cut off the bickering. “As it happens...” He sighed and slapped the scroll with Barclay's report onto the table. “Aye, His Majesty agrees with ye. He'd heard rumors of MacGill's actions but assumed ‘twas only disgruntled enemies. Having it confirmed—both by the MacDonalds and by yer visit to MacGill lands—set his mind at ease that the clan willnae suffer from their laird's death.”

Barclay shook his head. “If aught, the clan was grateful to be released from his rule.”

“Aye, but now the King has a conundrum. With no obvious heir, the MacGills are vulnerable to attack and manipulation.”

“Aye,” sighed Barclay, rolling his shoulders, hating this feeling of uncertainty.

Apparently feeling the same way, Grace stepped up to his side and slid her small hand into his. When he glanced over, she smiled.

And the band around his chest loosened as a feeling of contentment slid over him. She was beautiful today, wearing a gown of blue, which seemed perfect for court, her blonde curls cascading down her back. He knew she’d taken extra care in her appearance today, and he resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and rumple her.

“And...the other request?” she asked Drummond hesitantly, even while smiling softly at Barclay. “Is His Majesty willing to grant our petition to marry?”

Drummond didn’t immediately reply, and his silence was telling. Dread pooling in his stomach once more, Barclay turned to his commander.

The somber man appeared even more serious than usual. His arms were folded across his chest, his lips pulled into a frown. He was wearing his hair longer these days, but it did nothing to soften his fierceness.

“Drum?” Barclay prompted softly, already dreading the reply.

His commander shook his head. “What have I told ye about missions involving women?”

“Dinnae fook ‘em,” Craig replied promptly, repeating an oft-heard lesson.

“Dinnae trust ‘em,” Peyton said with a sigh and a pitying look as he dropped his hands to the table.

“Dinnae get involved,” Barclay whispered, shifting his gaze to Grace, knowing he was beyond a doubt involved. Involved in her life, involved in her heart.

Drummond growled, “And what did ye do?”

“I got involved.”

Craig leaned toward Peyton and whispered loudly, “Did he fook her?”

His friend nodded. “Looks like he went and fell in love.”

“If we’re no’ allowed to fook ‘em, we likely cannae fall in love, aye?” whispered Craig.

Before Peyton could answer—thank God—Drummond cut off their banter with another slash of his hand.

“Ye *got involved*. ‘Twas a simple assignment, Barclay! Ye were supposed to fetch a runaway daughter of His Majesty’s supporter. How hard was that?”

Barclay had asked himself the same question time and again as he’d been trying to fight his attraction to Grace. But once he’d given in, his heart had been so much happier.

Her hand was gripped tightly in his, and now he caught her gaze. “‘Twas much harder than ye might think,” he murmured.

Payton whispered to Craig, “‘Tis what she said.”

But Barclay concentrated on Grace, offering her a sad smile. If the King denied their chance to marry, he’d still love her until his dying day.

“Christ, Barclay,” sighed Drummond. “I *told* ye missions with women were dangerous!”

Barclay whirled on his commander. “Aye, and I’ve listened to ye for years. Ye think I set out to fall in love with Grace? Love isnae *planned*, Drum! It sneaks up on ye, then bashes ye over the head if ye dinnae give into it!”

“So romantic,” murmured Grace.

To his surprise, his commander sighed and lowered his arms. “Aye, I ken it. I also ken the heartbreak that comes when ye learn she’s betrayed ye.”

“That *willnae* happen,” Grace stated emphatically. “We want to be *married*, Drummond.”

“What did the King say about that, eh?” prompted Payton, exchanging a glance with Craig. “Ye’re being awfully grumpy, Drum.”

With another sigh, Drummond rubbed the back of his neck, an expression very much like regret on his face.

“His Majesty believes ‘tis no’ seemly, a lady such as Grace marrying a landless Hunter like Barclay. Ye have some money, aye, but nae home, nae estate to support a wife and bairns.”

Fook.

Fook fook shite fook.

This was what Barclay had been afraid of all along.

Mayhap Grace could sense his panic because she squeezed his hand. When he glanced at her, she offered a soothing smile.

“Ye *are* worthy of my love, Barclay. I dinnae care what the King says about it; I love ye, and I’ll no’ allow ye to spiral down into that place of doubt. Ye are worthy.”

‘Twas beautiful.

Barclay was staring at her, uncertain how to respond to such a vow, when Drummond cleared his throat.

“Worthy he may be, but Barclay doesnae have an estate, and the King doesnae want an unlanded Hunter marrying one of his noble’s daughters.”

Fook.

No matter Grace’s pretty words, ‘twas everything Barclay had feared.

The silence in the room was deafening, and he was certain he could hear Grace’s heart pounding as loudly as his was.

“‘Tis why...”

At Drummond’s careful words, Barclay wrenched his head around to stare hopefully at his commander.

Drummond rarely smiled. ‘Twas one of his finer points, all the Hunters agreed. But now, under Barclay’s hopeful gaze, Drum’s lips pulled into a grin.

“‘Tis why His Majesty has appointed Barclay MacGill—ye have to accept the auld bastard’s name, ye ken—as the new

laird of Clan MacGill.”

Grace sucked in a breath as both Payton and Craig released pleased whoops.

Turning, Barclay took Grace’s hands in his. “What do ye think, love?”

“I *think* one doesnae turn down such an offer,” she quipped with an impish smile. “But are ye going to be content, leading yer father’s people?”

Would he?

“The MacGills...they’re also my mother’s people, are they no’?” He felt her squeeze his hands and continued. “They are good people, we learned, and they need a leader.”

“Could ye be that leader?”

“Aye,” he breathed, staring into the gorgeous blue eyes of the woman he loved. “I could. And ‘twould mean a place for ye—for both of us. Ye could still be near yer father.”

“And our son will lead the MacDonalds after him.”

A son.

A son with Grace.

The thought of her belly swelling with his bairn was fooking *miraculous*.

Barclay swallowed, almost overcome with need for her. He wanted Grace, not just in bed, but in his life—his *heart*—for the rest of his days.

“Marry me, Grace?” he managed to choke out.

She grinned. “I would be delighted to, my Hunter.”

Behind him, Drummond cleared his throat. “Excellent. Because His Majesty has already called his secretary *and* his priest, and is prepared for the ceremony of investiture to begin immediately. Followed by a wedding.”

A wedding, here and now?

Barclay glanced around. Well, why not? Grace wouldn’t have her father beside her, but Drum would offer to give her

away, for certes. As for him... The Hunters were his family.

He was surrounded by the most important people in his life, here and now.

Gathering Grace in his arms, he smiled down at her. “Well, soon-to-be-Lady-MacGill? How about it?”

She was still grinning. “Let us marry posthaste, love.”

So they could start on the bairns!

“YE DIDNAE TELL me ye had yer own rented rooms in Scone,” Grace accused as he slid the lock on the door.

“Ye didnae ask.” He stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her middle, nuzzling against her neck. “Although I suppose I’ll divest myself of them, now I’m retiring.”

She twisted in his arms. “Ye dinnae mind?”

This new position brought her flush up against him, and she could feel the evidence of his intense need pressing up against her belly. Well, fair was fair; she’d been throbbing with need since the wedding ceremony, hours ago.

“Barclay?” she whispered, sliding her arms around his neck. “Ye asked me if I would marry ye. But ye never told me how ye feel about all these changes.”

“Changes?” He seemed...distracted.

“Becoming a laird. Leaving yer position as a Hunter.”

“Most Hunters retire when they wed,” he murmured, bending down to kiss her jaw.

She tipped her head to one side. “And *marriage*? Dinnae tell me ye expected all this when we arrived?”

“Grace...” His fingers began to pluck at the ties of her gown. Her *wedding* gown. “As soon as ye agreed to become mine, I kenned I’d do whatever I must in order to ensure yer

happiness. Retiring? Aye, of course. Gaining a clan of my own? Even better.”

Humming, she twisted slightly so he could push her bodice apart, giving him easier access. “I suppose I should be grateful ye’re so good at this?”

“Looking on the bright side of things?”

“Undressing a woman,” she corrected.

He grinned as he plucked the pins from her hair. “I *kenned* all that practice would come in useful.”

Her palms cupped his jaw and pretended fierceness. “As long as I’m the only woman ye practice on from now on.”

“I swear it,” he breathed, as he pulled her against him almost reverently. “Why would I want any other woman when my wife is the most perfect woman in creation?”

“Oh, Barclay.”

That was...*beautiful*.

He was beautiful.

Her *husband*.

She was the one to kiss him, and he smiled against her lips. In the sennight they’d spent at the MacGills, she’d been serious in her studies of his body and how to give and receive pleasure.

Tonight, she was going to learn so much more.

They tumbled, naked, atop the bed a few minutes later, already panting with need.

“St. Pancras forgive me, Grace,” he groaned, pulling her to him. “I *wanted* to take tonight slowly. I wanted to kiss ye all over, I wanted to bring ye pleasure afore I made ye mine.”

That sounded quite wonderful, but... “Ye’ve done all that, *husband*.” She kissed his throat, murmuring against his skin. “Tonight, I’m far too eager to become yers. Take me, Barclay. We can go slower the second time around.”

Since she finished her declaration by playfully dragging her teeth against his nipple, was it any wonder he growled and rolled onto his back, taking her with him?

She ended straddling him, knees planted on either side of his hips.

“Christ, Grace,” he growled, running his hands up her sides. “Ye’re magnificent.”

Arching into his hold, she gasped as the movement set her slick core sliding along his skin.

“Aye, lass, that’s the way,” he murmured, palming one breast as his other hand slid around to her arse. “I wanted to lick ye until ye come.”

That sounded wonderful, and thanks to his tutelage, she knew exactly what that meant. But for now...

“Please,” she gasped, rocking back and forth. “Please, Barclay.”

Mayhap he heard her desperation, or mayhap he was feeling the same.

“Put yer hands on my shoulders, lass. Aye, like that.” As her weight shifted forward, he reached beneath her to grasp his cock. “Now...”

When the tip of his member probed at her weeping entrance, she gasped in understanding. Slowly, perfectly, she lowered herself atop him, piercing her core with his cock in the most wonderful way.

In this position, *she* was in control. She inched closer to him, waiting for her body to adjust before taking more of him...and he lay still beneath her, his beautiful gray gaze locked with hers, sweat beading his brow. The muscles under her hands jumped and twitched as he fought to remain still.

All for her.

And she loved him even more for it.

When she was fully seated atop him, they both released breaths.

“Good?” he rasped.

She smiled. “So good.”

‘Twas the truth. Being filled by him felt...different. But really quite wonderful. She straightened, allowing herself to sink even farther down, and reached for his hands.

Their fingers entwined, their palms pressed against one another, and she put her trust in her husband.

He showed her how to move, how to rock forward and back, each infinitesimal movement causing shudders of pleasure to course through her. Her rhythm became faster and faster, until he was breathing as heavily as she was, and her inner muscles throbbed with need.

His hips bucked beneath her, plunging upward into her body’s welcoming embrace...and her pleasure mounted toward the clouds.

Barclay shifted her hold to his shoulders once more so he could pull one nipple toward his mouth. He continued to thrust, and she was lost in the sensations...

And then his other hand cupped her mound, his thumb finding the pearl of her pleasure hidden in her curls.

Grace exploded.

‘Twas the only description which did it justice. “*Barclay!*” She screamed his name as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through her body, each spasm sending her higher and higher.

Dimly, she heard him roar, felt him tense under her. A spurt of liquid warmth flooded her womb, and she knew—even as a dull haze of ecstasy settled over her—that they were well and truly joined.

Husband and wife.

Exhausted, she collapsed against him.

They lay like that for a long moment, with her cheek pressed against his shoulder. She could *feel* his pulse, and wondered if he could feel hers.

Finally, his arms came up to wrap around her and shift her to one side. His member, already softening, slid from her. He rolled to the edge of the bed and found a rag, which he used to clean first her—his movements gentle and not at all awkward—then himself.

When he joined her back in the bed, he pulled the blanket over them both and gathered her in his arms.

“Thank ye,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

She smiled. She knew she should thank him—for showing her pleasure, for introducing her to something so wonderful—but right now, she *was* feeling proud of herself. “Ye’re welcome,” she murmured arrogantly. “I was rather magnificent, was I no’?”

A chuckle burst from his chest, and since she was pressed against him, nearly dislodged her.

“Grace, ye ken I have few talents, but I am somewhat of a connoisseur when it comes to pleasure and women.” He kissed her temple. “So, when I say that was the most magnificent experience of my life, ye ken I ken what I’m talking about.”

Oh my. That was really quite wonderful, wasn’t it?

Smiling, she lifted her head to meet his eyes. “The most magnificent?” she prompted.

“I vow it.”

He was too much fun to tease, wasn’t he? “Well...” She pretended to be considering his words, even as her hand skimmed down his chest. “I dinnae ken if ‘tis a fair comparison to make.”

When her fingers brushed playfully against his thatch of hair cradling his cock, he sucked in a breath. “What?” His voice was too strained, too high-pitched.

She continued her serious tone. “After all, we’ve only fooked once, aye?”

“Nay,” he breathed, as her fingertip traced his member, causing it to stir once more. “That wasnae fooking. ‘Twas

making love.”

She hummed. “I think ‘tis only fair we give ye more opportunity for comparison.”

“St. Pancras bless me,” he groaned, dropping his head back to the pillow. “Ye’re too raw, too delicate.”

“Well, ye’ll just have to be gentle, will ye no’?” When she squeezed his cock, his eyes flew open. “We *did* say the second time would be nice and slow, eh?”

He pulled her up his body. “Have I told ye how much I love ye?”

Grinning impishly, she dropped her gaze to his lips. “I could stand to hear it again, husband.”

“I love ye, Lady Grace MacGill. For the rest of my days.”

“Good,” she breathed. “Because I love ye, my laird. My Hunter. My Barclay.”

He was grinning when he captured her lips, and she felt her heart leap with joy. This was the beginning of the most wonderful forever.

EPILOGUE



PAYTON MCINTYRE SIPPED his ale and watched the members of the court join in the revelry. The King had offered the first toast to Laird and Lady MacGill, and after a moment's hesitation at the bold announcement, everyone had joined in.

Barclay had slipped away with his new wife not long after, and Payton wondered if he was the only one to see them go.

His lips curled, knowing what his partner was up to even now.

Things would be different, with Barclay retiring.

He sighed and lifted his mug again as Craig slid onto the bench beside him. "Things will be different now, aye?" he rumbled.

Payton blinked into his mug, wondering if there was an echo, or if the ale had affected him worse than normal.

"Barclay should've listened to Drum," Craig said mournfully, pulling the mug from Payton's hand and gulping the contents. "I might be the baby Hunter on the team, but at least I can see how much trouble women cause."

Deciding he'd had enough ale, Payton rested his elbows on the table. "Aye, Baby, ye're right. Ladies in particular."

"Ye think so?" The giant used the mug to gesture at the revelers around them. "Some of these ladies arenae so bad."

'Twas easy to imagine a few of the more comely ladies sending admiring glances—and mayhap even invitations—to Craig when their courtier husbands were away. The man

towered over all of them, with shoulders wide enough to pull an ox from a bog.

He looked like a blacksmith, moved like a Hunter, and flirted like brick.

Och, well, mayhap ladies like a handsome idiot now and then.

Payton shook his head ruefully. “I suspect there’s a large difference in the ladies ye’ve made acquaintances of, Craig, and a lady like Barclay’s Grace. She was interested in love and marriage, after all.”

“And these ladies just want a fun time,” the large man agreed, sounding almost knowledgeable. “And I’m happy to oblige. I’ve had my eye on that pretty redhead across the way.”

Payton didn’t need her pointed out; she *knew* she was lovely and moved through the crowds like the Queen; but whereas the crowds moved out of the way of Her Majesty because of her position, ‘twas the lady’s beauty which garnered *her* attention.

Scowling, Payton looked away.

And had his breath driven from him when Craig jammed an elbow into his side. “Which one are ye admiring, Pay? I ken ye prefer ‘em quiet—how about the pretty brunette in blue over there?”

Payton didn’t bother following his friend’s pointing finger. “Nay.” He pretended interest in the King’s conversation with the advisor beside him.

“How about the blonde lady with the huge tits? I think she’s married to—”

“Nay.” Scowling, Payton lifted a hand, calling one of the pages over with another mug of ale. “I dinnae lust after any of these ladies—*any* lady.”

As he thanked the page with a quick nod, Craig hummed. “I dinnae ken...I’ve had my share of crofter lasses *and* ladies. They’re much the same once yer head’s under their skirts, if ye ken what I’m saying.”

If Craig was known for putting his head beneath their skirts, no wonder he was so popular with the ladies. Payton, however...

“Ladies are used to a certain level of finery, aye?” He growled. “I’m no’.”

His friend snorted. “Ye’re sitting at the King’s table—aright, aye, no’ his *actual* table. But ye’re dining with—well, nearby him. Ye’re at court. *Ye* were the one to teach me the manners I needed when I arrived here. Ye cannae claim ye’re no’ sophisticated and refined.”

“I didnae say that.” This conversation was getting too personal. Payton’s only hope was that they’d both be too hungover in the morning to remember it. “I’m saying...courtly ladies are used to beauty.”

He hurried to take a big gulp of the ale, hoping the conversation would be interrupted. Failing that, he hoped to get completely, totally drunk.

He was *happy* for Barclay, of course he was.

But love? Marriage?

Nay, those weren’t for Payton McIntyre.

“This is about the scar, is it no’?” rumbled Craig quietly from beside him.

With a sigh, Payton slammed the mug down on the table. “*Of course, ‘tis about the bloody scar!*”

“And ye think such a thing detracts from yer beauty?”

Payton swung on his friend, incredulous. Craig just shrugged and grinned, lifting the mug that used to be Payton’s. “It gives ye an air of mystery, friend.”

“It gives me fooking ridiculous headaches, is what it gives me,” Payton growled, and lifted his mug once more.

“It could be the ale.” The other man’s tone was just a bit too helpful.

Payton mimicked the tone when he mocked, “Or it could be the blade which removed my ear, part of my nose, and

almost took my eye. Which do ye think ‘tis more likely?”

Instead of being embarrassed, Craig grinned and saluted with the mug. “So nae ladies in yer future?”

Christ, it was difficult to be angry at the lummo. Sighing, Payton clicked his mug against his friend’s. “No *women*. Too much trouble.”

“No wives,” Craig agreed. “Drum says falling in love is more heartbreak than anything else.”

Love?

Payton snorted and leaned on his elbows to watch the flirting and dancing and general debauchery of court.

When a man looked the way he did, women were just a need to be fulfilled, an itch to be scratched occasionally. There was no need to talk to them, or get his emotions involved.

Love.

He took a long draught of the ale and was pleased to discover he *was* feeling the effects.

Love wasn’t for a Hunter. Especially not a scarred one like him.

BUT OF COURSE we know what’s going to happen! Keep reading for a sneak peek of Payton’s fall in *Kilty Plea*!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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On Historical Accuracy

You know what? It's been a while since I started an author's note with the reminder that the Great Kilt didn't become a "thing" until the late 16th century. Yes, tartans have been around longer, but what we think of as medieval men's wear is more accurately attributed to the early modern period.

That said, we do not give a fook, right?

I mean, what would a medieval Scottish romance *be* without hot Highlanders running around in kilts and great big swords and not much else?

We have standards, after all.

<serious nod>

While we're talking about actual history, let me mention something else totally wrong about this story (and a lot of other ones too): the political map of Scotland. Now, I'm purposefully vague on the timeline of a lot of my medieval stories, including exactly which King I'm constantly referencing.

As Kenneth—one of the King's Hunters—said in *Plaid to the Bone* when Leanna asked which King he worked for:

"Because...we're wearing kilts, aye, which is a modern invention. But there are rushes on the floor, and we're using torches for light; our technology is all confusing. Are we in the

thirteenth century, or the sixteenth? If I tell ye which king I'm working for, 'twill too clearly identify the time period."

Besides, there was a depressing dearth of truly Scottish kings in the medieval period. (England got involved hardcore only a few generations after Robert the Bruce.)

Now, in the early modern period, Scotland had gads of Scottish kings, with the first one generally being accepted as Kenneth I, who united the Picts and the people of Dalriada (basically the western isles) to form Scotland. However, by the time our medieval kings got to the throne, they had to contend with a lot of smaller "kingdoms" spread around the Highlands—the MacLeods, hanging out on their islands in the west, were once kings themselves—and there was plenty of conflict as they fought to exert dominance over these kingdoms.

So, it's false to think that, in the time of this story—whenever that may be—all of Scotland and the Highlands was united under one King, who could send his lawmen out to keep the peace. Mainly because the map of "Scotland" would've looked much different than it does today.

That said, again, fook it.

In my stories, the Hunters are gallivanting around Scotland—Highlands *and* Lowlands—punishing evildoers, protecting the weak, foiling plots, etc., etc.

Yes, they're very clearly a combination of the US Marshals from the historical American West, and Disney's TV show *The Mandalorian*. ☺

Now, we met plenty of the King's Hunters in the *Bad in Plaid* series—four of the seven heroes were Hunters, and Barclay appeared as a major character in the last book, *Plaid Attitude*, where he took Craig Oliphant under his wing. We met him as a rake and a charmer, and I thought it would be fun to start this new series with him!

One of the things which was really important to me to mention in this author's note was the location of the story.

In the summer of 2023 I was lucky enough to be invited to London for a huge book signing. I brought the entire FamiLee,

and the kids wouldn't let me leave the UK without a visit to Scotland. It was a short trip, mainly just to Edinburgh and the incredible history there...but one of the things we did was a twelve-hour tour of the Highlands.

Well, as much of the Highlands as you can see in twelve hours, anyhow.

It was rainy and cold, which—*hello?*—was perfect for the Highlands. We saw the Cairngorms (at least from the coach), hairy coos, whisky distilleries, and Loch Ness. But the best part of the trip, as far as I was concerned, was Glencoe.

Glen Coe (literally: the Coe Valley) is this hauntingly beautiful area in the western Highlands, right around the area of Ben Nevis (the highest point in the UK). The road we traveled through the center of the valley, followed the path of the ancient roads which humans have used for thousands of years.

I remember thinking that, were it not for this established road, it would take ages to pick our way over the hollows and fallen trees and sunken springs and hidden ponds. We were surrounded by mountains on all sides, and while the valley looked flat, it was deceptively so.

There were waterfalls which cascaded down from high mountain streams, and other streams which trickled and bubbled across the valley. There were scree-covered slopes, and boulders and so much ambiance I had to go have a lie down after.

One of the things which struck me was the lack of tall trees; all the trees were what I would've called "scrub" in that they didn't grow very high.

(Side note: prehistoric Scotland was covered in woodlands. The advent of agriculture meant a lot of these trees were cut down, and by the time the Romans arrived, only about half the country was forested. In the 17th and 18th centuries, most of the rest of the trees were chopped down for timber and coal mining and whatnot. Today, only about 5% of Scotland is covered in woodland.)

While traveling, I saw this hollow that really stood out in my memory; it was a natural dip in the landscape, surrounded on three sides by these “walls” of dirt and boulders, maybe six feet tall, and there were trees growing in the middle...the branches and leaves of those trees didn’t grow too high, because they were protected by the “walls” of the hollow, so they seemed to act as a roof for the entire thing.

It struck me as the perfect place to camp, and you can bet it appeared in this book (and possible future ones).

In fact, up until that trip, I wasn’t certain if I would tackle this series next, or the one I wanted to set in the Western isles. That single location, that hollow within the greater majesty of Glencoe, made my decision for me.

If you have the chance to visit that part of Scotland, take it. You won’t be disappointed.

Oh, one note about Glencoe: there aren’t bogs there.

Whoops.

Yes, there are bogs in the Highlands, and just because there aren’t bogs in Glencoe *now*, doesn’t mean there weren’t any when this story takes place (again, whenever that may be), so we’re going with that, okay?

Aaaand, just so you know I *do* look shite up when I write, and I’m not entirely making this up: puke.

Remember that whole conversation Barclay and Grace had about “pulling over” so she could puke? (Heh. I cracked myself up, thinking about pulling over a horse.) Well, the word “puke” has been around since Middle English, where it meant either *to spit* or *to burp*, depending on who you believe. The earliest written reference to “puke” meaning “to vomit” comes from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, which would’ve been a little late for Barclay and Grace.

But since they wouldn’t have been speaking English either, this whole point is moot.

And there we go.

A bunch of random shite about this book, and just enough history to hopefully make you go look up more and learn it better. Caroline Lee: Half-Ass Educator.

Anyhow, this was a fun story to write, and you can bet I have more for you! Payton is up next, and the heroine who is going to land in his lap is no lady, but a real spitfire. What's she running from, and can Payton be the hero she needs, despite his insecurities?

Check out *Kilty Plea* to find out! (Note: If you order directly from me, you'll receive the book a few weeks before anyone else!)

You can keep on reading for an excerpt, but first, I'd like to invite you to join my reader group. Caroline's Cohort is a really active group full of fun people, and we post plenty of stuff to make you laugh. Also, pictures of hot guys in kilts, interesting history, fun songs, and yummy recipes. Come hang out with us!

And now, for Payton...

SNEAK PEEK

From *Kilty Plea*

“To the Hunter! The King’s Hunter!”

Payton McIntyre didn’t want to drink, but he had to at least acknowledge the toast. So, he stood, lifted his mug, and nodded to the revelers.

They, being halfway to drunk already, gave a mighty cheer at his acknowledgement.

After what they’ve been through, they’d likely cheer anything.

Payton resettled himself in the chair—a finely carved one with a thick cushion—beside the Abbot and rested his untouched mug on his knee.

The Abbot, who was seated in an even finer chair, nodded to the mug. “Ye’re no’ drinking with us, brother Hunter?”

Payton didn’t drink while on assignment, and while this celebration was an indication his assignment was over and he’d soon be on his way to his family’s holding for Hogmanay, he still wasn’t going to drink with these people.

Or the Abbot.

The whole Abbey of the People itself, really, was creepy as fook, and he wasn’t certain why the King *cared* about them.

Still, it was easier to fall back on what was expected, rather than explain the truth. So, he tapped the steel helmet he always

wore on assignment. “This makes it difficult to imbibe, Father.”

The Abbot, a man who was only a decade or two older than Payton, with thick brown hair and a winning smile, scoffed good-naturedly. “*Surely* ye must eat and drink while on missions, brother? Ye cannae fault us for offering ye such hospitality after ye’ve saved us from such evil!”

The man laughed then, his broad gesture encompassing the men and women—and aye, even children—who cavorted and danced below their dais. Payton made a noncommittal noise and lifted the mug in salute but was careful to place it at the table by his side without drinking.

The helm was constructed such that he *could* lift it just enough to drink or eat if necessary. And of course, he didn’t wear it *all* the time...just when he was around others while on a mission.

As his commander had taught him, a Hunter’s helmet was a symbol, and symbols were powerful reminders of the King’s law and order. The man under the helmet mattered less than the symbol of the King’s Hunters in general. It didn’t matter *who* maintained the King’s laws, as long as they were maintained.

The remote Abbey of the People in remote, western Campbell land had reported having their lands attacked by bandits. His Majesty, anxious to remain in good standing with the Church, had dispatched Payton, who was on his way to visit his own family.

The bandits had been easy to defeat, especially with the fear the helmet evoked on Payton’s side. But he was pleased he didn’t have to stay any longer at the Abbey; the short time he spent in the Abbot’s company made him wonder if the place was associated with the Church at all.

For one thing, there were no saints venerated, no holy hours. The people who lived here were a strange mix; there were some monks, aye, but more laymen and their families, and quite a few unmarried lasses as well.

This place was more like a town and less like an abbey... except there *was* a clear and definite leader: their charismatic Abbot, who even now was watching Payton with a sharp gleam in his eyes.

“We are a *puir* community, brother,” he was saying, “and we cannae offer much in thanks other than our food and drink.”

Payton made an impatient gesture with his hand. “Nae thanks are necessary, Father. I am doing the King’s bidding. Write yer thanks to him.”

“Still, we owe you much, brother.”

Fook, always with the ‘brother’. Payton got enough of that when he visited his parents’ home; here he wasn’t a brother any more than these drunken fools were.

His gaze still on the people below, Payton tried not to allow his irritation to creep into his voice. “Ye owe me naught.”

“We have much to offer a man such as yerself.” The Abbot shifted closer, his breath smelling of something too sweet. “A warrior must celebrate his victories, I ken it. What better way than to sink into the pleasures of the flesh, eh?” When Payton shifted in his chair, torn between intrigue and disgust, the Abbot chuckled almost lewdly. “Food, drink, and a lovely lass.”

Payton couldn’t help the way his head turned to watch the group of young women who moved among the revelers, their heads down as they offered trays of mugs or bowls of food to others.

One caught his eye; a skinny waif in a too-big gown, her feet bare despite the winter’s cold. Her lanky hair fell into her eyes, and she kept her gaze directed at the ground. But as he watched, one of the men slapped her arse as he passed, and she froze. Slowly, she straightened and sent a glare at the man’s back which was fierce enough to make Payton’s lips curl beneath the helmet.

She was underfed, aye, but she had a woman's curves, and fire in her gaze.

At his side, the Abbot chuckled again. "These women are free to be used, brother, although I ken ye have a warrior's urges. There are whores in the next town for those needs; these are *my* lasses and are meant for marriage."

There was something about the way the Abbot bragged which made Payton's skin crawl. "I understand," he said gruffly, although he didn't. A woman sworn to a holy house should be meant for vows, not marriage.

Either way, ye cannae fook 'em, is the point.

They wouldn't want him, anyway.

"But still, brother..." the Abbot said slyly, "I can see ye have yer eye on one in particular. She shall be yers."

Payton didn't want her—didn't want to spend any more time among these people's company than he had to. But when the Abbot raised his hand to gesture to the wench, he knew he had no choice but to maintain politeness until he could slip away.

Soon he'd be home on McIntyre land, and all this would be behind him.

Soon.

Who's ready for some Christmas-themed shenanigans? You're not going to guess what Payton is about to get up to with this lass! (Well, I mean, I bet you *can* guess...) Check out *Kilty Plea!*