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BURROWES

MARY & FRAN
AND MATTHEW
A NOVELLA

contents

[Mary Fran and Matthew MacGregor Trilogy - 1.5 by Grace Burrowes](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

Mary Fran and Matthew

MacGregor Trilogy [1]

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MacGregor Trilogy - 1.5

Matthew Daniels is an English Colonel who has been sent home from the Crimea in disgrace. Mary Frances MacGregor is a Scottish widow who loathes everything about the English military, and yet both Mary Fran and Matthew know more than they want to about being lonely and isolated, even amid family. They yearn to understand each other too, but old secrets and divided family loyalties threaten to cost them their chance at shared happiness.

Annotation

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- [Mary Fran and Matthew](#)
 - [One](#)
 - [Two](#)
 - [Three](#)
 - [Four](#)
-

**Mary Fran and Matthew
MacGregor Trilogy - 1.5
by
Grace Burrowes**

One glimpse of Lady Mary Frances MacGregor, and Matthew Daniels forgot all about the breathtaking Highland scenery and the misbegotten purpose for his visit to Aberdeenshire.

“For the duration of your stay, our house is your house,” Lady Mary Frances said. She strode along the corridor of her brother’s country home with purpose, not with the mincing, corseted gait of a London lady, and she had music in her voice. Her walk held music as well, in the rhythm and sway of her hips, in the rustle of her petticoats and the crisp tattoo of her boots on the polished wood floors.

Though what music had to do with anything, Matthew was at a loss to fathom. “The Spanish have a similar saying, my lady: *mi casa es su casa*.”

“My house is your house.” She either guessed or made the translation easily. “You’ve been to Spain, then?”

“In Her Majesty’s Army, one can travel a great deal.”

A shadow creased her brow, quickly banished and replaced by a smile. “And now you’ve traveled to our doorstep. This is your room, Mr. Daniels, though we’ve others if you’d prefer a different view.”

She preceded him into the room, leaving Matthew vaguely disconcerted. A proper young woman would not be alone with a gentleman in his private quarters, and Mary Frances MacGregor, being the daughter of an earl, was a lady even in the sense of having a courtesy title—though Matthew had never before met a *lady* with hair that lustrous shade of dark red, or a figure so perfectly designed to thwart a man’s gentlemanly self-restraint.

“The view is quite acceptable.”

The view was magnificent, including, as it did, the backside of Lady Mary Frances as she bent to struggle with a window sash. She was a substantial woman, both tall and well formed, and Matthew suspected her arms would be trim with muscle, not the smooth, pale appendages a gentleman might see at a London garden party.

“Allow me.” He went to her side and jiggled the sash on its runners, hoisting the thing easily to allow in some fresh air.

“The maids will close it by teatime,” Lady Mary Frances said. “The nights can be brisk, even in high summer. Will you be needing a bath before the evening meal?”

She put the question casually—just a hostess inquiring after the welfare of a guest—but her gaze slid over him, a quick, assessing flick of green eyes bearing a hint of speculation. He might not fit in an old-fashioned bathing tub was what the gaze said, nothing more.

Nonetheless, he dearly wanted to get clean after long days of traveling. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

“No trouble at all. The bathing chamber is just down the hall to the left, the cistern is full, and the boilers have been going since noon.”

She peered into the empty wardrobe, passing close enough to Matthew that he caught a whiff of something female... Flowers. Not roses, which were probably the only flower he knew by scent, but... fresher than roses, less cloying.

“If you need anything to make your visit more enjoyable, Mr. Daniels, you have only to ask, and we’ll see to it. Highland hospitality isn’t just the stuff of legends.”

“My thanks.”

She frowned at the high four-poster and again walked past him, though this time she picked up the tartan draped across the foot of the bed. The daughter of an earl ought not to be fussing the blankets, but Matthew liked the sight of her, snapping out the red, white, and blue woolen blanket and giving it a good shake. Her attitude said that nothing, not dust, not visiting English, not a houseful of her oversized brothers, would daunt this woman.

Without thinking, Matthew picked up the two corners of the blanket that had drifted to the blue-and-red tartan rug.

“Will you be having other guests this summer?” He put the question to her as they stepped toward each other.

“Likely not.” She grasped the corners he’d picked up, their fingers brushing.

Matthew did not step back. Mary Frances MacGregor—*Lady* Mary Frances MacGregor—had *freckles* over the bridge of her nose. They were faint, even delicate, and they made her look younger. She could have powdered them into oblivion, but she hadn’t.

“Mr. Daniels?” She gave the blanket a tug.

Matthew moved back a single step. “You typically have only one set of guests each summer?” Whatever her scent, it wasn’t only floral, but also held something spicy, fresh like cedar, but not quite cedar.

“No, we usually have as many guests as the brief summers here permit, particularly once Her Majesty and His Royal Highness are ensconced next door. But if your sister becomes engaged to my brother, there will be other matters to see to, won’t there?”

This question, alluding to much and saying little, was accompanied by an expression that involved the corners of the lady’s lips turning up, and yet it wasn’t a smile.

“I suppose there will.” Things like settling a portion of the considerable Daniels’s wealth into the impoverished Balfour coffers. Things like preparing for the wedding of a lowly English baron’s daughter to a Scottish earl.

“We’ll gather in the parlor for drinks before the evening meal, Mr. Daniels. The parlor is directly beneath us, one floor down. Any footman can direct you.”

She was insulting him. Matthew took a moment to decipher this, and in the next moment, he realized the insult was not intentional. Some of the MacGregor’s “guests,” wealthy English wanting to boast of a visit to the Queen’s own piece of the Highlands, probably spent much of their stay too inebriated to navigate even the corridors of the earl’s country house.

“I’ll find my way, though at some point, I would also like to be shown where the rest of my family is housed.”

“Of course.” Another non-smile. She glanced around the room the way Matthew had seen generals look over the troops prior to a parade review, her lips flattening, her gaze seeking any detail out of order. “Until dinner, Mr. Daniels.”

She bobbed a curtsy and whirled away before Matthew could even offer her a proper bow.

“Miss MacGregor?”

Mary Fran’s insides clenched at the sound of Baron Altsax’s voice. She pasted a smile on her face and tried to push aside the need to check on the dining room, the kitchen, and the ladies’ guest rooms—and the need to locate Fiona.

The child tended to hide when a new batch of guests came to stay.

“Baron, what may I do for you?”

“I had a few questions, Miss MacGregor, if you wouldn’t mind?” He gestured to his bedroom, his smile suggesting he knew damned good and well the insult he did an earl’s daughter by referring to her as “Miss” anything. A double insult, in fact.

Mary Fran did not follow the leering old buffoon into his room. Altsax’s son, the soft-spoken Mr. Daniels, would reconnoiter before he started bothering the help—though big, blond, good-looking young men seldom needed to bother the help—not so with the skinny, pot-gutted old men. “I’m a bit behindhand, my lord. Was it something I could send a maid to tend to?”

The baron gestured toward the drinking pitcher on the escritoire, while Mary Fran lingered at the threshold. “This water is not chilled, I’ve yet to see a tea service, and prolonged travel by train can leave a man in need of something to wash the dust from his throat.”

He arched one supercilious eyebrow, as if it took some subtle instinct to divine when an Englishman was whining for his whisky.

“The maids will be along shortly with the tea service, my lord. You’ll find a decanter with some of our best libation on the nightstand, and I can send up some chilled water.” Because they at least had ice to spare in the Highlands.

“See that you do.”

Mary Fran tossed him a hint of a curtsy and left before he could make up more excuses to lure her into his room.

The paying guests were a source of much-needed coin, but the summers were too short, and the expenses of running Balfour too great for paying guests alone to reverse the MacGregor family fortunes. The benefit of this situation was that no coin was on hand to dower Mary Fran, should some fool—brother, guest, or distant relation—take a notion she was again in want of a husband.

“Mary Fran, for God’s sake, slow down.” She’d been so lost in thought she hadn’t realized her brother Ian had approached her from the top of the stairs. “Where are you churning off to in such high dudgeon? Con and Gil sent me to fetch you to the family parlor for a wee dram.”

Ian’s gaze was weary and concerned, the same as Con or Gil’s would have been, though Ian, as the oldest, was the weariest and the most concerned—also the one willing to marry Altsax’s featherbrained daughter just so Fiona might someday have a decent dowry.

“I have to check on the kitchens, Ian, and make sure that dim-witted Hetta McKinley didn’t forget the butter dishes again, and Eustace Miller has been lurking on the maids’ stairway so he can make calf eyes at—”

“Come, you.” Ian tucked her hand over his arm. “You deserve a few minutes with family more than the maids need to be protected from Eustace Miller’s calf eyes. Let the maids have some fun, and let yourself take five minutes to catch your breath. Go change into your finery and meet us in the family parlor. I’ll need your feminine perspective if I’m to coax Altsax’s daughter up the church aisle.”

Ian had typical MacGregor height and green eyes to go with dark hair and a handsome smile—none of which was worth a single groat. In Asher’s continued absence, Ian was also the laird, and well on his way to being officially recognized as the earl. While neither honor generated coin, the earldom allowed him the prospect of marrying an heiress with a title-hungry papa.

Mary Fran did not bustle off to change her dress for any of those reasons, or even because she needed to stay abreast of whatever her three brothers were thinking regarding Ian’s scheme to marry

wealth.

She heeded her brother's direction because she wanted that wee dram—wanted it far too much.

Matthew enjoyed a leisurely soak in a marble bathing chamber that boasted every modern convenience, then dressed and prepared to find his way down to the formal parlor. As he moved through the house, he noted the signs of good care: a faint odor of beeswax and lemon oil rising from the gleaming woodwork, sparkling clean windows, fresh flowers in each corridor, an absence of fingerprints on the walls and mirrors.

Lady Mary Frances, or her minions, took the care of Balfour House seriously. A swift drum of heels from around the next corner had Matthew stopping and cocking an ear. A man did not lose the habit of stealth simply because he was no longer billeted to a brewing war zone.

The hint of acrid cigar smoke warned Matthew that his father was in the vicinity.

“Miss MacGregor, perhaps you'd allow me to provide you an escort down to the parlor?” Altsax spoke in the unctuous tones of a man condescending to an inferior, though Lady Mary Frances was arguably the baron's social superior.

Matthew eased far enough down the corridor to see that the lady was attired in a dinner gown of green-and-white plaid that did marvelous things for her eyes—and riveted the baron's attention on her décolletage.

“That's gracious of you, Baron.” Her smile was beautiful, though it did not reach her eyes. “I hope Mr. Daniels will escort your womenfolk?”

The baron winged his arm. “I'm sure Matthew or your own brothers will see to that duty.”

As the lady tucked her fingers around the baron's elbow, Matthew's gut began to churn. Altsax was never polite to anybody, much less to pretty young women, unless he was maneuvering toward his own ends.

“So why aren't you married, Miss MacGregor?” Altsax stroked his fingers over her hand. “You're comely enough, wellborn, and intended for better than spinsterhood as your brothers' household drudge.”

The observation was Altsax's version of flattery, no doubt. Matthew felt a familiar urge to scream, or find a fast horse and gallop straight back to the Crimea.

“Marriage seems to be the topic of the day, my lord.” While Matthew watched in a conveniently positioned mirror, Lady Mary Frances smiled back at her escort, revealing a number of strong white teeth. “You are blessed with two comely daughters. It's a pity your baroness could not accompany them on this journey.”

As if Altsax would have allowed *that*. Matthew's mother knew better than to come along when her husband had decreed it otherwise, and quite honestly, Matthew envied his mother her freedom from Altsax's company.

“My wife and I have been married for thirty-some years, my dear. I hardly need to keep her underfoot at all times. Marriage is, after all, still a business undertaking among the better classes. I'm sure you'd agree.”

Altsax walked with her toward the sweeping main staircase, a monument to carved oak that suggested at some bygone point in the MacGregor family history, coin had been abundant.

Matthew had an instant's premonition of the baron's intent, a gut-clenching moment of knowing what was about to take place. The baron took his opportunity at the turn in the hallway where carpet

gave way to gleaming bare floor. He made a show of catching his toe on the carpet and jostling his companion sideways with enough force that she fetched up against the wall.

This allowed Altsax to mash into her bodily, and his hand—like one of the big, hairy spiders common to the tropics—to land squarely on the lady’s generous, fashionably exposed bosom.

“I beg your pardon, Miss MacGregor.” Altsax made an effort to right himself which of course involved clumsily, almost roughly, groping the lady. Matthew was about to reveal himself to his disgrace of a father, when the baron flew across the hallway as if propelled out of a cannon.

“Baron, do forgive me!” Lady Mary Frances was standing upright and looking creditably dismayed. “I did not mean to step on your foot, I sincerely did not. Are you all right, my lord?”

Her strategy left Altsax trying to look dignified and innocent of his crimes while not putting much weight on one foot. “The fault is mine, Miss MacGregor. I beg your pardon most sincerely. Shall we join your family downstairs?”

“Of course.”

As they moved toward the stairs, Matthew noted that this time, Altsax did not offer the lady his arm.

First skirmish to Lady Mary Frances, though as Matthew waited for a silent moment at the top of the stairs, it occurred to him that rising to the lady’s defense would have been enjoyable.

Tricky, given that he’d be defending her from his own father, but enjoyable.

“A word with you, if you please, Lady Mary Frances.”

Mary Fran tore off a bite of scone and regarded Mr. Matthew Daniels where he stood next to her place at the breakfast table. The baron had taken a tray out to the terrace, there to read his newspaper as he let a perfectly lovely repast grow cold at his elbow, while Ian and Miss Augusta Merrick, the younger of the two chaperones, had disappeared to the library.

And now Mary Fran’s favorite meal of the day—sometimes her only decent meal of the day—was going to be disturbed by this serious gentleman waiting to assist her to her feet. No doubt Mr. Daniels’s shaving water had been too hot, or not hot enough. Perhaps he objected to the scent of heather on his linen, or he’d found a footman using the maids’ staircase.

Mary Fran folded a napkin around the last of her scone and put it in her pocket, then placed her hand in Daniels’s and let him assist her to her feet. Thank God her brothers weren’t on hand to see such a farce.

“In private.” The gentleman kept his eyes front as he appended that requirement, as if admitting such a thing made him queasy.

“Shall we walk in the garden, Mr. Daniels? Pace off some of our breakfast?”

“That will serve.” He tucked her hand around his arm, which had Mary Fran about grinding her teeth. They skirted the terrace and minced along until they were a good distance from the house, and still Mr. Daniels said nothing.

“Is there a point to this outing, Mr. Daniels? I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve a household to run, and though you are our guest, my strolling about here among the flowers isn’t going to get the beds made up.”

He stopped walking and gazed down at her with a surprised expression. “You do that yourself?”

“I know how. I expect you do as well.”

Something flashed through his eyes, humor, possibly. He was one of few men outside her family

Mary Fran had to look up to. She'd been an inch taller than Gordie, and she had treasured that inch every day of her so-called marriage.

"I do know how to make up a cot," he said. "Public school imbues a man with all manner of esoteric skills. The military does as well. Shall we sit?"

He was determined on this privacy business, because he was gesturing to a bench that backed up against the tallest hedge in the garden. They'd be hidden from view on that bench.

Even if she were amenable, Mary Fran doubted Mr. Daniels was going to take liberties. Good Lord, if he was this serious about his dallying, then heaven help the ladies he sought to charm. Though as she took a seat, it struck her with a certainty that Matthew Daniels needn't bother charming anybody. For all his English reserve in proper company, he'd plunder and pillage, devil take the hindmost, when he decided on an objective.

Former cavalry could be like that.

"You are smiling, my lady."

And he was watching her mouth as he stood over her. Mary Fran let her smile blossom into a grin as she arranged her skirts. "I'm truant, sitting out here in the garden. I suppose it's fair play, given that my brothers—save for Ian—are off gallivanting about with your sisters and your aunt." And Lord knew what Ian was up to with the spinster cousin—probably prying secrets from the poor lady.

"About my womenfolk." He took the place beside her without her permission, though she would not have objected. "I have sisters."

He had two. The lovely Eugenia Daniels, whom Aunt Eulalie had spotted as a possible wealthy bride for Ian, and the younger, altogether likable Hester Daniels. Mary Fran held her peace, because Mr. Daniels was mentally pacing up to something, and he struck her as man who would not be hurried—she was familiar with the type.

"I have sisters whose happiness means a great deal to me," he went on, leaning forward to prop his elbows on his thighs. "You have brothers."

"My blessing and my curse," she said, wondering *when* he'd get to his point.

"My sisters are dear to me." He flicked a brooding glance at her over his shoulder. "As I'm sure you are dear to your brothers."

"Their hot meals and clean sheets are dear to them."

He sat up abruptly. "They would cheerfully die for you or kill for you. Not for the hot meals or the clean sheets, but for you."

She regarded him for a quizzical moment, trying to fathom his intentions. Insight struck as she studied the square line of his jaw and the way sunlight found the red highlights in his blond hair. "They won't kill your father while he's a guest in our home. Rest easy on that point."

"I cannot *rest easy*, as you say." He hunched forward again, the fabric of his morning coat pulling taut across broad shoulders. "My father's regard for women generally lacks a certain..."

"He's a randy old jackass," Mary Fran said. "I don't hold it against him."

Whatever comment the situation called for, it wasn't that. No earl's daughter, not even a Scottish earl's daughter running a glorified guesthouse ought to be so plainspoken.

"I'm sorry," she said, gaze on her lap. "I don't mean to be disrespectful. Your da's a guest in my home, and I'm responsible..."

"Hush." His finger came to rest on her lips, and when she looked up at him, he was smiling at her. He dropped his finger, but the smile lingered, crinkling the corners of his eyes and putting a light

in his gaze that was almost... gentle.

God in heaven. The man was abruptly, stunningly attractive. Mary Fran felt a heat spreading out from that spot on her mouth where his bare finger had touched her.

“My father *is* a randy old jackass, I was searching for those very words. He can offend without meaning to, and sometimes, I fear, when he does mean to.”

“He’s not the first titled man to show uncouth behavior toward women.” She linked her fingers in her lap lest she touch her lip as he had.

“No, but he’s my father. If he should come to a premature end, all the burdens of his title will fall upon me, and that, rather than filial devotion, makes me hope your brothers will not have to challenge him to pistols at dawn.”

The daft man was genuinely worried. “My brothers are Scottish, but they don’t lack sense. If Ian took to dueling with his guests, God Almighty could live next door, and the most baseborn coal nabob wouldn’t give a farthing to spend a day with us. Her Majesty has just about frowned dueling out of existence.”

Plain speaking wasn’t always inappropriate, and Mary Fran sensed Matthew Daniels could tolerate a few home truths.

“I fear, my lady, you underestimate your brothers’ devotion to you, and”—he held up a staying hand when she would have interrupted—“you underestimate the depths of my father’s more crass inclinations.”

Mary Fran studied him, studied the serious planes of his face, and noted a little scar along the left side of his jaw. “I can handle your father, Mr. Daniels. I won’t go running to my brothers in a fit of the weeps because he tries to take liberties.”

“Tries to take liberties again, don’t you mean?”

He had blue eyes—blue, blue eyes that regarded her with wry sternness.

“He’s too slow, Mr. Daniels. He can but try, and I shall thwart him.”

He peered at her, his lips thinning as he came to some conclusion. “Your brother had the opportunity to take my father very much to task the other evening for a verbal slight to you. Balfour instead suggested I see my sire to bed. I’d suspect the reputation of the Scots’ temper to be overrated, except I’ve seen Highland regiments in action.”

“Our tempers are simply as passionate as the rest of our emotions.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she realized she’d spoken *too* plainly. Ungenteelly, though that was probably not a proper word.

“I agree,” he said, rising and extending his hand to her. “Having fought alongside many a Scot, I can say their honor, their humor, their valor, and their tempers were all formidable. Still, I am asking you to apply to me rather than your family should my father’s bad manners become troublesome. I assure you, I’ll deal with him appropriately.”

She wouldn’t be *applying* to anybody. If the baron overstepped again, he’d face consequences Mary Fran herself was perfectly capable of meting out. God had given each woman two knees for just such a purpose.

“I can agree to bring concerns regarding your father’s conduct to you, Mr. Daniels, before I mention them to my brothers.” She placed her hand in his and let him draw her to her feet.

And there they stood for a long, curious moment. His blue eyes bored into her as if he were trying to divine her thoughts.

“My name is Matthew,” he said, still holding her hand. “I would be obliged if, when we are not in company, you would do me the honor of using it.”

He was so grave about this invitation, Mary Fran had to conclude he was sincere. He would be *honored* if she addressed him familiarly—there was no accounting for the English and their silly manners. She nodded, put her hand on his arm, and let him escort her back to the house in silence.

She did not invite him to address her as Mary Frances.

Maybe being born with red hair, slanting green eyes, a mouth that personified sin incarnate, and a body to match made a woman sad—for Mary Frances MacGregor was a sad woman.

Matthew drew this conclusion by watching her at meals, watching the way she presided over the table with smiles aplenty and little real joy. He drew further evidence of her sadness from the way her brothers treated her, verbally tiptoeing around her the way Matthew had learned to tiptoe around his wife when she was tired, fretful, or in anticipation of her courses.

And Mary Frances worried about her brothers. The anxiety was there in her eyes, in the way she watched them eat and kept their drinks topped up. To Matthew, it was obvious the MacGregor clan was not happy about having to trade their title for English coin, but the Scots as a race could not often afford the luxury of sentiment.

Because she was sad, and because he genuinely enjoyed dancing, when the middle brother, Gilgallon MacGregor, challenged Aunt Julia to a waltz—those were his words, he *challenged* her to a waltz after dinner—and Julia had laughingly accepted, Matthew joined the party adjourning to the ballroom.

“Who will play for us if I’m to show Gilgallon what a dance floor is for?” Julia asked the assemblage.

Before Genie could offer, and thus ensure she wouldn’t be dancing with Balfour, Matthew strode over to the big, square piano. “I will provide the music for the first set, on the condition that Lady Mary Frances turns the pages for me.”

Genie shot him a disgruntled look, but stood up with the youngest brother, Connor MacGregor, while Balfour led a blushing Hester onto the floor.

“What shall we play for them?” Matthew asked. “Three couples doesn’t quite make a set.”

“I believe my idiot brother demanded a waltz,” Lady Mary Frances muttered as she sorted through a number of music books stacked on the piano’s closed lid. “Take your pick.”

She shoved a volume of Chopin at him, which wasn’t quite ballroom material.

“I take it you don’t approve of dancing?” Matthew flipped through until he found the Waltz in C-sharp Minor and opened the cover shielding the keys.

“Dancing’s well enough,” the lady said. Her tone was anything but approving.

“Maestro, we’re growing moss over here!” Julia called, but she was smiling up at her partner in the manner of a younger, more carefree woman, and for that alone, Matthew would dust off his pianistic skills.

He launched into the little waltz, a lilting, sentimental confection full of wistful die-away ascending scales and a turning, sighing secondary melody.

“You play well, Mr. Daniels.”

Lady Mary Frances nearly whispered this compliment, and Matthew could feel her gaze on his hands. “That’s Matthew, if you please. I’ve always enjoyed music, but there wasn’t much call for it in

the military.”

Out on the dance floor, by the soft evening light coming through the tall windows, three couples turned down the room in graceful synchrony. Beside Matthew, Lady Mary Frances was humming softly and swaying minutely to the triple meter. He finished off the exposition with another one of those tinkling ascending scales, which allowed him to lean far enough to the right that his shoulder pressed against the lady’s.

“Page, my lady.”

She flipped the page, and Matthew began the contrasting section, a more stately interlude requiring little concentration, which was fortunate. Lady Mary Frances had applied a different scent for the evening. That fresh, cedary base note was still present, but the overtones were more complicated. Complicated enough that Matthew could envision sniffing her neck to better parse her perfume.

“What scent are you wearing, my lady? It’s particularly appealing.”

“Just something I put together on an idle day.”

Matthew glanced over at her to find she was watching the dancers, her expression wistful. “You haven’t had an idle day since you put your hair up, and likely not many before then.”

“A rainy day, then. We have plenty of those. Your sisters are accomplished dancers.”

“As are your brothers.” For big men, they moved with a lithe grace made more apparent for their kilts. “You should take a turn, my lady.”

“No, I should not. I’ve things to see to, Mr. Daniels, but it is nice to watch my brothers enjoying themselves on the dance floor.”

“Page.”

She turned the page for him, and Matthew had to focus on the recapitulation of the first, delicate, sighing melody. The final ascending scale trickled nearly to the top of the keyboard, which meant Matthew was leaning into Lady Mary Frances at the conclusion of the piece.

And she was allowing it.

“Oh, well done, my boy, well done.” Altsax clapped in loud, slow movements. “I’d forgotten your fondness for music. Perhaps you’d oblige us with another waltz, that I might have the pleasure of dancing with Lady Mary Frances?”

“When did he slither into the room?” Lady Mary Frances muttered, resignation in her tone.

Matthew rose from the piano bench. “I’m afraid that won’t serve, your lordship. My compensation for providing music for the ladies is a waltz with my page turner. Perhaps Hester will oblige at the keyboard?”

Gilgallon turned a dazzling smile on Matthew’s younger sister. “And I’ll turn the pages for her.”

“My lady, may I have this dance?” Matthew extended his hand to Lady Mary Frances, who smiled up at him in a display of teeth and thinly banked forbearance.

“The honor would be mine, Mr. Daniels.”

He led her to the dance floor, arranged himself and his partner into waltz position, and felt a sigh of recognition as Hester turned her attention to Chopin’s Nocturne in E Minor. The piece was often overlooked, full of passion and sentiment, and it suited the woman in Matthew’s arms.

“I hate this piece.” Lady Mary Frances moved off with him, speaking through clenched teeth.

“You dance to it well enough.” This fulsome compliment—certainly among the most lame Matthew had ever offered a lady—had her scowling in addition to clenching her teeth.

“It’s too—”

“Don’t think of the music then. Tell me what it was like growing up in the Highlands.”

She tilted her head as Matthew drew her through the first turn. “It was cold and hungry, like this music. Never enough to eat, never enough peat to burn, and always there was *longing*...”

Her expression confirmed that she hadn’t meant to say that, which pleased Matthew inordinately. That he could dance Mary Frances MacGregor out of a little of her self-containment was a victory of sorts. “What else?”

“What else, what?”

“What else was it like, growing up in these mountains?”

He pulled her a trifle closer on the second turn, close enough that he could hear her whisper. “It was lonely, like this blasted tune.”

“Your brothers weren’t good company?”

“They are my *older brothers*, Mr. Daniels. They were no company at all.”

She danced beautifully, effortlessly, a part of the music she professed to hate.

“And yet here I am, my lady, an older brother along on this curious venture for the express purpose of providing my sisters and their chaperones company.”

She huffed out a sigh. “I appreciate that you’re preserving me from your father’s attentions, Mr. Daniels, but I assure you such gallantry is not necessary.”

“Matthew, and perhaps I’m not being gallant, perhaps I’m being selfish.”

He turned her under his arm, surprised to find he’d spoken the truth. A man leaving the military in disgrace was not expected to show his face at London’s fashionable gatherings, and had he done so, few ladies would have stood up with him.

“What was it like growing up in the South?”

Her question was a welcome distraction. “I didn’t. I went to boarding school in Northumbria. I was cold and hungry for most of it.”

Her gaze sharpened. “Why the North?”

Another turn, another opportunity to pull her a bit closer and enjoy the way her height matched with his own. “The North is cheaper, and Altsax isn’t what anybody would call a doting father. I made some friends and spent holidays with them to the extent I could.”

Though those same friends would probably be careful not to recognize him now.

“So you weren’t lonely.”

He distracted her with a daring little spin, one she accommodated easily, and from there, conversation lapsed while Matthew tried to enjoy waltzing with a gorgeous, fragrant woman in his arms.

Her last comment bothered him though. In boarding school, he’d been lonely. The schoolmates who’d taken pity on him for a holiday here or there had not been the sort of companions to provide solace to a boy exiled from his home and family. The military had been a slight improvement, for a time, and then no improvement at all.

As Matthew bowed over the lady’s hand to the final strains of the nocturne, he admitted to himself that he’d been lonely for most of his boyhood as well as most of his military career.

And he was lonely still.

Mary Fran had a soft spot for wounded creatures, and the tall Englishman was nothing more than another wounded creature. The loneliness came through in his silences, in the grim quality of his expression around his father, in the way he watched his sisters as if bandits might seize them and carry them off.

A severely handsome, grave, quiet, broad-shouldered, wounded creature with beautiful, tanned hands. Matthew Daniels's hands embodied both grace and strength, and even on this family outing through the woods, Mary Fran had occasion to admire them often. Matthew—*Mr. Daniels*—was a solicitous escort, not like a brother who'd pelt along willy-nilly, dragging her forward as if she were a reluctant bullock.

He would shift his hold on her, grip her hand, link their fingers, or grasp her wrist to guide her over logs she'd been hopping since childhood, or past boulders that were hardly going to rise up and roll directly into her path. This solicitude was... lovely. His attention was also largely silent, and his gaze never suggested anything inappropriate.

She rather wished it would.

"That was a heartfelt sigh, my lady. Shall we tell the others we're turning around?"

He'd apparently forgotten he had taken hold of her hand, and she wasn't going to remind him.

"It's a beautiful summer day, I'm free of my chores, and I have a handsome escort for wandering my own property at my leisure. Maybe it was a sigh of pleasure."

He liked that answer. She could tell by the way he flattened his lips as if suppressing a smile, and the way his blue eyes lit briefly with humor.

"You regard this land as your property, don't you?" He shifted his grip again, so their fingers were linked. "Your brothers are almost here at your sufferance."

"They're good brothers, but no, I don't regard the place as my own, really. I wasn't raised here. None of us were. We spent our childhoods farther west in the mountains and came here from time to time to learn the English and have some schooling. The boys had to go to university. I, of course did not."

"You would have terrified the professors."

"Is that a compliment, Mr. Daniels?" *And when was he going to release her hand?*

"Yes, you may be assured it was." He reached up with his free hand and held back a drooping branch, so Mary Fran had to duck very close to him to pass. He didn't step back, and it occurred to her the man was quite possibly doing some English approximation of flirting with her.

Ah, to be flirted with. Not propositioned, not chased, not groped and pinched and leered at... A place in her heart that had been growing cold since her farce of a wedding night felt a small, curling warmth spread through it. To be flirted with...

But the rules of fair play—the English were very big on fair play—decreed she really ought to spare him the effort.

"You could have me, you know. Or I think you could."

Some subtle, smooth innuendo had been called for—an Englishwoman might have known how to dangle her interest coyly—but worse, far, far worse than Mary Fran's blunt declaration, was the awful longing she heard in her own voice.

The despair.

He did drop her hand then and turned to face her. “*Have you?*” His face betrayed nothing. Not shock, not pleasure, not judgment. But that was good, Mary Fran decided. She would have hated to see that calculating, lustful gleam in his eyes, despite her awful, bold words.

Hated to see him glancing around, choosing a tree to brace her against as he rucked up her skirts and unfastened his trousers. Hated it and longed for it. *God in heaven.*

Her chin came up, but this did little to reestablish her dignity when he was taller than she. She opted for bravado, her usual choice in difficult moments. “I’d dally with you, I think. I’m almost sure of it, in fact. I’m a widow—have been for years. I know all about being a widow.”

He looked... perplexed as he peered down at her. “You know about being a widow.” He regarded her searchingly then lifted his hand to trace her hairline with the side of his thumb. Mary Fran closed her eyes to absorb the unexpected pleasure of that slow, simple caress.

“You know about being lonely,” he said, dropping his hand. “I know about that as well, and while I’m flattered you’re *almost* sure you’d *consider* importuning from me, I am *not* sure I’m willing to settle for merely that. I hear Hester very obligingly whistling up the path so as not to surprise us. Let’s join her, shall we?”

He put her hand on his arm, wrapped his fingers over hers in an odd little display of gallantry, and led her in the direction of Hester’s off-key whistling.

While Mary Fran blinked back the damnable and stupid urge to cry.

When a man who’d been celibate for some time declined a beautiful woman’s almost, conditional, not-quite invitation to dally, that man was entitled to consider the situation afresh, when his wits were not sent begging by the way dappled sunlight danced across auburn hair. Matthew assured himself of this as he approached his hostess.

“Lady Mary Frances, a word with you, if you don’t mind a small interruption of your breakfast?”

She glanced over at him as he slid into the chair next to hers, but didn’t quite hide the impatience behind her smile. “Of course, Mr. Daniels. Are we to racket about the garden while we chat, or perhaps take another turn in the woods?”

“If you’d prefer, but I was hoping you’d show me some of the property, assuming the stable can spare us a pair of mounts.”

The idea had come to him in the middle of the previous night, when recollection of the feel of her waltzing in his arms, the feel of her hand clasping his, and the sound of her musical burr had necessitated two occasions of self-gratification.

“You’re inviting me for a ride?” Her brows knitted, suggesting the prurient interpretation of her question had escaped her notice.

“It’s a lovely day, and I’ve heard rumors that visitors to Balfour might chance upon Her Majesty if they spend enough time in your woods.”

As if he ever again wanted to report to his Queen face-to-face.

“A short ride, then. I’ve—”

“Things to see to,” Matthew finished for her. “Shall we meet in the stables in an hour?”

Those delicately arched brows came down. “I hardly need an hour to pop into a habit, Mr. Daniels.”

Matthew leaned near to top up her teacup. “You would have made an excellent officer, my lady. You are disciplined, organized, and decisive, also indifferent to your own comfort.”

She watched while Matthew added cream and sugar to her tea. "I'm not indifferent to my own ___"

He lifted the cup close to her nose, so she could see the fragrant steam curling up and catch a whiff of rich black tea. "You have not yet taken a single bite of your breakfast, and I would not hurry you through your meal. Part of the challenge Her Majesty's forces face in the Balkans is the simple logistical difficulty of defending our interests so far from home. This is the same factor that eventually defeated Napoleon. Drink your tea and eat a proper breakfast."

She took a sip. "The Russian winter had a hand in things, as I recall my history."

He couldn't help but smile. "You know some military history."

She smiled back, a small but genuine smile that fortified Matthew every bit as much as a stout cup of breakfast tea might. "Four older brothers, Mr. Daniels, and more than a passing respect for Highland winters. I'll see you in the stables in an hour."

Matthew rose, intent on changing into riding attire, but was arrested by the gaze of Ian MacGregor, Earl of Balfour. His lordship was leaning against the doorjamb to the breakfast parlor, the look in the man's eyes speculative.

"Daniels."

"My lord." Matthew hoped that would be the end of it, but the earl ambled along beside him as Matthew headed into the corridor.

"Ach, must we be milording so early in the day? If you're going to flirt with my sister, MacGregor will do, or Ian, since we've several MacGregors underfoot."

The earl wasn't just tall, he was broad, well muscled, and exuded the fitness of a man of the land. Dark hair made a handsome contrast to mossy green eyes, and his smile would have felled many a debutante in the ballrooms to the south.

"I'm going riding with the lady," Matthew said, pausing at the foot of the stairway.

The earl paused right along with him. "Riding is always a nice place to start. Can't get up to too much mischief when you're on separate horses, can you? You will be on separate horses?"

"For God's sake, Balfour, your sister is hardly going to content herself riding pillion behind an Englishman."

"Her husband was English." Balfour studied his big, blunt fingernails, while Matthew absorbed that Balfour was trying to warn him of something.

"It is not a crime to be English." *And why, come to think of it, did Lady Mary Frances eschew her married name?*

"It isn't any great advantage, either, at least not when a fellow is sniffing around Mary Fran's skirts." Balfour's face creased into a grin that wasn't exactly merry. "Enjoy your ride."

With that cryptic comment, the earl spun on his heel and disappeared in the direction of the breakfast parlor.

Matthew repaired to his room, laid out his riding clothes, and tried to determine what Balfour had been telling him. The Scots were deuced canny, of necessity. By virtue of famine, clearances, service on various fighting fronts in Highland regiments, or by operation of prejudicial law, a stupid Scot was historically a dead Scot. This reality had been impressed upon Matthew by the Scottish officers he'd shared campfires with, and by his own family's Scottish history.

But the typical Scot was also fair-minded to a fault.

Balfour really had been warning him, he decided. Warning him that only a stupid Englishman

would do more than flirt with the fair Mary Frances.

“Or perhaps,” Matthew told his reflection in the cheval mirror, “an Englishman who relishes a challenge and recognizes another lonely soul when he sees one.”

Though maybe dallying with Mary Fran was the aspiration of an Englishman who was both lonely *and* stupid.

“I haven’t been up to this lookout since...” Mary Fran paused to take in a great lungful of heather-scented air and tried to think back.

“Then it has been too long. A view like this restores the soul.”

Matthew Daniels sat a horse like a man born to the saddle. His horsemanship was a relaxed, natural thing, not a set of skills he’d honed just to show off, and his boots and breeches weren’t in the first stare of fashion. They looked comfortable, like Mary Fran’s old green velvet riding habit.

He gestured to the west, to the gleaming gray edifice under construction farther up the River Dee. “I take it that’s Balmoral?”

“None other. Albert had it designed for his Queen—and their children, of course. It seems a shame to use such a lovely property only a few months of the year.”

“It seems a shame that you are moldering away here in the countryside the year round, my lady. Doesn’t some part of you long for the society of Edinburgh?”

If he’d been flirting with her the livelong morning, if his efforts to boost her into the saddle had been the least forward, if he’d done anything except appreciate the beauty of her home, Mary Fran might have launched a barbed retort discouraging his suggestion that her life was somehow incomplete.

But he’d been a perfect gentleman. Polite and friendly without a hint of impropriety. His demeanor reminded Mary Fran of the way all the gentlemen had treated her prior to her marriage.

“I might like to see a bit of the South, but then I’d have to leave my Fee, wouldn’t I?”

“I beg your pardon?” He stood in the stirrups then settled back into the saddle, an equestrian at his leisure. “Your fee? I can’t imagine your brothers would begrudge you wages should you take a short holiday.”

Too late, Mary Fran realized that the barrier she vigilantly maintained between her role as hostess and her role as mother had fallen. Oh, the female guests usually got wind of Fiona at some point—the child was outright pestering the spinster cousin, Augusta Merrick—but Mary Fran kept her daughter away from the gentlemen guests.

Far, far away, particularly from the English ones.

“Not that kind of fee, but my Fiona.”

Daniels’s expression didn’t change.

“My *daughter* Fiona.” Mary Fran pretended to study Balmoral, a brand-new building intended to resemble something medieval, at least from a distance. She knew the place well—Her Majesty was a good neighbor, and His Highness an avid sportsman—but she did not know why she kept talking.

“Fiona is my heart. I love her dearly, but she’s impossible sometimes. She says the most confounding things, and she has no sense except at the oddest moments. Her uncles dote on her, and I worry that isn’t a good thing, then I worry that I ought to be doting on her.”

She fell silent, wishing not that she’d kept her mouth shut, but that her companion would say

something.

“You sound like my commanding officers, fretting over the troops. Doubting yourself for coddling them, doubting yourself for enforcing the discipline an army needs to function, despairing over the best soldiers when they do the most idiot things on leave.” He offered her a smile, a slow tipping up of his lips, the same smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. “It’s the very devil when one can’t help but care, isn’t it?”

She realized something about him then. He was not only a former military man at loose ends in the civilian world, not only an Englishman, not only a paying guest whose sister might well be the next Countess of Balfour.

He was a man, a human being, a fellow creature. A man who had refused Mary Fran’s invitation to sin simply because he was decent.

She basked in his smile, in the understanding of it, and offered him her own smile in return. “The very devil, indeed. I want to brain my brothers most days. They must wear their muddy boots in the house, swear in front of Fiona, and tell lewd jokes when they think I’m not listening.”

“Sounds like life in the military—though you might also have alluded delicately to the noisome bodily functions one doesn’t speak of in Polite Society.”

He was pretending to study Balmoral now too, but Mary Fran couldn’t help it. She laughed, a chuckle at first, then a great big belly laugh that had the horse shifting beneath her.

“Tell me more about military life, Matthew Daniels. I might have some useful suggestions for its improvement.”

They let their horses amble down the hillside while Matthew told one tale after another of pranks and skirmishes, though gradually, his tone became more serious.

“You did not want to leave,” Mary Fran guessed. “You hated it, and you loved it.”

He stroked a gloved hand down his horse’s crest. “I think most career military have mixed feelings, but no, I didn’t love it. I felt useful, though, and it grates upon me daily that I must idle about, my father’s much-vaunted heir, when I could be of real service in a part of the world that’s quickly heading for war.”

Useful. She knew what a cold comfort that was. *Useful* became an acceptable way to go on only when the alternative was to be useless.

“Could you go back?”

Mary Fran might have missed the expression on his face, but she liked watching the way emotion would flicker through his blue eyes. The happy emotions—humor, joy, pleasure in the scenery—were fleeting, while the other emotions faded more gradually.

“I cannot go back. Not ever, and I do not want to.”

Despair—profound despair—but also resignation crossed his features.

“I wish we’d brought a picnic.” The observation was as close as she could come to admitting she did not want to go back either—to the housework, the squabbling maids, her swearing brothers, and sometimes even to her own confounding, exhausting, endlessly dear daughter.

“A picnic sounds like a lovely idea for another day, my lady. Tell me, how do you think your brother is faring with his courting of my sister?”

The change in topic was welcome, and it was a relief to think that if Ian married Eugenia, then Matthew Daniels might become a relation of some sort to Mary Fran—and to Fiona.

“Ian must be studying the terrain before advancing his troops,” Mary Fran replied. “I can’t say as

I'd be very impressed with his efforts thus far, though you English do delight in your mincing about. He can hardly pounce on the lady and carry her off to his castle."

"Mincing about. I take it mincing about would not meet with your approval were a man to court you?"

They were back to his version of flirting. It made the prospect of her duties at Balfour a little more bearable and suggested that Matthew had had enough of shadows and regrets for one morning. "Mincing about would not impress me one bit. Shall I race you back to the stables?"

He didn't *let* her win, but Mary Fran's mount was carrying considerably less weight, and Mary Fran knew the terrain. They called it a draw, and as Matthew escorted her up to the house, Mary Fran let herself wonder: If mincing about as a courting strategy would not impress her, then what would?

"Pretend you don't see me."

The Balfour estate was home to many children. Matthew had observed them weeding the vegetable plots, herding sheep, spreading chicken manure on the pastures, mucking stalls, and otherwise taking on the tasks appropriate to youth. This was the first child he'd seen in Balfour House itself, and he knew in an instant the girl dismounting nimbly from the banister was the dear and dread Fiona.

"Are you asking me to lie, child?"

She studied him with the trademark MacGregor green eyes, twirling the end of a coppery braid between her fingers. "Not lie, *pretend*. This is the ladies' wing, so I will *pretend* I didn't see you here either."

"I'm fetching my aunt, my sisters, and my cousin, to escort them to dinner. My name is Matthew Daniels."

"Fiona Ursula MacGregor Flynn." She gave a sprightly curtsy that looked more like a Highland dance maneuver. "I know who you are. You are Miss Augusta's cousin, Miss Daniels's brother, and Miss Hester's brother too. The baron is your father, and Miss Julia is your auntie by marriage, which is why she's so young."

"I'm impressed." He was also charmed by this miniature version of Mary Fran. "Lady Mary Frances is your mother, and the earl and his brothers are your uncles."

"Yes." She twirled around, smiling gleefully. "And you are our guests. I had an adventure today."

Matthew took up a seat on the bottom stair. "I expect you have adventures most days. Lots of them."

"Not like this. A gentleman should ask a lady's permission before he takes a seat, you know." In her thick, piping burr, she was reminding him of his manners as a kindness.

"A lady stays off the banisters. What was your adventure?" Because, of course, she was dying to be asked, and Matthew did not like disappointing even so young a lady.

She plopped down on the stair beside him and tucked her pinny over her knees. "Romeo came after us."

"Romeos generally do give chase where pretty ladies are concerned." And this one was going to be gorgeous, right down to the freckles she shared with her mother.

"Romeo is our bull, our *breeding* bull, though the uncles won't let him step out with Highland heifers, only with the Angus. Miss Augusta and I went for a picnic, and Romeo came calling. Uncle

Ian saved us, and I was very brave.”

“You’ve had a busy morning. How is Miss Augusta?” Visions of Augusta Merrick scrambling over a stone wall brought back childhood memories of similar escapades with her and his sisters.

“She said she’ll tell Ma for me, tonight, after the ladies have had their tea. Ma won’t skelp m’ bum if the ladies are present. I think I should get a medal from the Queen for being so brave.”

This last was bravado, the kind of bravado a child produces when she knows her opinion will not be shared by her parent.

“She won’t skelp your backside. She might weep all over you, though.”

Fiona grimaced and resumed twirling her braid. “That would be awful. Ma hardly ever cries. I hate it when she cries, and so do the uncs. Uncle Con makes her mad so she won’t cry, and Uncle Gil makes her laugh.”

“What does Uncle Ian do?”

“Uncle Ian neg-o-ti-ates. He explained it to me. It’s a bit like playing pretend.”

Before Matthew could fashion a reply to this revelation—Ian would be negotiating the marriage settlements before too much longer—he caught an acrid whiff of cigar smoke.

Fiona sprang to her feet. “G’day, sir. I’ll just be going now.” She shot off up the stairs as Altsax sauntered into the corridor.

“Taken to lurking in the ladies’ wing, Matthew?”

Matthew rose and resisted the urge to dust off his backside. “I’ve come to fetch the women for dinner.”

“You won’t find that Valkyrie sister of Balfour’s here in the women’s wing. She bides in the family wing, where her brothers can do a better job of protecting her virtue than they did in the past. Sound strategy cozying up to the brat, though.”

“Her name is Fiona.” Fiona Ursula MacGregor Flynn, which did not explain why the mother was still using her maiden name.

Altsax fiddled with an ornate gold sleeve button so it winked in the evening sun slanting through the nearby window. “Getting protective already? You can take the boy out of the army, but not the army out of the boy? How very quaint, given the manner in which you and the military parted company. If you’re going to bed the Valkyrie, I suggest you be about it—though that is not a woman in whose presence I’d let my guard down one bit. She’ll likely steal the rings from your fingers while you lie sated and spent in her arms.”

“Your opinion regarding our hostess is ill-bred in the extreme.”

Matthew had managed to speak quietly—Hester or Genie could come tripping along any moment—and he had not balled up his fists or clenched his teeth. Even so, the comment was a tactical error, one that would inspire Altsax to further crudeness if nothing else.

“My, my, my!” Altsax smiled broadly, revealing tobacco-stained teeth. “Ill-bred, am I? It pains me to point out to you that I sit in the Lords and have more wealth than these kilted heathen will see in ten lifetimes. I can be ill-bred when I please, where I please, in any manner I please.”

“Which freedom you feel compelled to demonstrate on far too many occasions,” Matthew responded as pleasantly as he could.

The humor died from Altsax’s rheumy eyes. “Mark me on this, young man: you are a good part of the reason I had to drag your sister into the wilds of Scotland in search of a title for her. Had you not left a trail of scandal clear back to the Crimea, she could have had her pick of the London bachelors.

Instead, I'm put to the expense and ignominy of treating with a damned Scot for her hand, and a reluctant damned Scot at that. Cross me at your peril, *Colonel*. I can leave my wealth to your sisters and wish you the joy of a lowly barony."

A door opened a few yards down the corridor. Julia Redmond stood there, attired for dinner, a forced smile on her pretty features. "We'll be ready in just a moment, gentlemen."

"Matthew will escort you to dinner," Altsax said. "Though once the earl and I start parlaying family secrets between us, I doubt even a liberal-minded Scot would want the likes of my son at his table."

The baron stalked off as Julia slipped her fingers around Matthew's arm. "He's full of nonsense, you know. Genie has had three Seasons to pick out a swain, and she's waiting for some lightning bolt from on high to smite her and her one and only simultaneously. As an approach to matrimony, it hasn't much to recommend it."

Julia was a petite, pretty woman only two years Matthew's junior. Her marriage to Altsax's younger brother hadn't been a love match, and widowhood had left Julia comfortably well-off.

"You are kind, Julia. Altsax was speaking nothing more than truth. Association with me will not aid either of my sisters in their marital aspirations."

Julia kissed his cheek, bringing him a hint of roses and solace. "I've heard very little talk, Matthew, at least among the ladies of Polite Society. Whispers and hints at the edges of the ballrooms, but nobody seems to know exactly what went on. By this time next year, everybody will have forgotten. Let's fetch your sisters and Augusta, and go to dinner."

Amid a gaggle of pretty, merry women, Matthew traveled the earl's house to the formal parlor, where they'd enjoy whisky and conversation in anticipation of another fine meal. He'd enjoy feasting his eyes on Lady Mary Frances in her finery, too, and he'd tell himself that old army scandals would not matter here in the Highlands.

Except they likely would. Perhaps not to Balfour, or to his brothers, but if Altsax was the one relaying the tale, then at least to Lady Mary Frances, an army scandal that had Matthew Daniels compromising the honor of a young lady would matter a great deal.

"I was hoping I might find you out here." Matthew Daniels sauntered up from the direction of the gardens, and the guilt roiling in Mary Fran's gut threatened to choke her.

"I'm in need of a little solitude, Mr. Daniels." She pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, though it was a beautiful, soft night.

"No, you're not." He picked up her hand and tucked it over his arm. "Something has you overset. Are you feeling guilty for having spent the morning with me? All we did was talk, my lady, and admire your family's holdings."

Without her consent, he escorted her off the terrace and down into the gardens. And damn him and all his people unto the nineteenth generation, he was *right*.

"I talked. You talked, though you said precious little."

"I said enough. I don't usually burden anyone with remembrances of military life." He sounded a touch put out with himself, or maybe perplexed, but Mary Fran had been fascinated to hear his recounting of a colonel's responsibilities in the political cauldron that was the Crimea. She gathered he'd been mustered out through his father's machinations, which had left the baronial heir guilty and frustrated as war loomed ever closer.

Imagine that. An Englishman feeling guilty the same as a negligent mother might feel guilty.

“I won’t be riding out with you again, Mr. Daniels.”

“I was Matthew earlier today. I rather liked being Matthew to you, and I liked spending my morning with Mary Fran.”

His voice held no accusation, more a sort of wistfulness she could understand all too well.

“Matthew, then.” And she couldn’t leave it at that. She prattled on with no more poise than Fee might show on market day, saying things a grown woman ought not to burden a guest with. “Fiona was nearly trampled by a bull today while I was out larking around with you. She might have been killed.”

She paused in their progress to take a steadying breath. Thank God for the darkness. Thank God for the distance from the house.

He was a man blessed with fluid movement, like a big cat. He didn’t spook her. He just eased around to stand directly before her, put both hands on her shoulders, and pulled her gently into his embrace. “Tell me, Mary Fran. I assume she came to no harm, or you wouldn’t be out here in the darkness, flagellating yourself over a simple childhood misadventure.”

She went into his arms, more grateful for the refuge he provided than she could say. Her brothers treated her to their offhand version of affection, and from time to time Mary Fran allowed herself a discreet flirtation with a passing fellow.

But to be held...

“Talk to me, Mary Fran. You don’t need solitude. You have too damned much solitude even as you thunder around amid your family. Talk to me...” He went on, a low, soothing patter accompanied by equally soothing strokes of his hands over her back, her shoulders, her hair. She would not mistake him for a gentle man, not ever. His ability to *be* gentle had the tears spilling from her eyes.

“I love her,” she got out. “I love her *so much*, but I’m no good at being a mother. I’m no good at it at all... I never know where she is. I never know what to say to her. I never know what she needs except that I provide it too little and too late. My brothers help, but they’re only men...”

She just damn cried for long, wearying minutes. Cried until she realized Matthew had settled her on a bench and kept an arm around her shoulders. He let her wet the front of his shirt and his neckcloth, while she kept his handkerchief balled up in her hand.

When Mary Fran at last fell silent, his thumb traced her damp cheek—a small gesture, but so intimate. She turned her face into his palm, feeling foolish, helpless, and completely at sea.

“I have imposed,” she said, trying to sit up.

“You have been imposed upon,” he countered, keeping her against him. “You’re supposed to un a very fancy guesthouse, take care of three grown men to save them the cost of a housekeeper, play lady of the manor with the Queen of half the known world for your neighbor, and raise a rambunctious child without benefit of a father’s aid, guidance, or coin.”

Put that way, it was hard to decide which hurt worse: the comment about saving her brothers the cost of a housekeeper or the bald fact that Gordie’s family had no interest in Fiona.

“One gets weary,” he said, suggesting he was capable of divining her thoughts. His hand—big, warm, and slightly rough—came to rest on the side of her neck. “Not just tired, but weary. Physically, emotionally, morally. At such times, one needs friends.”

He sounded not English, but simply weary himself. A soldier who’d seen too much of war and not enough of peace. A son chafing under the demands of family. A man resigned to loneliness.

“One needs sleep too.” Mary Fran made another effort to sit up, and he let her, but kept his hand on her nape. “I owe you an apology, Mr. D—Matthew.”

“You owe me nothing.” His thumb stroked over the pulse in her throat, which should have been relaxing but was in truth more of a distraction.

“Earlier today...” Mary Fran steeled herself for the cost of being honest. “I had plans for you. Plans that might have involved the gamekeeper’s cottage, had you cast me even a single curious glance. It’s our informal trysting place, because my brothers won’t bring their passing fancies into the house.”

His thumb paused; Mary Fran’s breath stopped moving in her chest. His thumb resumed its slow progress over her skin; she resumed breathing.

“If all you’d wanted was a tumble, Mary Fran, I’d likely have obliged and acquitted myself as enthusiastically as the situation allowed. You are an exceptionally desirable woman, but I think you want something else more than you want a few minutes of oblivion and desire.”

Oblivion and desire? Was that what she’d been after? He was so much more substantial than that, and the yawning need inside her wanted more too. She tried to see into his eyes in the gathering darkness, but there simply wasn’t enough light.

“Let me hold you, Mary Fran. Please.” A suggestion, not a command. He understood her that much, which was better than she understood herself at the moment. She leaned against him and nuzzled his shoulder until she found a comfortable place to rest.

His arms settled around her. His lips brushed against her forehead, and something eased in her aching chest. She fell asleep in his embrace, there on the hard bench under the stars.

Three

Activity was the army's typical prescription for sexual restlessness, and Matthew found it served in most cases, though after tramping through the Balfour woods for an hour, he still couldn't get the scent and feel of Mary Frances MacGregor out of his mind, or set aside the conundrum of how honest to be with her. When a man wanted something more than a flirtation but deserved less than an attachment the usual rules were no help.

"Good day. A fine morning for a ramble, is it not?"

A man sat in dappled sunshine on a rough bench a few yards up the path. He rose to a substantial height and came toward Matthew. The fowling piece over his shoulder was exquisite, the stock and handle chased with silver. The fellow's attire was as fashionable as country turnout could be.

"Good day..." Matthew's heart gave a lurch as he placed that tall figure and the slight German inflection lacing the man's greeting. "Your Highness."

Francis Albert Augustus Charles Emmanuel, Prince Consort to the Queen, father to a growing brood of princes and princesses, and devoted sportsman, stood in the Balfour woods, frowning at Matthew.

"It's Colonel Daniels, isn't it?"

"Just plain Matthew Daniels, sir."

The frown cleared. "I recall your situation now. Her Majesty has fretted over you, *Mister* Daniels. May I assure her all goes well with you?"

Matthew hesitated an instant too long, proving to himself how distracted he'd become with his hostess at Balfour. "All goes well enough. My family is visiting at Balfour in hopes of securing a match between my sister and the earl."

"A delicate business, the advantageous marriage." The prince's eyes danced while he made this observation. "Walk with me, Mr. Daniels, because my wife will want a full report on you and on the matchmaking at Balfour. I would not disappoint her for anything."

One did not refuse a royal invitation, particularly not when one had nothing better to do but brood over whether a temporary liaison with Lady Mary Frances was worth the unpleasantness bound to ensue if she learned of the scandal hanging over Matthew's head.

"How fares Her Majesty, sir?"

"She loves it here, and the children enjoy it as well. I struggle along too, of course, between the fishing, the grouse moors, the deer-stalking. One must bear up under the press of duty." More German humor lurked in his words, both broad and subtle. His Royal Highness produced a flask and held it out to Matthew. "All is not so very well with you, though, is it? Your papa is not an easy man to spend time with."

The Queen was not the most political monarch to take the throne, but she kept her hand among the peerage socially, as Matthew well knew. "My father is a randy old jackass."

"So why not sport about at the summer house parties or among the fashionable beauties in Edinburgh? The company there is delightful for an unattached fellow."

What to say? The Prince was a devoted husband and father, a well-educated man who did much to improve the situation of the same working-class people who treated him with such disdain. He was also one of very few who knew the truth of Matthew's past.

Matthew took a nip of lovely whisky and passed the flask back. "For the present, at least, I am

not suitable company for fashionable beauties, and with one possible exception, there are no beauties who interest me.”

His Highness tucked the flask into an inner pocket of his shooting jacket, shouldered his piece, and sighted down the barrel as they walked along. “Do you know, Mr. Daniels, that though there is war brewing here and there about the realm, and the condition of our cities is a daily disgrace, and the nonsense that goes on at Westminster is without end, the only thing that truly can disturb me is difficulty between me and my wife? She is my exception, and I flatter myself that I am hers. One does well to pay attention to the exceptions.”

“My past—” Matthew fell silent. He wasn’t going to complain, for God’s sake, not to the Prince Consort.

“If she’s truly exceptional, that will not matter—if it even comes up. Would you like to give this gun a try? It’s heavy, but flatters my vanity, and the aim is excellent. It was a gift from my wife.”

Matthew accepted the fowling piece and spent another hour tramping about the woods, shooting twigs and branches of His Royal Highness’s choosing, and telling himself his past really ought not to matter to Mary Frances.

Provided all she wanted from him was oblivion and desire.

“The hell of it is, Gordie really had asked me to marry him.” Mary Fran made this disclosure to Matthew—he was no longer Mr. Daniels, even when they were in company—while they strolled the gardens after dinner. The men had abandoned their port and cigars by mutual agreement, leaving a surprised Mary Fran to accept an invitation to enjoy the flowers.

“Were you going to take him up on his proposal?”

She peered over at her escort. The night was warm enough that he’d shed his jacket and carried it over one arm as he walked beside her. He wasn’t touching her, and she... missed him. Missed the touch of him, missed the greater proximity necessitated by walking with arms entwined.

“I don’t know if I was going to accept. I’ve puzzled over it. Gordie was the marquess’s spare, and an earl’s daughter would be considered acceptable in his family, even a Highland earl’s daughter. I’m fairly certain I chose him because he was not acceptable to mine.”

“Because he was English.”

Matthew spoke the words softly, though in the dying light, Mary Fran felt the frustration in him.

“Any Englishman would have annoyed my family, but we did marry, didn’t we? Gordie was as much a Lowlander by breeding as English, though English alone does not cast a man from my family’s favor.”

“Then what was his besetting sin?”

His curiosity seemed genuine, and she ought to tell him, but even after all she *had* told him, the words didn’t come easily.

“Let’s sit a bit.” She glanced around for a bench, until Matthew took her arm.

“Up the hill, we can watch the stars come out.”

She was a widow, they were in full view of the house, and Matthew was damnably proper with her at all times. “To the pines, then.”

They walked in silence. Even when he switched his grip and held her hand—fingers laced, no gentlemanly pretense of guiding her along involved—Mary Fran didn’t comment on it.

Didn’t comment on the simple, profound, and rare pleasure of merely holding his hand.

“This will do.” He’d chosen a spot partway up the last slope before the woods took over the park, a place where young evergreens surrounded a shallow bowl and the sod was covered with thick grass.

He spread his coat on the ground, and when Mary Fran lowered herself to it, she realized they weren’t in view of the house after all, not when they were in the grass. A soldier would have known that when he’d chosen their location. Matthew came down beside her and settled back to brace himself on his hands.

“You were going to tell me the rest of it, Mary Fran. The part about why Gordie was such an ideal choice for mischief and a bad choice as a husband.”

Plain speaking, indeed. She plucked a little white clover flower from the grass, then another.

“He was a tramp, you see.” She spoke lightly, so the words wouldn’t stick in her throat. “I knew it, knew that’s how he’d come by all his flirting and flattery. He was *experienced*, and I was eighteen and so wicked smart.”

“I was eighteen once too.”

“But, Matthew, were you such a calculating little baggage you essentially tossed yourself under the regimental tomcat because you thought surely, a man that naughty would know how to look after you your first time?” She couldn’t keep the bitterness from her voice, from rising up the back of her throat as she spoke. “I was wrong, though.”

He moved closer while she systematically plucked hapless clover flowers from the grass.

“I was so bloody, blasted wrong.”

The sound of ripping grass filled a small silence.

“He hurt you.”

She nodded and forced her hands to stop their pillaging. “He hurt me two ways. First, he was not considerate, and then he was not discreet. The second injury was far worse than the first.”

A hand landed on her shoulder, warm and solid. The night wasn’t cold, but the warmth of that hand felt divine. She forced herself to continue with her confession despite the comfort Matthew was offering. “I think Gordie was trying to make me scream. Insurance, in case I wasn’t going to accept his proposal. We were at the regimental ball, a throng of people right out in the corridor.”

He drew in a breath, as if the words gave him pain. “You didn’t scream.” His hand slid across her shoulders to wrap her in an embrace. “You didn’t scream, you didn’t run to your brothers, you didn’t ask for mercy or quarter, but you would not allow your child to be born a bastard.”

“I might have.” She turned to press her face against the side of his throat. “I might have cursed my child that way, except Gordie bragged to his fellows about his latest conquest. His own officers were so disgusted with him that somebody got word to my menfolk, and then six weeks later there were documents executed and the handfasting became official. Ian and Asher promised me Gordie would be sent to Canada, and I’ve wondered if Asher wasn’t the one who made sure I was widowed. I was so stupid.”

“You were so young.”

His thumb traced up the tendon in her neck, a little nothing of a touch, but it eased her soul. He did it again and again, until Mary Fran began to cry.

“I didn’t come out here with you to blubber and carry on like some—”

He slid his hand gently over her open mouth and left it there, giving her a place where she could finally let the screams go. As his arm closed around her more snugly, she keened into his splayed

fingers, her fists clutching his shirt in a desperate grip.

“It shouldn’t still hurt like this...” She shook with the remembered indignity, with the hopelessness and pain of it. She cried for a stubborn young girl with too few options, and for a sad, tired widow who had even fewer. She wept for her daughter, for all the daughters, and even for the family whose love and respect she’d betrayed.

And when the tears finally, finally subsided and Matthew’s thumb was brushing gently over her damp cheeks, still she stayed wrapped up in his embrace.

“I am so ashamed. Bad enough I must comport myself like a strumpet, even worse I should seek pity for it.”

Matthew snorted at that pronouncement. “If an eighteen-year-old virgin *can* behave like a strumpet—which premise I do not concede—then you should forgive her for it. Look around at your housemaids, Mary Fran. They don’t know the difference between proposition and flirtation, not unless they’ve been in service since childhood. You were even more protected than they, more sheltered, and your grandfather very likely was overbearing and old-fashioned. Have you ever discussed this with your brothers?”

“The shame of it...” She started to pull away, needing to use her hands to better express herself, but Matthew bundled her closer.

“Spare me your Highland drama. I don’t mean you need to review all the specifics. Simply ask your brothers if they ever discussed it with your grandfather. My guess is they feel even more ashamed for letting you slip the leash than you do for taking up with a man who was likely lying in wait for you, grooming you for his own ends, did you but know it.”

“*Grooming* me?” She hated the term, because it brought to mind a pony standing docilely in the cross ties, preening at the attention given to mane, tail, hooves, and tack, never noticing the fellow in the corner strapping on roweled spurs and flexing a stout whip.

“Setting you up,” Matthew said, “leading you on, getting his hands on the dowry your family worked so hard to save for you, beating out all the other fellows to the prettiest young lady in the shire, the most highly titled...”

She subsided against him, considering his words. He did not have the right of it, but for the first time in eight years, Mary Fran considered that perhaps *she* didn’t entirely have the right of it either. Gordie could be charming and tolerant, but when he’d pressed his body to hers, the gleam in his eye had been not merely possessive, but *smug*.

Smug, like a man whose plans have played out exactly to his liking.

“I can hear the compression building in your mental engines, Mary Fran. The night’s too pretty for that.”

“You’ve given me much to think about, Matthew Daniels.”

“Let me give you a little more to think about.” He shifted her so she was on her back, the fine silk lining of his coat between her and the fragrant grass.

“Matthew?” *What on earth was he about?*

“You’re not eighteen. You’re a lovely, desirable woman with a lot to offer the right man. You have choices now, Mary Frances. Make those choices, and I’ll abide by them.”

He kissed her, and after no longer hesitation than it takes for a lady to smile in the darkness, she chose to kiss him back.

Lady Mary Frances MacGregor had needed kissing almost as badly as Matthew had needed to kiss her. With the moon rising like a benevolent beacon and the summer air cooling around them, Matthew felt the urge to intimately cherish a woman for the first time in a long, long time.

He desired her, of course he did, but other feelings eclipsed that desire easily. Admiration for her, protectiveness—he'd felt those things for his wife, too—but also a tenderness that hadn't found a place between spouses who'd joined in an expedient union.

He and his wife had been partners, comrades in arms and convenient sources of comfort for each other, but with Mary Fran, he wanted to be a lover. Call it a dalliance, an affair, a discreet liaison—he was not worthy of her hand in marriage, but he could share pleasure with her.

"I'll stop." He made her that promise while grazing his nose along the swell of her bosom. Her scent was luscious here, flowery and sweet. His mouth was literally watering for the taste of her.

"You'd best not stop yet, laddie." She winnowed her fingers through his hair and gripped his scalp in such a fashion as to hold him still for her plundering mouth. "Not bloody... Not if you... God, yessssss."

He eased her breast above her décolletage and ran the tip of his third finger over her nipple. She went still, as if focusing on his caress. *He* certainly focused on it, on the satiny, ruched flesh beneath his fingertip, on the pale, smooth curve of her breast in the moonlight.

"Lovely. Exquisite. Gorgeous..." He closed his lips around her nipple. "Delicious." She arched up, a soft, lovely sigh escaping her as Matthew drew on her. Her fingers stroked over his hair, traced his ears, and then cupped the back of his head.

"Matthew Daniels, you are wearing entirely too many clothes."

She was smiling as she squirmed under him. He could hear her smile; he could taste it. "You're scolding me?"

"I'll be tearing your shirt off in a moment—or skelpin' yer bum."

He liked that idea, but her brother might disapprove of a shredded garment should they meet the earl upon returning to the house. Matthew rested his forehead on her collarbone. "Undress me, my lady."

"You want me to do all the work?"

"Of course not." To make his point, he straddled her and used his teeth to pull her dress off one pale, freckled shoulder. "There will be enough work to go around."

She hugged him, with her arms and legs both, to the extent her skirts and petticoats permitted it. "You make me feel foolish, Matthew Daniels."

"I make you feel pretty and desired, which you are." He sat back and started to work on the myriad buttons fastening the front of her dress. "I make you feel entitled to a little pleasure and some companionship. I make you feel, for a time, a little less lonely."

She stroked a hand over the trousers covering Matthew's burgeoning erection. "I suppose pleasure and companionship are an improvement over oblivion and desire."

Abruptly, what he'd intended as a gift to her—a gift to them both—felt inadequate. "Are you asking me to stop?"

Her brows knitted as she shaped him through the fabric and sent pleasure shuddering through him. "Matthew, I'm asking you to hurry."

He hurried. He hurried *carefully*, as though his life depended upon it, hurried through the unbuttoning and unlacing and loosening and unfastening—and without tearing a single button or seam.

When she lay beneath him, her clothing and stays pushed aside—thank God for the old-fashioned, front-lacing country variety—the moonlight turning her breasts, ribs, and belly to so much living alabaster, Matthew took her hands and settled them on his chest. “My turn.”

“Close your eyes, please.”

He obeyed, which meant he felt the little tugs and twists as her fingers worked at his neckcloth, then at his waistcoat, and finally, his shirt. He could not be naked with her in the sense of revealing his past, but he could share the simple pleasure of physical nudity with her.

“You are such a braw, lovely man.” Her burr had thickened—a *braw, loovly mon*—while her hand skimmed down his breastbone, spreading warmth over his chest.

“I’m a man in need of kisses.” He shrugged his shirt off and shifted to prop himself on an elbow beside her. “Moonlit kisses taste the best.”

They felt the best too, particularly when Mary Fran’s hands roamed his person as if she’d sketch his soul with her touch. She lingered in the oddest spots—his nose, the soft skin inside his elbow, her thumbs in the vulnerable hollow of his armpit—and her hands felt as though they warmed not just his body, not just his lust, but his soul.

“Ye are no’ hurryin’, boyo.”

“I’m pleasuring.” A fine idea, one his conscience took to with the dreadful enthusiasm of a martyr. Mary Fran wasn’t particularly objecting either, so Matthew stroked a hand up her long, shapely leg, baring calves and knees and muscular thighs as he did. “I have the oddest urge to worship your knees.”

“Ye daft Englishman.” Such affection she put into her scolds. Matthew felt an abrupt pang of pity for the departed Gordie Flynn. The man had bungled badly, irrevocably, but had probably been unable to help himself.

Matthew knew exactly how that felt. “Spread your knees a bit, love. Pleasuring takes a little trust.”

She spread her knees more than bit. “And far too much time.”

He’d decided to keep his pants on, which meant the feel of her nails digging into his buttock was muted, a teasing hint of the intensity he craved with her—more damned martyrdom.

“Matthew Daniels, when are you going to bestir—Oh, that is...” Her hand relaxed on his bum and smoothed over him in a languorous pat. “That is lovely.”

Lovely was an understatement. To his questing fingers, the folds of her sex were dewy and hot, soft and sweet to the touch. He wanted to feast on her by moonlight, visually, orally, tactilely, but did not indulge himself beyond what would pleasure her directly.

“Shall I stop?”

She shifted to flat on her back and kissed him as his fingers dallied between her legs. When he dipped shallowly into her heat, she moaned into his mouth.

“More?”

Her grip on Matthew’s hair was fierce enough to distract him from the lust racketing through him.

“Aye, more. Now, if you please.”

“Always in a hurry. Don’t rush me, Mary Fran. I’ve things to see to.”

She was exquisitely responsive, and Matthew had the sense she wasn’t sensitive merely from long abstinence. Despite his own period of self-enforced celibacy, he found the resolve to drive her

mad with arousal, then soothe her with petting and kisses, then drive her mad again.

“Matthew, I canna... I willna... Ach, damn ye...” She trailed off into muttered Gaelic, most of which Matthew understood, thanks to Scottish grandparents on his father’s side. She called him daft and damned and dear, among other things. Lest she reveal unwitting confidences, Matthew increased both the pace and the pressure of his caresses.

“You can have your pleasure, and you shall, my lady. Fly free, Mary Fran.”

He infused the last admonition with a touch of command, despite himself, and though he wanted to watch her face as pleasure overcame her, he instead bent and took her nipple in his mouth.

When he drew strongly on her, she started bucking against his hand in short, sharp rolls of her hips. He thrust two fingers deep into her heat and felt her body fist around him in pleasure. The sensations were in some ways more intimate than coitus, more punishing than a shared climax would have been. Inside his breeches, he was undergoing torture, but in his heart, he flirted with something approaching absolution.

“Ye wretched, pestilential mon.”

“You’re welcome.” He pushed her over to her side and spooned himself around her. “You’ll take a chill in a moment.”

“Not with your great, lovely self draped around me. You make me rethink my estimation of the English.”

“Don’t.” He tucked his arm around her, cradling a full breast in his hand.

She kissed the back of his wrist. “Are you giving me an order, sir?”

“I’m begging you not to trivialize this shared pleasure as some exercise in international diplomacy. Are you all right?”

He was not all right. He was suffering the pangs of unsatisfied lust, which he’d suffered often enough in his life, but he was also suffering more of that need to cherish a woman—this woman.

“No, I am not all right, Mr. Daniels. A relatively harmless, well-mannered if gorgeous fellow has just sashayed out under the stars with me and plucked from my grasp not only my very dignity, but also the one thing I could keep—”

Her voice caught a little. Matthew threaded an arm under her neck and gathered her closer. “The one thing you could keep?”

“Damn and blast you, Matthew.” She heaved out a sigh and shifted. For a frustrating moment, he thought she was going to sit up and start dressing, but she instead shoved him to his back and straddled him. “What just happened—inside me, between us—it has happened before.”

“Frequently, I hope.”

She left off nuzzling his throat to frown at him in the moonlight. “Only when I’m drowsing, ye ken. More asleep than awake. It never happened with my husband. I wouldn’t allow it.”

“Mary Frances MacGregor, you probably drove the poor bastard right out of his mind, which is exactly what he deserved for entrapping you.”

“I drove him to Canada.” This was said miserably, the words muttered against Matthew’s shoulder.

He recognized guilt and recognized even more when guilt had been carried too long. “Gordie had choices too, Mary Fran. A marquess’s second son has a damned lot more choices than an eighteen-year-old virgin has. He could have transferred to a ceremonial regiment, could have apologized, could have wooed you properly, could have admitted he’d been desperate to secure your

hand at any price because he was smitten. You would have let him serve out a reasonable penance and then taken pity on him.”

She went still in his arms, her whole body in an attitude of listening. “I might have. I have a terrible temper, but I’m not unjust, usually. Fiona would say as much.”

Matthew traced the bones and muscles of her back, marveling at the texture of her skin, wishing he could count the freckles on her shoulders. Her silence suggested she was still thinking, reconsidering matters she’d long ago arranged in the optimum configuration for self-torment.

He knew how that felt too.

“When he took ship, I saw him off. The night before...”

Matthew gently squeezed her nape, and she sighed. “You forgave him. It’s good that you forgave him, Mary Fran. Men are much in need of forgiveness, particularly young men who’ve been spoiled their entire lives, and men afraid of losing their heart’s desire.”

When she said nothing, Matthew groped about for his shirt and waistcoat, piling them loosely over her. His next objective involved extracting his handkerchief from his trouser pocket and stuffing it into the hand she’d curled onto his chest.

While the stars winked into view and started their slow journey across the night sky, Matthew Daniels indulged—shamelessly and without limit—in the need to cherish a woman.

The season was flying by, just another summer, just another stretch of long, long days between the brisk months of spring and the brisker months of autumn, and yet Mary Fran had to admit this summer was also different.

Wonderfully different. The source of the difference walked along beside her while Fiona gamboled ahead of them.

“She has your energy,” Matthew observed, “your sense of things to see to.”

“My sense of recklessness. I worry for her.”

He patted the hand she’d curled around his arm. “You should make a list of the matters you must fret about. Write it down and haul it out at first light every day. Spend a full minute worrying about each item on the list—no skipping and no skimping—and then forbid yourself to waste any more time worrying until the next day.”

“You do not have children, Mr. Daniels. See how much good lists do you when that blessing befalls you.”

A shadow crossed his features, reminding Mary Fran that anything having to do with Matthew’s father, even something as oblique as an allusion to the baronial succession, invited that shadow into the discussion.

“I see one!” Fiona went scampering into the stables just as a marmalade kitten disappeared down the barn aisle ahead of her.

In the next instant, Mary Fran connected a tensing of her escort’s posture with the crunch of a boot on the walk behind them and a whiff of cigar smoke on the breeze. “I don’t know when I’ve seen a child exhibit such poor decorum,” the baron drawled. “Regular beatings are your only recourse at this point, Miss MacGregor.”

Matthew turned but kept his hand over Mary Fran’s knuckles. “Altsax, our hostess is Lady Gordon Flynn, if you’re to address her properly.”

“Lady Gordon Flynn? That means she’s claiming to have married the late Quinworth spare, and I

would have heard of such a misalliance.” Altsax swung his gaze to Mary Fran, his smile diabolically ugly. “My own son is known as the corrupt colonel. You needn’t put on airs to gain the notice of the likes of him.”

Beside her, Mary Fran felt Matthew petrify with rage.

“Mama, come quick!” Fee’s voice, redolent with wonder, came from the stables. “I’ve caught one, and it’s *purring!*”

Altsax rolled his eyes. “No doubt my son has purred for you too, my lady. Alas for you, he’s purred for many. Pity you can’t ask his late wife about that, isn’t it?”

“Mama!”

Altsax offered Mary Fran a jaunty bow and spun on his heel as Matthew dropped her arm. Beneath his tan, he’d gone pale, his lips ringed with white. In his eyes, there was no emotion, no warmth.

“Lady Mary Frances, if you’ll excuse—”

She grabbed his hand, which he’d balled into a fist. “You’ll not let that man have the last word like this, Matthew Daniels. Do you honestly think I’d believe one word of the bile he spews? Your father is unnatural. Come.”

He hesitated as Altsax went whistling up the path.

“Matthew, please. You cannot help who your father is—what he is.”

Fiona emerged from the stables, cradling a ball of black and white fur against her chest. “He’s purring! I think he likes me—or maybe it’s a she.”

Mary Fran did not turn loose of Matthew’s hand, but she turned an indulgent smile on her daughter. “Of course the dratted beast likes you—they all do. Take it to the dairy, and I’m sure there will be a dish of milk about for a wee new friend.”

Fiona scampered off, leaving Mary Fran to half drag Matthew in the direction of the stables. “Say something, Matthew. Clottie Itnyre knows all the herbs and potions. I’ve half a mind to ask him what I should serve up to your father to permanently shut the baron’s foul, lying, obscene—”

They’d gained the aisle running between the loose boxes when Matthew spun her up against the wall and fused his mouth to hers.

He was enraged—Mary Fran tasted that in his kiss, though the rage wasn’t directed at her—and he was in some desperate, silent frenzy that was expressing itself as passion. He’d lost a wife—that explained a few things, but exactly what it explained she could not fathom, not when she had to hang on to the man kissing her simply to keep her balance.

“I could love you,” Matthew whispered, his voice hoarse in her ear. “God help me, I could have loved you.”

“Hush, Matthew.” She lashed her arms around him, held him tightly, held him as if she could protect him from every injury. “You’re grieving. When the loss rears up, there’s a temptation to find comf—”

This kiss was different. His mouth moved slowly over hers, as if the tumult and desperation of the last kiss had never happened. His body no longer pressed her back against the hard boards behind her; it sheltered and warmed.

“Come.” She eased sideways and took his hand, leading him down the rows of stalls to the saddle room. Wherever this was going, she wanted a locked door between her and the prying eyes of the world.

God help me, I could have loved you.

She'd no sooner thrown the bolt on the saddle room door than Matthew had her back against a sturdy wall. He rested an arm against the wall and leaned down to run his nose along her collarbone.

"You cannot defend me against my own father, Mary Fran."

The way he hung over her conveyed both passion and something else—despair, in his voice, in his posture.

"Kiss now, talk later, laddie."

Kiss, caress, tease... a little dusty sunshine came through a small window high up on the outside wall. Time slowed, and Mary Fran let the moment seep into her bones: The good smells of horse and leather, the flutter of a small bird up in the rafters, the soft wool of Matthew's jacket, and the certain knowledge that of her own volition, she was going to make love with a man worthy of the honor.

"Mary Frances?"

He was asking permission to love her, permission to make love with her. She answered him by easing back and meeting his gaze. In the gloom, his eyes were not blue; they were simply watching her, ready for her to sigh and smile, to leave him here alone with his father's accusations wreaking their vile havoc.

She shaped him through the fabric of his riding breeches. He was wonderfully hard, ready for her. When she freed him from his clothing, his head fell back, and he hissed out a slow breath. She stroked his length, reacquainting herself with the odd wonder that was the male breeding organ in anticipation of its pleasures.

As she traced her fingers over the smooth skin of his erect cock, she saw the tension in him shift from arousal to self-restraint.

"I could love you too, Matthew Daniels." In that moment, she couldn't *not* love him. Couldn't deny herself the pleasure of his body, hard, masculine, and pressed against hers in desire.

She *hated* her clothing, simple attire though it was. Drawers and stays and chemise and petticoats—the morning was cool—came between Mary Fran and the man she sought to possess. Between kisses, sighs, and a few muttered curses, she stepped out of her drawers; with some assistance from Matthew, she got dress and chemise shoved about enough and her stays loose enough to free her breasts from their confinement, but the delay, the damned, fussy delay, had her ready to scream.

"Matthew, I want..." Mary Fran lifted her forehead from his shoulder to glance around. They were in a saddle room. The plank floor was littered with dried mud and bits of hay and straw; the only solid surface was a pair of trunks along the opposite wall. The entire space was designed for hanging bridles, stowing saddles on racks, and storing brushes and riding gear.

"We can make it to the hayloft," she said, trying to find something amusing about dashing up the ladder out in the barn aisle.

"Bugger the hayloft." Matthew shifted away, his shirt and waistcoat flapping open, his neckcloth hanging loose and wrinkled. He bent, and in one mighty heave, stacked the two trunks one atop the other. His next move was to grab a wool cooler—a MacGregor plaid, no less—and fold it over the top trunk. When he turned, his clothing askew, his erection straining up along his midline, his expression was unreadable.

"Or I can come to you tonight," he said.

Mary Fran eyed the trunks. "I'm not sure exactly..."

He hauled her across the small space and hoisted her onto the trunks. “You sit.”

She shifted back a bit on the trunks. The cooler was thick, folded several times, and the seat wasn't uncomfortable. The one shaft of sunlight fell on Matthew's red-gold hair as he stepped between her legs.

“You sit,” he said again, bending his head so Mary Fran felt the words breezing past her ear as much as she heard them. “And we love.”

The arrangement was perfect. Despite the clothing, despite the surrounds, despite the discord Altsax had tried to sow, as Mary Fran wrapped her arms around her lover, all she felt was pleasure and the sweet, sweet privilege of making love at long last with the right man.

Matthew's hands traveled over her slowly, touching her face and hair, tracing the line of her collarbone then easing lower to cup her breast in a caress that could only be described as cherishing. Better than that, even, was the time he gave Mary Fran to learn him in similar fashion.

She tasted the pale scar on the side of his jaw, used her lips and tongue to explore the contour of his small male nipples. His scent was clean all over, like sunshine and cool forests.

And then the feel of him, ah, the hard, warm feel of him, pushing intimately into her body. He was careful at first, a soft nudge, a sigh, another easy little push. The sun had never coaxed a snowy little crocus to open to its warmth as gently as Matthew Daniels joined his body to hers.

“Matthew, you're killing me. Killing—”

“Then we'll die together.”

She could not rush him, could not affect his damnably tender pace one bit. She tried, tried to recapture their previous frenzy with hot kisses, except he somehow turned them into lazy, hot kisses.

She dragged her nails down his muscular back, urging him faster, but by the time her hands reached his buttocks, her harrying had turned into a caress.

He was relentless in his tenderness and patience, a one-man onslaught of caring who would neither be dictated to nor distracted from his intention to devastate her with pleasure.

Mary Fran was practical woman, a woman who knew when she'd met her match, so she did something she would have never have considered doing with any other man: she surrendered and let herself be loved.

Four

Mary Fran was heaven, and Matthew was a devil. He stored up the sounds of her sighs and groans, saved back the memory of her heathery-flowery scent, made a miser's hoard of the pleasure of slow, deep thrusts into her heat.

He was wrong to abuse her trust like this, wrong to let her think Altsax had been spewing lies, wrong to make love to her for the first time in a damned stable—except it would be their only time, of that, Matthew was certain.

Mary Fran locked her ankles at the small of his back—her booted ankles. The clutch of her legs felt marvelous. The strength in her, the need, made a wicked, lovely contrast to the impersonal couplings he and his wife had shared.

Damn duty anyhow.

When Mary Fran started trying to scoot into Matthew's thrusts, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face against her neck. Her fingernails dug in low on his back, a fierce, unrelenting grip. Her breath came more harshly against his skin, and the sounds she made threatened to obliterate his control.

“Matthew—”

He kissed her to stop her from begging verbally, though her body was shameless in its demands, and even more shameless in their satisfaction. As she seized around him, hard, repeatedly, her kiss became a plundering of his reason, her pleasure his complete undoing.

He tried to pull away, but her legs were scissored around his waist, and she would not allow it. He growled her name and made another attempt to withdraw, but she held him, her arms and legs a vise, and the struggle itself only heightened his arousal.

“Surrender, damn you, Matthew.”

A command. Matthew understood about taking orders, and his body understood opportunity. Pleasure flooded him body and soul, a wracking release that had him pounding into his lover until his legs threatened to give out and he had to hold on to Mary Fran for both balance and sanity.

He managed to remain standing, if only to bask in the way her hand winnowed through his hair in a slow caress. She kissed his throat, nuzzled his breastbone, and still did not drop her legs from around his waist.

“We need...” His voice was hoarse, as if he'd been shouting for too long. “My handkerchief is in my left pocket.”

Thank God she obliged and dug into the breeches sagging around his hips. Matthew did not want to turn her loose from his embrace, not ever.

Though he would. Altsax had seen to that handily enough.

“The next time we do this,” Mary Fran said, “we're going to have a damned bed. My bum can't —”

His cock slipped from her body, slunk away in defeat more like. “There will not be a next time, Mary Fran, not unless you agree to marry me.”

She stopped dabbing at him with his handkerchief. Her head came up, and the smile disappeared from her well-kissed lips. “Are you trying to trap me, Matthew Daniels?”

Just like that, she'd emotionally come about and swung her gun ports open, which was fortunate, because for the hash he'd made of things, Matthew deserved to be sunk at sea.

Gordie had done the same bloody thing—started spouting off about marriage before he'd even stuffed his pizzle back in his knickers.

His relatively unimpressive pizzle, come to that.

And Matthew did not look smug or even nervous. He looked so very, very serious, even with his shirt hanging open and his breeches not properly fastened.

"I owe you an explanation, Mary Frances. I'd rather you hear it from me, because Altsax seems all too willing to give you his version of events."

"Put yourself to rights," she said, reaching under her skirts to make use of his handkerchief. She hadn't understood why he was trying to pull out until the instant he'd given up the effort. She'd come again, unbelievably hard, when he'd spent in her body.

Marriage wasn't out of the question, if the damned man but knew it.

"I can put my clothing to rights," he said, tucking himself up, "but to untangle what's between us..."

He ran a hand through hair Mary Fran herself had put in thorough disarray. She tidied herself up as best she could and scooted to one side of the trunk. "Sit with me, Matthew, and let's have none of your English dramatics."

This earned her the smallest smile, the smallest, saddest smile, but he sat beside her. He didn't take her hand, so she took his.

"I am the corrupt colonel." He recited this like a penitent's catechism.

"And I was Gordie's Highland whore. Did you lose a shipment of the cavalry's horse blankets, then? Slip them off to some orphanage?"

"I do love you, Mary Fran."

"Must you make it sound like this dooms you to misery?" Her attempt at a light moment failed utterly, and where a rosy, even optimistic glow had tried to take root in Mary Fran's heart, dread began to form.

"I love you for your fierce heart, for your courage, for your passion," he went on. "And because I love you, you must know the truth: I publicly compromised my general's daughter, and I did so while my wife of less than two years lay dying. My disgrace took place"—he kissed her fingers and then deposited her hand back in her lap—"my disgrace took place at the regimental ball."

Cold shivered over Mary Frances, a cold even worse than when, after deflowering her, Gordie had poured himself a drink and toasted their future.

"You would not do such a thing." She wanted to reach for his hand, but his posture was so calm, so self-contained, she stifled the impulse.

"I did such a thing. The girl—she was only twenty-two—went home under a cloud of scandal. I resigned my commission and put it about that my father was demanding my return. Ask anybody billeted to the Crimea, and they'll tell you all about the corrupt colonel. They have worse names for me too, of course..."

The cold became something worse, something like panic, dread, and rage, all rolled into Mary Fran's middle and jammed against her heart. "I don't believe you."

"You must believe me. It is the truth. We were found in a shocking embrace by no less than the girl's mother. Had I been single, the girl would very likely be my wife now."

"Did you make love with her?"

Why this should matter, Mary Fran did not know. For most men, particularly aroused men, the difference between kisses, caresses, and coitus was simply a few more minutes of privacy.

“I kissed her thoroughly, had my hands where a gentleman’s hands do not belong, had my tongue —”

“But not your cock.”

He reared back a bit, as if he’d just walked in on a scene such as the one he was describing. “Not my cock, but you have only my word for that, and the word of a cad should never be trusted.”

Except he wasn’t cad. Could not be.

She’d had the same argument with herself over Gordie. Told herself he would never take advantage of her curiosity, never proceed if she decided to call a halt. Gordie had made no pretense of withdrawing, and Fiona was the result. Matthew had tried to protect them from such consequences, and Mary Fran had prevented him.

“Tell me the rest of it, Matthew. If I can put this in context...”

He rose from the trunk and straightened a bridle hanging on the opposite wall. “I compromised a decent woman. What context could possibly excuse that?”

“You were grieving.” Mary Fran hunched in on herself, the very idea of making excuses for him rankling—he would never make excuses for himself. “Maybe the girl grabbed you and threatened to scream if you didn’t oblige her. Maybe you were drunk—very drunk. Maybe you were trying to distract her from a fellow who would make her miserable or give her diseases.”

He shook his head and tidied another bridle, but in his very silence, another idea tried to crowd into Mary Frances’s misery, more a feeling than an idea.

“You aren’t telling me the whole of it, Matthew Daniels.” She knew this the same way she knew when Fiona was lying or her brothers had done something they were uncomfortable with. “What do you think to spare me? I’ve been compromised. I’ve been labeled a whore. I’ve watched my family work themselves nigh to death just to keep up appearances. I’ve buried a husband I had no intention of grieving, only to find myself devastated by guilt. I’ve put up with groping old men and sly young ones...”

He did not look at her. He faced the whips lined up from longest to shortest on the side wall, though Mary Fran doubted he saw what was before him. “I wanted to dally with you, Mary Fran. I wanted to give you some pleasure, some relief and comfort.” More catechism, which only confirmed Mary Fran’s suspicion he was holding back.

“Oblivion and desire, Matthew?” She wanted to slap him, to slap the sadness off his handsome profile. “We’ve agreed that isn’t enough. When you’re ready to tell me the whole of your folly, then I’ll be ready to listen.”

She hopped off the trunk, her limbs protesting the sudden movement, her heart breaking to leave things thus.

“Mary Frances?” He did not touch her, but his gaze pleaded with her for—what?

“Why not Lady Mary Frances, if we’re to have so little trust to go along with our oblivion and desire?”

The damned wretched man smiled, a slow, gentle curving of his lips. “If I could tell you the whole of it, I would. That’s as much concession as I can make.”

His admission *was* a concession. She could see that in the caution lurking behind his smiling sadness. But it wasn’t concession enough.

“I’d marry a cad and a bounder—I’ve done it before, if you’ll recall—but I cannot marry a man who won’t trust me.”

“Break my sister’s heart, and I’ll kill you. Connor and Gilgallon will dig your grave, and the entire Deeside branch of the clan will dance at your funeral.” Balfour offered his promise cheerfully, sporting a grin that revealed even white teeth in abundant number. “A wee dram to ward off the chill, Mr. Daniels?”

Matthew nodded. They were alone in the library, and the earl’s warning was probably the Scottish equivalent of permission to court, which was ironic.

“And what if you break *my* sister’s heart, Balfour? I suppose I’ll have to see to both your execution and your burial myself? Dance you into the grave when I haven’t even a proper kilt to my name?”

Balfour’s dark brows rose, and then his expression became thoughtful. “Wearing a kilt takes a certain confidence. Try it before you mock us for it.”

“I have a kilt, not the full-dress business, but a McDaniel plaid.”

That had been a perfectly unnecessary admission, and it didn’t seem to make any impression on the earl.

Balfour poured out two stout servings of whisky. “The McDaniel dress plaid is a pretty pattern. You could wear it to the ball next week, and we’d kit you out in company style. I was serious about you breaking Mary Fran’s heart.”

Ian MacGregor held forth like a general, his speech—it wasn’t exactly conversation—leaping from one topic to the next without any pretension of manners. Matthew followed him easily.

“And I was serious about you breaking Genie’s heart.” Matthew lifted his glass slightly. “To the ladies.”

Balfour saluted with his whisky and took a sip. He served it neat, the way it deserved to be consumed. “Your sister Genie wants nothing to do with me. I can’t see how I’d break her heart, unless it’s by marrying her. I’ve reason to wonder why your dear papa has his heart so set on this match when the lady isn’t exactly willing.”

“Are you insulting my sister, Balfour? Implying she’s in some way tarnished goods?”

Balfour scrubbed a hand over his face. “And people claim the Scots have bad tempers. I would not insult your sister, Daniels. She’s sweet, pretty, endearingly stubborn, and scared to death of your father. That is not a sound basis for a marriage.”

Endearingly stubborn. Matthew filed that description away to apply to Mary Fran at some opportune moment. “Are you declining to court Genie because you’re concerned for her happiness?”

“I *am* concerned for her happiness—also for my own. My family needs coin desperately, though we need our honor more.”

Made with such casual, weary assurance, the observation stung. “Genie has a notion she’ll marry only for love, Balfour. I don’t know where she came by it. Altsax thinks marrying for love is vulgar, stupid, and common.”

“Not common enough,” Balfour muttered. “I had some questions to put to you on another matter, if you’ve a moment.”

And now the man with the piercing green eyes who made casual death threats and summarized Matthew’s sister accurately in a few words took to studying a portrait of some crusty old Highlander

over the fireplace.

“Balfour, I do not share my father’s opinion on the matter of marriage. I married once for duty, for Queen and Country, and while it was not a horror, it was not what either I or my wife deserved. Ask me your questions. If I know the answers, I’ll gladly share them, though I have to warn you—the press of business means I must travel south in the morning.” The press of business and the dictates of sanity.

The emotions flitting through the earl’s gaze weren’t hard to name: relief, wariness, and bewilderment. “Travel on if you must, but my questions are about your cousin.”

The words were parted with carefully, with a studied neutrality that fooled Matthew not one whit. “Break Augusta’s heart, and the same promise applies, Balfour. She’s been through enough. Too much, in fact, and all she wants is to be left in peace.”

“No, that is not all she wants.” Balfour spoke softly, humor and sadness both in his tone. “Neither is it what she deserves, but that’s a discussion for another time. I was wondering if you could tell me the other things.” He ran a hand through thick dark hair, took another sip of his drink, and commenced staring out the mullioned window at gardens he’d had years to study.

“What other things?”

“The small things... What is Augusta’s favorite flower? How did she come by her love of drawing? Is she partial to sweets? Does she prefer chess or cribbage or backgammon?”

The personal things. Abruptly, Matthew recognized a fellow suffering swain, particularly in the earl’s mention of the difference between what a lady wants and what she deserves.

“I could use a game of cribbage myself, my lord, and perhaps we’d best keep that decanter handy.”

“Never a bad idea.” Balfour crossed the room to rummage in a desk drawer. “Turnabout is fair play, too, you know.” He slapped a deck of cards on the desk, then a carved cribbage board.

“Turnabout?”

“You have questions, Daniels. About Mary Fran. As long as you don’t ask me to violate a confidence—the woman has a wicked temper and very accurate aim with a riding crop—I’ll answer them.”

Matthew fetched the decanter and prepared to lose at least one game of cribbage. He’d lost two—only one intentionally—before Balfour asked Matthew to fetch some sensitive documents back to him here in the Highlands posthaste.

Perhaps that was fitting, that Matthew be given a chance to torment himself with another glimpse of Mary Frances, and to contribute to the happiness of others—his own being a lost cause.

“Where are you going?” Fiona asked the question as she tried to descend from the hayloft while holding her kitten, Spats. Mr. Daniels’s horse didn’t take exception to the company, but then, the horse had likely known Fee was above.

“Have you started sleeping in haylofts, Fee?”

“The sun comes up early, and I wanted to play with my kitten. Are you out for a ride?”

He smiled at her. Mr. Daniels had nice eyes—he smiled with his eyes more than he smiled with his mouth. “I’m leaving for the South, Fee. Business, you know.”

This was not good. Mama had disappeared into the saddle room the other day with Mr. Daniels, and she’d been smiling radiantly at the time—also holding Mr. Daniels’s hand. “Send a wire for your

business. That's what Her Majesty does."

Mr. Daniels slipped off the horse's headstall and looped the reins of a bridle over the gelding's neck. "Her Majesty explains her business practices to you, does she?"

"She comes to our tea parties in the nursery at Balmoral sometimes, and so does His Royal Highness. They speak German to help us learn. If you're leaving, you ought to pay a call on her."

And he ought *not* to leave. Fiona would bet her favorite doll on that—if she could find it.

"Her Majesty is the last person I want to spend time with, Fiona."

Mr. Daniels had been in the cavalry. He put a bridle on his horse in a precise order, and he checked each strap and buckle in order too.

"I like the Queen. Why are you leaving?"

"I told you." He blew out a breath and stared over the horse's neck. "The press of business calls me away, and even if I were having second thoughts, and leaving was the *last* thing I wanted to do, your uncles need me to see to some things for them rather urgently. It's best if I go."

Things to see to must be half of what adulthood was about. Fiona didn't think such a life was going to be much fun. Uncle Ian's face wore the same expression when he talked about Marrying Won't Be So Bad. "You should not lie. Ma will skelp your bum."

"Would that it were so simple." He stared at his empty saddle, his eyes bleak. Uncle Gil looked like that when he stared at Miss Genie.

"I am forbidden to tell the truth by my own honor and by vows explicitly made to one whose requests I could not refuse." He muttered the last as he checked the horse's girth, which meant soon he'd lead the horse out to the mounting block.

"That is silly. Nobody is forbidden to tell the truth. It says to tell the truth in the Bible."

"It also says 'let the women keep silent in the church,' but I doubt you do. Put my stirrup down on that side, if you please."

Fiona put Spats on her shoulder and pulled the stirrup down, then ran the buckle up under the saddle flap. "If you are forbidden to tell the truth, and you *want* to tell the truth, then you must simply get permission first. Uncle Ian says you have to neg-o-ti-ate."

On the other side of the horse, Mr. Daniels peered over at her. "Get permission?"

"To tell the truth. You ask nicely, and give at least three reasons, and it doesn't hurt if everybody's in a good mood when you ask."

"I should get permission..." He came around the horse and scooped Fiona up against his hip, like Uncle Ian used to before she got so big. Spats hopped down, and the horse twitched an ear.

"You are a brilliant child. You're going to grow up to be as lovely as your mother, and I'm going to be there to see it—I hope." He didn't look nearly so bleak now. He looked fierce.

"I hope so too. May I have a pony if you are?"

"Not unless your mother says it's acceptable to her. I have to leave now, Fiona, but I will be back in time for the ball."

He hugged her, good and tight, and while he led his horse out to the mounting block, Fiona ensconced Spats on her shoulder again. She waved Mr. Daniels on his way in the predawn light, and watched as he cantered off. At the bottom of the drive, he turned the horse not toward the train station in Ballater, but to the west, toward Balmoral.

Which was odd.

Mary Fran hated the summer ball. Not the planning and organizing of it, not seeing her brothers in all their Highland finery, not seeing how excited Fee got as the day drew closer.

She hated the ball itself—had taken all balls, dances, and assemblies into dislike the night Fee was conceived, and saw no reason to change her opinion at this late date.

“You are glowering, my lady. Have I done something to offend?” Augusta Merrick posed the question in the soft, polite voice Mary Fran would never be able to imitate.

“All this nonsense offends,” Mary Fran said, glancing around the ballroom. “We won’t have a flower left in the garden, and the ice alone will beggar us.”

“He’ll come back, Mary Fran.” The same soft voice, but with a hint of something under it. “Matthew is honorable. If he told Ian and Fee he’d be back, he will be.”

“I’m that obvious?”

“You’re that in love.”

Mary Fran peered over at the Englishwoman who was arranging flowers for a small centerpiece. Augusta had suggested keeping most of the centerpieces low, and therefore simple and inexpensive. She’d also suggested including heather here and there to keep the air fresh and the tenor of the gathering Scottish.

“You wouldn’t begrudge me your cousin’s affections?” Mary Fran could not have asked that question of Matthew’s sisters. For some reason, they took less notice of him than Miss Augusta did.

“Let’s take a break,” Augusta said. “And no, we will not ring for tea.”

She linked her arm through Mary Fran’s and led the way out to the terraces, where footmen were setting up torches and tables while maids scurried in all directions. Mary Fran drew out her pocket flask when she and Augusta got to the first bench behind the privet hedge.

“A medicinal nip is in order.” Mary Fran passed the little leather-covered flask to her guest, who did not even pause to wipe the lip before taking a sip.

“Powerful medicine.”

“Each time we put on one of these fancy-dress affairs, I hate it a little more.”

“Matthew will lead you out, and then you won’t hate it so much ever again.”

“You don’t mind that we’ve become... involved? Nobody else seems to have noticed, not even your aunt Julia, whom I would think had some things in common with Matthew.”

“Grief?” Augusta passed the flask back, but Mary Fran studied it rather than take a drink.

“He loved that wife of his. He simply didn’t realize it until it was too late.” Mary Fran deduced that some of what afflicted Matthew was guilt, and one had to feel some love if guilt found a way to take root.

August Merrick didn’t seem at all discomfited by the topic. “I met Lydia only at the wedding. She was a plain little sparrow trying to make us think she was besotted with her dashing husband. The Queen had a hand in the matchmaking, from what Genie said, but I worried for the couple.”

“He said...” Was it violating confidences to repeat words spoken in private? “He said she saved his life, ordering him moved from the hospital, fetching an Arab doctor to tend him, selling her jewelry to see him properly fed and cared for.”

“And then she fell ill, and there was nothing Matthew could do. Hester has told me a little of it, but Matthew doesn’t speak of the past.”

He does too. To me he speaks of it, though not honestly enough.

“What gave us away?” Mary Fran took a sip, but a small one.

Augusta's smile was a little smug and a little sad. "You look at Matthew the way I look at Ian."

Mary Fran absorbed that truth, nodded, and passed her the flask. "Will you come with me to Balmoral after the shoot? Her Majesty won't be joining us for the dress ball, but she's summoned me to relay all the details afterward. His Highness might pop over for the shoot on Saturday."

"You visit back and forth as if they were any other neighbors?"

Mary Fran accepted the flask back. "We do. Fee visits the princesses often, and Ian and the Prince Consort are quite friendly. This time, though, Her Majesty has sent a formal summons."

"I suppose you'd best heed it, then."

The bloody damned trains and the bloody damned coaches and the bloody damned lame livery horses conspired to make Matthew bloody damned late to the ball. The idea that he might disappoint Mary Fran made him positively frantic, so frantic he barged in on the dinner gathering in all his riding attire and dirt.

And not a moment too soon. Balfour announced Genie's engagement, and good wishes were offered all around. By virtue of careful orchestration on the earl's part, Altsax was hustled off to the library with the MacGregor family surrounding him, while the guests called toasts from all sides to the prospective bride and groom.

Amid all the toasting and familial machinations following Balfour's announcement, Matthew had not one moment with Mary Fran, not even as they joined the family for the celebratory dram in the library.

"We'll return to the ballroom," Matthew said, taking Mary Fran's hand at an opportune moment. "Somebody needs to get the dancing started, and Mary Fran is the hostess."

Balfour sent them on their way with a grateful smile, while Mary Fran remained ominously silent.

"You got word from Her Majesty?" Matthew asked.

Mary Fran, elegantly turned out in MacGregor plaid with all the Highland trimmings, looked bemused and not... not unfriendly.

Also not quite kissable. "I cannot refuse an official summons, Matthew, and you cannot go back to the ballroom dressed like that and reeking of horse."

He stopped dead in the corridor. "I stink." Which likely explained why an audience with the Queen hadn't resulted in Mary Fran plastering herself to him in welcome.

Her lips quirked. "The smell of horse has never offended me, but Ian said he'd seen to your fancy kit."

The earl was not a man to be underestimated. "I'll change then." But damn and blast, he'd wanted to waltz with her. Now he'd have to wait until the good-night waltz, but at least that was typically a slower tune.

A more romantic dance. And some romance was apparently in order. Her Majesty had looked with favor on Matthew's plight, and had apparently seen matters set to rights, but Mary Fran was still regarding him with some... speculation.

"Come with me," Matthew said, tugging her down the corridor. "A man needs an extra hand if he's to get into his evening finery posthaste."

She came along, not reluctantly, but not enthusiastically either. As it turned out, Matthew did need her assistance, because Balfour's idea of evening finery was a McDaniel dress plaid and all the

trimmings, save a bonnet. Mary Fran's assistance was more than appreciated; it was necessary if Matthew was to don his clothing properly.

"Some fellows will wear their underlinen if they're in mixed company, but my brothers do not." Mary Fran stepped back and surveyed him in the confines of his bedroom. "The sporran helps protect your modesty, if that's a concern."

"Stop fussing over the clothing, Mary Fran, and tell me if you'll marry me."

Graceless, tactless, and the only question that mattered to him. She'd spoken with the Queen, gotten as much explanation as anybody could give her, and all that remained was to break Matthew's heart or crown his future with resplendent happiness.

"I wasn't sure you'd ask again, Matthew." She regarded his riding attire, heaped on a plaid-upholstered chair. "My past is no better than yours, in theory. I'm glad you told me of the scandal, but when I had time to think, to consider if something long ago and far away should control both our futures, I decided it should not."

She wasn't making sense, entirely, but her day had no doubt been long, and scandal, even scandal with a royal explanation, was a difficult topic.

He took her hand in his, relief and joy soaring around in his chest like so many shooting stars. "You'll marry me. That's all that matters. I'm sorry I could not be more forthcoming, but promises made to protect a lady's honor are not easily broken."

She gave him a puzzled look as he stepped closer. "We'll need to say something to Fiona."

"I think we have her permission." He took the lady of his heart into his arms. "Your brother approves too, of that I'm certain. Now, will you get me pinned into my sash, or will we be late to the dance, Mary Frances?"

She did get him into the sash, eventually, and they were late to the dance, too.

"I will bloody damned kill you, Matthew Daniels." Mary Fran did not shout, but she spoke the utter, sincere truth as she stalked along the barn aisle.

Matthew looked up from petting Fiona's kitten outside Hannibal's stall, the wee beast's purr audible at several paces. "You go calling on the neighbors with my cousin and come back in a tear?"

His expression was the cautious, teasing countenance of a man who wasn't certain what he'd done wrong.

"Don't you *cajole* me, you wretched mon." She scooped the kitten from his grasp and set the thing on the ground. "You and that scheming woman, you led me such a dance, and all along, you were a *spy*."

His expression shuttered, and he glanced around, tugging Mary Frances into the saddle room. "I thought you knew. You said you'd had your tête-à-tête with Her Majesty when we spoke of it the night of the ball."

"She'd simply sent me a note. We didn't speak of anything, not until today." Mary Fran wrenched from his grasp, ready to howl, to shout, to do murder at what her neighbor had so genteelly explained. "I was so damned glad to see you, so glad you hadn't turned your back on me over some silly scandal, except *you could have been killed*."

Her brothers might have told her to calm down; Matthew was smarter than that.

"I was an officer, Mary Fran. Of course I could have been killed. I take it Victoria only now apprised you of the details."

“I’m marrying a very quick study. She said—” Mary Fran stopped her pacing long enough to draw in a steady breath. “Her Majesty said you were charged with handling delicate matters, you and your wife, and that the two of you agreed to marry so you might be better situated to handle those matters.”

That had been the Queen’s term: delicate matters. Matthew, the most honest and forthright man Mary Fran knew, and the Crown had set him to sneaking and skulking.

He crossed his arms and widened his stance, a warning that he was about to be forthright again. “We were spies, Mary Frances. I was a spy, and so was my wife. She was much better at it than I was, but I’d learned Russian from some school chums as a boy and studied it further at university. There was much to be gleaned in diplomatic circles, and we were useful, even if many would not consider our activities honorable.”

“Useful.” She spat the word. “Honorable. Victoria said your wife came up with the notion you should compromise the general’s daughter, made it a dying request to you. I hate this wife of yours, Matthew. I always will.”

His expression was bleak, but again, he did not argue. “She was better at the game than I was. Her plan was brilliant.”

Mary Fran marched up to him, so angry she could have shouted. “What was brilliant about a plan that compromised your honor and left your future a bloody shambles? When Victoria told me of this, I could barely keep my temper, Matthew.”

He uncrossed his arms. “The general’s daughter was passing secrets—perhaps unwittingly—to the Russian pretending to court her, and compromising her was a way to get her back to England without letting anybody know she’d been caught. This scheme also kept the girl safe, in that the other side would not have spared her once they realized we’d used her to pass false information.”

“*What in the bloody hell does that matter?! You spared your Queen embarrassment, kept a dying promise to your wife, saw a foolish young woman safely home to England, but I could have lost you.*”

She turned her back on him, because the upset of it was still too raw. “I could have lost you over a stinking little military scandal, except you were clever enough to get around your vows and promises and see the truth laid at my feet. I love you, you dratted man, but I hate the truth.”

A white handkerchief scented with cedar dangled over her shoulder.

“When you thought it a stinking little military scandal—just another randy officer misbehaving with a foolish young lady—you were willing to marry me, Mary Fran. If I didn’t love you before, I will always love you for that.”

She snatched the handkerchief from him and blotted her eyes. “I want to wallop you, and you talk of love. What if Her Majesty hadn’t been willing to trust me with the truth?”

A hand slipped around her waist, and a muscular male chest warmed Mary Fran’s back. “Then I would have told you, somehow, in some version that skirted all those vows and all that honor. I’d made that decision while I was traveling from here to London and back in less than a week. I could not let you go on thinking I’d play false with a woman’s honor out of something as cavalier as drunkenness or carelessness. Doubt me all you like, Mary Fran, but never again doubt your own judgment. The rest of the world, even my own father, can think what they please, but you deserved the truth.”

A second hand slid around Mary Fran’s waist and tugged her gently back against Matthew’s

taller frame. “What am I to do with you, Matthew? The thought of your sacrificing your good name when I know how much it means to you... I’d like to skelp your bum but good, but I love you—heaven help me.”

“You can do both, you know. Love me and skelp my bum.”

His chin came to rest on her temple, and Mary Fran stood in his embrace for long moments, absorbing the calm of him. She turned and wrapped her arms around him when it became apparent he’d said all he felt needed to be said.

“Is there more, Matthew?”

“More I cannot tell you?”

She nodded against his chest, dreading his answer.

“There’s more I have to say to you, but nothing more about my time in the Crimea. I did a lot of translating, a lot of lurking and overhearing, and not much flirting. Russians are a jealous lot, with good aim and loads of determination. War with them will be a difficult undertaking.”

“Marriage with me will be a difficult undertaking.”

“Life without you would be impossible. Then, too, I’m sure as a husband, I will be far from perfect—you might have to skelp my bum regularly.” He sounded so certain, no shadows, no doubts. “I want a family, Mary Fran. Not for the succession—we don’t have to use the title if you don’t care to—but for us, and for Fiona. Your brothers will make sure she has cousins, but she’ll be a marvelous big sister.”

Still Mary Fran remained in his embrace. “Leaving my brothers will be difficult, Matthew. Difficult for me and for Fiona.”

“We won’t go far. His Royal Highness said there’s a fine property a little farther along the river, which has just come up for sale. I’ve plenty of investments and rental properties, so we can bring up the children right here in Aberdeenshire.”

He kissed her cheek, and Mary Fran felt her heart melt. “We need a bed, Matthew. Right now, we need a bed and a door with a stout lock on it.”

“I have something better, Mary Frances.”

He kissed her other cheek, and she rocked into him more tightly. “What could be better than a bedroom with a locked door and you and me on the mischief side of it?”

“Not much, almost nothing, in fact.”

This time he kissed her mouth, a luscious, lingering kiss that had Mary Fran wondering if the two trunks were still stacked along the wall. She eased back, prepared to drag him bodily to her bedchamber.

He resisted long enough to reach into his vest pocket and withdraw a piece of paper.

“What’s that?”

“The only thing better than that locked bedroom, my love. This is a special license, and it has our names on it.”

As it turned out, they made use of the special license fairly quickly, with all of Mary Fran’s family in attendance, including Fiona and one black-and-white cat. Thereafter, they made use of the bedroom with the locked door with great frequency, until Fiona was a big sister many times over, and the MacGregor brothers uncles many times over as well.