

THE LAIRD OF LOCHLANNAN



FIONA MONROE



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-100-0
Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-389-1
Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-390-7
V2

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



Catriona laid a hand on the doorknob, scarcely breathing until she felt it turn unresisting under her fingers. She paused to listen to the silence in the still, dark castle, then pushed gently on the door to Sir Duncan Buccleuch's private study.

There was no noise. No creaking of rusted hinges, no groan of ancient timber as the door swung inward. But Sir Duncan's study was in the modern wing of Lochlannan Castle, it was not part of the massive square fifteenth century keep that formed the core of the Highland fortress. The door opened soundlessly on smooth, oiled hinges, and Catriona slipped into the room.

It was not quite dark. There was a gleam of moonlight through the long window, which had been left uncurtained and unshuttered, and there was a glow from the dying embers in the fire. Catriona shaded the flame of her candle, and crept across the carpet to the bureau by the window. She walked cautiously, but quickly.

Earlier that day she had watched Sir Duncan cross to the old-fashioned walnut writing desk, unlock its sloping lid and put something into its depths. A bundle of papers, yellow with age, which he had folded and wrapped up with a black ribbon as soon as she had

come into the room. Papers he had obviously been reading before she entered, and unhurriedly, but most definitely, concealed from her view; but not before she had caught sight of the back of a page, and seen that one of the papers at any rate was certainly a letter.

And in that glimpse, she was sure she had recognised her mother's hand.

She laid the candlestick on the small table next to Sir Duncan's leather armchair, beside a pipe balanced on an ashtray and an empty brandy glass, and gently eased her fingers under the lid of the desk. It would not yield.

She had expected that, though it had been worth the trial. The reason that she had thought it worthwhile lying awake until the clocks throughout the castle struck three, the reason she had dared to set out through its ancient corridors in her nightgown and breach Sir Duncan Buccleuch's private sanctum, was that after he had put the packet of papers into the desk, Sir Duncan had shut the lid and locked it and then placed the key carelessly onto an upper bookshelf. He had done this right in front of her, attempting no concealment. It was as if, Catriona thought, that he could not for a moment imagine her capable of such a feat of boldness as this. She supposed he locked the desk as a basic precaution against curious servants or possible housebreakers, but then kept the key somewhere convenient to himself, barely concealed.

The shelf was just high enough to hide its contents from a casual glance from below, and only just low enough for Catriona to reach with her outstretched fingers. She was tall for a woman, not much shorter than her cousin-by-marriage and guardian, but Sir Duncan's arms must be longer than hers. She strained on tiptoe, feeling with her fingertips along the smooth, dusty wood until they encountered the coldness of metal.

The key fell to the rug below with a clunking noise. She scooped it up, and stood still for a few breathless moments, listening intently to the silence of the night. There was no sound but the

gentle tick-tock of the clock on the mantelpiece. She relaxed, then quickly attempted the key in the lock of the bureau.

It was immediately obvious that it was far too large to fit the narrow keyhole. What she had in her hand was more like a door key, chunky and solid. She put it on the table and tried the shelf again, searching the unseen surface with an increasing sense of urgency. She did not want to drag over any of the heavy chairs to stand upon, as that really would make a noise, and she did not want to risk disarranging the room too much. He must never know that she had been in here.

At last, her fingertips brushed against metal again, and she eased a much smaller, daintier key from the ledge. This time there was no problem; the lock turned with ease, and she lifted the heavy lid of the bureau smoothly enough. When she saw what was within, she quailed.

Inside, the desk was a mess. A haphazard jumble of papers was crammed into its every shelf and recess, folded letters and rolled-up wads and bound notebooks all stuffed higgledy-piggledy together. She could not even see the bureau's little internal drawers beneath the confusion.

How was she to find a particular parcel of papers quickly in this shambles? She began to rummage, frantically, less concerned than she had been about leaving no evidence of her interference. Surely, a man so careless in his domestic affairs as Sir Duncan evidently was would fail to notice any rearrangement of this mess. He had deposited the papers in here only yesterday evening, so it would be reasonable to assume that they were somewhere near the surface. But the desk contained many nooks and crannies, and he could have put her mother's letter into any of them.

She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to remember exactly what Sir Duncan had done with the packet, so hastily bundled away from her eyes. He had stood, she thought, nearer this side, close to his chair, and had not simply dropped it into the desk. He had pushed it firmly into some cavity near the top.

With trembling fingers, Catriona pulled at random at the edge of a wedge of papers jammed into the bureau's uppermost shelf. Unfolded, it proved to be a farrier's bill from the year 1805. She tried again, and found a list of crofters' rents.

The third likely looking paper packet fell open in her hands and she saw at once that this was, at last, a letter, and in a lady's elegant hand. Her hands were trembling as she began to read.

Oh wicked viper, stinging snake that you are! Sir, how could you serve a lady so, she who has placed her tender heart whole into your cold, cruel hands. Those hands, which not so long ago delved into the deepest and most private places a woman hides within her petticoats. Ah! I feel them still, caressing my bare skin, venturing where only a husband ought. And now, five weeks, and no word from you, no letter, no word, no reply to my three last — and then what do I hear but that you have been in town these three days, and were seen dancing with Miss Atholl at the Assembly Rooms and whispering with her in a private corner! Tell me now sir, if you dare, how you can use me so, after taking from me my most precious possession and swearing by a thousand stars that you would repay me for it with your troth.

A blush mounted up Catriona's cheek as she deciphered these words, and she kept reading even after it was evident that this letter was not the one she was looking for. Indeed, she glanced at the date at the top of the page and saw that had been written on 2nd February 1817, only three months before.

She turned the paper over.

I ought to hate you, abhor you, banish you from my presence forever. If this finds you still in town then come to Hanover Street tonight, after ten. Mrs. Burness will be abed, and the kitchen maid will let you in by the back door as before. I will be waiting for you beneath the sheets, naked as the day I was born.

Catriona put a hand to her mouth and drew in a breath, and at that very moment she became aware of a soft footfall right behind her. She spun around, the letter dropping from her suddenly nerveless fingers.

Sir Duncan Buccleuch stood before her, fully clothed despite the lateness of the hour. Indeed he was still dressed for dinner, but without jacket or tie; his white shirt had lost its collar and flapped open at the neck, revealing a few dark hairs curling from his chest. He regarded her with a hard glittering glare that was both furious and faintly triumphant.

"Miss Dunbar," he said, in his cold, drawling tone. "Now what the deuce are you doing in here, at this hour, and in such fetching attire?"

With a swift movement that made her quail backwards, he swooped the fallen letter up from the floor. Catriona watched his face darken as he saw what she had been reading. Now, when he lifted his eyes to meet hers, there was no hint of amusement there. Then he noticed the open desk, and he walked over to it and closed the lid slowly, as if he could not believe what he was seeing. The key, Catriona had laid on the top of the bureau. He picked it up and held it before her.

"Where did you find this, Miss Dunbar? Because I am very sure it was not here."

"On—on the bookcase, sir."

His eyes flicked to the shelf where the key had been ineffectually hidden. "So," he said softly. "You left your bedchamber, came downstairs... in the still hours of the night, in your nightclothes... broke into my study, and deliberately sought the key to a desk that you knew was locked. In order to pry into my private papers—my private affairs?" He shook the letter.

"I—" Catriona was rarely lost for an answer, but she was overwhelmed by fright and a mortified awareness of her own wrongdoing, and could not immediately speak.

"What were you looking for? Money? Did you mean to rob me on your second night under my roof?"

A great wave of defiance rose within her breast, mortified as she was. "Sir! You insult me. I am no thief."

"Then what in Hades do you think you are about?"

"Sir, I—" Her mind raced, and she looked at the carpet, feeling dizzy. What could she say, what untruth could she possibly form that would not betray her true purpose?

"I'll tell you," he said, shaking the letter in her face. "Impudent curiosity! You thought my private correspondence might be more entertaining than some damned novel, eh?"

She was outraged by this suggestion too, but she hung her head and kept silent. It was better to be thought a silly, snooping girl than to risk him guessing what she had really been looking for.

Sir Duncan was silent also for a moment, and when Catriona lifted her eyes, she saw that he was gazing at her with a return of that appraising expression. "I had hoped," he said slowly, "that you would not prove to be a handful, as your mother was. It seems I am to be disappointed, and so soon." He opened the desk and put away the letter, locked it once more, and put the key into his pocket.

Despite her embarrassment, and some shame at being discovered in an act she knew to be quite wrong, Catriona cared nothing for her new guardian's disappointment. She dropped a curtsy and said, "I'm very sorry, sir. It won't happen again. Goodnight, sir." She turned, and headed for the door.

"Now just one minute."

Catriona stiffened as he actually grasped her arm, and steered her with no little force back into the room. She tried to shake him away, but he held firm. His fingers were strong, and he was close enough for her to feel the heat of his body and to smell his scent of tobacco and brandy.

"Indeed it will not happen again," he said, in a low voice. "We'll make sure of that, right now. Clearly you need a lot of guidance, Miss Dunbar. No doubt your feckless mother let you run wild. There will be none of that here, under my roof, under my charge."

"Sir, I apologise, it was very wrong of me to unlock your desk, and to read your correspondence, but I must ask you to let go of my—"

She did not get the chance to finish her sentence. The final

words were swallowed in a shriek as the room spun upside down, and she realised that he had swept her bodily from her feet and turned her over. He lifted her as effortlessly as if she were a rag doll, and the shock was such that she did not for a moment struggle against the outrage. Before she could gather herself to resist, she was carried across the room and he had planted himself in his leather armchair and thrown her face forward across his knee.

Now she did attempt to break free from his grasp, but it was too late. He had her wrists above her head and pinned against the arm of the chair in a grip that felt like an iron shackle, and he had trapped her legs tight between his knees. She bucked and thrashed her body, but his legs were clamped together firm as a vice.

"What are you doing?" she cried. She could see nothing but dark shadows on the carpet.

"What am I doing? I am going to teach you a lesson—one that it seems is well overdue. I am going to teach you what happens to wicked young ladies who break into their guardian's study in the middle of the night. Now... what shall we use as our instrument of instruction?"

She felt him reach over and heard a rummaging above her. She managed to lift and twist her head round, and saw that he had taken something from within the desk.

It was a wooden rule, a foot long and at least half an inch thick, made of dense polished wood and tipped with inlaid brass.

"Aye," he said, studying it with evident satisfaction, "this should do the job well enough for the present."

"Sir! Let me go!"

"Oh no, my dear young ward. Not until you are feeling very sorry indeed for your abominable behaviour."

"You will not—you will not strike me with that thing?" In disbelief, she could hear the pleading tone in her own voice.

She made one more violent attempt to escape him, pushing desperately against the implacably strong grip of his arm pressing down her back and his legs holding hers immobile. Her heart was

hammering, her face was flushed with exertion and something else—shame. A burning, dizzying shame that this man whom she had met for the first time only two days ago, who was no true relation of hers—no father, no brother, merely a cousin by marriage—should violate her person in this way, and hold her close across his lap as if she were a small child to be skelpt for stealing a penny. She wanted to scream for help, but she also could not bear a servant or anyone else to come and see her in this humiliating position.

And besides, who would help her? He was the Laird. At Lochlannan Castle, and for miles around, his authority was absolute.

"Hold still," he said, sharply. "Take your punishment well and I may not need to lift this nightgown and see your nether cheeks blush as prettily as your face now does. Though I think this thin cotton will offer little enough protection."

She gasped as she felt his hand run across her backside, which was angled high over his left thigh, and his fingers squeezed the flesh below just briefly. She was so shocked by this liberty that her words, her protests caught in her throat, and she stopped struggling for a moment.

"That's better," said Sir Duncan, and he raised his right arm.