



The Most Dangerous “Wolf” of All

by
Taylor Manning

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"Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf.

"I say 'wolf,' but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets.

"And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all."

-- Charles Perrault, 1697

Prologue

*Hawkwood Estate,
Hampshire, England
1714*

I was twelve when I married Duncan and he but fifteen. We stood in the parlor of my father's country house as the minister pronounced the words:

"Those whom God has joined let no man put asunder."

I slid a sideways peek at my new husband, Duncan Blakely. I had never seen him before today and found him devilish handsome.

He had his full growth, towering over me, and the long, lean slimness of youth. His face, too, was boyishly beautiful, square-jawed and high-

cheeked. His rich ebony curls were unpowdered and caught up at his nape.

No more had I taken my first sip of his heavenly beauty than to my complete horror, the small party gathered for our nuptials took us by the arms and pulled us to the bedchamber.

This was completely according to custom, but totally unexpected on my part. After all, it was midday and the bright June sun streamed through the bedroom windows. I had thought we would at least wait until evening.

But that was not to be.

As if they hadn't a moment to lose, Mother and my two aunts pulled and tugged every garment from my body, exposing my childish figure to all present.

From between them, I caught glimpses of the same task being performed on Duncan, though his determination to do it himself hindered the haste of the gentlemen of the company.

I was quite sure that disrobing before a female was not a new experience for my young husband.

He stood tall and straight with a stubborn set to his chin and without a trace of embarrassment as his last garments fell away. I could not help but wonder how many maids he had bedded, and how I would fare in comparison.

The ladies escorted me to the bed, graciously allowing me to quickly hide beneath the white coverlet. I immediately clutched the protection to my breasts and am afraid that I stared in fascination as Duncan, naked as a

stone, moved with an easy grace and slid in beside me.

It was only then that I meekly lowered my gaze, waiting for the company to follow my mother from the room.

To my complete dismay, five of them posted themselves around the bedchamber, three ladies by the east window and two gentlemen near the fireplace. Conversing in undertones, they left Duncan and me to our own devices, only occasionally flicking a curious glance in our direction.

I could feel the heat of Duncan's body beside mine. But nowhere did our flesh touch.

If only his hand would reach out and take mine. Or his arm curl around me and pull me close. I was not afraid of the intimate act, so why did he not do what would make me his wife in truth and not just in name?

I waited. He never spoke. Never touched me.

What was he thinking?

With a jolt I understood his reticence. He was disappointed, perhaps even disgusted to be with me.

My carrot hair. He hated it.

And I was too small for him. At only four foot nine, I'm sure I still looked like a child. I wanted to scream and tell him I wasn't. My courses had started four months past.

Of course, as yet I had no breasts to speak of, only dusty-pink nubs no larger than a pigeon egg.

Just then he moved and my breath caught in my throat. He rolled

onto his side, facing me. Ah, at last.

But he closed his eyes so he didn't have to look at me. Within moments his breathing slowed.

He had fallen asleep.

I was shamed beyond compare. He did not want me, could not even bring himself to touch me. How could I face the humiliation? My first inclination was to run naked as the day I was born from the room and hide in the nursery where I had been reared, until everyone was gone and I could recover. But that would have alerted all the witnesses to his indifference. No, that would not do.

I scooted closer to him, so it would at least seem we were whispering endearments. I, too, closed my eyes, but remained alert, my thoughts devoted exclusively to how tonight, when we were alone, things would be different.

And so the afternoon passed. At dusk the witnesses gathered at the foot of our bed.

"What now, Winifred?" old Mrs. Haskins asked. "They appear to be napping."

I cracked open one eye and saw Winifred, the Dowager Countess Meadowbrook, frowning most unpleasantly.

"Bad business, this," she said. "No consummation is an open door to all kinds of scandal."

"Should we wake them up and make them try again?" one old man

asked from the vicinity of the fireplace.

"Just wake the boy," said his companion in guarding the fire. "He's the one who needs to do something. The gal can keep sleepin'."

A long silence followed this comment, one where I felt every eye on my sleeping husband and me. It was Lady Meadowbrook who finally spoke.

"No. Leave them be. I told them the girl was too young."

Lady Meadowbrook led the crowd away, at last leaving us to our rest. I snuggled into the unexpected and pleasant warmth of my husband's body and intended to follow him into peaceful slumber against the time of his awakening, when he would be more rested and ready to perform his duty. Alas, I had barely wiggled my way into a comfortable place when Duncan pushed away from me and rolled to the opposite side of the bed.

He rose and ambled to the place where his clothing lay on the divan by the window. Without so much as a glance in my direction, he pulled on his breeches, then his shirt, covering the boyishly muscular chest I had so briefly admired. I waited for him to speak to me, some word of ... something. Not love, surely, for we had not been married for love, but some declaration of any tender feeling he might have developed for me.

None came from his lips. He finished dressing and went to the door, where he paused, turned to look at me, then, with a nod one might use to greet a particularly disliked neighbor, he left.

I lay there on the verge of tears. My husband found me so

unappealing he could not even do his duty. Was I such an appalling creature?

My tears died unborn, my anguish changing to ire. How dare he walk out as though I were nothing?

The opportunity to ask Duncan these questions never materialized, for the very day following our nuptials he departed on a grand tour of the Continent.

I had been abandoned.

Chapter One

"Happy anniversary, dearest Constance," my mother said as we bustled around the kitchen, preparing the basket I took every week to Grandmother Froth.

I grit my teeth. Being reminded of my married state was not something for which I could feel gratitude.

"Thank you, Mother." The words sounded hollow to my own ears and to my mother's as well, if her expression spoke true.

Seven years to the day had passed since my marriage to Duncan. Seven years I had spent waiting for him here at Hawkwood. Seven years which I had spent in a limbo, married, yet not married. To add to the insult, Mother, dear heart, never once forgot my anniversary, unlike my husband.

"Perhaps," Mother said in a falsely hopeful voice, "a letter from Duncan will arrive today, with well wishes for your anniversary."

I snorted, earning myself a reproving glance. "Mother, Duncan's letters are hardly *billet doux*s. The last thing I wish is another missive from my husband admonishing me to keep chaste, while he himself is probably chasing skirts all across the breadth of Europe."

"Constance!" Mother blushed at my words. She visibly calmed herself, as we had had this unseemly discussion many times before. "The fact is there are different standards for gentlemen." Her brow raised as she added, "A man may take a mistress, but his wife receives the honor of his name and raising his children. And if you wish to find any happiness in your life, you must remember that."

"Pshaw! Honor. How is infidelity honoring one's wife? Why must a wife tolerate her husband's straying? And as for children, well, a husband must be home to create them, or am I in error about that?"

Mother made a pretty moue as she placed the wrapped honeycomb into the basket. "It does seem a shame, that instead of special celebration with your husband today, you will be doing the same as every day. Do you not wish to have a special dinner or something, dear?"

The idea of celebrating the mockery which was my marriage was totally unappealing.

"No, thank you, Mother. I appreciate your attempt to cheer me, but I enjoy ministering to the pensioners and the ill in the village. I must say, I may not find such enjoyment in ministering to my husband, if he ever returns. In fact, I may just develop an incurable aversion to his presence."

"Now, Constance, do not be peevish."

"I have sometimes thought it would be better to be a widow in truth than what I am: a widow in effect. A widow has so much more freedom than I."

"Constance! Enough of such talk. I'm sorry I even mentioned your anniversary if this is how you feel."

Mother knew I would have a bone to pick with Duncan when, if, he returned, for I had complained enough over the years. She always chose to ignore my frustration and told me to be patient. Today at least she did not go so far. Instead, she changed the subject.

"I do hope Grandmother Froth enjoys this." She poked beneath the white linen napkin covering the basket. "Two Sower oranges, lamb pasties, piece of cake, a little pot of butter, a honeycomb, a bottle of plum brandy. She does so love her plum brandy. Yes, I do believe she will find this appealing."

Folding the napkin back, she handed me the basket. I picked up a dueling pistol, one of a pair my father had taught me to use when I was but a

child.

Mother tsked. "I wish you would take a man along with you."

"I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Mother. I trust this--"
"I held up the pistol, "More than any man." I slipped the pistol under the linen covering and took the basket from my mother's hands.

"Remember, dearest, do not tarry. It looks like rain," she called from the door as I departed.

"I shan't, Mother."

I walked the sylvan path trying to enjoy the soft touch of the breeze on my cheeks, the beauty of the flowers heavy with pollen, the buzz of the bees going about their business of flying from one to the next.

Like my husband no doubt was doing at this very moment. The reminder of his lack of care for me raised up all the resentments built up over the past seven years.

I sighed. Once again this year Father had sought word from the Blakelys about Duncan's return, and once again had been told Duncan was traveling or studying or some such thing somewhere on the Continent. This year he was again in Paris.

I had come to believe that Duncan cared not for our vows, for even in rustic Hampshire we knew well the goings on in Paris. Goings on any man would take an interest in.

I resented that before he'd departed he had not left me with some marriage music. Ah, a child to brighten my days as I awaited his return. No

greater wish had I than to have babes.

Instead I remained as chaste as the day I was born, with no foreseeable hope for a change of that state in the future.

Chastity. I snorted. At least my natural instincts had shown me how to sate my womanly need when it came upon me. How I resented that I, a wedded woman, had to resort to use of my own fingers to find pleasure in bed.

And there was one more reason I allowed myself to be angry at my husband--those bloody letters.

In each and every one he commanded me to remain chaste, as if I were some night walker or a piece of rabbit pie intent on playing in-and-in with every man in the shire. A pox on my husband's letters! And a pox on him!

I had half a mind to take up with our new curate. Or better still, to travel to London for a fling.

Thoughts of infidelity swam in my head as my feet took the familiar path to the mill, beside which stood the cottage of Grandmother Froth.

Grandmother Froth had been nursemaid to both my father and me. Father had retained her until last year in the hope she would also be nursemaid to my children, but had finally given up and pensioned her.

I loved to visit her. She was still spry and alert and the pleasure of her company allowed me to forget for a time my frustration with my husband's absence. I let the anticipation of a visit calm me.

Why let Duncan Blakely--the cad, the bounder, the scoundrel--ruin a perfectly good walk?

The path to Grandmother's cottage passed between the greenwood and the meadow. Flowers bloomed in abundance, sharing their bright hues and fragrant odors with me. I decided a bouquet was just the thing to add to my basket for Grandmother.

Hiking my skirts, I waded through the deep meadow grass to a bright yellow bed of cowslips. Their sweet fragrance touched my nose as I bent over to pick the best blossoms. The sun, not yet gone behind the growing clouds, heated my head and I took off my bonnet, allowing the breeze to cool me while I gathered the flowers.

My gathering took me quite close to the edge of the greenwood. As I bent over, I realized my bosom strained at my gown's bodice, almost threatening to spill out.

I laughed out loud. What a difference from the pigeon eggs of my youth! It was unfortunate I had no husband--

No, none of that. I refused to let this beautiful day be ruined further and resumed my gathering.

As I reached for a particularly beautiful blossom, I heard:

"Split me!"

My head snapped up toward the greenwood whence the voice had come. I knew I had heard it. I was not given to the imaginings of hysteria.

I stared, trying to discern some figure hiding beyond the trees, yet

saw nothing. With a calm I did not feel, I retrieved my bonnet and slowly returned to my basket with the cowslips, laying them on top. I took the opportunity to run my fingers along the hard barrel of the pistol lying reassuringly beneath the linen cloth.

As I resumed my walk, the breeze strengthened, carrying the hint of the rain to come. The zephyr carried a scent, but not only that of the meadow blossoms. I inhaled more deeply. A most pleasant scent, delectably spicy.

What was it?

I closed my eyes to better identify it. Long ago I had found it possible to heighten a single sense by denying the others. And so I took the odor deeply into my nose and concentrated.

My nerves began to tingle and bit by bit all dullness of my mind and body drained away. Every vital spirit within me responded, quite against my will, as the scent continued to waft over me, filling me with its sweet spice. My heart speeded and, to a wonder, my knees weakened.

In amazed silence I stopped, transfixed. For reasons I did not understand, my breath quickened.

What was this paragon of scent disturbing me?

At last I identified it.

Sandal of citron.

Satisfied, I opened my eyes and continued on, now wondering at the source of the perfume.

As I turned a curve in the path, I saw a man leaning against an old oak. He did not appear to notice me and seemed to be ill. Why else would he lean against the tree's bole, his eyes closed?

The scent grew in intensity as I neared. I slowed my pace, knowing I'd found the source of the delectable smell.

As I approached him, I resisted the urge to step nearer and inhale deeply, as though I might make his scent a part of me. Better sense prevailing, I stood at a fair distance, taking a closer look.

No arch country bumpkin was he, of that I was certain. He had the appearance of being naught but a beau, in love only with himself, his mirror, and his shadow.

Then I noticed he had the courage to wear his own hair. No wig hid the locks hanging long and dark, caught up at the nape.

Yet, his neck cloth was a Steinkirk, current high fashion in Paris.

Then another observation took my opinion back the other way. His dove-colored waistcoat was completely buttoned, quite unlike a dandy's practice. The breeches were buckskin in hue, the stockings and shoes black, and his sword silver-hilted.

All in all, his dress was not indicative of a country squire, nor, I had to admit, a Narcissus. I could only conclude that he was from a metropolis.

A well-formed, handsome man was he, broad of shoulder, narrow in the waist. His long legs filled those buckskin breeches, leaving little to the imagination.

Just then his eyes flashed open.

My thoughts stumbled. His eyes were the exact glorious Prussian blue possessed by my husband. Many of Duncan's features had long ago blurred in my memory, but I will never forget the stunning beauty of his eyes.

And the orbs were locked on my carrot-pate.

Chapter Two

Why did everyone always stare at my tresses? Just because most women with hair as red as mine used a leaden comb to darken it did not mean I had to. I had become rather proud of the splendid ginger of my locks.

Though I couldn't stop the annoyance I felt at his stare, I would not deny aid to a person in distress, as he seemed to be.

"Are you ill, sir? Are you in need of assistance?"

He shook his head and continued to goggle me, so I stared directly back.

After some moments he managed to remove his gaze from my hair and rove it over my person. His eye looked experienced as he idly perused me from head to toe. The examination stirred my indignity and, I am compelled to admit, something more.

"I beg your pardon, Lady--?"

His accent was French, the sounds smoothly rolling from his lips. I had judged correctly. He was from the city.

"Lady Blakely, sir."

"Lady Blakely," he said, bowing deeply. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sir Loup duBois. I am visiting a friend nearby and decided to take some air, but seem to have become lost. If you could direct me to the mill, I believe I could find my way from there."

The mill! How disturbing that Grandmother Froth's cottage lay so close to this man's destination. I clutched the basket closer to my side. The action caught his eye.

"Would you be visiting, carrying treats to your bedridden grandmother?"

"One very like my grandmother." I wondered if I should mention that his destination and mine were very near to one another?

What harm could there be to helping him find his way?

"My grandmother lives near the mill you seek, Sir Loup."

"I hope it would not be an imposition to accompany you?"

"Not at all," I said, but it was.

An imposition on my senses, which were under assault by every aspect of his being. Seeing him, hearing him, smelling him--only touch and taste remained of the senses to be engaged, and even they felt the agitation of the others.

Why was I reacting so?

This man was a complete stranger and should stay that way. Though a dashedly attractive one, I had to admit, assuring myself that there was nothing wrong in a married woman finding a man handsome, so long as she kept the thought to herself.

He bowed deeply, saying, "Your kind generosity is appreciated more than I can say."

He fell in step beside me and we began walking. For reasons I cannot fathom, this pleased me greatly.

"Would you," he asked, "by the remotest chance, be related to Duncan Blakely?"

"W-w-why, yes." I couldn't help the stammer. "He is my husband." After a moment, I managed to ask, "Are you acquainted with him?"

"I had the honor of meeting him in Paris not long past."

"Such a small world, isn't it?" Suddenly much too small. My treacherous fascination with this stranger brought heat to my face.

"And how fares my husband?" I asked, to remind him--and myself--that I was a married lady.

"Hale and hearty, last I saw him. Though he did relate a tale or two in

which he came near to death."

I stopped in my tracks as a gasp escaped my lips.

"What say you? Death?"

My escort nodded, at the same time reaching toward me and laying what he must have thought was a calming hand on my forearm. Instead of calming me, his gesture sent my heart to playing a tattoo.

How faithless to be stimulated by another man's touch after learning my husband had been in peril!

"He told me he had been gored by a boar while hunting in the Black Forest. Something about him needing months to regain his health." He put a fingertip to sculpted lips. "What *was* his second tale?"

I waited with impatience as he pondered.

"Ah, yes. He was captured by bandits in the Pyrennes and held for ransom, but eventually escaped. He then turned the tables on them, hunting them down and bringing the brigands to justice. Took him the better part of two years, I believe he said." He must have noticed my skeptical expression, for he added, "Of course, that was only what he told me."

Did Sir Loup have his doubts as I did as to the truth of my husband's story, bracing though it was?

"Oh my!" I wondered if Duncan had been in such straits why I, his wife, had not been informed.

"He also mentioned that during his unfortunately lengthy absence from home he hoped that his wife, a lovely creature back in Hampshire,

would remain faithful."

The old ire with Duncan's lack of faith flashed into full flame once more.

"I see why he worries, lovely lady." Sir Loup quirked a dark eyebrow at me, looking me up and down most disturbingly, as if questioning whether Duncan's worries on the subject of my behavior had basis. I felt compelled to defend my honor.

"For seven years I have lived a quiet life here at my father's estate. I am no pert hoyden, sir, as Duncan would know, were he here where he belonged."

"No ogling of men? No flirting with fans?" He grinned.

"Feeding of ducklings. Making of clotted cream," I replied.

"I find it difficult to believe that a woman of your beauty has had no meetings under the roses while awaiting your husband's return."

"'Tis no concern of yours, sir, whether or not I have had secret meetings."

"Ah, but Lady Carrot-Top, I would make it my concern."

Both offended and flattered by his words, I knew not what to reply. So, I averted my eyes and busied myself shifting the basket from one arm to another, replying nothing.

He reached forward and placed a bold fingertip 'neath my chin, tilting my face upward.

"Though no rose bower stands near, there are blossoms in the

meadow."

I was so aghast at his boldness that I am quite afraid my mouth fell open and stayed that way.

Upon hearing no refusal, he must have taken heart, for he continued.

"Your husband should adorn you with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds and silks. Instead he leaves you here to rusticate in the country. He is but a bungler, an unperforming husband, and, if I may add, a damn'd fool. I would show you what it is to be worshipped as you should be.

He pulled me into an embrace. My heart skipped a beat, I swear, and my foolish knees buckled, causing him to clutch me even closer.

With my bosom pressed tightly against his chest, he sidestepped, thrusting one of his legs between my own. Astonishment overwhelmed me, making me giddy-brained, while my faithless loins groaned in response, wetting me.

Only when one of his hands slid from my waist, trailing tingling delight up my side, then boldly closed upon my breast, was I able to overcome the sensual lethargy which had stolen my senses.

I pushed at his chest with all my might. He let me go, taking a single step back, a grin on his face.

"You pull the wrong pig by the ear, Sir Cod's Head. Were my husband here he would thrash you soundly. I will brook no more of your impertinence. Be gone!"

I thrust my finger forward, pointing down the path, all the while

struggling to ignore the heat in my loins and willing my quivering knees to keep me standing.

He had the audacity to grin wider and sweep me a deep bow, saying, "Your wish is my command, m'lady. I shall be waiting for you at the mill if you change your mind."

With that he turned and strolled away.

I watched him until he disappeared over the hillock. Even then, I remained in the same spot, no more able to resume my journey than to put shoes on a goose, so jangled were my nerves, so hot my needs.

"Fan me, winds," I cried, "and cool my passion." Nature heeded my plea with a strong breeze across the meadow, bowing the grasses and blossoms.

I closed my eyes and allowed the refreshing wind to ease my body's unwelcome heat. Alas, the breeze did nothing to chill my thoughts, which refused to release the excitement of what had just occurred.

Chapter Three

When I at last opened my eyes, I realized the cooling of the breeze was accompanied by a suddenly darkened sky filled with roiling black clouds. Thunder clapped overhead and as the first raindrops pelted me. I hiked my skirts and ran as fast as I could to Grandmother Froth's.

By the time I reached the cottage I was soaked through and through. Even from a distance I could see the door stood ajar. I took no time to puzzle, for a chill had overtaken me. Entering directly, I called out.

"Grandmother Froth, are you here?"

I received no reply.

The cottage was but two rooms, so I called again, sure that if she were present she could not help but hear me.

There was still no response, which suited me. I was in dire need of dry clothes and, perhaps, if I were alone, something else. Something more. . . intimate.

I long ago learned to see to my own needs, particularly those needs normally met by a husband, and had no guilty conscience for doing so.

I quickly entered the bedroom, latching the door behind me. After setting the basket on the table, I shucked off my sodden clothes and, in a flea's leap, was down to my fine Holland shift. I stirred the fire and set another log on it to take the chill from the room, then fell in the rocking chair in front of the fireplace without regard to appearances. I was, after all, alone.

Having had seven years' practice, it took but a moment for me to hoist

my shift and find the vexed nub. With one hand between my thighs, I moved the other to my breast, alternately pinching and circling my nipple through the fine linen. Sweet jolts of sensation shot into my belly, tightening it. My toes curled. My breaths quickened. My lips parted on a moan of pleasure.

I stroked my velvet until I became slick with wetness. A slow, smoldering fire spread over me, demanding more, demanding fulfillment. Need for more drove one leg over the arm of the rocking chair, opening me wider. Cool air swept over my hot wet flesh, intensifying the sensations.

Foregoing my nub, I sunk my longest finger deeply into my hollow, twirling, plunging, twirling, plunging, matching my thrusts to the rocker's motion.

Tremors rippled over me.

A long moan escaped my lips as I reached the pinnacle of ecstasy.

Ah, sweet release.

My passion exhausted, I let my head loll against the back of the gently swaying rocking chair and a delicious lethargy settled over me.

As I sat there, I became aware of the rise and fall of heavy breaths, echoing my own.

I was not alone.

The shocking revelation had me jumping to my feet, flinging my shift around my still-weak knees. I looked around the room. I could see no one hiding in the dim corners.

My gaze fell upon the bed, shielded by heavy drapes. Could Grandmother Froth be abed at this hour?

Had she witnessed my carnality?

The thought made my face burn with shame.

"Grandmother Froth?" As gently as a lamb, I approached the bed and, with a tremulous hand, pulled back the brocade drape.

"Grandm--" Before my shocked senses could fully register it was not Grandmother Froth, fingers strong as iron bands seized my arms and I was tossed onto my back.

I struggled with all my might, but to no avail. A heavy body collapsed upon me. Fear shot through me as a swollen rod of flesh pulsed against my belly.

In the dim light I could make out the looming visage of the gentleman from the wood.

"Monsieur duBois! How dare you?"

"I dare because you want me to, Lady Carrot-Top."

"How can you say such an absurd thing, sir? I no more want you than I want...."

I could think of nothing.

"So, your precious lips say, but your eyes speak otherwise."

I gasped. "You are a sinful man to act so basely. I am faithful to my husband."

"Faithful to your hand, of which I have one, also." He grinned. "If

you would allow me to show you the pleasure two hands can bring to two people?"

His words ignited a spark within me. I sent up a prayer to St. Agnes, seeking forgiveness.

"Let me show you," he whispered.

He rocked his hips atop me, rubbing his Man Thomas against me. To my shame, my passion, so recently sated, flared anew.

He lowered his head until his lips grazed my ear.

"You know your husband has not remained chaste these past seven years. Why should you? Is it not your right to enjoy the same pleasures as he?"

I shoved at his shoulder. "I can forgive him. I could not forgive myself."

Nor could I forgive myself if I did not escape from beneath him before I succumbed to his seductive logic. A solution came to me.

With a small smile, I took his hand and held it to my face. "Though, perhaps I could forgive myself just this once." I stroked his long fingers. He did have beautiful hands. "What big hands you have, sir."

"All the better to feel you with. To capture your bountiful breasts and your tight white buttocks."

I fought the tremors his words sent through me.

I let my hand stray to his chest, my fingers finding and gently brushing his small, flat nipples.

"The hair on your muscular chest is so feathery and soft."

His breath caught on a gasp. "All the better to rub against your breasts, to arouse your nipples, to make them hard so that my tongue can lave them. Like this...."

He grazed against my linen-covered nipples, roughing them through the material. So sensitive were they that they jumped as though seeking his touch. When I thought they could swell no more, Sir Loup lowered his head, laying his opened mouth over the straining points and suckled.

I gasped. In self-defense, I set my hands to the sides of his head and raised him away from my overeager body. I touched his lips.

"And your lips, your mouth, are beautiful, as though sculpted by a master.

"All the better to taste you with," he said, lowering his lips to mine.

His kiss warmed me through, as though I needed further heating. I felt near to combustion already. Then his tongue traced the parting of my lips and I found myself anxious to taste him inside my mouth.

Dear merciful Heaven! What was I allowing to happen?

I broke the kiss, though my treacherous body would have gladly died from lack of breath to continue. I looked him in the eye, careful to avoid any appearance of falsehood.

"Dearest Sir Loup, I fear you have awakened such passions in me that I must admit you were correct about my need. But before we continue this most pleasant teaching, I must visit the chamber pot. If you would be so

kind as to allow me to arise for a moment?"

"Of course, dear Lady Carrot-Top." He rolled off me.

I scrambled from the bed and stepped toward the table on which I had placed the basket. Reaching quickly beneath the napkin, I pulled forth my pistol, and aimed it straight at him.

His eyes widened and he scrambled back on the bed.

"Blister me!"

"You, sir, are but a traveled fop who has brought back with you Continental ideas which falsely make you believe that a chaste wife will cuckold her absent husband. Such is not the case. I will only engage in intimacies with you when pigs fly in the air with their tails forward."

The irritating man smiled. "Can you shoot that thing, Carrot-Top?"

"A hare is not yet safe that sits within ten miles of my father's house, sir, for he is a crack shot and has taught me well. This pistol is primed and ready for discharge. A shot through the body would put to rest your rude advances."

He looked at me with what seemed to be a gleam of admiration.

"Split me, madam! Would you shoot your own husband?"

Chapter Four

My husband?

No. It was not possible. Surely I would recognize my husband?

"You lie. My husband would not--"

I stopped. How did I know what actions my long-absent husband was capable of?

No. He had to be lying. Trying to catch me off-guard again. I re-leveled the pistol at his belly.

"You are barmy in the crumpet if you think you can convince me you are Duncan. You only want to flesh your sword in my loins. Confess and be hanged, sir, that I may pull this trigger in good conscience."

At that he laughed heartily.

"Admit it," I nearly shouted. "You are trying to bamboozle me."

When his laughter at last faded to a silly grin he said, "No, my little Carrot-Top, I truly am Duncan Blakely, your husband, home at last from abroad and, I freely admit, eager to make up for the lost time away from your beauty."

"And once again I say shittle cum shaw, sir. I do not believe you. If you are truly Duncan, you must prove it."

He got up from the bed and approached me. I kept the pistol trained on his middle, though my hand began to shake, for I had never threatened a person with shooting before.

"Look in my eyes, Constance."

He knew my name. I had not told him my Christian name, of that I was certain.

And his eyes, the same glorious Prussian blue as Duncan's. Could it be?

"Not convinced yet, my darling? Very well. We were married on this very day seven years past, in your father's parlor. You were but twelve, I a callow fifteen. You were a child, whom I would not touch when we were put to bed. I pretended to sleep as did you. Lord Malcolm wanted to awaken me to do my duty, but Lady Meadowbrook, bless her soul, took pity on us and left us alone."

I could not believe it, yet it had to be true. Duncan stood before me. He had finally returned.

But he had lied about his identity. Accosted me in the woods. Pretended to be lost. Pretended to be a French fop.

Why?

The answer came to me immediately. He hoped to catch me in infidelity. To prove I was the unchaste harlot he had accused me of being in every letter he had bothered to write.

He would not get away with this.

"I should shoot you on principle."

His expression changed from amusement to concern.

"Now, Constance--"

"Don't you 'now, Constance' me, you cad. You tried to seduce me to make me betray my vows. Well, it will not work."

His face softened into a smile. "How could I make you betray our vows when I am your husband?"

Duncan was gifted with a rare head for logic. Once again he stopped me with it. But anger and resentment left festering for seven years did not easily fade before mere logic.

"Tell me, husband, how fared you these seven years apart from your wife?"

His smile faded. "I have not been faithful to you, Constance. I had felt no shame until you said you could forgive me. I would hear the words again. Can you truly forgive me for abandoning you while I took my pleasure elsewhere?"

I was not so naïve that I did not know men often said anything to gain what they wanted. What was Duncan's desire?

"What is it you want, Duncan? Will you finally make me your wife in truth and then flee again to the Continent to dally wherever your Man Thomas finds roost?" I shook my head. "No. If such is your desire, I would be free and leave you likewise."

I had finally spoken the words aloud. And my heart clenched as I awaited his response.

He shook his head. "No, my love. I will not give you an annulment. I want to be your husband and father to our children." He spread his hands,

palms up. "I have done with roaming. I admit my error leaving you for so long, to have my itch scratched by other than your sweet fingers. I can only plead that I was a boy, a stupid boy. But now I am a man. Can you forgive the boy and love the man?"

The words I had not thought to ever hear were ones I now recognized as my heart's desire.

I lowered the pistol.

Duncan made no move. "I await your word, my lady."

Our gazes locked. I saw the truth of his declaration and my poor heart leapt.

"I forgive the boy, my lord." I laid the pistol back into Grandmother Froth's basket. "And I have loved the man from the first moment I saw him."

Duncan took the single step between us and fell to his knees before me. He clasped his arms around my waist, burying his head against my belly as a huge sigh shook his broad shoulders. Shoulders I was now free to stroke.

"And I love you." The words, muffled against my shift, made my heart soar. . .and my loins ache.

"Duncan?" I asked in a whisper.

He looked up at me. "Yes, darling?"

"May I at last be initiated into wifehood?"

Even as I spoke the words my nether parts tightened in eager

anticipation. What would it be like to make love with the man who had stirred my lust even before I learned he was my husband?

Duncan made no verbal answer to my question, but instead sprang from his knees and scooped me up as if I weighed no more than a handful of goose down. He carried me to the bed and lay me down ever so gently, kissing my forehead and saying, "One moment, Constance."

"What--"

I fell silent as he began to disrobe before me. Waistcoat, neck cloth, garters, and stockings fell away, leaving only his breeches. As his long fingers nimbly unbuttoned the front, my eyes widened and my breath caught in my throat. He was not half-done with the buttons when his manhood sprung forth like a brandished cudgel. Upright as a parson's wife and thick as my wrist, his pillar reached to his belly in a lewd display of promise.

Fascinated, I could not take my eyes from his male masterpiece with its florid knob. Duncan's gaze followed mine and he said, "Do not be afraid, my love, for I shall prepare you."

Chapter Five

At that, he knelt on the end of the bed and lifted my foot to his lips and began to nibble my toes. One by one he drew each toe into mouth and suckled. His mouth was hard and demanding, and his teeth gently bit along each toe's length, sending sparks of delight into me. As his mouth busied itself, so did his hands, exploring my ankles and legs.

I watched from the pillow as he kneaded and stroked, his long, strong fingers exploring every inch of my skin. The amazing thing was, as he sucked and caressed me he held my gaze locked with his own blue orbs of passion. It was as if he willed us to become one in our desire.

I struggled to hold his gaze, but my flesh no longer responded to my will. My legs quivered and my eyes glazed. My breath came in heaving sighs and my lips released soft moans.

I did not see, but rather felt, with fiery intensity, when his mouth roved up my limbs. I gave myself over to the hunger gnawing at me from within, no longer able to control the maelstrom into which my senses had fallen.

His lips found my thighs and I whimpered as his tongue licked upward.

At my sound, he nipped me there on the tender inside of my thigh. My legs fell wantonly apart.

He took advantage of my position with a long slow tonguing straight

up my thigh, ending with his mouth perilously close to my woman's cleft.

"Duncan," I whispered hoarsely, "What are you doing?" I tried to pull away, but his hands gripped my hips, holding me where he wanted me. I struggled, not willing to let him delve further. He could not, should not, kiss me there. I reached down to grab his hair and pull him away, but I was too late.

He'd crooked my knees and pushed them wide. I felt as if I must look like a well-cooked goose with its drumsticks spread. Duncan must not have seen me so, for his breathing came heavier as he stared at what lay hidden within my woman's silent beard.

Sure as eggs be eggs, I knew what he would do next and that nothing I had ever seen or heard would prepare me for it.

He lowered his head, burying it between my thighs. In a twinkling it happened. His tongue found the focus of my passion and flicked me there, once, twice, more times than I could count. Then his lips closed over me and he suckled.

My hips jerked spasmodically. I moaned deeply and flung my head from side to side. His mouth held tight, working me hard. I could not control my grinding hips, my gasps of pleasure, or the juice pouring forth.

This seemed to be what Duncan awaited, for he released his mouth and plunged a finger straight and deep into me.

My aroused loins met his hand again and again and again. I whimpered, "I cry you mercy! Cease, Duncan, before I die."

"Never!" came his husky moan as he plunged his finger into me over and over until at last I arched off the bed and collapsed, my heart about to burst.

In a fog, I barely realized Duncan had moved up and now lay beside me, but a heat as great as my own pressed against me and I forced my eyes open, only to see his handsome face next to mine.

His brow was moist and his mouth glossy from my woman's liquor. His eyes twinkled as he chuckled and reached over to brush dampened tendrils off my brow.

"Has my little chuckaby come back to earth?"

I returned his smile, weak though mine was, and reached over to lay my palm against his cheek.

"Law, I feel as if I have drunk a pint of laudanum. Should that be so, Duncan?"

His smile broadened into a self-satisfied grin. "That is but the first dose, Carrot-Top."

My eyes widened. "You cannot mean--"

"I do mean. But first we must dispense with this damned shift."

At that he straddled me with his hips, slipped his fingers beneath the bodice of my shift, and tore it from my breasts. I barely noticed, however, for my gaze had locked on his root, which, unbelievably, had swelled to even greater proportions than before. How would that pilgrim's staff ever fit where only one nimble had been before?

"I am not at all sure, Duncan, that I can accommodate--"

He planted a quick kiss on my lips, sharing my essence with me, and whispered against my lips, "Hush, my darling, and trust in me."

With that he spread his hands on my belly and slid them upward, catching a breast in each. He kneaded gently and I watched in fascination as my dusky nipples stiffened to hard little knobs.

Duncan took them, one between each thumb and forefinger, and rolled them back and forth. Just as I was about to die from the pleasure, his head descended and his lips closed over one nub. To my surprise, he opened his mouth wider and suckled in as much of my bosom as would fit in his mouth.

Then the most exquisite of tortures began. Strong fingers kneaded. His mouth suckled. His tongue flicked. He consumed my entire bosom in a melange of indescribably delicious sensations.

Thinking no higher pleasure possible on earth, Duncan proved me wrong by slipping his other hand down to my mound of Venus and plunging his fingers--two this time--deeply into my hole of holes.

Sure as the Creed, I wet his hand with enough hot secretions to fill a pint-pot. He released my breast, slid upward, and placed his lips beside my ear.

"Now, my love, we shall truly become one."

Before he had finished his words, I felt his thick rod of manly flesh probe my darkest place, then plunge inside.

I could not help the yelp of pain escaping my lips as he tore through my maidenhood. A sharp ache continued as the remainder of his length stroked to its full length into me.

He filled me completely and then held himself without moving.

"It shall pain you no longer, my love," he whispered in my ear, his breath coming in short gasps. "Would that I could linger over this moment, sweetest, but I am dire afraid my pleasure at having you can no longer be denied."

Not completely sure of his meaning, all I could do was assure him I was eager for him to continue.

"With this body I thee wedded, Duncan. Prithee, make it thine at last."

A moan escaped his lips as he plunged into my body, his hard shaft possessing me more wholly with each stroke. I clutched at him, trying to hold him inside. My hips rose from the bed to meet him as he returned to me again and again.

Sweet shards of the agony of pleasure thundered through me, from belly to head, crowding out thought. I only felt. I only felt him. Inside me. Making me his at last.

The shards coalesced into an explosion rocking me to my soul.

"Duncan, my love!" I shouted his name to the heavens, making my claim on him.

Duncan groaned, his face a mask of pain, his eyes closed as he

plunged one final time, spilling his seed into my womb.

"Constance."

He collapsed upon me, his breaths coming in gasps as though he had run a league.

We lay thus for long moments, before he sat up and turned to set pillows against the headboard. He rested on them and pulled me to lean against his hard-muscled chest.

"How do you rate my teaching, Carrot-Top?" he asked, a smile audible in his voice.

I, too, smiled. "Compared to what, Sir Loup?"

"Compared to your own talented hand?"

In truth no self-made release was ever so complete as that my husband had given me. Yet, I was a bit loath to admit it to him so soon.

"I cannot say with only one demonstration," I replied. "Perhaps I could have more data with which to make my determination?"

"Lusty wench!" He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight against him. "Over the next sixty years, you shall have all the data you require."

Epilogue

Duncan and I spent the night at Grandmother Froth's cottage, for she never returned. We were to learn later that she had run off and married a "wolf" of her own, the woodsman John Huddle, who was not yet too old to swing his axe.

I suppose, if one must be honest, the moral of this story is that ladies, both young and old, should never talk to strangers, unless they are their husbands, or future husbands, in disguise. Even then, one must be careful. These gentle wolves are still the most dangerous of all, for they will keep you abed and drive you to madness with their passion.

Nine months after I met my Sir Loup in the woods, our beautiful twins were born. Duncan nicknamed our girl "Little Carrot-Top," while I called our boy "Little Wolf." I am happy to report that both have their father's Prussian blue eyes.