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THE PERFECT GIFT

MACKENZIE
Family Christmas

**A Mackenzie Family Christmas:
The Perfect Gift**
by Jennifer Ashley
The Mackenzies series

**A Mackenzie Family Christmas
The Perfect Gift**

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Chapter One

December 1884

Ian Mackenzie hated funerals.

He especially hated dour, overly long funerals that dragged family and friends out to the side of a damp grave in the middle of a Scottish December, wind coming off the hills to chill the bone.

The only warmth was Beth, standing at his side like a bright flame. She wore a dark gray frock trimmed with black, in keeping with the solemn occasion, but she could have been dressed in fiery red for the heat that suffused Ian. Because of Beth, he was able to come today and pay his respects to an old neighbor.

The minister droned on about man being cut down like a flower in his prime--ridiculous, because Mrs. McCray had been ninety. A Sassenach from northern England, she'd married the laird in the next valley, a crony of Ian's father. Now Mrs. McCray and her husband were gone, and her sons, tall Scots lads who'd already produced more tall Scots lads, would take over the lands.

The funeral ended, somber to the last. The McCrays had been very stern, very Scots, very Protestant, Mrs. McCray just as stern as her husband. Decadence strictly forbidden. And the Mackenzies, her neighbors, were so very decadent.

"'Twill be quieter around these parts without her, that's certain," Mac Mackenzie said as they walked back home, Beth close to Ian, Mac arm in arm with his wife Isabella.

Hart was riding back in his carriage, the Duke of Kilmorgan ever aware of his dignity. He'd come alone, as Eleanor, his new bride, was too far gone with their first child to make the journey to the chill funeral.

"She never spoke except in a voice that would shatter glass," Mac went on. He put on a falsetto. "*Roland Mackenzie, when are you going to leave off painting that trash and settle yourself like a gentleman? You disgrace yourself, your family, and your father.* I can still hear her, poor woman."

"Surely she left off after your marriage turned happy," Beth said behind him. "And you produced a son and heir."

"No," Mac said, turning to flash his wide grin. "That was last week."

"She went swiftly, which was a mercy," Isabella said. Wind stirred the dark blue feathers in her hat, and Mac's reddish hair. "She was working in her garden. Never felt a thing."

"That's how I want to go," Mac said. "Walking upright one moment, flat on my nose the next."

Isabella moved a step closer to him. "Let us not speak of it."

"Aye," Cameron Mackenzie said. A sharp gust billowed back his long black coat, and shoved his hair from his sharp face. "Too many bloody funerals in this family already."

Ainsley slid an arm around his waist. Cameron, the largest Mackenzie, bent his head as he pulled his wife to him.

Ian felt Beth close on him as well, her gloved hands on his arm. All thoughts of

funerals, old Mrs. McCray, and cold Scots winters dissolved. Ian had Beth, and nothing else mattered.

They walked down the hill to the valley that held Kilmorgan Castle. Kilmorgan Castle was a large manor house now, the old castle having been pulled down a hundred and more years ago so that a modern, gigantic Georgian structure could be erected in its place.

Ian, as always, felt lighter as he beheld the beautiful symmetry of the house--four wings of identical dimensions running back from a long perpendicular wing. The long wing was proportional to the four shorter wings by exactly two to one, not an inch out of place. The height of the house likewise was pleasingly proportional to its breadth and depth. Ian had studied the house meticulously over the years, measuring it to the last fraction. His father had tried to beat the obsession out of him, but Ian had taken comfort in the precise calculations.

Behind the house, formal gardens had been laid out in the same kind of mirrored symmetry. Mac said he found the entire setup stifling, but the astonishing simplicity of the house and gardens had helped keep the young Ian from complete despair.

Now he shared this beauty with Beth . . . he shared so many things with her.

The house's massive front hall welcomed them with warmth, made still more cheerful by the greenery and ribbons the ladies of the house had hung here, there, and everywhere. *Like I'm walking through a bloody woods*, Hart had growled, but without any true rancor behind his words.

Curry, Ian's valet, met them in the hall and ushered the family into the private dining room, where warm tea, coffee, whiskey, wine, and plenty of food awaited them. Curry, a Cockney man who'd helped Ian through the worst days of the asylum, considered funerals bad luck, especially funerals of a lady who'd turned a rough tongue on Curry on more than one occasion, and so had stayed home.

Hart, having arrived before them, insisted they lift at least one glass to old Mrs. McCray. "May she, her husband, and our father be bullying one another in the great beyond."

"I hope they enjoy it," Mac said, lifting his glass. His cut crystal goblet held tea, not whiskey. Mac now drank no alcohol of any kind.

"Confusion to them all," Cam said, joining the toast.

Hart downed his single malt in silence, then he left the room, off to seek Eleanor. The ladies sipped, each enjoying a warm spiced wine, but Ian didn't drink.

"She wasn't cruel," Ian said into the lull.

The others turned to him in surprise, as they often did when Ian added to a conversation long after that conversation had ceased.

"No?" Mac asked, an edge of anger in his voice. "She urged Father to have you committed as a lunatic, and then told Hart he made a mistake letting you out of the asylum again."

"She thought she was helping me," Ian said. "Father wanted rid of me. There is a difference."

Mac studied him for a moment with an unreadable expression, then went back to the exotic tea his valet kept brewed for him. "If you say so, little brother."

"She were a right bother, that's for certain" Curry said, approaching with more whiskey. "Forgive me bluntness. But old Mrs. McCray could be kind too. She took in

urchins, gave 'em a warm belly and a job."

"In return for a piece of her mind," Mac said.

"Aye, that's so. But when you're starving, you're not so choosy. As I know."

Ian sipped his whiskey and sat down with Beth, no longer interested. Mac laughed at Curry. "You mean, the Mackenzies took you in, and in return, you have to put up with us?"

"Now, I'd never say something like that, your lordship," Curry said. His eyes twinkled, and he tipped Beth a wink, but Ian had lost the flow of the conversation. The funeral, Mrs. McCray, and all that it meant, were finished.

"By the way," Curry said, coming to Ian with the decanter. "While you were out, it came."

Ian waited while Curry filled his glass, Ian taking in the flow of the amber liquid, the exact way the droplets splashed into the glass and spread in perfect ripples.

When Curry finished and took a step back, his words, along with Beth's excited smile, connected in Ian's brain.

"It's here?" Ian asked.

"Aye, m'lord. Waiting for you in the Ming room. With the Russian gentleman's compliments, his man who delivered it said."

Ian didn't hear the last. He left his seat, his brothers, their wives, and Curry a blur as he strode out of the room and down the enormous corridor, not realizing until halfway that he still clutched a full glass of whiskey, the liquid sloshing out over his hand.

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Beth walked out after Ian, her skirts rustling, but she didn't hurry. She knew where her husband was going and why.

This summer, Ian had found an illustration of a Ming bowl in a book he'd read with his usual speed, and nothing would do but that he acquired said bowl, no matter what the cost.

He'd scoured antiques stores in London, Edinburgh, Paris, and down into Italy. He'd visited dealers, written letters, sent telegrams, and waited anxiously for the answers. Because Ian was one of the foremost collectors of Ming bowls in Great Britain and Europe, many came forward to say they had a bowl exactly like it, but Ian had always known that none of them were right. *It isn't the same*, he'd tell the disappointed merchant or collector.

At long last, he'd pinned down the current owner of the bowl in the book--an aristocrat in Russia. The Russian gentleman had agreed to the price and said he'd send the bowl by courier. Impatient Ian had thought of little else from that day to this.

Beth found him at a table in the middle of the Ming room, his broad hands tearing back the paper and straw in a wooden box. She paused to observe him, her tall husband with a blue and green Mackenzie kilt hugging his hips, his dark formal coat stretched across his shoulders. He'd mussed his close-cropped hair, lamplight burnishing auburn streaks in it.

He worked quickly, gaze intent on the box. The room around him was filled floor to ceiling with glassed-in shelves and glass cases on the floor, each bearing a Ming bowl on a little stand, each precisely labeled.

Bowls only. Ian had no interest in vases or in porcelain from any other period. His

early Ming collection, however, was priceless, the envy of all other Ming aficionados.

Ian lifted the bowl from the wrappings and swiftly examined it, holding it up to the light and studying every side. Beth held her breath, fearing the Russian had cheated him, and wondering what Ian's reaction would be if he had.

Then Ian relaxed into his devastating smile, his golden gaze seeking hers. "My Beth, come and see."

He held the bowl with steady fingers as he waited for her. Beth marveled that his hands, so large and strong, could be so gentle--with his Ming bowls, on her skin, while holding his son and daughter.

The bowl was certainly beautiful. Its thin porcelain sides were covered with interwoven flowers and tiny dragons in blue, one object flowing into another in delicate strokes. The inside of the bowl held more flowers dancing around the rim, and on the bottom was a single lotus flower. The underside held a dragon, four claws curled around the bowl's bottom lip. The blue, the only color, was incredible--dark and intense across the centuries.

"Lovely," Beth breathed. "I understand now why you hunted for it so hard."

Ian kept his gaze on the bowl, his face betraying joy he didn't know how to convey. He said nothing, but his look, his happiness, was enough.

"The perfect Christmas gift," Beth said. "How on earth will I find something for you to compete with it?"

"Today isn't Christmas," Ian said in his matter-of-fact voice, still looking at the bowl. "It's the twelfth. And we give our gifts at Hogmanay."

"No, I meant . . . Never mind." Ian could be so very literal, and though he did try to understand Beth's little jokes, he didn't always catch when she meant to be funny. *Poor Beth*, she imagined him thinking, *She doesn't understand a word she's saying.*

Ian set the bowl into her cupped palms. "Hold it up to the light. The pattern is deep. You can see the layers when th' light is behind them."

He kept hold of her wrists as he guided her to raise her hands, holding the bowl toward the warm yellow wall sconce, which dripped with long, clear crystals.

The light unfolded more flowers from between the dragons and vines, small and light blue. "Oh, Ian, it's exquisite."

Ian released her wrists to let her turn the bowl this way and that, but he remained behind her, his warmth on her back. Her bustle crushed against her legs, Ian's arm coming around her waist. He leaned to kiss her neck, the love in the kiss rippling heat through her.

Beth held the bowl up again, her fingers trembling. She needed to tell Ian of the outcome of their nights in bed this autumn, but she'd not had the chance yet. But now .

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Beth started to turn, to lower the bowl, to hand it back to him.

Her shoe caught on the edge of the Aubusson carpet, its fringe snagging the high heel of her boot. She rocked, and Ian caught her by the elbow, but the bowl slipped from her fingers.

She lunged for it, and so did Ian, but the porcelain evaded their outstretched hands.

Beth watched in horror as the blue and white bowl fell down, down, down to the wooden floor beyond the rug, and smashed into shower of beautiful, polished bits.

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Chapter Two

Beth followed the bowl down, her dark skirts spreading as she sank to her knees. "Oh, Ian." Her breath caught on a sob. "Ian, I am so, so sorry."

Ian remained fixed beside her, his polished boots an inch from her skirts. His large hand curled against the blue and green plaid of his kilt, a silent sign of his anguish.

Beth reached for the pieces, tears in her eyes. What had she done? What had she *done*?

She found Ian on his knees next to her, his hands gently lifting hers from the broken shards. "You'll cut yourself."

His voice was even, almost a monotone. Ian's gaze fixed on what was left of the bowl, his whiskey-colored eyes taking in every piece, as though he knew exactly where each of the bits fit together.

"We can fix it," Beth said quickly. "I'll have Curry find some glue, and we can put it back together again."

"No." Ian kept hold of Beth's hands.

"But we can *try*."

Ian finally looked at her, his mesmerizing gaze meeting hers for a brief instant before it slid away again. "No, my Beth. It won't be the same."

Tears slid down Beth's cheeks, and she reached again for the pieces. She would gather them up, paste the thing back together, try to find its beauty again.

A bite of pain made her jump. Ian lifted her hand and kissed a spot of blood on her thumb.

"Stay here," he said quietly.

He flowed to his feet, leather boots creaking, and walked swiftly out of the room. Beth waited, more tears coming, and she put her thumb into her mouth to stop the bleeding.

She couldn't believe she'd done this, ruined the thing Ian had wanted so much, had worked so hard to find. He'd finally won his heart's desire, and Beth had broken it.

She had to fix it. She had to. If she couldn't repair the bowl, she'd have to find another one. The Russian gentleman might have a similar bowl, or know someone who had. She'd need help--and she knew just which Mackenzie she would recruit to help her. Hart could make the world turn upside down and shake out its pockets if he truly wanted to, and Beth would explain that he truly wanted to. This was for Ian.

Ian returned, carrying a broom and a dustpan. He put out his hand to stop Beth when she tried to climb to her feet, then Lord Ian Mackenzie, youngest brother of the Duke of Kilmorgan, swept up the tiny shards of porcelain and shoved them into the dustpan.

"What the devil?" Curry ran into the room, taking in Ian then Beth on the floor. "M'lady, what happened?"

He asked Beth, because Curry knew that if Ian didn't choose to answer, he wouldn't.

"I broke the bowl," Beth said, miserable.

Ian carried the broom and dustpan to Curry. "Throw the pieces away."

"Just like that?" Curry bleated. "*Throw the pieces away?*"

Ian gave him an impatient look, shoved the dustpan and broom into Curry's hands,

and turned for the open door.

"Where are you going?" Beth called after him.

Ian glanced back at Beth but didn't meet her gaze. "Jamie and Belle will be awake from their naps in five minutes."

Because Ian knew his son's and daughter's routines by heart, and never let anyone vary them, he would be right.

Beth didn't relax. "Tell them I'll be up soon," she said.

Ian nodded once and walked away.

Beth got to her feet, picking a minute piece of porcelain out of her skirt.

Curry stared at her, round-eyed, still holding the dustpan. "What happened?"

"I don't know. It slipped out of my hands." Beth dropped the last piece into the dustpan, her breath hurting as she spoke. "Oh, Curry, I feel so very awful."

"No, m'lady, I mean, what did 'e *do*?"

"He . . . fetched a broom and swept up the pieces. But I could see he was upset."

"That's all?"

"I wouldn't say that was *all*. He had trouble looking at me, and I know I've hurt him. He wanted that bowl so much."

Curry turned away, laid the dustpan next to the opened box, and propped the broom against the table. "'E broke another bowl once," he said in a slow voice, "about a year before 'e first clapped eyes on you. It were 'orrible, m'lady. Screaming like . . . I've never 'eard a sound like that come out of a 'uman throat. Me and Lords Mac and Cameron had to sit on 'im to keep 'im from 'urting 'isself. 'Is Grace wasn't 'ere--off politicking at the time--but 'Is Grace had to come back from wherever 'e was to calm Lord Ian down. It were days to get 'im to quiet, and none of us slept a wink."

Beth listened, disquieted. She'd seen Ian in what he called his "muddles," when he lost control of his rage or performed an action over and over, desperately trying to make sense of whatever had happened to set him off. But he'd not done that in years, not since their marriage ceremony in their cozy house not far from here. Beth's domestic life so far had been nothing short of blissful.

Ian had broken Beth's heart the night she'd met him, when he'd explained that he had no ability to love, had no idea what love felt like.

He'd since proven he *did* know how to love--he proved it every day.

"Ian's become quite good at controlling his rages," Beth said, but the words didn't come out with the conviction she'd hoped they would.

"Aye, and we all breathe a sigh of relief, we do, knowing you're looking after 'im. But this were a Ming bowl. Maybe 'e's just 'olding it in."

"He'd never let himself go into one of his muddles in the nursery. He'd never do anything to hurt the babies." Her conviction was firmer now.

"If ye recall, 'e didn't actually say 'e were going to the nursery. 'E only said the kiddies were finishing their naps."

Beth and Curry shared a worried look, then both of them rushed to the door. At the last minute, Curry stepped back to let Beth exit first, then they hurried down the hall and up the long staircase to the huge nursery the cousins shared when the family gathered.

Nanny Westlock, who considered herself in charge of the rest of the nannies, looked up from her darning in surprise as Beth and Curry ran inside the sunny room.

Near one of the wide windows, Ian was just lifting Belle out of her cot. Two-and-a-half year-old Jamie had already headed for the large wooden rocking horse he'd received from Cameron for his second birthday.

Ian set Belle on the floor and held her little hands while she walked eagerly toward Beth. "Mama!" she said brightly. Ian slowed his giant steps for her, his boots alongside her chubby legs.

"Look at me, Mama!" Jamie yelled from the horse. "Like Uncle Cam."

"Excellent, Jamie," Beth said. "Uncle Cameron says you have a good horseman's seat." She lifted Belle as Belle dropped Ian's hands and raised her arms for her mother.

Ian put his hand on Belle's back, Ian always worried that the little girl would fall. Beth hugged her close, determined to prove she wouldn't drop *this* precious package at least.

Ian met Beth's gaze and gave her one of his rare, full smiles. No pain lingered in his eyes, only the warmth he showed when he was in the nursery. The bowl might never have been broken.

"Yes, Mr. Curry?" Nanny Westlock said as Curry lingered in the doorway. "May I be of assistance?"

"Just going, Miss Westlock. Ye run your kingdom to your 'eart's content."

Miss Westlock only gave him a look, but Curry grinned at Beth and shut the door behind him.

Ian moved to Jamie and started showing him how to hold the reins between his small fingers. Jamie was already tall for his age and robust. He'd be a towering Mackenzie before long.

Beth cuddled Belle in her arms and watched her husband become absorbed in his children. She hoped Curry would take the broken pieces downstairs, but she'd have to worry about the bowl and what to do about it later.

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The at least twenty people in the servants' hall listened in horror and then surprise as Curry related his tale. John Bellamy, his blunt fingers working a needle to repair the lining of one of Lord Mac's riding coats, listened while Curry spoke with his usual flair for dramatics. Curry finished by dumping the contents of the dustpan across the table, what was left of a very expensive Ming bowl.

"'Er ladyship wants it put together again," Curry finished. "So 'ow 'bout it?"

The servants around the table leaned forward, white caps and dark and light heads bent as hands reached for the pieces and started sorting.

Bellamy stayed out of it, his hands with their ill-healed broken fingers not good for lifting delicate things like shards of porcelain. A needle and thread was about as nimble as he could get. He usually asked a maid to help him with mending Lord Mac's clothes, but there was so much to do to ready the house for Christmas that he didn't feel it right to bother them.

As he watched the others start fitting pieces together and arguing about what went where, he again thought about his decision to retire. Lord Mac should have a younger man, one more like the suave Marcel who waited on the duke, instead of a broken-down former pugilist.

Lord Mac's lady wife was looking after him fine now. No more did Bellamy need to lift a limp and drunken Lord Mac, undress him like a child, and put him to bed.

Bellamy was nearing forty, and he'd been in one too many fights. He'd worked for a crooked fight manager who'd staged every one of Bellamy's matches, but that didn't mean the punches hadn't been real.

Time for him to move on. He'd run a pub, or he'd train young boxers and teach them how to avoid working for outright thieves.

Wouldn't be easy to tell Lord Mac, though. Lord Mac's feelings would be hurt, but Bellamy knew that his lordship didn't truly need him anymore.

Feeling slightly sad, Bellamy laid aside his mending and left the hall, seeking the back door. He heard the others' exclamations of surprise when Curry explained that Lord Ian *hadn't* had one of his fits when the bowl broke, but Bellamy was not amazed. Lord Ian had been a changed man since he'd married little Mrs. Ackerley.

There was another reason Bellamy wanted to go. He was lonely.

Outside, all was dark, and freezing. The sun had gone, night coming swiftly this far north. Bellamy's breath fogged out, and his feet crunched on the frozen ground. No snow at the moment, but it was coming.

He walked around the corner of the kitchen wing, out of the wind. He heard a gasp, saw another fog of breath, and stopped. At his feet crouched a bundle of clothes. Not rags--the person inside had piled on as many layers as possible against the cold.

A face inside a hood stared up at Bellamy, terror in her eyes flaring as she took in his height and breadth.

"Please," she said. "Don't make me move on yet. Just a while longer, out o' the wind."

Her accent wasn't broad, but it put her from right here in the Highlands. Bellamy had never seen her before.

"Who are you?"

Bellamy's voice came out harsh and scratched. His east London accent couldn't be reassuring either.

The woman flinched, but she held on to her courage. "I'm no one. But please, if you could spare a bit of bread before I go."

Bellamy reached for her. She cringed away, as though expecting a blow, but Bellamy held his hand to her, palm out. "Come with me."

The woman started to scramble to her feet. "No, I'll move on. I know he's a duke and all. I never meant no harm."

Bellamy seized her by the arm, clamping down when she made to jerk away. "Don't be daft, woman. I meant ye need to come inside and get warm."

She stared up at him in more fear, then resignation. This poor lass probably hadn't had a word of kindness in a long while, and when she had, she'd likely had to pay for it.

Bellamy felt a bite of anger at whoever had made her pay in the past. Well, she'd understand soon enough that not all was darkness. He led her into the echoing hall behind the kitchens and closed the door against the night, all thoughts of retiring pushed aside for the moment.

*** **

Eleanor, the Duchess of Kilmorgan, lay in the warm bliss of her bed, while her husband placed another slow kiss on her swollen abdomen.

This had been one of the difficult days, when she'd only been able to rise to toddle

to the necessary and back again. And she had to use the necessary so often these days. Her three sisters-in-law assured her this was normal, but Eleanor worried. She was thirty and having her first child. She knew there was danger, and Hart did too.

The duke kissed her again, adding a brush of tongue. He lifted his head, Hart's eyes deep golden in the shadows.

"You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said in his low, rich voice.

Eight months of marriage hadn't dimmed Hart's passion. In fact, their marriage was awakening desires he'd kept long buried. Eleanor learned more about Hart every day she lived with him.

Eleanor smiled as she laid her hand on her belly, feeling a tiny movement within. "I am very rotund."

"Beautiful," Hart repeated firmly, a spark lighting his eyes. He liked to be commanding.

"Carrying your child," she said. "I'm very happy to."

Hart slid a little way up the bed and touched a kiss to her equally swollen breasts. They ached, but his kiss soothed.

Eleanor was naked, surrounded by blankets and pillows, and the fire in the white and gold stove was stoked full of coal. She must be the warmest person in the house.

Hart had returned from the funeral a little bit ago and come to her--cold, disgruntled, his face hard. He'd undressed near the stove, boots, coat, and cravat coming off impatiently, shirt following them to the floor. He'd stripped out of his underbreeches, leaving his kilt in place, then climbed up on the bed with her, laying Eleanor down and kissing her before he'd spoken a word.

Seeking comfort. Eleanor was happy to give it. Hart had suffered much loss in his life, had sacrificed so much, more than anyone but Eleanor understood.

Hart told her about the funeral while he lay against her, having skimmed off her nightrail. He touched her with the possessiveness of a husband, the tenderness of a lover. They'd talked, voices low, until his bleak look had gone. Hart hadn't been great friends with Mrs. McCray or her husband--far from it--but the funeral had stirred memories of his father and the rather horrible man he'd been.

"Not long now," Eleanor said, her chubby fingers tracing the movement on her abdomen. "Thank heavens. I look forward to walking about my own house again. Without the waddling."

* * * * *

Chapter Three

Laughter tinged Hart's voice. "You don't waddle."

"Mac said I looked like a mother duck. And he is right, blast the man."

"I'll speak to Mac."

"Don't bother. I shook my finger at him. But the comparison was apt. I caught sight of myself in the mirror. Still, 'twill be a nice Hogmanay gift, do you not think? A little boy to dandle on your knee?"

"Or a girl."

"We've had this argument many a time. He will be a boy."

"Mackenzies do as they please. So do Ramsays." Hart ran his hand across her lower abdomen and around her navel.

"I know they do. Which is how I know he is a boy. Did you wager on a girl in Daniel's pool?"

Hart sent her a glance laced with heat. "Do you think I would wager on the outcome of my own child?"

"Danny's become quite the little bookmaker, has he not? I of course put down twenty pounds on boy."

"Only twenty? I thought you were so sure of the outcome."

"It's a frivolous wager, and one should not set a bad example. Besides, Daniel is drawing a large commission. I asked what he needed the money for, and he said he was building things. I shudder to imagine his flat in Edinburgh--loaded to the brim with mechanical parts and gears and oddities, I shouldn't wonder."

"I don't know. He lets no one in." Hart skimmed his hand down to her thigh, his fingers gentle but skilled. He moved to the foot of the bed and knelt there, kilt spreading over his large thighs. "Lie back. I'll rub your feet."

"Mmm." Eleanor wriggled her toes as Hart took her heel in his hand. "Every princess wants this in her Prince Charming. He rides up to the castle, kisses her awake, and rubs her aching feet."

Hart pressed soothing circles into the ball of Eleanor's foot, and she hummed in pleasure. Even more so when Hart leaned down and licked across her arch.

Hart had taught Eleanor pleasures she had never heard of, and she knew he'd only touched upon his vast knowledge. He feared to shock her or hurt her, but Eleanor was teaching him that she was made of stern stuff.

He'd continued to make love to Eleanor as she'd been increasing, up until the last month, when everything, including walking, had become painful. Even then, Hart had known how to make her feel good.

She'd learned this year about the erotic touch of silk or feathers on skin, how a blindfold could heighten those feelings, how the whisper of Hart's breath in intimate places could render her body open and ready for him. He'd touched every inch of her with light strokes or with the weight and pressure of his hands, until she was coming apart in pleasure.

He hadn't done much with restraints once her body had begun thickening, but Hart had continued stirring her excitement by brushing her with the tethers of silk and leather. Eleanor shivered now, thinking on it.

"Lie still," Hart said in a low voice, but one that held steel. "Let me look after

you."

Eleanor forced her body to relax. She really shouldn't--she had a million things to do to prepare the house for the holiday celebrations, and she couldn't expect Ainsley, Isabella, and Beth to do everything for her.

But Hart's touch, his voice, made her sink down among the pillows. He lifted away, and she heard a clink of glass on glass, smelled the warm perfume of oil. Hart ordered oils from Paris, and he'd made her choose her favorite scents from a very discreet shop when they'd traveled to France in the summer.

Mmm, vanilla and a touch of spice. Eleanor kept her eyes closed and inhaled as Hart smoothed his hand around her ankle. He slid his fingers up her calf and behind her knee, kneading a little, before he returned his attention to her right foot.

He pressed his thumbs into her arch and onto the ball of her foot, the oil and his touch easing tension. He gave pleasure to each of her toes, smoothing them, rubbing, pinching the slightest bit.

He pressed her heel against his bare chest and gently rotated her foot, holding her toes while he eased her swollen ankle. Lowering her foot to the mattress, Hart held it lightly with one hand while he slid his other hand up her leg to her inner thigh.

His fingers lingered just below the join of her legs, his eyes warm as he watched her. He stroked his thumb over the inside of her thigh, not touching her more intimate places, but coming very close. The whisper of air he stirred, the stroke of his oiled fingers, made Eleanor let out a slow breath.

She started to move, lifting to his touch, but Hart pressed her firmly back to the mattress. "No, love. Stay still. I'll do everything."

Eleanor let herself sag again. Difficult when Hart's touch, light yet confident, sent ripples of hot pleasure through her body.

She'd learned not to fight him. To fight him brought out his wicked side--the feral smile, the look in his eyes that would frighten a lesser woman. Sometime, when she was feeling brave, Eleanor deliberately disobeyed him, to see what he'd do.

And the things he'd do . . . He'd become firm, no longer tender, tie her wrists with a cravat, or fasten her hands to the bed, or roll her over and chastise her backside. It would start as a game, and then Eleanor, who prided herself on her presence of mind, would become a begging pile of emotion. She'd dissolve into pure pleasure, crying his name, pleading for him, hearing his dark laughter, the bite of his teeth in her flesh, the sting of his hand.

He'd been kind to her, Hart said, during her pregnancy, but he promised he was storing up all sorts of things for later.

For now, his touch was light, warm, tracing pleasure onto her skin. He circled his thumbs over her inner thigh, just brushing the curls at the join of her legs. One finger flicked her opening, so sensitive now. She dragged in a breath, then another even more sharp as Hart leaned down and kissed where he'd touched.

His breath tickled her skin, hotter than his hands. The cool of the wedding ring on his left hand contrasted the heat, making her remember the intoxicating moment when she'd slid it onto his finger.

A knock at the door made Hart's body tighten, but he never roughened his touch on Eleanor.

"Your Grace," a faint voice came through the wood. "It is Wilfred."

Hart said nothing, but the soft light left his eyes, angry hardness filling them. No one, but no one, disturbed the duke when he was alone with his wife.

"Poor Wilfred," Eleanor said. "You'd better see what he wants. He would never dream of bothering you if the matter weren't terribly important."

Hart heaved a long sigh. He pressed a kiss to the inside of Eleanor's knee, got himself off the bed without jostling her, snatched up his shirt, and dragged it on as he went to the door in it and his kilt.

He jerked the door open only enough to slide out and close it again, never letting Wilfred catch a glimpse of Eleanor in the bed.

Eleanor rested her hand on her abdomen as she waited impatiently. Drat her uncooperative body. She was dying to know what Wilfred had to say, but she couldn't rise from the bed to find out.

A long time passed before Hart returned, keeping the door partway closed as he entered. He turned the key in the lock, then paused to skim off his shirt and unpin his kilt, letting the plaid fall to the floor.

Naked, gloriously so, Hart climbed back onto the bed, again not disturbing Eleanor, and snuggled down in the covers next to her.

"Well?" Eleanor asked when he remained silent. "Tell me at once, before I go mad."

Hart deliberately settled the covers around both of them, ending up resting his elbow on Eleanor's pillow, his hand on hers on her abdomen. He took another minute or so after that, simply looking at her, before he spoke.

"Beth broke the bowl."

"Oh, no." Eleanor sat up, or as upright as she could. Hart didn't have to explain which bowl. "What happened? Is Ian all right? Is Beth?"

"Apparently, Ian took it in stride. Beth is more upset, from Curry's reports."

"Well, she would be. How awful." Eleanor started to push back the sheets. "We must make sure she's all right."

Hart stilled her with a strong hand. "*You* must stay here and rest. Beth and Curry have things in hand, and Ian is with his children."

"And he's not . . ."

"He hasn't done anything at all, Wilfred said. Don't worry, love." Hart pressed a kiss to her lips, his body curving around hers protectively. "We'll watch him, and make sure all is well."

"We must find him a new bowl. One just like it."

"So Beth says." Hart softened enough to give Eleanor a smile. "She already told Wilfred I am to assist. I hear and obey."

"Because you're worried about Ian too."

"Yes." His smile vanished. "I am. The last time this happened it was a bloody disaster, and I was no help at all." He closed his eyes, shutting out remembered pain. "I hated that Ian wouldn't respond to me. I'm one of the most powerful men in Britain, I have foreign princes afraid to cross me, and I couldn't reach my own brother."

Eleanor stroked her hand through his hair, the warm silk of it soothing. She'd seen his frustration and hurt when he looked at Ian, great worry, and love.

"Ian's much better now. He has Beth."

"I know." Hart opened his eyes again, trying to hide his pain, but Eleanor always

saw it.

"You'll find another bowl," Eleanor said with confidence. "You know so many people, and I'm certain they all owe you favors."

"They do. And I will."

"*After* you finish my foot rub."

Hart's smile returned, and with it, a glint of wickedness. "You're a demanding thing."

"Greedy." Eleanor ran her finger down his nose and tapped its tip. "Hungry for you. And sore."

Hart pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to her lips. "I'll give you your foot rub. But *my* way."

He ran his hand down to her thigh, fingers doing their dance on her sensitive skin. Eleanor leaned back on the pillows and gave herself over to the very talented ministrations of her husband.

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Isabella Mackenzie finished writing yet another letter the next evening, and stretched her aching fingers. The windows in her private sitting room were dark, and the air had turned frigid, though the coal stove kept her toasty warm.

Planning the large holiday festivities was a long and tedious process, but she, Ainsley, and Beth were determined to make Hart and Eleanor's first Christmas together memorable. The Scots, Isabella had learned from years of being married to one, didn't pay as much attention to Christmas Eve and Day as they did Hogmanay--New Year's. However, Hart had two English sisters-in-law and often had a houseful of English guests who expected Christmas crackers, plum pudding, and feasting on Christmas Day. Therefore, they had to plan two large celebrations, one at Christmas, one for Hogmanay, and yet another for Twelfth Night.

Isabella wanted this Christmas to be memorable for Eleanor in a good way. Some past Mackenzie Christmases had been out-and-out disasters, most of which had been caused by Mac's drunken debauches and his and Cameron's equally debauched friends. Half of these friends had ceased to be welcome at Kilmorgan--any Mackenzie household--after they'd decided it amusing one year to lock Ian into an attic room.

Isabella shuddered at the memory. Hart had been livid, and he and Cameron had had a punch-up, Hart blaming Mac for the friends' antics, Cameron defending Mac, who could barely stand up from a hangover. Only Isabella's persuasion had kept Hart from slinging his two brothers out into the snowy night.

This year, the house would be full of rejoicing. Babes filled the nursery, more family and friends would pour in on them soon, and the Mackenzie men were . . . well, not exactly *tamed*. But at peace with themselves, no longer fighting life.

Ian's broken bowl was on everyone's mind, however. He'd said not a word about it, appearing at breakfast with Beth as composed as ever. Beth's flushed face and little smile told Isabella how Beth might have been soothing him, but the brothers were still worried.

She felt Mac's presence behind her before two strong arms came around her, and Mac's lips brushed a warm kiss to the curve between her neck and shoulder. The scarf that he wore over his hair when he painted touched her cheek.

"What are you doing out of your studio?" Isabella asked. Mac had retreated there

after breakfast and hadn't been seen since. He still wore his painting kilt and boots, though he'd donned a shirt. Most of the time when painting, he didn't bother with the shirt. "Has something happened?"

"Yes, Nanny Westlock. Time for the children's tea. I was taken to task for not returning them to the nursery, and I came to you for comfort."

"And as you can see, I'm swimming in plans for Hart's Christmas ball and New Year's celebration."

"Isn't that what Wilfred is for?"

Isabella reached for another sheet of paper, Mac's arms still around her. "Wilfred is a man and what I have in mind needs a woman's touch. Eleanor is fragile, and I like doing this for her."

"I know you do, love. You have a generous heart."

He kissed her again, and Isabella closed her eyes, momentarily consigning plans for Christmas, Hogmanay, and the coming year to oblivion. She'd fought long and hard to reconcile with Mac. She wanted to savor every moment she had with him, to erase the years she'd had to do without him.

"Daniel telegraphed," Mac said. "Cam's out, so the majordomo handed the telegram to me. He'll be arriving tonight."

"Excellent." Isabella opened her eyes, smiling in true enjoyment. "I miss having him underfoot. He's all grown up now."

"He's quick-witted, resourceful, inventive, and as stubbornly obsessive as any of us. Very dangerous."

"And yet, he'll still be the little boy who mistook me for your fancy lady the day after we married. Poor thing. He wasn't to know you'd brought an innocent miss into your house."

Mac's arms tightened around her. "Love, you'll never know how hard I fell for you, my haughty debutant, when I saw you in the middle of that ballroom, all lace and fineness. You looked at me, the great Mac Mackenzie, and I knew I was lower than worms."

"I was an arrogant little thing, so certain I was the catch of the Season. You brought me down a peg or two. I needed it."

"I never meant to bring you as far down as I did." Mac's voice went low, and Isabella remembered the pain and heartache of the first years of their hasty marriage.

"We were both young, impatient, and selfish," she said softly. "It was bound to go wrong."

"Whereas now we are old, wise, and staid?" He nibbled her neck. "I hope we have some wickedness still in us. How about I send Bellamy for some scones and tea?"

Isabella flushed bright red, remembering one afternoon in her London house, when she'd shared scones and clotted cream with Mac for the first time since their separation. Her behavior had been decidedly *un-ladylike*.

"Perhaps," she said, the word demure, her gaze cast down.

Mac growled. "My little Sassenach. Do ye know how much I love you?"

Small footsteps interrupted Isabella's intended answer. They turned to see Aimee, their adopted daughter, five going on six, watching them solemnly from the carpet.

Isabella rose, her love for Aimee flooding her. They'd rescued the poor girl from a madman, and she'd brought Isabella and Mac closer again.

Isabella went to Aimee and lifted her, reflecting sadly that she was getting too big for such things. She planted a kiss on Aimee's pink face. Mac joined them, his arms going around his wife and daughter.

"Why are you out of the nursery?" Isabella asked.

"Yes," Mac said. "You'll have Nanny Westlock hunting me, ready to put buckshot into my backside."

"Papa," Aimee said reproachfully. "Don't be so silly. Nanny wants to find Gavina. I told her I'd ask her what you've done with her."

"Gavina?" Mac blinked. "She belongs to Cam. Why should I have done anything with her?"

"Because she likes to play in the studio with us, and Aunt Ainsley didn't return her to the nursery for tea. Nanny thinks you might have forgotten where you left her."

"I didn't leave her anywhere," Mac said. "If she's not with Ainsley, she must be with Cam somewhere."

"Uncle Cameron has gone to the pub. Would Uncle Cameron have taken her to the pub?"

"No . . ." Isabella began, then she stopped. With Cameron, anything was possible. She glanced out the dark window. "I'm sure she's only followed one of the dogs or fallen asleep." Isabella set Aimee on her feet and took her hand. Mac took Aimee's other hand, his wink at Isabella telling her they'd continue their discussion about scones later. "Come along, Aimee. Let's find her."

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Daniel Mackenzie stepped off the last train of the night to Kilmorgan, settling his hat as the train puffed steam then chugged slowly up the track to its next destination.

"Master Daniel," the stationmaster said. "Welcome back. If you wait a few moments, my son will drive you up to Kilmorgan Castle."

"I'll walk," Daniel said. "I've been sittin' on trains since Edinburgh, and my legs, they need some stretching. Have the lad take my case, but I'll take a stroll through the village."

"Powerful cold night for a stroll, lad."

"Aye, but the warm pub is between here and there." Daniel grinned at the stationmaster, who'd been stationmaster for more than the entire eighteen years of Daniel's life.

The stationmaster chuckled, snatched up Daniel's one bag, said good night, and disappeared into the station. Daniel pulled his greatcoat closer and walked swiftly to the road that led to the village.

Coming home was always a mixed blessing. Christmases at Kilmorgan had become much better since Ian had married Beth, even better with Mac and Isabella now back to loving each other, and the best since his father had done the sensible thing and married Ainsley.

Now that Eleanor was Duchess of Kilmorgan, maybe Uncle Hart would stop behaving like a snarling bear. From what Cameron had said, since the marriage Hart had regained the more playful, lighthearted side of his youth--*God help us all*, Daniel's father had concluded.

This homecoming would be more interesting than others, that was certain.

On the other hand, Daniel was restless, tired of waiting for life to begin. He liked

his studies at Edinburgh, but they didn't move quickly enough for him. He'd taken to slipping away to spend time with a middle-aged man who built crazy gadgets in his house, which had led to a few scrapes that Daniel hoped had not come to the attention of his father.

The one street through Kilmorgan was deserted, not surprisingly, because a cold wind cut through the huddle of houses and back out again. No snow yet lay on the ground, but it clung to the mountains and waited to pounce on the valleys.

With relief, Daniel opened the door of the pub and stepped into its welcoming warmth.

A large man holding a glass of ale in one hand and a lit cigar in the other lounged at a table between fireplace and door. He sat alone, though he'd cut off a conversation he'd been having with two men playing cards at a nearby table.

The man took several long drags of the cigar, blew out the smoke, and said, "Hello, son."

* * * * *

Chapter Four

"Dad." Daniel lifted his hand to the regulars in the public house, men he'd known all his life.

Lord Cameron Mackenzie, next in line for the dukedom until Eleanor bore a son, sat comfortably in their midst. The locals had never minded Cameron or Mac coming in to drink, play cards or darts, and join in the conversation. They didn't mind Ian either, who'd drink and sit in silence the rare times he'd visited with his brothers, though Hart still made them a bit nervous.

An open box of cigars sat on Cameron's table, and from the acrid scents around him, many of the men here had dipped into it. Daniel's father was generous--these were expensive.

Daniel took one of the cigars, bit off the end, lit the cigar with a match from a box on the table, and sank down across from Cameron. He smiled over at the barmaid, who smiled back and started working the taps.

"Wasn't expecting you 'til next week," his father said in his rumbling baritone.

"Wasn't expecting to come so soon." Daniel blew out smoke. "But I thought it was time to leave Edinburgh."

Cameron's eyes glinted. "You owe someone money?"

"Naw, they owed it to me. And are being bad-tempered about it. But when I claim my clockwork numbers machine can add a string of figures faster than a human being, they need to believe me."

"Clockwork numbers machine, eh?" Cameron took a long draw on his cigar, following it with a swallow of bitter. "What professor is teaching you that?"

Daniel shrugged. "No professor. Something I'm looking into on me own."

Cameron emphasized his words with fingers holding his cigar. "You begged me to go to that university, Danny. You're taking the degree."

"Oh, I'll have it, don't you worry." Daniel smiled up at the barmaid as she set the ale in front of him. "How are you, Kirsten? No girls as fine as you in Edinburgh, that's the truth."

The barmaid Kirsten had very blond hair, large blue eyes, a ready smile, and a body that stopped a man in his tracks. She was a few years older than Daniel, but had been perfectly happy to teach him to kiss once upon a time. "Och, don't lie to me, lad," she said good-naturedly then moved back to the taps under the watchful eye of her father.

"Why aren't you at the house?" Daniel asked. "Billing and cooing with me sweet stepmama?"

"Ainsley, Beth, and Isabella are planning a grand Christmas and Hogmanay feasting. Including a ball or two, bonfires, banquets, and numerous other festivities. There are decorators, extra servants, supplies coming at all hours, the ladies making lists, running about, and chattering, always chattering."

Daniel took a sip of the ale. Not the best in the world, but it had a bite that told him he was home. "Ye fled for your sanity, did ye? Will stepmama be happy when she finds you gone?"