

The Light of the Highlander

By R. A. Fletcher

Elizabeth woke with a start, shrouded in complete darkness. She lay sprawled out on a cold stone floor, her skirt ripped and disheveled, and her head throbbing. She tried desperately to remember where she was, or what she was doing there, but her mind was completely blank. She scanned the room attempting to make out her surroundings in the dim light that shone from under a door that she assumed led to a hallway. She determined that in front of her was a rather large bed. Upon further inspection, she could make out many furs laid over it. She ran her hands through some of the soft blankets, either the owner of them was an amazing hunter and tanner or very wealthy.

She moved her attention to the other items in the room. She could make out the shapes of what she thought was a large wardrobe in one corner and a long desk in the other. She stood slowly, and as she did, her head began throbbing and the floor seemed to slowly spin below her feet. After a moment, the throbbing subsided and she hesitantly took a step forward. She felt as though she needed to feel these objects, they may help her determine where she was. Before she could take another step, she noticed the light from the hall was growing brighter. Terrified of what was coming, she quickly hid behind the large bed and slowly peered over the furs.

The door swung open and the light that flooded in almost blinded her. She inadvertently made a small squeak as her eyes struggled to adjust to the blinding light. When she could finally see again, she was instantly glad that she hadn't gotten the chance to feel the other furniture. The "wardrobe" was actually a weapon cabinet with various swords and battle axes in it. On the desk was an intricate assortment of tanning tools, leathers, skins, furs, and a variety of knives.

Why would someone keep so many dangerous things in their chambers? She thought.

Before she could really dwell on the question she found her answer. Standing in front of her with a concerned look on his face was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen. He stood almost six and a half feet tall with muscles that seemed to be sculpted of sheer stone that rippled through his entire body. No doubt he could use any one of these weapons with no problems. He had short, shaggy brown hair that fell in front of his eyes ever so slightly. His

ice-blue eyes were so captivating that she did not realize she was holding her breath. With such handsome features, his expression made her want to jump up and ask this stranger what was wrong, and comfort him. When she finally tore her eyes away from his, she examined his wardrobe and instantly knew she couldn't. This man was dressed in Highlander attire with a dark green and deep blue plaid draped across his bare chest and a matching kilt.

Was she kidnapped? She wondered. How else would she get here with no recollection and no way out? Why else would she be in the chambers of a ruggedly handsome Highlander?

"Mi' Lady!" He said in a gentle, warm voice. "What 're ye doin' out o' bed? Ye took a rather nasty fall. Ye really should be resting." He placed the bright lantern he was carrying on the long desk and crossed the room in two long strides, appearing right next to her in no time at all.

"Fall?" She whispered. That was all she could manage, her knees were weak and her breathing shallow.

"Yea, I was out with mi' brothers hunting, when we heard the most dreadful screamin' we ever did hear. 'Twas a rather nasty sight. Yer horse threw ye near ten paces I gather. Ye hit yer head on some rocks over by the river." He paused, as he lifted her off the floor and placed her gently on the bed. Her breath caught in her throat. For someone so muscular, he really was gentle.

"Amelia!" He called in a commanding, yet calming tone.

"Yes, mi Lord?" said a small voice after a few moments. A young maid, who Elizabeth assumed was Amelia, appeared at the door holding a tray, but Elizabeth couldn't see what was on it.

"Can ye please attend to th' lady for a moment? I' goin' to fetch her some water." Said the Highlander before disappearing into the hallway.

Amelia approached the bed with the tray, which Elizabeth could now see was filled with bandages and other medical supplies.

"How's th' head feelin' miss?" Amelia asked.

"Um. It throbs a bit in the back here." Elizabeth said pointing to the spot that had made her head reel when she had tried to stand. "Where am I?"

"Ye' 're at th' McCullen estate near Eyemouth." Amelia said matter of factly as she pressed a warm cloth with medicinal herbs to the back of Elizabeth's head. She felt instant relief and her thoughts became a bit clearer.

"Am I safe?" Elizabeth managed to say in barely a whisper as the words caught in her throat while she tried not to panic.

Amelia stopped what she was doing and looked Elizabeth straight in the eyes. "O' miss. I can na' imagine how frightenin' this mus' be 'or ye. Th' McCullens 're a right honorable lot, an' I never seen the Master so concerned for anyone as much as he was when he rushed in with ye this afternoon. Ye won' need to worry 'bout any harm befallin' ye tonight Miss. If ye need anythin', I will be right across the hall all night."

"Thank you." Elizabeth said with a sigh of relief.

"Is she alright?" The Highlander said reappearing in the doorway with a cup in hand.

"I think she'll be fine, she just needs a bit more rest." Amelia said, cleaning up the medical tray. "Sleep well miss." She said before exiting the room.

"I', sorry if wakin' in a strange bed scared ye any miss. I dinna expect ye to wake so soon."

"I didn't wake on the bed." She said in a voice much too high. "I was on the floor."

He looked horrified at the thought. "Now that just wonna do now will it?" He said calmly and climbed into the bed next to her, pulling her close to her chest.

"I beg your pardon sir, but I don't even know your name." She protested as she tried to push away from him. "This is highly inappropriate! Especially if you expect me to believe you were my rescuer. What could be more absurd than a Highlander rescuing a young English woman traveling alone?"

"On the contrary miss, 'tis just the opposite. We consider ourselves to be vera hospitable people here. Whether ye 're English or not, ye were in trouble. I coulna leave ye there to get taken by som ruffians whom do na; better than sellin' ye to the highest bidder." He squared his shoulders and set his face in a grim scowl. "I donna wan ya to to get hurt. I'll make sure ye donna fall again. If I am to be returnin' ye to yer home I donna wan 'em to to be thinkin' I did ye wrong. As for mi name, I'm Gavin McCullen."

"I'm Elizabeth." She answered, unsure of what else to say to that. "Please, you don't have to send me back to my family. When I am well enough all I ask is my horse and some supplies. I can pay you anything you want for it."

"Now that's rather impossible miss. When yer horse got spooked, it ran off an' we couldna find it. I'm afraid any money ye had with ye was lost wit' yer horse."

Elizabeth was shocked. *No horse, no money, stranded in Scotland, and trapped in bed with a Highlander who wanted to send her back to her family? How could things possibly get any worse?* She didn't want to know the answer to that question. It was a mistake to even think it. She had never been overly superstitious, however, she always thought that fate had a funny way of making things happen in the exact opposite way of what she would like.

Gavin pulled Elizabeth closer to his chest so that when she breathed she inhaled his intoxicating scent. She felt like there was a fog clouding her thoughts. Laying there in this strange man's arms, drowsy from the apparent events of the day, she laid her head on his broad, strong shoulder. She could hear his slow and steady heartbeat lulling her deeper into a drowsy stupor.

"Mr. McCullen," she said in a slow voice, "I do not wish to be returned home. Did you not find it strange that you found me riding alone in a strange country?"

"I would never pretend to know the intentions of a women, Miss. Yer business is yer own." Gavin said.

"Well, in any case I beg you not to return me. I just need a horse." She tried to sound defiant, but she knew it came out in a drowsy slur.

Gavin let out a low chuckle that rocked Elizabeth like a father rocking his child. "Ye 're quite different Miss Elizabeth. If ye rest tonight an' let me watch ove' ye, I'll get ye what ye need in the mornin'."

"Fine." Elizabeth gave in with a small yawn and drifted off to sleep.

Light streamed through the tall castle window as Elizabeth woke to an empty bed. There was a moment of confusion before the events of the night flooded back to her, and she remembered where she was. She took a deep breath, sitting up in the large bed and drinking in her surroundings for the first time in the light. The furniture was beautiful dark wood, maybe cherry? Each piece had intricate carvings of stags and woodland scenes.

On the desk, her eyes rested on a tray filled with a delicious selection of breakfast foods and at least five different drink options. Next to the tray was a bundle with a note on top. She hesitantly crawled to the edge of the bed, digging her way out of the many furs. Slowly, she swung her legs over the edge and stood with the support of the bed frame. She was surprised to find that there was almost no pain in her head as she pulled herself upright. With a sharp breath, she walked with as much confidence as she could muster toward the mystery items.

She settled into the ornate chair next to the desk and opened the note. It was from Gavin.

Miss Elizabeth,

I wasn't sure what you liked so I had the kitchen prepare a little bit of everything for you. I know you are probably used to English delicacies so I made sure that they prepared some breads and eggs for you. Please eat your fill, you need to gain your strength back. I've also had Amelia select some new clothes and perfumes for you so you can freshen up. I've had to step

away this morning to tend to affairs of my estate. When you are feeling well enough, Amelia will help you with whatever you need.

- Gavin

Elizabeth didn't know what to think. It really did seem like he was being an honorable host. Her head was spinning with thoughts now, but her stomach won the battle with a loud groan reminding her how long it had been since she had a warm meal. She turned her attention to the breakfast tray filled with fresh fruits, eggs, warm bread, porridge, bacon, sausages, beans, and a few dishes she had never seen before. It wasn't long before she had devoured almost everything on the tray aside from the mystery dishes. She was grateful to be alone for the meal, she could just imagine what her mother would have said if she had seen her eat like that.

Quickly, she took a large gulp of the wine from the drink tray and shook away the thought. The last thing she wanted to do was think about her mother. Finally, she examined the bundle that she assumed held fresh clothes. She wanted nothing more than to feel clean again, but she knew it would take more than a new dress to do that. She carefully opened the package to find a rather tasteful gown, a hairbrush, and a small pouch filled with perfumes and soaps. She almost cried at the thought of a hot bath. Taking one last drink of wine and setting her posture, she walked to the door and cracked it open, peaking into the large stone hallway.

"Amelia?" She called in what she hoped was a friendly tone. She saw a doorway just across the hall, but no other doors. The hall wrapped in a curve around the rooms with even more weapons and woodland scenes lining the walls.

"Mornin' miss." Amelia said emerging from the small room. "How can I be o' service?"

"I was wondering if there was anyway I might take a bath?"

"O' course! Follow me."

Elizabeth couldn't believe how good it felt to take a bath after being on the road so long. She took the time to reflect on the events of the past few days. The hot, perfumed water was relaxing and invigorating at the same time. By the time she was getting dressed, Elizabeth was feeling much more confident and at ease, than she had since her mother had made her announcement that horrible morning. It was only a few days ago, but standing here in a highland castle, wearing a simple dress, it felt like a whole lifetime ago. The sun was high in the sky by the time Elizabeth finished pinning her hair in place and finally emerged into the hallway where Amelia was waiting for her.

"Ye lookin' a right lot better if ye donna mind me saying miss." Amelia said as she gathered Elizabeth's torn clothing.

"Thank you, Amelia. I am feeling much better."

"Master Gavin said ye would be needing a horse today. I can take ye down to th' stables if ye like." Amelia had already called in two other handmaidens who were cleaning the tub and carting away all evidence Elizabeth had used the room. "I am at yer service, miss."

"Actually," Elizabeth said, "I was hoping to speak with Gavin."

"O' I donna kno' 'bout that miss. He is right busy surveyin' the grounds today."

"Please, Amelia. It will only take a few minutes. I can't just leave without thanking him for all he has done for me."

"Alright, miss. But he may no' be happy to be disturbed."

Amelia led Elizabeth out of the castle and through a beautiful garden path that narrowed into a wooded trail. They walked for almost an hour through the woods making small talk about the estate and the McCullen family. Finally, they could hear the voices of men ahead of them.

"Master Gavin!" Amelia called loudly so the men knew they were approaching.

"Amelia?" Elizabeth heard the deep, calm voice of the man who had slept next to her last night break through the trees. "I thought I told ye I'd be busy for the-" He stopped short as the women came into view. "Miss Elizabeth?"

“Laird McCullen, what is the meaning o’ this. Bringin’ women out here while we ‘re attending to business?” Said a short, round man in red plaids. He wasn’t nearly as muscular as Gavin, he had been softened by years of food and drink, though it was clear he had once been a capable soldier on the battlefield.

“Excuse me, Duke, it’s just an unforeseen situation with a distant relative. Feel free to carry on with mi brother for a moment while I attend to these ladies.” He nodded at another tall, muscular man in the same green and blue plaids he wore and approached Elizabeth. The other two men wandered off talking about the hunting season.

“Miss Elizabeth, I thought ye’d be long gone by now.” His voice sounded impatient, but there was something else there as well. Perhaps a hint of, excitement?

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, sir. It’s just that I couldn’t take off without thanking the man who saved my life.”

His expression softened. “Please.” He said gesturing for her to walk with him. She fell in a slow stride beside him. “I dinna’ mean to offend ye, miss. It’s just that ye made such a fuss about needing a horse last night I assumed ye’d be on yer way at the first chance.”

“You’re right, it was all a bit much. The truth is, with my horse and supplies gone. I’m not sure what to do now. I was going to use that money to start a new life. Now…” She trailed off, unsure of how to put into words the fears that had been swirling around her head all morning. She knew she wasn’t going home, but without any money, she had no place left to go.

“I’m sure yer family would take your back if ye returned to Engla-”

“No!” She said much too loudly before he could finish his thought. She cleared her throat and spoke again, much more softly. “No, I couldn’t possibly return home. Please,” her voice began to shake and her eyes burned as she tried to hold back tears, “don’t suggest it again.”

His expression softened, “Tis my duty to make sure a young woman is cared for miss Elizabeth. What is so frightful that yer willing to give up everything for?”

She bit her lip and stared at the ground, trying to decide if it was safe to tell him. Would he send her home anyway? Finally, she took a deep breath and stared straight into his eyes. "Death." She breathed in such a quiet voice that she wasn't sure he had even heard, but the look in his eyes told her he had.

"My mother has been trying to find me a husband for three seasons now, much to long for a lady of my position. Or, so she says anyway." She began walking again. It was hard enough to say the words out loud much less look this handsome man in the eyes as she did. "As this season was drawing to a close, she made it clear that I had no options left. So she made a deal. She promised me to be married to the Lord Greenfield. The man is very wealthy, it would be a good match for the family." She paused.

"So what's the problem then?" Gavin asked quietly.

"Lord Greenfield is in his seventies, he has a very different idea of what society is and, well, a stern view of women. I am no fool, I know that many woman in my position have made sacrifices for the benefit of their family. But, that's not the issue. If I were to go through with the marriage, I would be his sixth wife. Every woman who has ever been matched to Lord Greenfield was never seen again. Not until their funerals anyway." The last part was barely a whisper. She could hardly bring herself to voice the accusation aloud, and to a man she hardly knew.

"I understand." Gavin said quietly. Suddenly, he wrapped her in a tight embrace. "You donna' have to worry, miss Elizabeth. No Englishman will ever know yer here." He motioned for Amelia to come closer, she had been trailing behind just out of earshot. "Amelia, prepare a room and fetch miss Elizabeth anything she needs."

"What?" Elizabeth said with confusion.

"Yer staying with me miss." Gavin said in a stern, but understanding tone. "I have some things I must finish up for the day, but I shall be back by dinner. Please, make yer self at home." And with that, he turned and walked off into the forest.

Elizabeth was quiet all the way back to the castle, and Amelia didn't ask any questions. She couldn't believe what was happening, but she felt exhausted by the time they finally walked through the doors. Amelia led her to a drawing room and told her to wait while she prepared accommodations for her. The sky was beginning to grow dark, so Elizabeth settled into a chair near a window that overlooked the garden path. She gazed into the forest, waiting to see the light of her Highlander.