

A BAD WOMAN

by

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A Kinord Book

1

Growing Pains

'At fifteen, beauty and talent do not exist; there can only be promise of the coming woman.' – Honoré de Balzac

GALLOWAY, 1861

NOTHING IS EVER as it seems. Bella looked devoutly towards the pulpit while the echo of his voice bounced off the oak rafters. She watched his ruddy face and neck turn an alarming shade of purple against the black of his robe. His arms flailed like the wings of a monstrous bat till at the climax of his sermon he bellowed as if tormented and roared for God to have mercy on them all, sending a silvery spray of saliva in all directions.

Forgetting the cold clamminess of the church and the hard discomfort of the pew, she found his furious righteousness amusing. Did such unholy rage signify demons writhing within him, ready to come bursting forth in a sickening deluge? She tried to listen to his words, but a sparkle lit up her blue-green eyes and a bubble of illicit laughter rose deep in her chest, though she checked herself for such wickedness. The corners of her mouth had turned up in a smile when, to her horror, her gaze met the minister's.

She glanced away, raising a hand to her cheek.

The slight movement did not pass unobserved. With a fierce sidelong glare, her mother hissed, 'Stop your fidgeting!' and gave Bella a sharp nudge in the ribs which instantly restored her sobriety.

Mrs Pattie tucked in her chin, to resume her pious Sunday pose.

Bella squared her shoulders and stared at the beads of

perspiration that glistened on the preacher's brow.

In the painful, threatening stillness that followed his performance, the Reverend Adam Haggerty stood contemptuously surveying his flock: illiterate peasants to whom his erudition meant naught, their ignorance the cross he had to bear. Was it to serve these dullards he'd been educated? They had no concept of the enormity of his task. Week after week he strove to explain to them the Bible and the mysteries of creation, yet all too frequently he suspected his efforts were wasted. In addition to his Sabbath duties, there was the mind-numbing round of pastoral visits, Kirk Session meetings, and the occasional wedding, christening or funeral. However, this was his calling, if not an easy one, and the position did bring certain advantages. Now he could look forward to the stiff dram of whisky that would precede his lunch.

God knows, he deserved it!

Scowling down from the pulpit, his expression softened at the sight of Bella. She must recently have turned fifteen, he reckoned. He itched to reach out and caress that glorious golden hair of hers that gleamed in the watery sunlight filtering through the leaded glass windows. The cherubic innocence she had possessed as a child, once so enchanting, was gone. Puberty had refined her facial features, filled her out nicely in other places and lent a pertness that defied her humble origins. Increasingly she resembled someone he was acquainted with ... but he was damned if he could remember who! For ages, he had wrestled with the problem. Then in a flash, right there in the pulpit, it came to him: of course, why hadn't he realised it sooner? The girl was the living embodiment of Sandro Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus', a painting that never failed to stir him! A delicious tingle of excitement went coursing through his loins. For longer than was proper, he allowed his gaze to linger on her, until a cough disturbed the deathly hush.

Quickly Mr Haggerty shifted his focus and strove to regain his inner calm.

There was a flutter of uneasiness in the pews. Mrs Pattie crossed and uncrossed her neat ankles. Though less vain than most, she was inordinately proud of her small feet which on Sundays were forced into tiny black leather button boots. Others shrank back guiltily inside their best clothes, their disquiet greater with each second that passed as they tried to avoid the minister's beady eye.

Did they imagine *he* could not see into their hearts, did not appreciate the evil of which they were capable? Well might they squirm! This was the moment that made his dedication worthwhile. As if they were whimpering puppies, he could grab them and rub their noses in the mess of their sinfulness, suspending them in misery for an hour, if he chose!

The tension became almost unbearable before he said in a syrupy little voice, 'Let us pray.'

As was his habit, Mr Haggerty stood smugly by the church door to nod and smile as the congregation filed slowly out, a glob of spittle still hovering by one side of his mouth. To a favoured few, he extended a limp, sweaty hand, and Bella always cringed at his touch. With an involuntary shudder, she wiped her fingers down the side of her dress and followed her family out of the churchyard, relieved that she'd not have to see the minister again for a whole week.

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Each morning she woke at dawn to the crowing of the rooster in the farmyard. Her two brothers slept on, oblivious to her sharp intake of breath as her bare feet met the icy hardness of the bedroom floor. Never would she be allowed to forget the solitary instance when she had turned over and gone to sleep again; it was a woman's duty to be up and about before the men in the house.

Pulling on her working dress and woollen stockings in the early gloom, Bella shivered her way through to the kitchen. She knelt in front of the hearth to shovel out the cold ashes, took

them outside and fetched a handful of dry straw and kindling to light the fire. When it began to crackle and blaze, she laid some small pieces of peat on top, went to draw water from the well outside, and hung the kettle on a hook above the flames. With the clank of the iron pot being placed on the heat to make the porridge, the heavy curtains covering the kitchen recess quietly opened and Mrs Pattie rose from the box bed she shared with her husband. There was nothing like a good bowl of porridge to start the day, Mr Pattie declared over breakfast, but nonetheless Bella knew it would leave her fast as she toiled in the fields.

It was October, when the dry earth got everywhere at the annual potato harvest. She tasted it in her mouth, and felt the familiar crunch of grit between her teeth as she stooped to fill the wire basket on the ground beside her. On no account would she be dismissed for laziness: she worked as well as any man, until she was too tired to speak. Soil lodged under her fingernails, dirt streaked her face, and she would find worms of black muck between her toes when she took her stockings off at night.

From the tiny side window of their cottage, Mrs Pattie stood watching for her daughter to come up the narrow track, clicking her tongue in irritation when the girl veered off towards the trees instead of coming inside.

‘You’re late ... I thought you’d surely got lost!’ she snapped, when Bella finally appeared in the doorway.

‘I don’t feel right, Ma.’ Bella set the precious pennies she’d earned on the mantelpiece.

‘Aye, there’s many a time I don’t feel right, either, but I just have to get on with it.’ Impatiently she dumped a tight, glossy green cabbage on the table. ‘Are your hands clean? Get that chopped up and into the pan afore your Da gets in.’

Sympathy did not come easily to Mrs Pattie: she too had experienced the rigours of digging potatoes in her youth. Stealing a look from the corner of her eye, she decided maybe Bella *did* seem whiter than usual, but then she was always pale,

as if the red of her hair somehow drained the colour from her complexion.

The mother stretched up for five dinner plates from the shelf, placed them at the side of the table and said, 'What's wrong with you anyway?'

'I've no idea,' Bella said, drawing out a kitchen chair that scraped against the flagstone floor. She sat down, glad to take the weight off her feet, and lightly touched her stomach. 'I've a kind of a pain here, and there's blood ...'

'Och, give me strength!' Mrs Pattie recoiled, screwing up her nose in distaste. She bustled across the room to raise the lid of the old wooden chest. 'That's all we need! I forgot you'd be starting. Well, you'd best get used to the monthlies. Now you'll understand what we all go through – one o' the joys o' being a woman.'

'What d'you mean, the *monthlies*?'

'*Wheesht!* You can't sit talking of such a thing, and your father due in any minute – away you go and get freshened up! There's nothing as bad as a dirty woman's smell ... it's a foul, horrible thing, a hundred times worse than rotten fish.' She held out a fistful of cotton rags. 'When you're done, wash them and let them dry beside the mangle where your Da and the boys won't see them.'

She sighed and lifted an arm to her forehead: as if she didn't have enough to cope with!

'But what will ...?' was all Bella managed to say before Ma's determined fingertips were around her wrist, hustling her unceremoniously outside.

'On you go! And hurry!' said Mrs Pattie.

Indignantly jerking out of the vice-like grip, the girl slammed the door behind her. She drew water from the pump, and furiously cleaned herself in the miserable blackness of the privy. Already she hated the shameful redness that stained her underclothes, resented this sudden affliction that was not to be spoken about.

Without realising it, Bella had joined the sisterhood of grown women, which guards its secrets from the uninitiated, and treats its own with a very special unkindness.

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WHITBURN, LINLITHGOWSHIRE, 1861–1865

Life was not easy in mining villages like Whitburn, a hundred miles north of Galloway. The Bartholomews were no better and no worse off than anyone else of their acquaintance, which made the deprivations they endured more bearable. Everyone subsisted in equal misery and hardship in the rows. Youngsters seldom had enough food in their bellies and were lucky to have shoes on their feet. By the age of twelve, only a minority attended school. If you want to make something of yourself, fathers told their sons, you should quit the books as fast as possible. You must *be a man*, grow up and get earning. Learning was for idiots and malingerers who were fit for nothing else. *Real men* went down the pit.

Charles Bartholomew was not quite thirty. He had worked underground for more than half of his existence, as witnessed by the tiny coal shards permanently lodged beneath his sallow skin, visible only during the few waking hours when he wasn't black with dust from top to toe. Nearly two decades had passed since he was first taken on at the mine, and it was on that day he grew up. At the tender age of eleven, he had queued with other new fresh-faced recruits, most of them not even past boyhood, and artlessly committing their futures to the darkness. The child had stepped forward smartly, in boots that were much too big, when the call came for him to sign up for a man's job.

'Name?' growled the clerk, with scarcely a glance at the urchin in front of him.

'Charles Bartholomew.' The boy spoke timidly, his voice crackly, unbroken.

Without listening, the clerk had begun to write.

‘Excuse me, Sur,’ said Charles fearfully, ‘but that’s no’ what I said. I think you’ve made a mistake. You wrote Barclay but my name’s Bartholomew.’

‘Is that so?’ sneered the official. ‘Well you’d better mind that come payday, laddie, because you’re down in the ledger as *Charles Barclay*, and that’s how it stays! You’re the one that made the mistake – you didnae speak up loud enough. Your name’s *Barclay* in this office, and that’s the end o’ it. There’s twenty men behind you, so move along,’ he ordered peremptorily.

Glowing over the boy’s crown, he roared, ‘*Next!*’ and Charles had no choice but to stand aside. The slapdash error of a petty official gave rise to a ripple effect that would surface off and on in the Bartholomew line for a century.

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In the same year that Bella Pattie turned fifteen, Charles and Isa Bartholomew celebrated the birth of their fourth baby, a fine-looking lad they named after his father. They lived in a humble row cottage that consisted of a room and kitchen. Despite having two sons and a daughter, Isa believed her new-born was the most adorable creature she’d ever seen, with his dark curls, big brown eyes and the longest lashes in the world. Folk said he was in danger of becoming a spoiled brat, the way she doted on him, but Isa didn’t care. Of all her children, she would always have a particular soft spot for Charlie, even after the arrival of his baby sister, Henrietta.

On the morning of February 15, 1865 Charles rose at six as usual, and lit the fire while his wife breast-fed the infant. Having waved her husband off to the pit and her three oldest children off to school, Isa could relax over a cup of tea. She cradled the infant in her arms, revelling in the stillness of the kitchen until Charlie’s piping voice cried from the bedroom.

‘Mammy! Can I get up now?’

‘Come on through, pet, and see what I’ve got for you this

mornin’!’ Isa replied, laying Henrietta on the box bed. Charlie’s ‘treat’ would be nothing more than a spoonful of cream rather than milk with his porridge, or a sliver of butter on his bread instead of the lard his siblings got, but it was his mother’s way of making him feel special. In just a year, once he was five, she’d have to send her favourite off to school with the rest. Till then, she would make the most of these moments with her little prince.

Around ten o’clock, having cleared away the breakfast dishes, she set off for the grocer’s, carrying Henrietta close to her body in the plaid, with wee Charlie trailing alongside her. Suddenly, from nowhere, panic descended with the urgent, discordant clanging of bells, a sound everyone dreaded. The boy yelled out in fright and instinctively made a grab for Isa’s skirts. With never a word, she clutched Henrietta more firmly to her, seized hold of Charlie and went running along the street towards the pit head.

A crowd had gathered. In a shivering huddle they stood, young women with pasty complexions etched with lines of anxiety, old before their time. The persistent ringing of the colliery bells meant disaster, an event that could mark the end of life as they knew it. Bereavement was practically guaranteed for some who waited.

After five long hours of digging, Charles Bartholomew’s mangled body was carted out of the tunnel where he’d been working. On the accident report was written:

Engineman allowed his engine to go the wrong way and took him over the pulleys.

The death certificate stated that he had died instantly, which brought a small measure of consolation to his distraught relatives. After nine years of marriage, in her late twenties with five children, Isa was a widow.

2

First Love

'We have chains, though no eye beholds them; and are slaves, though men call us free.' – Oscar Wilde

QUEEN VICTORIA COULD HARDLY CONTAIN her overwhelming love for Prince Albert, who was her first cousin. After their marriage, she wrote to her uncle, King Leopold of the Belgians:

Oh! my dearest uncle, I am sure if you knew HOW happy, how blessed I feel, and how PROUD I feel in possessing such a perfect being as my husband ...

Nine months after her marriage in 1840, the Queen gave birth to Princess Victoria, and a son, Bertie, arrived a year later. She wrote of her fervent prayer that the boy would grow up to *'resemble his angelic dearest Father in EVERY, EVERY respect, both in body and mind.'* As the future King Edward VII, much was expected of the Prince of Wales. His childhood was devoted to a gruelling educational regime, and discipline was maintained by physical punishment when deemed necessary by his father. With no regard for the pupil's interests or aptitude, private tutors followed Prince Albert's rigorous instructions to the letter. The boisterous Bertie nevertheless grew up to be a charming, sociable young man, despite a disappointing lack of scholastic accomplishment.

His tour of North America in 1860 – the first by an heir to the British throne – was a resounding personal and diplomatic success. In Canada, he inaugurated Montreal's Victoria Bridge across the St Lawrence River, and laid the cornerstone of Parliament Hill, Ottawa. With amusement he watched Charles

Blondin cross Niagara Falls on a high wire, and went on to spend three days at the White House in Washington D.C. as the guest of President James Buchanan.

Released from the tyranny of his earlier teachers, Bertie's academic record improved during terms at the Universities of Edinburgh and Oxford. Reports of the undergraduate's high jinks unfortunately reached the palace, resulting in a spell with the Grenadier Guards at Curragh Camp in Ireland. But the move intended to teach him greater self-control backfired badly. During the summer of 1861, the irrepressible Prince lost his virginity to Nellie Clifden, described by some as an actress and by others as an Irish whore.

The boy had to be married as quickly as possible, stated his exasperated mother, before any further scandal erupted. Within three weeks, the Prince of Wales was whisked off to Germany for an introductory meeting with Princess Alexandra of Denmark, his parents' choice of bride for him. Subsequently he went to study at Cambridge University, where he was kept under constant surveillance.

Convinced that the lad was not adequately chastened, Prince Albert travelled to Cambridge in December 1861. On a miserably cold afternoon, when it poured with rain, father and son took a walk together during which Bertie was subjected to another vicious tongue-lashing for his misdemeanours.

No sooner had Prince Albert returned to Windsor than he fell ill: he passed away a fortnight later. Queen Victoria would forever blame her wayward son's philandering with Nellie Clifden for hastening his father's death. Her beloved Albert had been *'killed by that dreadful business'*, she declared.

In a letter to her eldest daughter, she wrote that the very sight of Bertie made her shudder. The Prince of Wales would never be forgiven.

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GALLOWAY

Too much learning was not good for girls. It gave them ideas that could not be put into action, and led to discontent – or so the minister frequently declared. All the same, James Pattie believed that sons and daughters merited equal education, and had insisted that Bella went to school until she was fourteen. She was an able student, but needlework class was where she shone.

In the evening her father read aloud to the family from the newspaper. Abraham Lincoln's struggle to abolish slavery in America was underway, while slave labour in Britain had officially been banned thirty years earlier. Still, it seemed to Bella that indentured farm workers like Da led lives of virtual servitude. Just once was she brave enough to actually say so.

'Nonsense!' came the reply. 'There are masters and there are servants because that's the natural order of things. We're aware of our place, but we're *not* slaves. We do an honest day's labour for an honest day's pay, without trying to rise above our station.'

Ma agreed wholeheartedly: Bella should hold her tongue and keep her opinions to herself. Women were frail creatures, born to tend the home, husbands and children. Politics were best left to men. If the girl wasn't careful, no decent man would marry her, the way she questioned things. In the not too distant past, she might have been burned as a witch for less! She'd end up with some wastrel, Ma cautioned, might even land in the hovels or the poorhouse, with only herself to blame.

Bella pretended to listen, but the rebellious glint in her eyes worried her mother. It was a bad sign. Spirit in a woman was undesirable, a fire to be damped down. The lassie would need a tight leash. Fifteen was a dangerous age.

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Mrs Pattie could shirk her responsibilities no longer. She prepared herself to broach the facts of life with Bella one

afternoon as they stood alone together peeling vegetables in the kitchen.

In mixed company, the mother began, a young woman should speak when spoken to, neither smile too readily nor laugh out loud. She should wear a hat out of doors, as proper ladies did, since over-exposure to the sun would ruin the pale complexion considered attractive. Her hair might be her crowning glory, but it should be pinned up, rather than left around the shoulders. Makeup should be shunned as a mark of immorality, used by actresses and 'loose women'. True beauty was natural, devoid of artifice.

Bella listened dutifully, her interest piqued only when Mrs Pattie touched on the topic of marriage.

Good girls remained chaste until their wedding night. Then they would take the leap from virginity into the unknown. *And all your ridiculous notions of romance will go flying out of the window*, the mother wanted to add.

Instead she said sternly, 'Guard your self-respect. Don't give in to any lad, however tempted you may be, till you've got a ring. You'll go to the altar clean and pure, like I did, and afterwards all will be revealed. Learning to please a husband is part of the bargain of marriage.'

From the set of her mouth it was evident that the subject was closed. She had told Bella what was necessary for her protection and Mrs Pattie would fret no more. Her duty was done, thank God. Female confidences were not for sharing. Her daughter had been launched into womanhood, armed with as much knowledge about the birds and the bees as any girl could possibly aspire to in the early 1860's.

Bella continued with her task, her mind brimming with questions she dared not ask. Experience would be her guide.

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The terrain of south-west Scotland is one of contrasts, a mosaic of lush pastures and fields of arable crops, rolling hills, woods,

rivers and coastline, swampy peat bogs and dry thorny heathlands. For centuries the old harbour at Palnackie had been an important destination for barges ferrying commodities to and from the area. James Pattie was full of stories of how Galloway was invaded by the Romans – with her siblings Bella had played in the ruins of a round Roman fort – and by fierce Norsemen, who had ruled the area from the ninth to the twelfth century. With her red hair, he called Bella ‘his wee Viking’.

When she first went to school, her older brother’s pals had teased her, chanting, ‘Gin-ger! Where’s Gin-ger?’ Cheeks burning with annoyance, she would chase them, raising her arm to hit out at them, but they were forever beyond her reach, laughing. Yet she had no objection to the nickname when it came from the new driver of Keane the grocer’s cart.

Twice a week Tam called at the Pattie cottage. He waited on the dirt road, hoping it would be Bella, and not her mother, who would come hurrying along the path. His eyes lit up as he straightened his white cotton apron and said, ‘What can we get for you today, Ginger?’

His arrival always brightened her morning. His easy banter never failed to bring a smile to her face, a smile she still would be wearing when she got to the door and laid down her basketful of provisions. Checking that Ma was not by the window, she turned round to wave, since Tam would be seated high up on the wagon with the horse’s reins in one hand, ready to wave back to her.

Preparations were made on Saturday for the lunch that followed the church service, because Sunday was a day of rest. In the afternoon, an intimidating silence reigned in the Pattie dwelling, broken by the occasional hushed voice and the doleful tick of the mantel clock. Even a loud sigh brought one of Ma’s black looks, and Bella seethed with frustration that her scant leisure hours had to be squandered on reading and quiet reflection. It would have eased the dreariness to knit or sew, to trim her nails or her hair, but only heathens did such things on the Lord’s Day. She might even have played a game of cards with

wee Jimmy, her brother, but the 'devil's books' were not to be touched on the Sabbath: they stayed in the sideboard drawer. Hardest to stomach was seeing her older sibling, Johnny, leave to meet his friends. It rankled to watch him go off gallivanting while she was imprisoned indoors.

With her sixteenth birthday a miracle happened. Worn down by her pleas and persuasion, Da agreed that she could tag along with Johnny on his Sunday jaunts. Had she been a lady, she would have worn pretty frills and flounces, daintily carrying a lacy parasol to promenade, but such fripperies were not for working-class girls. After tidying the lunch table, washing the plates and scouring the pans, Bella put on her church bonnet and shawl, to go waltzing off with her brother along the winding dirt path to the main road. Conscious of Ma's scowling disapproval, she tried to curb the gleeful spring in her step. Safely out of sight of the house, she tore off her hat to break into a little run, from sheer happiness.

In her delight, she barely noticed their two mile walk into Palnackie. But evidently something had changed with those same boys who had teased her mercilessly about her red hair: bold no more, Johnny's friends were shy, almost tongue-tied when she spoke to them. Tam the delivery boy knew no such awkwardness.

Whether straggling in twos and threes along the banks of the Urr or wandering through the Doach Woods, Tam made a point of walking close to Bella's side, immediately glancing round with a mischievous grin if by chance their hands brushed. Once as they climbed a steep grassy slope, she lost her footing and he saved her from falling. For the rest of that afternoon they strolled with her fingers gently yet firmly laced in his, both oblivious to the sniggering and knowing winks of their companions.

'You'll no' half catch it from Ma and Da if they find out what you were up to with Tam,' Johnny warned her on their way home.

Tartly Bella replied, 'What d'you mean? I wasn't *up to* anything! He's the one that took *my* hand.'

‘Aye, and you let him, didn’t you?’

‘But ... they’ll not hear unless you tell them. You wouldn’t do that to me, would you?’ she said, taking his arm and smiling up at him.

She had yearned for romance. Now it had arrived, and nothing else mattered – or so she was naive enough to imagine.

3

Tea and Sympathy

'That which is loved may pass, but love hath no end.'

– Gilbert Parker

PRINCE ALBERT'S UNTIMELY DEATH in 1861 had sent Victoria into an extended period of mourning. She withdrew into seclusion, avoiding public events and social engagements. To her Uncle Leopold, King of the Belgians, she wrote:

The poor fatherless baby of eight months is now the utterly heartbroken and crushed widow of forty-two! My LIFE as a HAPPY one is ENDED! The world is gone for ME! ... Oh! to be cut off in the prime of life – to see our pure, happy, quiet, domestic life, which ALONE enabled me to bear my MUCH disliked position, CUT OFF at forty-two – when I HAD hoped with such instinctive certainty that God never WOULD part us, and would let us grow old together (though HE always talked of the shortness of life) – is TOO AWFUL, too cruel!

While she wallowed in her misery, even visiting foreign royalty were refused an audience. The Prince of Wales bore the brunt of her impotent rage and depression at Albert's demise; her younger children were abandoned entirely to the care of others. Life as a recluse left Victoria out of touch with her family, her country, and reality. Questions were raised as to her fitness to rule, but she refused to share power with her heir, declaring, 'I am DETERMINED that NO ONE person is to lead or guide or dictate to ME ...'

By 1864, both Parliament and the public were losing patience with their invisible monarch. In March a protest notice was pinned to the railings of Buckingham Palace that announced:

These commanding premises to be let or sold in consequence of the late occupant's declining business.

On the advice of her uncle Leopold, she took to appearing more often in public. She drove through London in an open carriage, and graced the Royal Horticultural Society at Kensington with her presence. When a rumour circulated that she was about to go out of mourning, the newspapers rejoiced. Queen Victoria responded with a hand-written letter to the Times:

This idea cannot be too explicitly contradicted. The Queen heartily appreciates the desire of her subjects to see her, and whatever she CAN do to gratify them in this loyal and affectionate wish, she WILL do ... But there are other and higher duties than those of mere representation which are now thrown upon the Queen, alone and unassisted – duties which she cannot neglect without injury to the public service, which weigh unceasingly upon her, overwhelming her with work and anxiety.

Her physician recommended she adopt horseback riding as a hobby, and John Brown was summoned from Scotland, arriving at Osborne in 1865. He spoke bluntly with a strong Scottish accent, and treated the Queen no differently from anyone else. With just a look, Victoria might strike terror into the hearts of her ministers of state, but the gillie from Balmoral would not be intimidated by her.

'*I am on a dreary sad pinnacle of solitary grandeur,*' she is reported to have said, but Brown was unimpressed. She might be the most powerful woman on the planet, but to him, she was

a sad, lonely wee widow. Members of her household gasped in horror at the arrogance of the uncouth, whisky-drinking Highlander who had infiltrated their elite circle. In his kilt and tweed jacket, he stood head and shoulders above the formal, dark-suited courtiers, like some rare exotic species plucked from its native habitat.

The monarch was charmed.

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WHITBURN, 1865

Isa was in shock, sleep her sole refuge. She would dream that Charles lay beside her, till she woke up and the awful truth struck her: he was gone and would never be back. Closing her eyes, she would snuggle down under the blankets hoping to recapture the sweet forgetfulness of the night. She loathed the relentless cheeping of a blackbird in the half-dark outside, announcing the start of a new day. In the bleak gloom of early mornings, she lay cowering as the silhouette of the empty grate emerged from the shadows, its cold black hollowness a bruising reminder of how she felt inside. Gone was the joyful spark that used to get her up. It took all her willpower to drag herself out of bed and dress, light the fire and put on a pot of water to heat before the bairns woke up, when their whining and incessant squabbling would resume.

Apprehensively she opened the door to solicitous friends and relatives who called. However kind their intentions, each one unwittingly reopened the wound of her bereavement. Far from bringing consolation with their worn platitudes over endless cups of tea, they left Isa feeling strangely violated: like an animal in a zoo, a permanent exhibit to be stared at with pity and curiosity. She was a hostage to convention in her own house, forced to listen to words she did not want to hear, and wanted to scream that time was *not* a great healer, it was her enemy. Her husband had been her best friend, and the breadwinner. Yes, she had tenure of her tiny row home, but when the small financial

compensation brought by Charles's death had run out, how was she to pay the rent and feed her five bairns? Time would not alleviate the penury that loomed ahead.

Haunted by her loss and the uncertainties of the future, her inner calm was gone. She could not be still, or she would fall apart. As Henrietta napped, she would slip out for water from the pump to resume another round of laundry and ironing, cooking, mending or knitting – it made no difference *what*, as long as there was something, anything, to occupy her. When she went out to buy provisions, carrying the baby, her pace did not slacken for one moment, and wee Charlie had to run to keep up with her. Regular routines bordered on binges of manic activity. Unable to quell her agitation, she'd become like a woman possessed, and feared she was losing her sanity. She hardly dared contemplate the fate of her children if she were carted off to the lunatic asylum.

One Sunday afternoon, Henrietta lay asleep while her four siblings were out playing on the street. Isa stood in the kitchen mixing batter, as was her custom at that hour because Charles had appreciated a fresh pancake on his day off. When the knock came at the door, her first instinct was to ignore it. What if it was Charles's brother again, with that snaggle-toothed wife of his, whose smirk belied the sympathy of her gaze? Isa stood holding her breath, hoping the caller might think no one was at home, yet knowing that was foolish. There was no escape. *Of course* she was in: there was nowhere for her to go. No decent woman would be out a month after her husband's death! In ten seconds came another rap, more insistent.

Inhaling deeply, she wiped her hands on her apron and went to lift the latch, unleashing a chain events no one could have foreseen.

A stranger stood at her door, a man who seemed vaguely familiar. Perhaps she'd noticed him among the sea of faces at the funeral? Isa couldn't be sure.

He smiled, taking it for granted that she would recognise him.

‘I was out for a walk. Thought I would swing by and see how you are.’

‘Och, I’m all right, thanks. Just takin’ everything as it comes ... nothing else for it, is there?’ She wished he’d go away, but he continued to stand awkwardly on the doorstep. ‘Will you come in?’ she said, her tone not overly encouraging.

‘Well, I dinnae want to disturb you, Mrs Bartholomew. But I decided I should bring you this.’ Almost apologetically, he held out Charles’s lunch box.

‘Oh!’ Isa gasped at the sight of the scratched rectangular tin, its rounded corners rubbed and dented. For a decade, she had dutifully packed it each working morning. In the hurly-burly of the early hours when countless chores cried out to be done, it had been a tyrant, that box, demanding to be filled, no matter what other concerns she had ... but then no man could keep going on an empty stomach. How casually she had thrust it at her husband as he set off for the pit, little dreaming that fateful day was his last on earth. Now she would give anything to have Charles back, would willingly pack his lunch a hundred times a week, if things could be as they once were! An unexpected lump rose in her throat. She swallowed hard and forced herself to look up.

‘You’d better come in, Mr ... eh ... I’m sorry. You were at the pit wi’ Charles, and I remember your face, but I forget your name. My memory’s like a sieve, wi’ all the ups and downs we’ve had recently!’

‘Aye, that’s understandable. My name’s Inglis. Peter Inglis.’ He followed Isa into the kitchen, taking off his cap to reveal cropped, spiky hair that was turning grey.

‘Take a seat, Mr Inglis.’

It would be polite, she realised, to sit and make conversation, but she stood frozen, staring at the tin lying on the table between them. She could still picture her husband with that box tucked under his arm, as he went to the pit. Ridiculous as it seemed, Charles’s grubby prints on the lid disconcerted her. Those oily

whorls, never much observed, had come from his strong hands that only touched her with gentleness, cut and callused though his fingertips might be.

The guest cleared his throat and Isa gave a start.

‘I’m sorry, I was in the middle o’ makin’ pancakes when you came to the door.’

Her mouth quivered and he discreetly lowered his eyes.

She drew the mixture towards her and blindly began stirring, her wooden spoon giving a dull, liquidy *thwack* as it hit against the sides of the bowl. Tiny air bubbles formed on top of the thick creamy batter. Determined to regain her composure, she blinked and moved away to ladle some of the mix onto the black cast iron griddle that hung over the fire. With a palette knife she deftly flipped the half-cooked pancakes, leaving them to sizzle and rise for several seconds before serving them, steaming and fragrant, onto a painted china platter of her mother’s – one of Isa’s few treasures. Then she covered them lightly with a white linen cloth.

He watched approvingly as she bustled around, taking dishes, cups and saucers from the shelf. She was a fine figure of a woman, he was thinking: tall and slender despite five children. Kept a clean enough house, too – poor and maybe a bit untidy – but quite comfortable. He breathed in, absorbing the homeliness of the kitchen, and the sweet, mouth-watering aroma of baking that filled the air.

Accustomed as she was to visits of condolence, Isa was uncertain how to deal with this stocky outsider who remained so quiet, a mere acquaintance about whom she knew virtually nothing. Was it even proper for a widow woman to entertain a man alone? She was full of doubts these days. She poured two cups of tea and sat herself down.

‘Help yourself, Mr Inglis.’ She pushed the hot cakes nearer him, desperately searching for something to say till she had a flash of inspiration. ‘The kids are oot playin’. I’ll get them to come in, will I?’ Already she was rising up.

‘No, sit still. It’s really you I came to see.’

Isa perched on the edge of her chair. He was about Charles’s age, she was thinking: quite short for a man, barely as tall as she herself was, but fit and muscular.

‘It cannae be easy for you and the bairns, this situation ...’ The caller spread his arms helplessly. ‘I’m no’ very good wi’ words, I’m sorry ... and I dinnae want to upset ye further after what ye’ve been through, but ye know what I’m tryin’ to say – ye’ll have heard it all before.’

All of a sudden, irrationally, she felt sorry for him. The poor wee man meant well. This errand was probably as much of an ordeal for him as it was for her!

‘There’s always accidents, but somehow I didn’t dream anything would happen to Charles, and I’d be left like this,’ she said. ‘But maybe that’s what everybody thinks.’ Henrietta gave a whimper and Isa leaned across to the box bed, grateful for the diversion. ‘Sshhh, darlin’! Mammy’s here, it’s all right,’ she crooned as she lightly stroked the baby’s cheek with one finger.

Peter Inglis spread a spoonful of jam on his pancake, and took a bite so soft and delicious, it positively melted on his tongue. He fought the urge to devour it in one mouthful and reach for a couple more. Some decorum was in order, he reminded himself. ‘Ye’d been a fine wife tae Charles, I can see that.’

Unaccustomed to such high praise, Isa struggled to think of a suitable reply.

‘Well, I tried. He was a good man to me.’

‘Aye, I’m sure he was, Mrs Bartholomew. In fact, he was a good man, full stop.’ He nodded in respect, then washed down the remnants of his pancake with a gulp of tea.

Talk of Charles was making it tough for her to keep the tears at bay.

‘Can I top you up?’ she said, rather too hastily.

‘That would be grand. Thank you very much,’ he said, extending his cup and saucer.

‘Have another pancake with it, Mr Inglis, they’re best when they’re newly made. You might as well take two ... they’ll be tougher than the soles of your boots by tomorrow.’

As if food ever lasted any time in her house! If the children weren’t out playing, the dish would have been emptied in one fell swoop.

‘I’d feel better if you called me Peter. Ye could manage that, could ye not?’

He certainly didn’t stand on ceremony! She gave a tight smile, unused to such fast familiarity. Yet where was the harm?

‘I’m not ... well, yes, I suppose I could,’ she said.

What did the trivial rules of accepted behaviour matter, when her whole life had been turned upside down? No normal person could have any concept of the dazed isolation into which Charles’s death had thrown her: and if they did, she doubted they’d care. Her plight was a common one, to be dealt with as best she could. At that very instant, Isa decided that she would be afraid no longer of what other people might think. To hell with them all and their damned etiquette! She would do and say whatever she herself considered appropriate. Even so, when she eventually spoke, his name felt foreign on her lips.

‘So, do you and your wife have any kids, *Peter*?’ she asked shyly.

‘No. No kids ... and no wife naggin’ at me either! Just the landlady in Bathgate to answer to, and she’s happy provided I pay my rent when it’s due. I’m *my ain boss* and that’s how I like it!’

He laughed, and sat chewing thoughtfully.

Isa responded with a tentative laugh, and the ice was broken. She began to relax.

‘Bathgate did ye say? That’s quite a walk ye’ve had!’

‘Aye, but I enjoy the exercise. It’s a grand thing, a walk, gies ye an appetite.’

‘And your landlady, does she feed you well enough?’ Isa enquired.

‘She’s no’ a bad cook, I suppose. I eat what she puts in front o’ me – it’s better than what I could make – but believe me, that’s no’ sayin’ much! Her pancakes are rubbery; never in a million years could she bake anything as light and fluffy as yours.’ He licked a dollop of jam from his thumb, and added as a mischievous afterthought, ‘Could I give her your recipe?’

Had it seemed she was fishing for compliments? Embarrassment brought a trace of pink to Isa’s cheeks. ‘Oh, no, I didnae mean it that way! But I wondered ...’

Peter saw her confusion and laughed aloud.

Gently he said, ‘Fine I realised what ye meant. I was kiddin’ ye on!’

She raised her brows to smile, and gave a quiet chuckle.

Could he be trying to flirt with her? She dismissed the notion. ‘Well, I appreciate you goin’ to the trouble o’ bringin’ back the tin. I hadnae minded a thing about it!’

‘Nae bother. I didnae know what else to do wi’ it ... and it was an excuse to come and see ye.’ He drained his cup, and delicately set it on its saucer.

His eyes sought hers.

For several minutes, they looked at one another across the table.

And in that companionable silence an understanding of sorts was born between them.

‘Another wee drop?’ Isa finally said, lifting the teapot.

‘No, I’ll get goin’ – I honestly didnae want to inconvenience ye, but I did enjoy talkin’ to ye.’ He stood up and gestured towards their empty plates. ‘This was very nice, thank you.’

‘It was kind o’ ye to come by.’ To her astonishment, she wished he didn’t have to leave. ‘If you’re over this way again, come by for a cup o’ tea, won’t ye?’

Immediately she feared that she’d sounded too forward.

‘Ye should be careful what ye say! I’ll maybe take ye up on that. Ye’re a dab hand wi’ a pancake – I could eat them to a band playin’!’

He smiled and picked up his cap.

She closed the door, feeling more cheerful than she'd done in a while. He'd been like a breath of fresh air, this person who materialised from nowhere, who showed compassion without treating her as an object of pity. It was surprising how effortlessly the talk had flowed once they got started. Even more astounding was her appreciation of Peter's droll sense of humour, when she'd thought her ability to laugh had died with Charles.

Glancing at the tin, her smile faded. She tried to count: she must have filled that thing two thousand times. How amazing that she hadn't missed it! It was as if it had returned to reproach her. Foolishly she imagined Charles was observing her from afar, but even if he was, so what? Surely no rational being could claim she was disloyal to her husband for engaging in conversation with Peter Inglis ... or could they?

With Peter she had rediscovered the mystical rapport there could be between male and female, even as strangers. It had been comforting to have a man about the house, if just temporarily, though she would not admit it to a living soul. He'd made her feel human once more.

Hearing the children's voices at the door, she snatched up the box, and crossed the room to climb on to a rough wooden crate that was used as a stool. She stretched up as high as she could, and very deliberately shoved the offending item to the back of the highest shelf, safely out of sight. It had served its purpose, was a relic of her previous existence.

She had to think of the future.