

ONE LESS LONELY EARL

One

Colin MacBride, the Earl of Blackwood, folded his arms atop the massive oak desk in his study at Blackwood Castle, and wondered if his older brother's widow was intentionally trying his patience, or if it was purely by accident.

The petite blond sat in the chair across from him, her prominent chin lifted stubbornly. "I will not be put off. I demand resolution."

He glanced at his identical twin brother standing at the sideboard pouring scotch and silently appealed for help. James simply shrugged. Colin's brother seemed as lost as he was when it came to dealing with Malcolm's wife.

Colin aimed an apologetic smile in her direction, hoping a show of sympathy would stave off an argument—and knowing it was likely a hopeless cause. "I am sorry, Audrey, but I will not increase your pin money. As we've discussed on several occasions, we must live frugally for the time being."

His sister-in-law sniffed, raising her aquiline nose in the air. "I am Lady Blackwood, and you have not been given leave to address me by my first name."

"My brothers call you Audrey," he pointed out, slightly nonplussed to be caught in this contentious relationship with the lady of the house.

Colin never expected to inherit the title from Malcolm, nor had he anticipated having any dealings with his sister-in-law beyond the requisite visits to Blackwood Castle around the holidays. His oldest brother had begun filling his nursery when Colin, James, and Gavin were still at Oxford. As luck would have it, Malcolm had fathered only girls—five clever little minxes that had wormed their ways into Colin's heart with their first smiles. He didn't mind admitting, he was smitten with his nieces. Their mother was another story.

"James and Gavin may address me however they like," Audrey said. "They have not limited my accounts at the milliner and dress shop, and neither did Malcolm."

Perhaps if his older brother had not indulged his wife's every whim, their

situation might be less grim. Colin practiced restraint, forcing a tight smile rather than speaking ill of his brother. He suspected Audrey missed Malcolm a great deal, and he attributed her frequent tantrums to grief. James and Gavin said he was being too generous. From all reports, she was ill tempered long before their eldest brother was thrown from his horse earlier that spring.

Colin cleared his throat, not wishing to recall the tragedy that had taken Malcolm's life. "I take no pleasure in placing limits on you, Lady Blackwood. Yet, it appears I must, since you have placed none on yourself, despite my requests. Your pin money will not be increased again, and the shopkeepers in Danby will no longer extend you credit."

"You deplorable cur!" She burst from the chair and planted her palms against the desk, leaning forward as if she might vault over it to attack him. A scarlet blush flooded her ivory face. "Am I to be treated no better than a prisoner? What about necessities?"

Colin's brother approached with two tumblers half filled with scotch and slid one across the desk's lacquered surface. Colin left the drink untouched as he met his sister-in-law's challenging stare. James perched on the edge of the desk to watch their heated exchange like a spectator at a boxing match.

"You may present me with a list of necessities," Colin said reasonably, "and if your request is indeed a need rather than a luxury, I will insure you have it."

Colin's twin brushed a lock of dark hair from his own forehead. His steel-blue gaze flickered toward Audrey.

She slapped the desktop before straightening her spine and plopping her hands on her hips. "What about a governess for Malcolm's daughters? Your nieces' education has been neglected long enough. But perhaps you consider it a *luxury*."

"Gads. She always resorts to guilt." James shook his head before sipping his drink.

Surely, she didn't hold Colin responsible for the two governesses they had lost over the summer. With Audrey's tendency to look over the young women's shoulders and offer criticism, was it any wonder they had trouble keeping one longer than a month?

“You know I placed an advertisement as soon as the last governess gave notice.” Colin thought he responded to her accusation of neglect with an impressive amount of calmness, considering his knuckles were white from gripping the edge of the desk. “Now, if you will excuse us, we were in the middle of discussing estate business before you barged into the study and demanded an audience.”

She hadn’t even removed her hat and gloves upon returning from the village before marching into the study to berate him for the restraints he’d placed upon her spending. His sister-in-law glowered a moment longer, then snatched the glass of scotch and defiantly took a gulp. Tears sprang to her eyes as she fought to keep from coughing.

Colin remained silent, refusing to engage in her childish game. When she realized she would not get a rise out of him, she stormed from the room with the tumbler clutched in her hand. The slam of the door echoed off the stone walls.

“Are you going to allow her to steal your drink?” James asked.

Colin sank against the back of the leather chair. “It is hard to determine who needs it more: her or me.”

“I concede your point.” Colin’s twin pushed from the desk to claim the chair their sister-in-law had vacated. His gaze bore into Colin. When they were younger, it seemed speaking hadn’t been required to know what the other was thinking. A slight prickle at Colin’s nape suggested now was one of those times.

“You were in here a long time with Mr. Patel,” James said. “I sense a storm approaching.”

The new land steward’s report had been dire. Colin wished he had that drink now so he could stall. He trusted James to keep his head about him once he learned the nature of their situation. Simply, Colin wasn’t eager to admit the truth—even to himself.

He exhaled, believing it best not to waste time trying to soften the blow. “The condition of the flock is worse than I was led to believe when I arrived at Blackwood Castle. We had an alarming decline in the flock numbers this spring. Too many stillbirths, and far too many ewes were lost in the process.”

James grunted softly and swirled the amber liquid in the cut crystal glass. Colin

suspected they were thinking the same thing. Malcolm had mismanaged the flock, and the problem had been brewing for at least a year. Possibly longer. As usual, Malcolm hadn't confided in his siblings. Colin's eldest brother had been thirteen years old when he and James were born, and Malcolm had never treated them as his equals. And he'd treated Gavin as if he was still a boy, even though the youngest MacBride brother had turned three and twenty on his last birthday—only two years younger than Colin and James.

"Mr. Patel is guarded with his predictions," Colin said. "There are a few healthy rams for breeding as well as mature ewes, but the fields are poor. We are destined to lose more of the flock over winter unless we can procure decent pasture."

His brother's thick brows dropped low on his forehead. "Is that all? Well, we have nothing to fret about then, do we?"

Colin did not miss the sarcasm lacing his brother's words. He rested his head in his hands and glanced at the solid walnut surface of the desk. That morning he'd shoved a summons from their meddlesome neighbor in the drawer with every intention of forgetting about it, but now it called to him. "I could go to Danby."

James drew back in horror. "You cannot be serious. Have you forgotten how that old curmudgeon tried to manipulate Malcolm into marrying one of his granddaughters?"

"Of course I haven't, but this is a chance to discuss the pastureland to the east. I might be able to convince the duke we can be of assistance to each other.

"Do you truly expect Danby to listen to a word you have to say? He wants you for one reason only—to saddle you with a wife." James scoffed. "If anything, he will dangle the land in front of you to insure your cooperation."

"I will not allow the duke to catch me in the parson's noose. We will discuss the land. Nothing more. Despite rumors to the contrary, I believe him to be a reasonable man."

"*Reasonable?*" James barked with laughter. "You are dicked in the nob if you believe you will fare any better with our neighbor than Father or Malcolm did. Danby knows his great-grandfather stole that land from our family, but he will never surrender it—not without stipulations."

James had good cause to believe as he did. Their grandfather had been promised a return of the land in question upon marriage to Danby's sister, but Lady Margaret had eloped with another man two weeks before the wedding. Grandfather's pride had suffered, and he had never forgiven her for putting him through a yearlong courtship only to leave him empty-handed in the end. The broken betrothal had only intensified the feud between the two families.

Some years ago, the current Duke of Danby had tried to entice Malcolm to marry one of his granddaughters in exchange for the same land, but Colin's eldest brother had already set his heart on Audrey.

Colin snagged his coat from the back of the chair and shrugged into it. "I will not ask him to surrender the land. As you have pointed out, it did not work for Father or Malcolm." He headed toward a set of polished oak doors more suited for a race of giants than any member of the MacBride clan, and he and his brothers would never be described as short.

"Wait! Are you calling on the duke *now*?"

"It does seem best to put the matter behind me."

His brother surged to his feet to follow Colin from the study; their equally long strides reached the curved staircase in no time. "What do you propose to do?" James's voice echoed off the stone ceiling.

Blackwood was solid like a cave, but bright with massive windows every two feet to bathe the marble in a golden glow. The castle was home to Colin, even though he hadn't resided there since he and James were sent to boarding school at age nine. He couldn't fathom Blackwood falling into ruin.

"I am going to save our home," Colin said.

"But how?" His brother grabbed his arm as they reached the ground floor, detaining him. "Tell me what you will say to Danby."

Colin sighed impatiently. "I will ask the duke to allow our sheep to graze on the land, and I will offer him a percentage of the profits when the sheep are sheared in the spring. He makes no use of the pasture, but I am to understand it is well maintained. Sheep to keep the terrain tended and payment for his good deed; what more could he want?"

“You are a fool to even ask. Danby probably knew about the condition of our flock and fields before you did. He anticipated you would come to him asking for help.”

“The duke asked to see me, not the other way around. You give him too much credit.” Colin scowled at his brother’s fingers locked around his forearm. James released him.

“You don’t give him enough,” his brother countered. “Are you aware his grandson is staying at Danby Castle?”

“I hardly see the need to be worried. Our nieces are too young for the marriage mart.”

Malcolm’s oldest daughter was only twelve-years-old. Colin expected to support his sister-in-law and nieces for many more years, and he wished to do right by the girls.

James crossed his arms. “Julian Beckford is already married. He arrived with his pregnant wife and her family.”

“And this should concern me because...”

“Mrs. Beckford has a sister of marriageable age. I expect the duke wants to help his grandson foist her onto another man.”

“Danby will be disappointed then.”

Colin stalked across the stone foyer en route to the massive door leading outside. He wasn’t in any position to take on another dependent, which the duke likely knew already. The question remained if the man cared that he would be sentencing Mrs. Beckford’s sister to an uncertain future.

End of Chapter

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