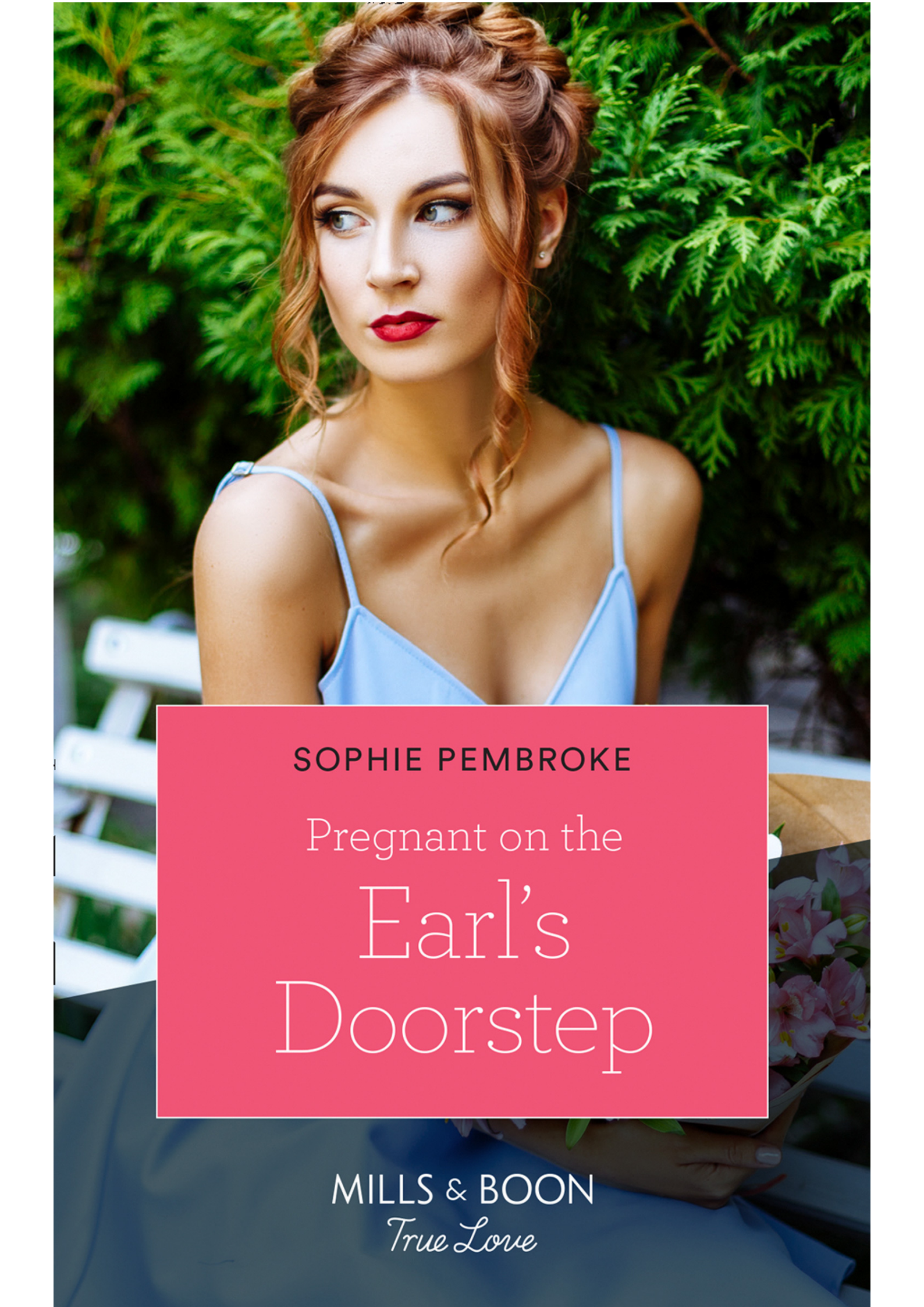




SOPHIE PEMBROKE

Pregnant on the
Earl's
Doorstep

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Mills & Boon True Love

Sophie Pembroke

Pregnant On The Earl's Doorstep

«HarperCollins»

Pembroke S.

Pregnant On The Earl's Doorstep / S. Pembroke — «HarperCollins»,
— (Mills & Boon True Love)

An Earl's reputation is everything...But scandal's knocking on his door! Earl Cal Bryce is guardian to his late brother's children, and needs help! He's saved when Heather Reid agrees to be their nanny. But Heather needs his help too – she's pregnant with his brother's baby! This could ruin the Bryce reputation...unless Cal can open his heart to another new role – husband and father!

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An earl's reputation is everything...

But scandal's knocking on his door!

Upon his brother's death, Cal Bryce assumed the role of earl, becoming guardian to his young niece and nephew. Knowing nothing about children, he's saved when sweet teacher Heather Reid agrees to be their nanny. But Heather needs *his* help, too—she's pregnant with his brother's baby! This could ruin the Bryce reputation...unless Cal can open his heart to another new role—husband and father!

SOPHIE PEMBROKE has been dreaming, reading and writing romance ever since she read her first Mills & Boon as part of her English Literature degree at Lancaster University, so getting to write romantic fiction for a living really is a dream come true! Born in Abu Dhabi, Sophie grew up in Wales and now lives in a little Hertfordshire market town with her scientist husband, her incredibly imaginative and creative daughter and her adventurous, adorable little boy. In Sophie's world, happy is for ever after, everything stops for tea, and there's always time for one more page...

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Pregnant on the Earl's Doorstep

Sophie Pembroke

MILLS & BOON

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For Carolyn

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CHAPTER ONE

LENGROTH CASTLE LOOKED bigger than it had on the website. More imposing.

On the slick, professional website of the Earl of Lengroth the castle had been bathed in sunlight, with impossibly blue skies shining behind its corner towers, the stone walls almost white in the sunshine. In reality, even on a dry July day in Scotland, the skies were more white with cloud than blue, and the stone was a heavy, dark and imposing grey. The seventeen stone steps up to the dark wooden front door seemed designed to put visitors off altogether—they were narrow, steep, and they looked slippery with moss encouraged by the moat they rose across.

In fact, the whole scene was enough to make Heather Reid want to jump on the first train back to Hertfordshire and never return.

Except she couldn't. Not until she'd done what she'd come to do. After that...? Well, what happened next was anybody's guess. By then the ball would be firmly in the court of Ross Bryce, Earl of Lengroth.

Steeling herself, Heather crossed the gravelled courtyard from the open front gate and carefully made her way up those seventeen slippery steps. Halfway up, she risked a glance down at the moat. The water was black and bottomless. Much like her fear.

Heather swallowed and took another step.

A splash beside her made her jump and almost lose her footing. Grappling for purchase on one of the higher steps, Heather darted her gaze around, looking for the cause of the sound. A fish? Duck? Crocodile? She wouldn't put it past the Earls of Lengroth to have installed the Loch Ness Monster in their moat.

Then she spotted the rubber duck, bobbing happily on the dark water.

'Not a monster,' she whispered to herself. 'That's a start.'

But that duck definitely hadn't been there when she'd started climbing the steps. Risking letting go of her step, Heather looked up at the windows overhead, trying to see who might have thrown the rubber duck.

Nothing.

Ross Bryce had kids, she remembered uncomfortably. Two of them, perfectly turned out in a party dress and a sailor suit respectively, featured on the home page of the website, standing and smiling sweetly next to their handsome father, the Earl, and their beautiful mother, Lady Jane Bryce, Countess of Lengroth.

She'd been physically sick when she'd seen that photo and realised how monumentally she'd screwed up. Of course, she'd been throwing up a lot lately anyway. But seeing that photo had marked the moment she'd realised just how much trouble she was in, and the magnitude of the consequences she had to face.

There was still no sign of the duck's owner, but Heather had been a teacher long enough to know that when a child threw a duck at you it meant you weren't wanted. In fact, she was pretty sure she'd have been able to figure that much out even *without* her teaching qualification.

Carefully, she reached down to the water and retrieved the duck as it bobbed past, tucking it under her arm.

'I don't want to be here, either, kid, believe me,' she muttered.

And then she took the next step anyway—because what choice did she have?

She'd made a mistake and now she needed to own up to it, deal with it and face it head-on. She knew only too well what happened when people ducked their own guilt and tried to cover up their actions with lies.

The big brass knocker on the castle door echoed around the courtyard as she lifted it and let it fall against the wood. At least she'd survived the steps and the duck missile. As long as the door didn't open outwards and send her flying into the moat she was almost there.

And then would come the really hard part.

She'd practised what she would say to Ross—it was hard to think of him as the Earl of Lengroth at this point—all the way up on the train. She'd thought of different ways to break the news, but it all came down to the one basic fact.

I'm pregnant. With your child.

She really hoped his wife wasn't in the room when she saw him again.

Not that he'd mentioned his wife, of course, when they'd met that night in London. Or his kids. He'd told her about the castle, and about lonely dark Scottish nights—even in early June, apparently. He'd talked about the countryside and his responsibilities and the parties he went to.

But he'd failed to mention his family. And he hadn't been wearing the wedding ring she'd seen on his finger later, in the most prominent website photo of them all—a large family portrait.

'You must have all the aristocratic ladies after you,' she'd joked, when he'd told her where he lived and shown her a snapshot on his phone. *'How do you know they're interested in you and not your castle?'*

'Trust me,' he'd replied with a wicked grin. *'My castle is the least impressive thing about me.'*

Heather groaned, just remembering the line. How had she fallen for that? She blamed the cocktails her friend Lacey had insisted on them drinking.

Was anybody *ever* going to open this door? She really wasn't enjoying reliving the worst mistake of her life in her head while she waited. She'd done enough of that over the last month as it was.

Now she was there, at Castle Lengroth, she just wanted to get this over with. She wanted to see Ross Bryce and tell him everything. She wanted this to be someone else's problem, too, even if just for a few minutes before he inevitably threw her out.

Heather didn't have high hopes for this meeting. But she knew it was something she had to do. Ross deserved to know about the baby—even if he didn't want anything to do with it, or her, after this. At least she'd have done the right thing.

Because, apart from one stupid night in London almost two months ago, Heather Reid *always* did the right thing. Her mother had taught her that much—if only by being a stunning example of what happened when a person didn't.

Finally the door creaked open to reveal an elegant, polished older lady in a navy skirt suit and a cream blouse, with a string of pearls around her neck and sensible navy shoes on her feet.

'I'm here to see the Earl of Lengroth,' Heather said as confidently as she could, as if it were the sort of thing she said every day.

'You're late,' the woman told Heather sternly. *'Come on. He's waiting.'*

Heather blinked twice, then followed. She got the feeling that this woman wasn't used to being disobeyed.

'Um...how am I late, exactly?'

Well, she *was* late—six weeks late at this point—but she was pretty sure the woman wasn't talking about Heather's period.

'I didn't have an appointment...' Maybe she should have made one. Except she couldn't imagine that Ross was going to be happy to see her again.

The woman didn't answer—in fact, Heather wasn't even sure if she heard her over the sound of her own heavy footsteps on the polished stone floors of the hallway. On either side the walls were painted dark shades of green, in between bare stone columns, and every now and again they'd pass a chair with tartan cushions, as if there to give people a chance to recover from the unrelenting hard darkness of the place.

Finally, after several more hallways, eight chairs and two staircases, the woman stopped in front of another heavy wooden door and rapped her knuckles sharply against it.

'Come in,' a male voice called, and as the woman opened the door Heather thought she heard him mutter, 'Finally...' under his breath.

Heather stepped inside just as the woman said, 'The new nanny is here, sir.'

Nanny? Okay, someone had got something *seriously* confused here.

But as Heather stared at the darkly handsome man behind the mahogany desk she realised that a case of mistaken identity was the least of her problems. Because the man sitting at the desk belonging to the Earl of Lengroth wasn't the man she'd slept with in London almost two months earlier.

* * *

Cal Bryce had never harboured any ambitions to be the Earl of Lengroth. He didn't want the title, the castle, the requirement to provide an heir, the responsibility, or to have to uphold the reputation expected of a sterling member of the aristocracy.

And in fairness, he still didn't have most of those things. He wasn't the Earl—he remained the Hon Calvin Bryce, as he'd always been as the Earl's younger brother. The castle *wasn't* his—it belonged to his nephew Ryan, the eight-year-old newly minted Earl. He *didn't* have to provide an heir—and he didn't think anyone was expecting Ryan to do so for quite some years yet.

Since his brother Ross's death, however, the responsibility *was* all his—at least until Ryan turned eighteen. And the reputation... Well, it seemed that was Cal's to fix, too.

What on earth made you take that corner so fast, brother? Cal thought, not for the first time since he'd got that middle-of-the-night call and heard Mrs Peterson, the castle housekeeper, shrieking incomprehensibly down the phone at him from thousands of miles away in Scotland.

'They're dead! They're both dead, Cal!' she'd finally managed to say.

And the bottom had fallen out of Cal's world.

His whole life Ross had been a constant. And he'd needed that so badly—especially when they were growing up. While the world around them might have believed that the Bryce family were a perfect example of modern aristocracy done right, Ross and Cal had known the truth.

The family weren't above scandal and outrageous behaviour—they'd just grown very, very good at covering it up.

As a child, all Cal had known was that he had to get out of the way when his father started shouting, and that if he was drinking it was better not to be in the castle at all. Ross, three years older, had taught him all the best hiding places—and the signs to look out for telling him that it was time to run. And when Cal got it wrong Ross had stood between him and the Earl to give his little brother a head start.

Cal had idolised Ross. Until six weeks ago.

Even as he'd grown up into a teen, and then a young man, it had taken Cal some time to realise the true nature of his genetic inheritance. The Bryces hid their scandals well—even from their own flesh and blood. But once he'd seen his first evidence—walking in on his father in bed with the barmaid from the village pub was a scene sadly seared into his memory—he'd started to notice it everywhere. Especially as his parents had become less careful of their words around him.

There was the affair his mother had been having with the family lawyer for most of Cal's life. The endless parade of barmaids and local girls he'd seen letting themselves out of the castle kitchens in the mornings. The bruises on Ross's face and arms after a shouting match with their big bear of a father—red-faced and fuming so much of the time.

Hell, there was even the legend of the Lengroth ghost, which was currently causing him issues in ways the woman couldn't possibly have imagined a hundred years ago when she'd died. The story went that a century earlier one of the local village girls had got pregnant and claimed the father was the Earl. Shunned by the local village people, and with her reputation ruined, she'd come to the castle

to ask for his help. The Earl had denied her and sent her away, and she'd fallen down the castle steps and died—although some still whispered to this day that she'd been pushed.

Cal wished he didn't know the truth about that one, if he was honest. His ancestors were enough of a disappointment to him already.

But not Ross. Ross had married the beautiful and lovely Janey and had two beautiful and lovely children. Ross had bucked the family trend.

Cal couldn't even look at the battlements of Lengroth Castle without remembering all the awfulness that had happened inside it. But Ross had moved the family in—made the castle a home, even if it *was* still stone-walled and imposing. Ross had found a way to overcome their genetic disposition towards scandal and bad behaviour.

At least so Cal had believed, until he'd returned home to take over the reins after Ross's death.

Now he was starting to think that Ross had just been better than all of them at hiding his true self.

Cal had thought that the world of business was hard—building up and running a company with a multiple seven-figure turnover took time, energy and commitment. He'd thought he understood about responsibility and challenges.

But that had been before he'd had to deal with the gambling debts, the lies and promises Ross had left behind him.

And before he'd had to hire a nanny for two grieving and uncontrollable children.

He eyed the latest one—the ninth in six weeks—as Mrs Peterson showed her in. In addition to being a full forty minutes late, she looked a little casual for a job interview, dressed in a flowery sundress and sandals—with a jumper on top because this *was* summer in Scotland, after all. Her copper-coloured hair flowed loose in waves over her shoulders, and she carried a rucksack on her back, as if she were a gap year student going travelling. Which she might be, he supposed. She looked young enough.

She also had a rubber duck tucked under her arm, but Cal decided he wasn't even going to ask about that.

The bottom line was that desperate guardians couldn't be choosers, and the agency must be running out of nannies to send him by now.

Mrs Peterson was also looking unimpressed with her. *She*, Cal noticed, was wearing her best suit and heels—the way she always did when there was a potential new member of staff on-site or an important visitor of some sort. She must have got more wear out of it in the last six weeks than in the decade beforehand. But Cal knew she'd have her fluffy slipper boots back on the moment she made it back to the kitchen. The stone floors of Castle Lengroth were hard on the feet.

He turned his attention back to the nanny. Part of him wanted to dismiss her out of hand, but another, larger part, knew that he needed her. He wasn't capable of being the parental figure his niece and nephew so desperately required. He just wasn't father material—he'd always known that.

Which meant he needed someone who would stick it out and look after Daisy and Ryan for the next six weeks—and he'd got the impression from his most recent call to the agency that this was his last shot.

Which meant he had to be persuasive. And he had to follow the plan he and Mrs Peterson had cooked up the night before.

1. *Offer her more than she can get anywhere else*
2. *Make it completely conditional on her finishing the six weeks*
3. *Don't mention the ghost*

Easy.

'Okay, Miss...' he consulted the notes from his call with the agency '...Thomas. Here's the deal. My niece and nephew need a reliable, effective and capable nanny for the next six weeks of the school holidays, until they leave for boarding school in England. Your agency says that you're up to the job,

and I have to believe them. So I'm going to make you an offer you won't get anywhere else. If you stick out six weeks here at Castle Lengroth, and get the children prepared physically, mentally and emotionally for boarding school, I'll pay you for a full year's work at your agency base rate. But if you quit before the six weeks are up you get nothing.'

The redheaded nanny opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then she said, 'I think there's been some sort of misunderstanding—'

Cal cut her off before she could get any further. That was another thing he and Mrs Peterson had agreed on—not giving her too much time to overthink things. He knew that the agency nannies talked to each other—they probably had their own message group on social media or something—so she almost certainly already knew the situation here.

The last nanny had quit before she'd even made it into the castle, when ten-year-old Daisy had thrown a bucket of soapy water over her from the nursery window above the front steps. Cal wasn't risking losing this one before she even met the devil children.

'I know what you must have heard from your predecessors, Miss Thomas,' he said, smiling as charmingly as he could, given what was on the line here. 'I can't imagine it's many families that go through eight nannies before they find the right one. But I have an excellent feeling about you,' he lied.

'Eight nannies?' she echoed faintly, and Cal cursed himself for mentioning it. It sounded so much worse spelt out like that.

'The children have been through a lot since their parents died nearly two months ago,' he said, defensively. 'It's natural that they're acting out a bit. And, in fairness, seven of the eight said it wasn't the children that drove them away, it was the ghost.'

Dammit. I wasn't supposed to mention the ghost.

In the doorway, Cal saw Mrs Peterson throw up her hands in despair and turn to leave, closing the door behind her. Obviously she knew a lost cause when she saw one.

But the new nanny didn't even seem to register his mention of a supposed supernatural being haunting the castle. Probably because she was a sensible person who didn't believe in ghosts and was going to accept his offer. He hoped.

'Eight nannies in less than two months?' she said incredulously.

Then her pale face turned somehow even whiter. Cal resisted the impulse to check over his shoulder for the ghost.

'Wait, their parents...? The Earl of Lengroth, Ross Bryce, and his wife...?'

'Yes. My brother, Ross, and my sister-in-law, Janey,' Cal confirmed, confused.

She sank into the chair opposite him without being invited to do so. Since she looked as if she might fall over otherwise, Cal didn't object. He probably should have asked her to sit before he'd hit her with the terms of the job, actually.

'They died? When?'

She placed the rubber duck on the desk absently. Really—who brought a rubber duck to a job interview?

'Almost two months ago,' Cal repeated, since the information clearly wasn't going in.

She couldn't be a local girl if she didn't know that already, although he'd guessed that from her accent anyway. It had been a mere blip of a mention in the national news—a blink-and-you'd-miss-it piece. But locally it had dominated the newspapers for weeks.

'June,' she said softly, and bit down on her lip. 'It must have been just after I—' She broke off and shook her head, copper curls rustling.

'Miss Thomas. Tragic though my brother's passing is...' Cal swallowed hard at the memory, hearing Mrs Peterson's panicked voice all over again '...I really think we should get back to the matter in hand. Your position as nanny to my niece and nephew.'

She looked up, her green eyes bright. 'And *I* think, Mr Bryce, that we need to start over. You see, I'm not Miss Thomas from the agency, and I'm not here for the nanny position. I'm here about your brother.'

And suddenly Cal knew that his faith in his perfect older brother was about to take another hit. One it might not be able to recover from.

CHAPTER TWO

THE YOUNGER, EVEN more handsome Bryce brother stared at her across the desk—some sort of family heirloom, Heather supposed, given the weight and colour of it. The rubber duck clashed horribly with the surroundings, bringing a sense of surrealism to the whole scene.

As if it wasn't absurd enough already.

Don't get distracted by the desk. Or the duck. Focus on what you're here to do.

Except mentally debating the provenance of furniture was far easier than telling the man sitting behind it that she'd had a one-night stand with his dead brother. Before he was dead. Obviously.

Oh, this was going to go badly.

'You're not from the agency?' Mr Bryce repeated. 'Then who exactly are you? And, more importantly, who were you to my brother?'

Did he already know? Maybe Ross had done this sort of thing all the time. Maybe she was just the latest in a line of women his brother had taken 'meetings' with over the last couple of months.

Heather took a deep breath, and began. 'My name is Heather Reid,' she said, forcing herself to meet his gaze. 'About two months ago I met your brother, Ross, in a nightclub in London and spent the night with him. And now I'm pregnant with his child.'

A child who would never know their father. Heather clutched at the arm of the chair as reality hit home now the words were out in the open. Ross was dead. The vibrant, laughing, charming man she'd spent the night with was gone. More importantly, her child's father was dead.

He might have been an adulterous liar, but she wouldn't wish death on *anybody*. Especially since it meant she was all alone in this now.

Even if Ross had thrown her out of the castle she'd have always known that her child had a father he or she could go to later, if they needed to. That there was someone else in the world that they belonged to.

And now there was only her. And her baby's uncle, sitting on the other side of that damn desk, staring at the rubber duck she'd placed between them.

His expression had hardly changed, she realised. Whatever he was feeling about her revelation, it wasn't shock. Which told her a lot more about Ross's general behaviour than she liked.

'Mr Bryce?' she said, when he didn't answer.

'Cal,' he said tiredly, rubbing a hand over his forehead. 'My name is Cal Bryce.'

'Right. Um... Cal, then.' She waited. Still no response. 'Do you want to... I don't know...see some ID or something?'

Cal's eyebrows rose slowly as he turned his gaze back on her. 'For you or for the baby?'

Heat flushed to her cheeks. 'Right. Obviously you'll want some sort of DNA test at some point—which is fine. I mean, for all you know I'm some random woman who read about your brother's death and came here to try it on and get some money out of you. Except I'm not.'

Cal was looking at her as if that was *exactly* what he thought she was, now she came to mention it. Heather couldn't really blame him. She was *not* good at this.

'Oh! I have one thing that might help...' She pulled her phone from the pocket of her dress and scrolled back through the photos to find the one she wanted before holding it out over the desk to show him.

His eyes darkened as he stared at the photo of her and Ross, surrounded by the dim lights and noise of that London bar, both grinning into the lens as he'd held the phone out to snap the picture. Something to remember him by, he'd said.

Turned out she really didn't need the photo.

Cal sat back, looking up again, over her shoulder, and Heather took the phone back. This couldn't be pleasant for him, either.

Although, *he* wasn't the one who might throw up the sandwich she'd eaten on the train any second now, because of a load of stupid hormones, so her sympathy only went so far.

'Do you believe me?' she asked quietly, when he still said nothing.

'Yes,' Cal replied. 'The lawyers will want the test, of course, but, yes. I believe you. I'm just trying to figure out what to do next.'

Heather gave him a small, lopsided smile. 'You and me both.'

He wasn't that much like Ross, now she'd got past the looks, Heather decided. Ross hadn't stopped talking the whole time they were together—about himself, about her, about places he'd been or wanted to go—yet he still hadn't managed to say any of the things that really mattered.

Cal, after his initial pitch for the nanny job, had been practically silent ever since she'd broken the news.

But he believed her. That was a big thing. She was clinging on to that.

'What did you hope to get from coming here today?' Cal asked finally.

Heather shrugged one shoulder. 'I'm not sure. Mostly I just wanted to tell Ross about the baby. I knew...' She swallowed. 'After I took the test, and he didn't answer his phone, I looked up the castle he'd talked about online. I saw the photos of him and his family on the website. He didn't... When we met he wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and he didn't say anything to lead me to believe he was in a relationship, let alone married with kids.'

Cal's eyes fluttered shut for a second. 'No. I suppose he wouldn't have.'

'So I wasn't coming here for a happy-ever-after, or to demand that he marry me, or anything. I was sort of expecting him to throw me out, to be honest, so in some ways this is already going better than that.'

Apart from the bit where his brother was dead, of course. Oh, she was *really* screwing this up.

'Basically, I knew the right thing to do would be to tell Ross that he was going to be a father. Again. That's all I wanted. After that... Well, it would have been up to him. I just wanted to do the right thing.'

Because that mattered. She needed to be able to look her reflection in the eye when she caught sight of it in the mornings. She needed to know she'd done the right thing for her child.

The way her own mother hadn't.

And now she'd done that.

Which meant she had to figure out what the hell happened next on her own.

* * *

'The right thing?' Cal repeated the words with an ironic smile. As if there *was* such a thing in a woeful situation like this one.

He pitied that baby, being born into the Bryce family, with its legacy of screw-ups, scandals and sadness. What chance did it have?

Or perhaps he or she would be luckier than the rest of them. After all, this baby wouldn't have to grow up in Lengroth Castle, surrounded by reminders of the expectations the world placed upon it and knowing that if he or she didn't want to meet them, they'd have to learn how to hide the truth.

And, most of all, this baby would have Heather Reid, which was more than Ross's other two kids had. They were stuck with Uncle Cal, screwing them up for the rest of their childhoods.

Cal knew what Ross had been thinking when he'd named him as guardian—he'd been assuming it would never be needed. And who else was there, really? Who else would be able to understand the legacy of the Bryce family well enough to try and fix things for them all—or at least hide the truth a little longer?

Heather Reid wouldn't understand that, he'd bet. She was probably an honest, good girl, out of her depth in the pool of Lengroth scandals.

Of course, he could be overestimating her. Because, really, who travelled all the way from London to the wilds of Scotland just to ‘do the right thing’? Nobody in Cal’s family, that was for certain.

He wasn’t sure any of his ancestors or relatives would even know what the right thing *was*, if it came calling. Not even Ross.

So, as trustworthy as Heather seemed, Cal knew better than to take those wide, innocent eyes at face value.

‘Did you hope he’d support you financially?’ he asked. That had to be it, right? Ross had told her he lived in a damn castle—of course she was after money. ‘Or buy you off, so he didn’t have to tell Janey?’

The worst part was that was probably exactly what Ross *would* have done. What Bryce men had been doing for generations to cover up their misdemeanours and betrayals. Hiding their scandals away under a blanket of hush money.

It was just that Cal had been so sure that Ross was different. And that if Ross could be different maybe he could, too. Maybe the scandal gene had skipped a generation, or something.

But here it was, fresh and revitalised for a whole new era of Bryces, ready to bring the Earldom of Lengroth into disrepute once and for all. Hiding bad behaviour had been a lot easier before the advent of social media.

Across the desk, he saw Heather’s eyes had widened with shock. ‘I didn’t... *No*. Like I said—I have a job of my own. Supply teaching might not pay brilliantly, but I like working with the kids and it’ll pay enough to support me *and* this baby, just. So, no, I wasn’t expecting money. As I told you—if anything, I was expecting him to throw me out.’

‘But you came anyway?’

‘But I came anyway.’

Cal eyed her across the desk. She seemed genuine. Sincere. But then, people always did—until they screwed you over.

Then his gaze landed on the duck again. ‘I have to ask...’ He gestured towards it.

Spots of pink appeared on Heather’s cheeks. ‘Oh! It sort of...appeared in the moat as I was approaching the door. It seemed wrong to leave it there so I brought it in with me.’

Daisy, Cal was willing to bet. After tossing a bucket of water out of that nursery window a rubber duck was nothing. Practically a step down, in fact.

Cal thought wistfully of the time when he’d honestly believed that his niece and nephew were delightful, well-behaved children. When he’d lived thousands of miles away and only seen them for an afternoon at a time.

‘How do you imagine the duck got there?’ he asked Heather. ‘In the moat, I mean?’ An idea was starting to form somewhere in the back of his brain. It was entirely possible that it was a terrible idea, but it wasn’t as if he had any better ones to go with. Especially since it seemed that the latest nanny from the agency hadn’t even made it as far as the castle gates.

‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly say.’

There was a wry smile on Heather’s face that told Cal everything he needed to know. Firstly, that she knew *exactly* who must be responsible for the duck, but wasn’t going to drop the kids in it. And, secondly, that Heather Reid was an open book, with her every thought and feeling shown on her face for him to read—as long as he could see it.

It was the second of those two facts that convinced him to follow the hare-brained plan that had evolved in his mind. After all, if he could see Heather’s face he’d know when she was about to do something stupid. Like sell her story about her night with the Earl to the local papers. Or try to blackmail him for financial support. Or whatever.

And maybe, just maybe, what Daisy and Ryan really needed was someone on their side—the way Cal had always had Ross. And Cal had a feeling that Heather could be that person.

If she said yes.

Well, he'd never know if he didn't ask.

'So. You're pregnant with my niece or nephew. I am guardian to your baby's half-brother and half-sister. Clearly whatever happens next we're all in each other's lives now.'

Heather frowned. 'I... I suppose.'

Her lack of enthusiasm was, Cal supposed, understandable. He wouldn't want to be a part of this family either if he hadn't been born into it. Even then, actually. But he didn't have any choice. All he could do now was try and make growing up as a Bryce less awful for Daisy and Ryan than it had been for him and Ross. And he sure as hell couldn't do that on his own.

He took a breath and tried to smile as he said, 'In which case I have a proposition for you. If you'll hear it?'

He had no idea what to do next if she wouldn't.

* * *

A proposition? Heather remembered all too well what had happened *last* time a guy with the surname Bryce had propositioned her. But Cal didn't seem like the sort.

She'd come all this way. The least she could do was hear him out. After all, it wasn't as if she had any clear idea of her path forward. All she knew was that she needed to figure out a way to handle her situation without bringing scandal and shame down on her father. *Again*. He'd had enough of that for one lifetime, and last time... Well, the bottom line was she couldn't risk that happening again.

She needed to manage this carefully. Maybe Cal could help her do that.

'I'm listening,' she said neutrally, watching his expression.

Cal leaned forward in his chair, folded his hands on the desk next to the rubber duck and gazed straight into her eyes. 'I want you to stay here for the summer as nanny to Daisy and Ryan—Ross's children.'

Heather blinked. 'What?' She might have been less surprised if he'd suggested he ravish her over the desk, or that they set up a rubber duck factory together. 'I'm... I'm not a nanny.'

'No, you're a teacher. Which means you know kids a hell of a lot better than I do, for sure. Daisy and Ryan...they're ten and eight and they're struggling. They need someone who knows what they're doing and I think that person is you. Plus, teachers get great summer holidays, right?'

Six weeks. Six weeks in which she'd normally be planning for the next school year, sorting out her classroom, preparing supplies and resources... Except she'd been on a maternity leave cover contract for a year and, despite the promise of another position when the teacher she was covering for returned, last-minute budget cuts meant she didn't *actually* have a new job for September yet. No class to prepare for. And, given all the upheaval in her life, she'd figured some supply work might be best for the next term or so anyway. Until she figured out what she was doing.

All of which meant she really *didn't* have anything to do this summer.

She thought back to Cal's rambled job description when he'd thought she was Miss Thomas.

'If you stick out six weeks here at Castle Lengroth, and get the children prepared physically, mentally and emotionally for boarding school, I'll pay you for a full year's work at your agency base rate. But if you quit before the six weeks are up you get nothing.'

Did that offer still stand? A year's wages, even at nanny agency rates, would go an awful long way towards providing her with the cushion she needed to take care of this baby—and herself—until she got a new job. She could break the news of her pregnancy to her father in her own time and, while she'd have to tell *him* about the whole sleeping with a married earl thing, maybe no one else would need to know. It didn't seem that Cal was desperate to shout it from the rafters.

There'd be talk at home, of course. But an unmarried mother was a totally different thing to an aristocratic homewrecker. And very different again from last time, with her mother. Maybe it would be okay...

Besides, if things got bad she'd have money, and if she had money she had options. She could go and stay somewhere else for a while, until everything blew over. Take Dad with her, even. Maybe Wales, where they'd used to go on family holidays before.

Heather ran her tongue across her suddenly dry lips. 'What are the terms?'

She didn't *want* to spend the summer in Scotland. Not that she had anything against the country particularly, but it wasn't where she belonged. Especially not in this dark and foreboding castle with duck-wielding children.

But if *she* didn't want to be in this scary, imposing place, how must the kids feel about it? They'd grown up here, of course. But given what she knew of their father, and what she could therefore guess about their parents' marriage and family relationships, would that be a good thing or a bad thing?

'Same as if you really were the nanny from the agency,' Cal said. 'In fact, no one but us two need to know that you aren't. I think that would be better for now, don't you?'

Heather gave a slow nod. But *would* it be better? She wasn't good at secrets. She knew the harm they could do. But under the circumstances...what option did she have?

'So, you'd stay a full six weeks and get the children ready for boarding school—I have a folder with the details somewhere...' He looked around his immaculate desk, empty except for the rubber duck, then back at Heather. 'Or perhaps Mrs Peterson does. Anyway. You do that and I'll pay you a year's wages—not as a bribe, or because my brother got you into trouble, but because you'll have earned it.'

He'd anticipated her issues with the arrangement, Heather realised. As much as she could use the money, it *did* feel like a bribe—and that wasn't what she'd come here for. But he'd offered the money before he'd even known who she was, so it was a genuine payment for services rendered.

God, how bad *were* these kids?

At least there's only two of them. That can't be harder to handle than a class of thirty-four, right? And I manage them well enough.

Besides, teaching was one thing. Living with and supporting kids through important life changes was something else entirely. Something she needed to learn to do now she was going to become a mother.

'I don't suppose I can take some time to think about it?' she asked.

Cal shrugged. 'Honestly...? You might as well say yes now. Even if you leave in the next day or two nobody will be surprised. In fact, forty-eight hours will be more than the last nanny managed.'

'You're not selling this, you know.'

'I know.' Cal sighed. 'I'm not going to lie to you. The kids are hard work. I don't understand them, and I don't think they even *want* to be understood. Plus, the castle might actually be haunted—but you'll be long gone by Halloween, so hopefully that won't be an issue.'

'I don't believe in ghosts.' There were enough things in the real world to be terrified of, Heather had found, without adding a whole new fictional layer of fear.

'Even better.' Cal gave her a small smile—maybe the first she'd seen from him. It made him look younger, lighter. And even more handsome. 'The bottom line is, if you stay you can get to know your baby's family. And we can get to know you. You might decide you want nothing to do with us afterwards, but at least you'll have the information to make that decision with. And I'll get to help you financially without it being underhand or dodgy.'

'No one else will know why I'm really here?' Heather asked. That was important. 'I haven't... You're the only person who knows about the baby.'

He looked a little surprised at that. 'No one else will hear about it from me,' he promised.

And against her better judgement Heather believed him.

Six weeks. Six weeks to figure out what she wanted to do next and earn the money to pay for it. Six weeks to figure out how to admit to her father how badly she'd screwed up. To steel herself against his disappointment and upset.

Nannies were practically servants, right? And servants were prized for being invisible. Heather liked being invisible. If people didn't see you they were less likely to talk about you, taunt you or humiliate you.

She'd spent her childhood being part of the most talked about family in her small village. Here she could be completely anonymous—despite the scandal she carried inside her.

Six weeks.

How hard could that be?

She nodded. 'Okay.'

CHAPTER THREE

CAL HARDLY LET her get the word out before he pressed a button on the phone on his desk and called Mrs Peterson.

'Is she staying?' his housekeeper asked bluntly through the speakerphone. 'Or do I need to call another taxi? Only you know how much Harris hates driving all the way up here every time you lose another nanny. He'll be on his lunch break now, anyway.'

She made it sound as if he was misplacing them somewhere, in the nooks and crannies of the cavernous castle. As if they weren't actually running out through the front door without looking back.

The last one hadn't even waited for Harris—the driver of Lengroth village's only taxi—to show up. She'd walked the three miles to the station instead.

'Miss Reid is staying with us,' Cal said smugly.

'Reid?' He could almost hear Mrs Peterson's eyebrows rising. 'I thought the agency said her name was Thomas?'

Damn. He wasn't good at subterfuge. But he'd have to get better quickly if he was going to disguise his brother's pregnant mistress as a nanny for the next month and a half.

'A mix-up at the agency, it seems. Our new nanny is Miss Heather Reid.'

'I've stopped bothering to learn their names,' Mrs Peterson replied. 'Did the agency get the time of the interview wrong, too?'

'Yes. Yes, they did.' Mrs Peterson valued promptness highly, and what was one more little white lie if it smoothed the relationship between the nanny and the housekeeper of Lengroth Castle? 'In fact, Miss Reid was technically fifteen minutes early.'

'Hmph.'

Across the desk, Heather was looking most amused by his attempts to pacify his housekeeper. He resisted the urge to toss the rubber duck at her to stop her silent laughter.

'So if you could please come up to the office and take Miss Reid for a tour of the castle, and to meet the children...?'

There was a loud sigh on the speakerphone. 'I suppose,' she said, and then the line went dead.

'Mrs Peterson is not a big fan of nannies?' Heather asked.

'To be honest, the last few we've had haven't really tried to endear themselves to her.' Cal tried to smile reassuringly. 'Mrs Peterson is a sweetheart when you get to know her, I promise.'

Heather looked sceptical.

But when Mrs Peterson arrived a few minutes later—Cal suspected she hadn't wasted time going all the way back down to the kitchen...she'd probably figured she'd be needed to show the nanny out before she even got that far—Heather smiled sweetly at her and talked about how excited she was to get to know the children and the castle.

'We'll see how long *that* lasts,' Mrs Peterson muttered ominously.

As they shut the door behind them Cal let out a long breath and sank down into his chair to process the last half an hour. Much as he'd far rather take a nap, there were still so many things to deal with.

So, taking stock...

Pluses: he had someone to look after Daisy and Ryan, hopefully for the rest of the summer, so he could get on with fixing everything their father, his brother, had screwed up before his death.

Minuses: that person was pregnant with Ross's child, and was basically another scandal waiting to happen.

Cal didn't think Heather was about to go running to the papers, seeking a pay-out for the headline *Adulterous Earl Fathers Baby from the Grave* or anything, but he knew better than most that

appearances could be deceiving. At least this way he'd be keeping the scandal close to home, until he was sure of Heather's character. And the baby *was* a Bryce—he definitely believed that much.

Another nephew or niece for him to not know how to love. After all, it wasn't as if he'd ever been given any examples of loving parenthood, or even a loving relationship.

'Your heart's as cold as a Scottish winter,' his latest ex-girlfriend had told him as she'd walked out. *'The view might be nice, but you wouldn't want to live there.'*

She might have had a point, he had to admit. But *his* life wasn't the problem here. Ross's was. And not just because of Heather.

With a sigh, Cal pulled over the folder sitting on the corner of his desk, sending the rubber duck toppling over as he did so. The folder's cover was blank—purposely. Cal didn't need a reminder to know what was inside it.

Another of his big brother's follies.

Living the lives they did, the Earls of Lengroth had never been particularly good at holding on to their money. Fortunately the estate was still reasonably lucrative—with most of it rented out to farmers or tenants in the linked village. But the castle took a lot of upkeep, which required all that money.

At least it did when there was someone sensible at the reins—usually an estate manager or the current Countess of Lengroth.

Ross, however, seemed to have believed he could do it all himself. Or maybe he'd felt he *needed* to, in order to keep his secrets. Because what Ross mostly seemed to have done with the estate finances was gamble it away.

Cal's eyes fluttered closed as he tried, for an unsavoury moment, to imagine his perfect big brother at the gambling tables, throwing away his children's inheritance. Or in a London bar, seducing Heather Reid.

The latter was alarmingly easy. With that river of copper hair, and those soft green eyes, Cal could easily imagine any man's attention being drawn to her, even across a darkened bar.

He opened his eyes again. *Not helping, Cal.* Especially since he liked to think—in his better moments—that he might actually be able to resist the kind of scandalous fall from grace that seemed to afflict all the Earls of Lengroth sooner or later.

'But I'm not the Earl,' he muttered to himself.

He was going to do everything in his power to stop Ryan from following that same path. But first he had to finish fixing Ross's mistakes.

He flipped open the folder, ready to start again.

Most of the basic gambling debts he'd dealt with up front, the moment he'd found them. He should have used the estate money, he knew, but that was Ryan's, and Cal didn't want his nephew to be saddled with money troubles from the outset. Fortunately Cal's own property business in the States was lucrative enough that he'd had enough personal wealth to fill the hole. His accountant hadn't been happy about it, but then neither was Cal, really.

More problematic to deal with were the times when Ross had clearly tried to use his title and minor celebrity in place of money. Or to impress, Cal supposed. He wasn't sure what else would explain the obligation sitting on top of the pile, waiting for him to fix it. An email from a magazine editor, confirming plans made with Ross for later in the summer.

'Why on earth would Ross have invited a reporter to come and stay at the castle?' he wondered aloud, rubbing a hand over his eyes as if that would change the contents of the printout in front of him.

It didn't.

Only one way to find out, Cal supposed.

He picked up the phone to try and explain to this editor that, with Ross dead, there was no way in hell he was letting a journalist anywhere near Lengroth Castle this summer.

* * *

She'd left the rubber duck in Cal's office, Heather realised as Mrs Peterson showed her yet another identical green and grey room in the cold, dead castle. She should have brought it with her—either as a peace offering or a sign that she couldn't be intimidated by flying bath toys.

Except she was, of course—intimidated. And not just by ducks.

Thirty-four children in a classroom were one thing. Two children alone in a castle, with a ghost and a revolving door for nannies, were something completely different.

Heather felt sick again. Didn't this castle have *any* bathrooms? She wasn't sure that Mrs Peterson had shown her one.

'And this will be your room,' Mrs Peterson said finally, opening the door on a grey room with a grey metal bed and a green and grey tartan bedspread. There was a chair by the window, looking out over the front of the castle all the way to the grey gates. Heather wondered if this was where Daisy had thrown the duck from.

'Is there a bathroom?' Heather entered the room cautiously, looking for a bathroom door and possibly a ghost, or a child waiting to jump out at her and pelt her with bath toys. She saw neither.

'Down the hall,' Mrs Peterson answered. 'Lengroth Castle was built before the advent of your modern en suite bathrooms, you realise.'

Lengroth Castle had clearly been built before indoor plumbing, central heating, electricity and Wi-Fi technology, too, but Heather sincerely hoped *they'd* all been included in any subsequent remodelling.

'Down the hall? Right...'

Feeling she'd taken in enough of the room, Heather dumped her rucksack beside the bed, turned to Mrs Peterson and said, 'So, shall we go and meet the children?' in her best Mary Poppins voice.

Mrs Peterson looked suspicious.

'I mean, that *is* what I'm here for,' Heather went on, knowing she was babbling and unable to stop herself. 'To be a nanny, I mean.' And definitely not the bearer of the children's illegitimate half-sibling or anything. *No, sir.*

Oh, she was *terrible* at lying. Clearly she took after her father and not her mother there. Why had she ever thought she could pull this off?

But after a long moment Mrs Peterson stepped back, out of the doorway. 'The nursery is this way.'

She click-clacked off down the corridor, her heels echoing off the stone walls, and stopped at the next door, a good ten metres away.

Heather steeled herself, and followed.

'Children,' Mrs Peterson said as she opened the nursery door, 'this is Miss Reid, your new nanny.' She sounded almost...*fond*, Heather realised. Which, given what she knew of the children so far, didn't make much sense.

Unless they were in it together, determined to drive away any newcomers to the castle.

Heather was so engaged in a sudden daydream of Mrs Peterson dressing up in a white sheet pretending to be a ghost, while Daisy and Ryan stood behind her hurling rubber ducks at an invading army of nannies, that she almost forgot to greet the children.

'Hello! You can call me Heather. And you two must be Daisy and Ryan!' She was still channelling Mary Poppins, she realised. If she wasn't careful she might burst into song at any moment.

'She doesn't look like the other nannies,' Ryan said, eyeing her with suspicion.

His dark hair was curled over his forehead, so like his father's and his uncle's that Heather felt a pang of sympathy all over again.

Mrs Peterson looked at Heather and sighed. 'No. No, she doesn't.'

'Maybe that means I'll last longer than they did,' Heather replied, a little archly.

Mrs Peterson's mouth flickered into something that might almost, *almost* be considered a smile. If she squinted. The almost smile was gone so quickly that Heather wasn't entirely sure she hadn't imagined it.

'Daisy. Come and say hello to Miss Reid.'

Over at the window, looking out over the very steps Heather had climbed to get into the castle, sat Daisy. She must take after her mother, Heather decided, given the pale mousy hair, braided into thin plaits that hung over her thinner shoulders. There was nothing about Daisy that spoke of the broad-shouldered confidence the Bryce men seemed to be born with.

Then she turned away from the window to face Heather and pierced her with sharp, intelligent amber eyes that were all her Uncle Cal.

'Nannies don't wear baggy jumpers,' she said, looking Heather up and down. 'Or trainers.'

'Well, this one does,' Heather said cheerfully.

These kids had better get used to her wardrobe, since she hadn't brought anything smart in her small rucksack. In fact, she hadn't brought much of anything. A single change of clothing, her phone charger, that sort of thing. She hadn't been planning on staying, after all. She'd have to find out if Cal's generous employment deal included an advance for suitable work wear.

'I'll leave you to it, then, Miss Reid,' Mrs Peterson said, as if she were saying, *I hope the lions don't eat you, but they probably will.*

'Heather, please,' she tried one last time, but Mrs Peterson ignored her.

'Dinner is at six in the dining hall,' she added, closing the door behind her.

Heather looked at the children. The children looked at Heather, clearly waiting for her to break first.

They'd broken eight different nannies, Heather remembered uncomfortably. But they wouldn't break her. Because Heather knew something that they didn't.

They were family. Or they would be once this baby was born. And if Heather had learned one thing from her taunting, scandal-ridden childhood, it was this: you never ran out on family.

'Right,' she said, clapping her hands together *à la* Mary Poppins. 'Mrs Peterson has shown me all around the inside of the castle—how about you two show me around outside?'

Daisy and Ryan exchanged a look that Heather couldn't read.

'Outside?' Daisy asked suspiciously, as if there had to be a catch somewhere.

'Yep. I saw some great-looking woodland on my way in—I bet that's fun to explore.' She shot a sideways look at Daisy, who was trying to communicate something to her brother using only her eyebrows. 'Plus, I understand that the castle moat has some very unusual ducks in it.'

Ryan stifled a snigger at that, while Daisy glared at him so hard that Heather thought lasers might shoot out of her eyes.

'Come on! It's summer. You two should be outside, enjoying the glorious sunshine.' Heather glanced out of the window. 'But grab your wellies on the way, yeah?'

They *were* in Scotland, after all.

* * *

The dining hall at Lengroth Castle was large, cold, prone to damp and currently mostly empty.

From the head of the oversized table Cal stared down at the vacant seats arranged around him. Alone, it was almost too easy for him to remember them occupied by Ross, or their parents. Even society's brightest and best, in the castle's heyday, before his father's rages had taken greater hold and entertaining had become just too risky.

Right now, though, all that was missing was his niece, his nephew and his new nanny.

'Dinner will be cold,' Mrs Peterson said, speaking volumes with her tone.

With just those four innocent words, Cal knew exactly what she was *really* asking.

Who is this Miss Reid? Why is she here? Do you really expect me to believe that the local agency sent her, with an accent like that? And, most importantly, What has she done with the children?

‘I’m sure they’ll be here soon,’ Cal said, as mildly as he could. ‘Miss Reid seems like a very responsible person.’ Apart from sleeping with strange, married earls she met in London bars. ‘And her references are impeccable.’

She was practically family, after all. And if Cal’s parents had taught him anything about family it was that they knew where the bodies were buried, so you had to keep them close.

‘Hmm...’ Mrs Peterson said, speaking volumes once more with just one noise.

Suddenly the huge, wooden door of the castle crashed open.

‘Sorry we’re late!’

Heather’s English tones rang through the castle corridors, probably reaching them a good thirty seconds after she spoke, due to the distance from the door to the dining room. Clearly she had some lungs on her.

‘Where’s the damn...? I mean, Daisy, where’s the dining room?’

The last was quieter, but sound carried well in the castle. Something Cal had had reason to curse plenty of times in his life.

‘I think they’re here,’ Cal said redundantly, and Mrs Peterson gave him a look that suggested that, given their joint ability to state the obvious, he and Miss Reid deserved each other.

‘I’m so sorry!’ Heather gasped as she and the children barrelled through the big double doors at one end of the dining hall. Not the end nearest to the front door, Cal noticed, which meant that Ryan had been playing his usual trick of trying to get the new nanny disorientated and lost.

He blinked as he took in the full impact of their appearance. Behind him Mrs Peterson made a faint noise of either astonishment, disgust, or both.

Mud was dripping from Heather’s nose. And her hair. And her sodden jumper. The skirt of her sundress was caked in mud, and there were twigs in her cascading copper hair.

Daisy and Ryan were suspiciously clean by comparison.

Cal surveyed his niece and nephew, both of whom appeared to be working hard at maintaining an air of innocence. Then he met Heather’s gaze and saw there a determination and steeliness that surprised him with its depth.

It’s going to take more than a fall in the river to scare this one off, kids.

At least, that was what he assumed had happened. It was what they’d done to nanny number three, anyway. There was a stretch where the bridge didn’t *quite* reach the far bank—not since the river had swelled and burst its banks the winter before. It was simple enough to jump to safety via the stepping stones on the other side, but only if you knew to look for them. If you weren’t paying proper attention when you reached the end of the bridge—say if an evil child was distracting you by dangling from a tree, or something—it was easy to miss the fact that the bridge basically gave way to a river of mud.

‘Miss Reid, perhaps you would like to freshen up before dinner?’ Mrs Peterson said, as if Heather had merely a smudge of dust on her nose or something.

Ryan snorted. Daisy, as ever, remained implacable. The girl was definitely her mother’s daughter, Cal decided. Janey must have known what Ross was really like—what was going on behind her back. But he’d never seen a glimpse of it in her calm, serene expression.

Heather gave a grateful smile. ‘I won’t be long. Children, why don’t you come with me? We can all change for dinner.’

‘But *we’re* not muddy,’ Ryan protested.

They hadn’t eaten since lunch, what with the impromptu nature ramble Heather had taken them on, so Cal assumed the boy must be starving. He knew *he* was.

‘The great outdoors is full of all sorts of germs, though,’ Heather said airily. ‘You definitely need to wash before you eat. Maybe even have a bath...’

There was a wicked twinkle in her eye. One Cal approved of mightily.

‘But our dinner will get cold,’ Daisy said, perfectly reasonably.

Heather pulled an expression of regretful sorrow Cal was *almost* sure was fake.

‘I know—I’m *so* sorry. So *clumsy* of me to slip in the mud on the bridge. If only I’d known that the bridge ended short of the riverbank I wouldn’t have spent so long flailing around in the mud, waiting for you two to come down from the trees and help me up. And then we wouldn’t have been late for dinner.’

She flashed a quick smile at Cal and Mrs Peterson.

‘All my fault, you see. But the children and I really *must* clean ourselves up before dinner. Please, don’t wait for us, though.’

She ushered the children out of the dining room, Ryan still grumbling as they went. Cal watched them go, smiling. This might all work out a lot better than even he had planned.

‘I make that one to Miss Reid and nil to Daisy and Ryan,’ Mrs Peterson murmured softly.

Cal glanced up to see that the older woman had a small smile on her face. One he didn’t think he’d seen since he’d returned for Ross’s funeral.

‘I think you’re right,’ he replied. ‘Now, do you think we can reheat dinner?’

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