

A HIGHLAND BRIDE



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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Monroe, Fiona
A Highland Bride

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62750-907-7

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-387-7

Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-388-4

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



"I must apologise yet again for my daughter's absence," said Mr. Campbell, gazing unhappily through his half-moon glasses at the empty place setting on the other side of the long, polished dinner table. "She is... she has been somewhat wayward of late, if truth be told."

"Truth, sir, should always be told to your minister." The Reverend Iain Farquhar helped himself to a jointed quail, and nodded his assent as the attendant footman slid smartly in to offer sauce from a bone china pitcher.

The dinner plates and other tableware were of the same set, he had noticed. He was no great expert, but even he could see that the porcelain was of the latest design and finest quality and doubtless came from one of the new factories in England. The silverware was untarnished and gleaming, the long dining table and its many upholstered chairs were also a la mode. Everything in this room was new, and that included the room itself.

Mr. Campbell, on the other hand, seemed older than his sixty years. Edinburgh's wealthiest wine merchant hunched over his plate, pushing half a slice of beef around in a puddle of gravy, his shoulders drooping and his face grey with sorrow and anxiety.

Farquhar knew what troubled Mr. Campbell, and he was here to talk to him about it, but he had no intention of doing so until they were alone. He could see, however, that his host had more than one grief on his mind. So, with an aside glance at the blank-faced footman, he asked, "Does Miss Flora Campbell give you much trouble, sir?"

Mr. Campbell shrugged unhappily. "Not so much, not so much... Mr. Farquhar... as my poor dear..." He trailed off, and his glance too flicked to the servant. "I should have said, not so much. But I am very much afraid..."

There was a sudden commotion from the hallway, two female voices; one angry and scolding in tone, one high and defiant and also angry.

"Ah," said Mr. Campbell, putting down his fork and smiling, clearly relieved.

The footman took a step towards the door, but he was not in time to stop Miss Flora Campbell sweeping it open with her own hand and half running into the dining room.

She was wearing a half-open pelisse and shawl and brought with her into the warm, shuttered room a blast of the bitter night air. "Papa, I—" she began, and stopped, with one gloved hand in the act of removing her shawl, when she caught sight of their visitor. Her eyes widened and she dropped a clumsy curtsy.

Farquhar had already stood, and acknowledged her with the briefest bow that courtesy could allow. He was not, as he thought, prone to discomposure; but the consciousness of what he had come here to tonight to do, made him distinctly nervous in her sudden presence.

Flora Campbell was a girl of nineteen or thereabouts, tall and very dark, but with a fair skin flushed by the cold of a February night in Edinburgh. She met his gaze boldly, with eyes that were so dark and lovely that he was unable to look away again quite immediately, as he felt he ought. He knew he had allowed himself too

many glances at her as she sat in her family's pew alongside her father and her elder sister, distracting him from his devotions and filling his mind with thoughts unworthy of a minister of the Church of Scotland. He hoped he could make a beginning on amending that, of turning it to account, but so much depended on her.

From the hallway came a loud, "Miss Flora!"

"Flora," said Mr. Campbell. "As you can see, Mr. Farquhar has joined us for dinner. Why don't you dress, my dear, and come down as quickly as you can."

"Yes, sir," she said, and dropped another curtsy. "Good evening, Mr. Farquhar."

Stiffly, Farquhar bowed again. When Flora had gone and the footman had closed the door behind her, he resumed his seat.

There was an awkward silence before Mr. Campbell said, "I'm sure, Mr. Farquhar, if Flora had known you were to honour us with your presence this evening, she would not have been so late back."

"But excuse me, sir. She knew she was expected to be in time for dinner?"

Mr. Campbell said nothing for a moment, toying with his fork against the edge of his plate, absent and distressed.

"Could I ask," Farquhar persisted, in a low voice, "where Miss Campbell has been this afternoon?"

"I... do not know exactly. Mrs. Burness could tell you, no doubt."

Since it was the housekeeper Mrs. Burness's distinctive sharp accents that Farquhar had overheard from the hallway, he had an idea that the worthy woman was as ill-informed of her young mistress's comings and goings as her father was, and far more angry about it. And this, allowed in a family that was already under such a pall of disgrace. Farquhar shook his head and held his tongue. Mr. Campbell's apologetic, cowed demeanour suggested that he knew his own guilt. He must bide his time a little longer.

After only five minutes, which passed in a silence broken only

by the ticking of the carriage clock on the mantelpiece and the muffled clatter of horses' hooves and carriage wheels in Charlotte Square outside, the door to the dining room opened again and Miss Campbell made a more dignified entrance.

Despite the brevity of her toilet, she had managed to turn herself out in a simple yet elegant ivory gown, trimmed with lace and cut very low. So low, that Farquhar had to look away as she leaned to kiss her father on the cheek and dropped into a seat beside him. The head of the table remained empty, a poignant reminder of the Campbell household's absent mistress.

The colour was still high on Flora's cheeks, and she looked petulant. "I haven't missed the first course, then?"

"We waited for you, my dear," said her father, and carved her some beef and offered her some quail.

Both gentlemen had already eaten quite enough of the first course, so were obliged to watch and wait while Flora began to tuck heartily into beef, fowl and fish. She signalled to the footman to fill her wine glass.

"My dear," said her father. "I wonder... how your afternoon was?"

"Very pleasant, thank you, Papa. I called on Caroline Sinclair and then we went for a stroll in Princes Street Gardens."

"But, Flora, it has been dark these three hours at least. You cannot have been strolling in the dark, in February."

Flora banged her fork down against her plate with a clatter. "What?" Her tone switched with shocking suddenness from quiet gentility to shrill anger. "Do you doubt my word? And if I were to be strolling in the dark, what of it?"

"My dear, I only mean..."

"Are you accusing me of telling an untruth, and in front of Mr. Farquhar?"

"No... no."

"I am quite sick of being imprisoned here in this house. I am nineteen years old, Papa! I should be out, I should be *seen*! And you would lock me up like an ogre, for something that was no fault of

mine! Am I to be punished forever for what Margaret did?" She pushed back her chair and stood up.

Mr. Campbell too rose to his feet and, reflexively, Farquhar followed. "Flora... my dear... please."

"No!" she said with a sob, and ran for the door.

Impassively, the footman opened it to let her through.



FARQUHAR WAITED until the meal was over and they had withdrawn into the smoking room before embarking on what he had come here to do. Once the butler had offered the gentlemen cigars, which Farquhar himself declined, lit his master's and retired, Farquhar began.

"Sir," he said, remaining standing while Mr. Campbell settled disconsolately into his leather armchair. "You might have guessed already that Mr. Guthrie asked me to come and see you."

"Yes... yes, I thought as much, Mr. Farquhar. Is... is he going to ask me to resign my position as Elder?"

"No!" Farquhar was shocked. "Mr. Campbell, you ought to know that an Elder of the Church of Scotland is ordained for life. Mr. Guthrie, and indeed I, would like to see you and you're... daughter back at church this very Sunday, and he would like to see you attend the next Assembly. Indeed, it is your God-given duty to do so."

Mr. Campbell covered his hands with his eyes and seemed to shrink further into the embrace of the armchair. "How can I? How can I appear in public, how can I allow Flora to appear before the mocking eyes of the whole parish, when our family is crushed under such disgrace?"

Farquhar felt pity as he looked at the shattered old man, but he had to harden his heart a little and stay firm in his resolve. "Mr. Campbell," he repeated. "Forgive me, for you are a much older man than I, and my natural inclination is to defer to and respect you, but

it is my duty as your minister to say what may seem harsh. From everything I have heard before today, and particularly from what I have witnessed here tonight, the disaster that has befallen your family seems to have been caused largely by you. By your faulty indulgence of your daughters, by your failure to teach them good principles and correct their wayward natures."

Mr. Campbell let out a groan of anguish and fully buried his face in his hands, the untouched cigar abandoned in an ashtray.

Farquhar allowed him a moment to say something in reply, and when he did not, pressed on. "It is true that the whole of Edinburgh knows that your elder daughter has fled her father's roof and put herself in the power of Count Ercole de Felice, whose wife the Countess waits, I understand, at home in Italy for her husband to return. Where are they now, sir?"

Mr. Campbell groaned again, then staggered to his feet, went to the bureau, and withdrew a letter from a drawer. He handed it to Farquhar then sank back into the chair.

Farquhar, a little surprised, studied the document in his hand. It was written on thick, good quality paper, with the frank of the French postal service.

"That came this morning," mumbled Mr. Campbell.

On one side, the direction to Charlotte Square was written in a fair, sloping hand. On the other, was a brief letter in the same. He caught a waft of expensive perfume as he unfolded it.

My dearest Father, I am writing to you from Paris, both to let you know that I am safe and that pursuit would be quite useless. I am staying here for the time being with my beloved Conte, so you will know that you must quite give me up. But I am happy! So very happy indeed, and there will come a time when you will see me again and address me as Contessa. Until then, dear Father, I remain your dutiful and loving daughter, Margaret. PS: All my love to my sister Flora, too.

Farquhar felt a twinge of sick dismay at the foolish girl's wicked words as he twisted the paper over in his hand and looked at the stricken father she professed to love.

He had known Miss Campbell too by sight, just as well as he knew the father and younger daughter. For over a year he had been one of the assistant ministers at St Andrew's Church on George Street, largest and grandest of the churches recently built to serve the city's fashionable new residential quarter. He had taken to watching the family during services more than he ought, his eye drawn by the charms of the younger daughter, and not much liking the look of the elder. Miss Campbell was more strikingly handsome than her sister, but even before her shocking elopement he had thought she had a cold, impudent air.

"In my first rage," said Mr. Campbell in a wavering voice, "I wanted to pursue the blaggard and challenge him to a duel. I wanted to rescue my daughter and bring her home. But..." He waved feebly at the letter, which was still in Farquhar's hand. "You see what she says. She is happy..."

"No, sir. She is not happy and never will be again. She is lost. To fight and perhaps kill the Count would have been a wicked sin that would have imperilled your immortal soul. And more to the point, you can never bring your daughter home. For the sake of Miss Flora if nothing else."

Mr. Campbell nodded unhappily. "Do not blame me, Mr. Farquhar."

"Excuse me, sir. I must speak plainly. I do blame you. You have clearly failed to discipline your daughters, and this," he struck the paper, "is the consequence."

Mr. Campbell sighed deeply. "When my beloved wife died, the girls were both so small. They missed their mother grievously. I could not bear to upset them further. Everything they wanted, they had. Everything that could make them happy."

Farquhar was appalled. "And if they misbehaved?"

"They did not misbehave. They were good girls. The governesses who left were... unsuited to their spirited natures."

"Did you never correct them, or allow them to be corrected?"

"Oh no, no, no. Nothing like that." He sighed again. "Perhaps I should have."

"Excuse me, sir. Yes. You most certainly should have."

"It is too late now."

"Not at all. Too late for Miss Campbell, yes. She has been ruined forever, and even if she left the protection of this Italian Count and returned to you, it would be of no avail to punish her except as an exercise in justice, as her virtue can never be restored. But Miss Flora is in such great danger."

"Flora is a young lady now. She is full nineteen years of age. She is too old to be chastised."

"I tell you, Mr. Campbell, if either of my sisters - at nineteen years of age or any age - had behaved as impudently and spoken to my father as your daughter did this evening, in front of a guest and a minister of the kirk - they would have visited his study forthwith, and would not have sat comfortably for a week."

Mr. Campbell looked up with a brief light of something like hope in his eyes, then he shook his head and sank further. "I could not do it. God forgive me, I could not start now. I have failed Margaret, and she is ruined. I am failing Flora, and her prospects are blighted. My poor dear Mary, it would have broken her heart." Suddenly, he put his face in his hands and began to sob.

For all his attempted professional demeanour, Farquhar was horrified to see the older man give way like this. He knelt beside the chair and put his hand on Mr. Campbell's arm and said gently, "Sir. Do not give in to despair."

"But Flora will never find a husband now. Despite her fortune, no respectable man will connect himself with our family. Margaret has ruined her sister's life as well as her own. And it is all my fault for being weak and indulgent."

"Mr. Campbell. Please listen to me. I wish to propose a solution."

He stood up straight again and waited until the merchant had composed himself once more. Then, feeling his heart knocking against his ribs, he said, "I learned earlier today that I have been

offered a parish of my own. It is in the village of Scourie, which is in my own country, Inverness-shire."

"The Highlands," muttered Mr. Campbell.

"Yes. It is a very long way from here. The local laird is an old acquaintance of my father's and it is through his influence that I have been appointed. I will leave Edinburgh to take up my new duties within a fortnight."

"We shall miss you, Mr. Farquhar—" Mr. Campbell began to say, weakly.

Farquhar cut off the conventional protestation, too intent on what he had to say to stand on courtesy. He had to say it immediately, or lose his nerve. "With your permission, sir, I would like to offer my own hand in marriage to Miss Flora."

Mr. Campbell's eyes widened in surprise, and his spectacles slid down his nose. For the first time in their interview, he straightened his shoulders and half-rose from the chair. "You, Mr. Farquhar?"

"Yes, sir. Is it so astonishing? I am not a wealthy man, I am my father's third son and my eldest brother inherits. But I have some small fortune of my own from my mother, and combined with this my stipend from the church - which is substantially more at my new parish - supplies me with quite as much as I need to support a wife in the modest style befitting the mistress of a rural manse. Miss Flora Campbell has been used to balls and theatres and the other brilliancies of life in the city. I cannot offer her that, but then nor would I wish to. I think she would be safest far away from all these temptations, and the possible influence of her sister - because you could not prevent Miss Campbell and the Count returning to Edinburgh should they choose to, nor do I believe - excuse me, sir - that you would be able to prevent Miss Flora visiting her sister should they do so."

"But the disgrace! Your position as a minister of the kirk! Would the Assembly allow you to marry into a family such as ours has become?"

"I am prepared to face down any disapproval from my superiors

in the church," Farquhar said firmly. "I do not need their permission to marry anyone, and my appointment to the ministry of Scourie Kirk has already been made. Perhaps it will prevent me ever rising any higher in the church, but I had no great ambitions to do so anyway. To lead a useful and virtuous life within a parish where I can daily bring souls to God through example and preaching is all I ask of life. And to safeguard, redeem and educate a young lady whose reputation and very soul is in the gravest danger - that is an end worth any sacrifice."

Mr. Campbell let out a long breath. "You will take her very far from me."

"I will, sir. But that is another advantage of my situation. In the parish of Scourie, no one will know of the scandal. In this great city you think that the affairs of Edinburgh are the affairs of the whole world, but out in the Highlands, folk know and care only about what happens in their village and the next along the road. Your daughter will arrive at the manse as Mrs. Farquhar, her reputation untainted by association."

His prospective father-in-law nodded gravely and a little sadly. "And you will... educate her, you say?"

"I must be frank again, sir. If Miss Flora, as Mrs. Farquhar, behaves towards me as I witnessed her behave towards you this evening, then I will correct her. It would be my duty as a husband."

"Well, well. I give my permission and with thanks - but only if Flora will agree to it herself. I will not force her into marriage."

"Sir," said Farquhar a little angrily, "I hope you think better of me than to imagine I would wish to marry her against her will."

"No, no. Indeed. Well, I shall ring the bell and have her brought down immediately."



AS SOON AS she had closed the door on her bedroom, and on the officious Mrs. Burness, Flora Campbell regretted having left the

dinner table so impulsively. She had always found it difficult to control her temper, and she had been so wretched and alone since her sister had left - and the atmosphere in the house had been so ghastly - that she was now on the verge of tantrum or tears almost every moment.

She was slightly sorry for shouting at her father, but her regret was mainly that her outburst had deprived her of the chance to dine in company with Mr. Farquhar.

Probably, she thought as she flung herself moodily on the bed, the unexpected presence of the minister in the dining room had been what had unsettled her in the first place after her disappointing, frustrating afternoon. She had called on her great friend Caroline Sinclair in George Street, and had been told by the footman who answered the door that Miss Sinclair was not at home. As she had been going back down the front steps, she had glanced backwards, and caught a glimpse of a white dress and a staring face in an upper window. Caroline had been at home, but had simply not wanted to see her. Or perhaps her father had forbidden her to receive her, now that she was tarred by the ugly brush of Margaret's sin.

Humiliated and furious, Flora had not gone home as she ought. She had wandered in Princes' Street Gardens alone, drawing curious glances from passers-by concerned to see a well-dressed young lady abroad unescorted and unprotected. When the dark February night closed in so early, she wrapped her pelisse tighter and made her way to the Theatre Royal at the end of Princes Street, to watch the early theatregoers and the lights and the carriages and hear snatches of music from within. She had not been allowed to go out to the theatre since Margaret's elopement. She had not been allowed to go anywhere. She felt that her life was over before it had begun and that none of it was her fault. It was so desperately unfair.

It was only when two men, drunk and swaying slightly, tried to talk to her that she came out of her resentful daze and stormed back home. They were gentlemen, and it was a well-lit street with

plenty of people about, but she had never in her life been spoken to abruptly and outright by anyone to whom she had not been introduced. There was only one possible reason that these strangers could have approached her; they must have thought she was a woman of the town, looking for business outside the theatre. It shocked her into realising the impropriety of her situation, and she hurried home as fast as she could.

She had not realised the lateness of the hour, either. She had not intended to draw attention to her extended absence by missing dinner. The old witch Mrs. Burness was angry with her, and then she had been faced with the unlooked-for presence of the man she had, before her sister's disastrous flight, spent so much time watching in church as he sat on the benches below withered old Mr. Guthrie. Time that ought to have been spent instead with her head bent in prayer.

She had not told even Margaret about her secret and perhaps ridiculous passion for the new assistant minister. Margaret had always thought clergymen to be far too unglamorous as a species, certainly compared to the glittering attractions of a uniform, or a title, or at least a published quatrain of poetry. While Margaret talked of her balls, and her beaux, Flora - who was not yet out - thought secretly of the severe, magnificent whitewashed interior of St Andrew's and the dark-clad, dark-haired and powerfully built man who sat below the altar and sometimes would lift his startling blue eyes from his prayer book and look directly into hers. She was sure, of course, that those moments were accidental. She even wondered if he was disapproving of her wandering mind, because there was always a hint of sternness in that blue gaze.

But she could not help wondering what could lie underneath that severe black clerical outfit, and in her more dangerous moments in bed at night she would give her imagination free reign. It seemed so unfair - once again - that Margaret was somewhere many miles away by now, indulging perhaps at this very moment in all the sensuous pleasures of the flesh. Embracing her dashing

Italian Count, as naked as he, his hard muscles pressing against her soft hot skin. As these images flooded through her, her breath came short and faster.

She got restlessly to her feet and went to the window to look down at Charlotte Square far below, trying to ascertain whether Mr. Farquhar had left yet. He would not have come in a carriage; his lodgings in George Street were no distance away. She could see nothing in the street but pools of light from the lamps and a solitary night watchman clipping along the broad pavement. It was all so different from the press and bustle of what they now called the Old Town, where the family had lived for most of her life in the top two storeys of a tenement overlooking the Royal Mile.

There was a sharp knock on the door, which Flora knew at once was Mrs. Burness.

"Go away," Flora snapped.

"Miss Flora, your father wants to see you in his study."

"I'm getting ready for bed. Tell him I shall see him in the morning."

To her extreme annoyance, the woman actually pushed open the door uninvited and therefore saw immediately that Flora was not in any way dishabille. She was, in fact, still fully dressed for the dinner table. Flora turned away from the window and glared at the housekeeper. She had conceived a hearty dislike of Mrs. Burness, who had come to work for the family only two years ago when they had moved into this smart new house. Auld Nettie, who had been their combined housekeeper and nursemaid in the 'auld hoose', had been pensioned off. She hadn't wanted to leave the frowsy midden of the Old Town and live out her last years in what she saw as a cold and remote suburb.

"Miss Flora," said the crone again, "your father is very insistent that you go down to his study."

"Oh very well!" Flora swept passed her and tripped lightly down the two curving staircases that took her from her bedroom to the ground floor and the flagstone tiled entrance hall. Forgetting her

regret over her earlier discourtesy towards her father, she deliberately neglected to knock on the door of her father's study and entered the room unannounced.

Her father was in his usual leather armchair by the fireplace, an unsmoked cigar and a glass of brandy on the occasional table beside him. And standing near to the hearth, his hands locked behind his back, his tall figure dominating the room, was Mr. Farquhar. He stared and frowned at her sudden unannounced entrance. That feeling that she had often had in church, that he disapproved of her, came back strongly. She felt herself blush, but she could not unlock her gaze from his. Such startling blue eyes, in such contrast to his black hair.

"Come in, Flora my child," said her father, and his voice was gentle.

Flora had definitely picked up from Mrs. Burness's tone the suggestion that she had been summoned to her father to be upbraided for her behaviour at dinner, but now she relaxed a little and came into the room. She curtsied to Mr. Farquhar, still blushing.

"Mr. Farquhar has something to say to you, my dear, and you can be assured it is with my full permission and approbation."

She looked up at Mr. Farquhar again, fully this time. He was staring directly at her and paused for several moments before saying in a firm voice, "Miss Campbell, I wish to offer you my hand in holy matrimony." And as if demonstrating this, he took one hand from behind his back and offered it out to her.

Flora was overcome with confusion, dumbfounded, and the beginning of a warm thrill that radiated from deep within her stomach and spread its delicious tendrils through her body to the tips of her fingers and her lips. Her breath was caught away by the surprise, and she could not speak.

"Miss Campbell," he said again, in a rather warmer tone, "if you would do me the honour of becoming my wife, it would make me very happy."

"And I!" she said in an impulsive rush, hardly knowing what the proper response was. Since his hand was still held out, she grasped it as if in friendship and found her own slender hand enclosed in a firm, hard grip that promised more than that. "Yes, Mr. Farquhar. Yes!"