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BEAUTY'S BEAST

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Chapter 1

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"**A**re you out of your ever-loving, motherfucking mind?" Taren screamed, from what she thought was a safe place about ten feet away from him, as she hastily rearranged her clothes. She yanked her undies back into place in a blithe manner that had her wishing she'd been more mindful of the condition of her backside. Pressing her hands down over her skirt in the front, she glided them over her butt in back, carefully, without really touching it. She molded it against the backs of her thighs to about mid-thigh, where it ended, to reassure herself that it actually was hanging down over her and was not still hitched up in the back as it had been, an alarmingly few seconds ago.

She dragged the backs of her hands over her face, scraping away the tears, even over the big, ugly-assed, bumpy red patch of scar tissue that couldn't be missed on her right cheek. For pretty much the first time in her life, she was happy to feel the stark difference of it because it forcibly grounded what had been her highflying feelings.

As if 'The Bruce' McCullough – People's Sexiest Man Alive,

more often than not, swinging single, smack your momma gorgeous – was going to be interested in her.

What had gotten into his head, she wondered, that he thought he could do that to her?

She'd – *they'd* – gone home early from the social event of the season, or what passed as one in the hinterlands of New Mexico, anyway, the annual end of summer barn dance/pot luck that was held at the grange hall just outside of town. She'd spent the evening hugging the wall, dodging Luke Boyd's occasional clumsy passes, and trying not to stare at the bastard as he managed to charm the pants off every woman there who still had a pulse, and some who were so old she was sure they didn't.

He'd been nothing but gracious to those who requested autographs, posing for selfies with anyone who asked, flirting outrageously with every female in his path and commiserating with every man. He danced with their pretty young mayor, danced with someone's darling little girl – her feet on his what looked like size thirteen EEE pontoons – and just generally made everyone, including all of the men who really should have been terribly jealous of him, fall in love with him.

Just like she was trying desperately not to.

She was painfully aware of the fact that she was spending all of her time there mooning over him, her eyes following him around the room in what she hoped was a covert manner. Although he'd looked up occasionally – it was easy to watch him do it because he was already so much taller than everyone else around him, except perhaps her brother – as if he was trying to find someone in the crowd, and he always managed to catch her looking at him.

Not that that stopped her, apparently, despite the fact that she got so red each time he spotted her and gave her that sly smile of his – sometimes even going so far as to wink at her knowingly or to lift his glass slightly to her, depending on what he was doing at the time – that she felt positively faint. She might knock it off for

a while and go get some punch, or pretend to nibble on one of Marlene Dalton's famous toffee nut bars, but minutes later she'd be back to stalking him with her eyes, but from a different vantage point that no matter how covert she tried to be, he always managed to suss out.

Until, that was, she decided to stop torturing herself and leave altogether, although she had to run through the gauntlet to do so, of course. Why was it that every time she came to her senses about something like this – which she never should have done in the first place – everyone she'd ever met in her entire life decided to try to talk her out of it?

Sam was first. She was headed for the coat room, which vaguely resembled a war zone full of coats and hats and even the odd pair of what looked like agonizingly uncomfortable high heels as well as the occasional pair of worn out boots, to collect her wrap, and he knew immediately what she was doing without her having to say a word.

Sometimes she hated him with a passion.

He had one of the Taylor twins hanging – quite literally – off each arm, and they were shitfaced as usual. He might have hoped for a different result, but she knew her brother. He was a good man. They'd both arrive home safe and sound – hell, she wouldn't put it past him to tuck them each into bed – completely unscathed, of course.

She needed to find a man like that, Taren thought, then immediately reconsidered. No, she didn't. Men like that were few and far between, and because they were like that, they had their choice of perfectly gorgeous, gorgeously perfect women. Men like that – good men, honorable men – *deserved* to have that kind of woman.

No man like that would give her a second glance, and she knew it. She had long since accepted that her fate – when Sam finally got married, which was inevitable even though there was no one in line for the position of sister-in-law at the moment –

was to always be the indulgent aunt rather than the somewhat indulgent mother, and she was okay with it.

She really was.

Except every time she saw Bruce McCullough.

"You're not heading home so early, are you, Mouse?" he asked, parking the girls on one of the nearby benches and turning to her, but also keeping a weather eye on them, lest someone of lesser character try to take advantage of either of them in their highly inebriated state.

Wrapping the light pashmina around her shoulders, Taren gave Sam a withering glance in lieu of an answer, since he already knew it.

Hands on his hips, he scolded her, "You haven't danced once. Not once, with anyone," sounding – and looking – for all he was worth just like their father.

"Have you been spying on me?" she asked, her eyes narrowing dangerously on him.

Sam wasn't anyone's fool. When his sister gave him that kind of a look, he took a big step back, hands in the air. "No. I just noticed that you didn't seem to be having much fun."

"You asked me to come. I came, and now I'm leaving," Taren interrupted firmly.

A quiet, well-modulated, depressingly brogue-filled voice interrupted from not very far behind her, "I beg pardon, but I believe I was the one who asked you to come, not Sam."

Taren could feel her face reddening – well, parts of it anyway, she thought – knowing that blushing made her even uglier than she usually was because of the stark contrast between the two skin tones on her face. But she didn't allow any of that to stop her from whirling around to face him. "Yes, you asked me, but my brother asked me first."

Sam took a step towards them both, a huge grin splitting his face. "Bruce asked you to the dance?"

She began to wrangle the wrap mercilessly around her when

it didn't need to be, adjusting it almost compulsively while inwardly wrestling with the nervousness and alarm the big man in front of her inspired within her, not to mention her annoyance with her brother whom she rounded on. "Don't say it like that; this is not high school. He merely asked whether I'd be going, not if I'd go specifically with him."

The man in question took another step closer to her, and she could feel him almost touching her back, could smell his spicy, masculine aftershave and feel his breath on her shoulders which only served to accentuate just how feminine and small he made her feel, and she wasn't a tiny woman. She was almost five-foot-nine in her own right, and she tended to tower over a lot of men.

But not him. He was six-five – she'd read it on IMDB as soon as she'd heard that he would be coming to stay with them – he had long, heavy legs, the impressively muscled calves of which were on display in the kilt he was wearing, hugged as they were by the off-white hose he was wearing.

He'd worn a motherfuckin' kilt to a barn dance – and he'd been the belle of the ball because of it. Well, being a world famous, award-winning actor didn't hurt any, either, she supposed, but even if he hadn't been famous, he would have caused a stir by wearing it and everyone – especially the women in the crowd – would have loved him for it, regardless. He was that kind of disgustingly wonderful guy that everyone – even the men who should have been jealous of him – liked.

That shiver-inducing, deep accent rained down on her ears from a position that was entirely too close to her. "I don't mean to dispute what you're saying, Taren, but I would have asked you properly if you'da hung around long enough to hear it."

Why was it that his rolling r's made her nipples peak every damned time?

"You're not leaving already, are you, Taren?"

Lovely. Taren put her hand to her forehead. Another country heard from – and the one she least wanted to.

Luke Boyd moved into the small circle they'd all formed, impolitely blocking the exit, of course, but then it was early and no one else was trying to make what was supposed to be a covert exit. He had the unfortunate luck of standing next to Bruce, and coming off quite badly because of it. Luke was – like Taren – in his mid-twenties, with short, sandy-brown hair, big chocolate brown eyes and a round face that bespoke of his youth.

Compared to Bruce's barely leashed, confident masculinity, he ended up looking like a thirteen-year-old boy, as yet untried and untested. "Yes, Luke, I'm leaving." She didn't know why, but she plastered a fake smile on her face as she said it. Luke wasn't a bad sort, but she knew he had a crush on her – why, she would never be able to fathom – and even now, if as bad a mood as she was in, she couldn't quite bring herself to be mean to him.

He looked somewhat panicked. "I can't take you home because I came with Smitty, and he's already way past the point of being able to drive himself."

Taren interrupted impolitely because she didn't want him to get himself all het up about something that wasn't a concern, especially since she hadn't come with him, either. "Not a problem. I came here in my car, anyway, and I haven't had so much as a beer all night, so I'm perfectly fine to drive myself home."

Luke made an unintelligible sound of protest from behind her as she began to move towards the door.

"Uh, Taren."

It was Bruce. Given a choice among the three of them, she would have preferred to deal with Luke's clumsy advances to her brother's snarky complaints about her being a hermit. And she'd rather not consider what it might be like to have to sit in the front seat of her tiny sub-compact car while riding home with him.

But, of course, that's exactly what ended up happening.

"I could use a ride home, too. I'm a bit bushed."

She almost smiled involuntarily at the cute way he pronounced bushed as 'booshed,' but the out-and-out terror of



realizing that she was going to end up trying to drive while he sat next to her dispelled the impulse as if it had never been.

Luke might have been some kind of help, but he was no match for Bruce in any way, and her brother was only too happy to have her spend time with him, so no one was going to rescue her from this fate worse than death.

Hell, she knew Sam – at least – was fervently hoping she got some from the giant Scotsman.

But what she got was hardly what Sam had in mind for her, she hoped, anyway.

After they'd said their goodnights, her brother now nicely silenced about her leaving, she realized with a frown, the big man made it to the door before her and pulled it open. She nodded feebly at him in acknowledgement of his impeccable – if unnecessary – manners. Her eyes not meeting his as she brushed quickly past him, she was again hit by the potent scents of him, some aftershave, but a lot of just plain clean man smell. Which she knew wasn't easy to achieve in the heat, and with all of the physical activity she knew he'd done all evening, dancing with every and any lady who asked him.

That was one of the reasons that prompted her to want to go now, before he had a chance to ask *her*.

Her keys were in her hand immediately as she pressed the button to unlock the locks. Taren was horrified to hear her brother say slyly from behind them, "Don't wait up!"

Lovely. Let the man think that he was going to be alone in the house with her. Why didn't Sam just flat out tell him she was his for the taking, for crying out loud – as if he'd go after someone like her on his worst day.

He caught up to her in just a few strides, snatching the keys from her hand.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't like to be driven around by other people," he stated flatly.

"Right. And you were both in the front driving *and* in the back while you were arriving in all of those limos at all of those red carpet events, I'm quite sure."

He extended his elbow to her, and she pointedly ignored it. "Do I really strike you as being that elitist?"

"Yes."

He seemed a bit taken aback by her straightforward answer, although his arm never wavered in his wordless offer of gentlemanly courtesy. "Well, that's an interesting character analysis. And besides, you don't drive a limo to this kind of an event."

Luckily, for him, Taren was in just enough of a 'don't give a fuck' mood that she decided it would be nice for someone to drive her for a change, so she decided not to fight him for her keys. She refused to consider the very real possibility that she might not win that fight.

A few steps later, when she still hadn't taken his arm, he simply reached down and appropriated her hand, firmly but gently tucking it into his elbow and leaving his to rest over hers, as if he knew she wasn't going to leave it there without some quiet encouragement to do so.

To her surprise, he actually accompanied her to the passenger's side instead of splitting from her when they got to her car, as ninety-nine point nine percent of American men would have. He reached out and opened the door for her, then took her right hand in his and helped her in. Not that she really needed it, but, since she was wearing a dress, she got into the car the way her mother would have wanted her to, sitting first then inserting her legs into the car, instead of her normal method of spreading her legs and entering one leg at a time as she slid her butt into the seat.

She doubted he appreciated the nicety. No doubt, all the women he dated – and according to TMZ and other gossip sites, he was quite the ladies' man – did that automatically.

Taren watched him round the hood of her tiny car then

made no effort to hide how interested she was in watching him try to wedge his tall, broad self into the tight confines of the front seat area that she was already taking up at least fifty percent of.

Although she was already armed with a quip about him needing a shoehorn to get in, he did the smart thing. He first leaned down to adjust the seat itself as far back as it would go, as well as the setting the seat back the same way, so that when he did slid in, he did it with an elegance that made her want to smack him.

His midnight black hair, which was long and straight from the top, although it got wavier further down, brushed the ceiling with every move, but other than the fact that every time he raised his right arm he managed to elbow her in the boob, he was doing much better than she'd given him credit for.

But, damn, it was cramped in there, and he was nothing if not intimidating – if just in deference to his size – so blasted up close and personal. Taren felt as if she might as well have been sitting in his lap. Their thighs touched every time either of them moved, and that just pointed out to her – which she definitely didn't need to know – that his were least twice as long and muscular as hers.

In order to prevent what she knew would be an awkward silence any way you sliced it, she reached over and turned on a mix station that played a lot of songs she knew.

But, once he'd pulled onto the highway, he reached out and turned it down.

"You didn't dance with anyone tonight."

Her eyebrow rose at his choice of conversational gambit, but she kept her tone carefully neutral. "No."

"I saw several men ask you, but you turned them down."

He did? So he was keeping tabs on her the same way she was on him. That was certainly an interesting tidbit of information. "Yes."

He gave her a thoughtful look. "If I had brought you, would you have danced with me?"

She refused to look at him, staring out her window and answering softly, "You wouldn't have brought me."

That seemed to have given him pause for thought.

"You would have turned me down?"

"In a heartbeat," she returned, almost before he'd finished the question.

That got a soft chuckle from him. "Why? Am I that ugly?"

Very little he could have said would have gotten her attention quicker than that, causing her heart to squeeze painfully in her chest. Her eyes flared as she glared at him, willing them not to fill with tears that were already nearly overflowing, and her voice betrayed her emotions quicker than the tears that ran down her cheeks. "Don't be ridiculous. *I'm* the one that's ugly in this equation. Men like you don't go out with women who – women who look like me."

There. She'd said it.

Bruce reached over the scant few inches that separated them occasionally, placing his big hand over hers. "Women with glorious wavy red hair that I want to run my fingers through? Women who are taller than usual so that I don't have to bend down as far to kiss them? Women who have beautiful green eyes that a man could lose himself in?"

Entirely unable to hear his romantic notions, Taren snatched her hand out from under his as if it was a live spider, not that she had a good place to put it once she'd done so, and she ended up just dropping it lamely into her lap. "Don't be deliberately obtuse."

"I'm not, lass."

"And you can cut it with the *Outlander*-slash-*Highlander* speak, too. I *dinna* find it charming in the least," she lied harshly through her teeth.

She could feel him stiffen in his seat, and he cleared his throat

thoroughly, in a manner that left her no doubt that he was peeved with her.

Which, as far as she was concerned, was just too damned bad.

The rest of the ride home was conducted in just the manner she hoped, a terribly awkward silence, although she hardly felt triumphant about it. When he finally brought the car to a halt in front of the garage, she didn't wait for him to come around and help her out but practically bolted from the car before it had come to a full stop.

But a few paces away from it, she succumbed to an urge she'd been fighting since he'd arrived, reaching as she walked more slowly away than she'd intended, too intent on what she was doing to pay much attention to her surroundings.

Finally, she'd found the half empty pack of cigarettes and the tiny lighter she'd hidden in the clutch she'd been holding onto for dear life all night, knowing that if her brother found out her secret, there'd be hell to pay. Seconds later, she had one between her lips and lit the end, taking a big, deep breath of that which she knew would likely kill her.

But damn, nothing could beat a cigarette when she was upset.

Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.

That was when he'd gone all Neanderthal on her ass – much, much more so than Sam would ever thought of.

"What on God's green Earth do you think you're doing, la – woman?" Bruce roared, stalking towards her.

She might have been a taller than average woman, but he was at least half again her size, and she was smart enough to start backing up as soon as he began eating up the short distance between them.

But it was too little too late, she quickly realized as he easily gained on, then overtook her, manacling his enormous fingers around the hand that held the cigarette.

His command to, "Drop it," was surprisingly calm and deadly quiet, while his eyes held hers and fairly dared her to challenge him, as if he knew she wasn't going to be able to resist the urge and was thoroughly looking forward to it.

Instead, she issued a hearty, "Fuck. You." Then she did her best to lean her mouth down to where the cigarette was still between her fingers.

But as soon as he realized what it was that she was trying to do, he used his other hand to knock it to the ground, stomping on it vigorously as if he was taking out his frustrations at her on the poor, defenseless cigarette.

Which was perfectly fine with her, because she was busy lighting another.

And what he did about that hadn't really occurred to her as an option, until she found he was already doing it. Her wrist still manacled, butt knocked out of it and stomped on by one foot, that firm hold used to tug her over the knee he'd raised to just about the perfect height by putting his other ghillie up on the bumper of her car.

She came to rue the fact that she hadn't chosen a more form-fitting dress, considering the ridiculous ease with which the one she was wearing was raised to her waist, her boy briefs lowered to skirt her knees in an alarmingly efficient manner. Firm, hard flesh smacked down onto much softer, more yielding flesh within seconds of her having lit that fateful second cigarette.