

MASTER OF THE HIGHLANDS by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

As he led her down the dark and twisting hallway, she made a conscious effort to keep her eyes off the sight of his powerful back, a rippling triangle of lean muscles that led down to his belted plaid. Instead, she tried to note every twist and turn of the low-ceilinged stone corridor. If the varying sizes and types of stone were any indication, several additions had been made to the original castle and the result was a confusing warren of back passages and dark corners.

Lily was engrossed, counting how many of the dimly lit wall sconces they had passed when she felt a wall of cold air hit her leg and foot as she abstractedly wondered just where the floor went.

The laird spun in time to catch her by the elbows and swing her up against a small rough-hewn doorway. She looked down to see a cavernous stairway winding down into blackness below.

Lily gasped at his touch. As he grabbed her, his hands had managed to push her sleeves up and they felt warm and powerful on her skin, yet his grip was gentle. He gave a quick squeeze and Lily lifted her eyes to meet his. His features burned with a dark intensity, yet a mischievous hunger played at the corners of his smiling eyes. He wore a devilish grin, like a tiger eyeing prey that he planned to toy with before devouring.

A jolt of desire shot through Lily. She tried to fight it by crossing her arms purposefully across her chest. “Wh- what do you think you’re doing?”

“Easy lass. I can’t let you fall down the stairwell.” Ewen wrapped his arm tightly around her for emphasis.

Cocking an eyebrow, he said, “Who knows where you’d end up this time, aye?”

Ewen slowly slid his hands down her arms and gently uncrossed them. Stroking his thumbs in her palms, he clasped her wrists and raised Lily’s hands over her head. Standing this close, she could see the faint stubble of his beard, dusted like charcoal along the strong line of his jaw, and she felt it as it scraped along the tender inside of her arm as he brought his face to hers.

“These stairs...” Ewen began. Lily felt the brief, shallow whispers of his breath on her cheek, and it was as if by not fully exhaling, Ewen could keep in check an avid lust that had overtaken him. “These stairs...they’re particularly treacherous.”

“I...I can see that—” Lily’s words broke off with a gasp as Ewen shifted his hips, inadvertently skimming his leg along the cleft between her thighs. The rough linen of her petticoat grazed her tender skin, and Lily felt the answering flush of desire with a wet ache between her thighs and the sudden exquisite chafe of fabric across her tightened breasts.

Her intellect was putting up a valiant fight but she was starting to give in to the wanting of him that pulsed deep in her. In one last effort to suppress the clamoring of her heart and body, Lily stammered, “B-but, Ewen, don’t you think--”

“Och, that’s precisely it, lass,” Ewen growled in a voice thick with desire. He became suddenly—frighteningly—still. Inhaling sharply, he rested his forehead on the damp stone above Lily’s shoulder. He turned his head slightly, just short of nuzzling her neck and, like a wild

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animal, Ewen breathed in her scent for what seemed to Lily like an eternity.

Gathering himself, the laird lifted his head and, dropping her wrists, abruptly pulled away. “Aye, that’s it lass, it seems I’m not thinking at all at the moment.” His eyes were unable to meet hers and instead focused on some vague point below. “Shall we down the stairs then?”

The passion that had roiled within her only moments before just as violently flashed into anger. She was furious. Furious at her body for having such a traitorous reaction to the man. And furious at the man himself for bringing her to the brink of surrender only to pull back at the last moment. It had happened once before at the lake after she had injured her foot, and she vowed she would not let it happen again.

Lily glared at his profile and declared in the iciest and most clipped tone she could muster, “Yes. Let’s do continue.”

Ewen became the stoic Highland warrior once again and, with a curt nod, led Lily through the door.

“Is this how it is with you and all the women at this damned castle?” Lily uttered under her breath.

Swinging his head about, Ewen stared fiercely, “What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

Ewen began to descend the stairs, but Lily stopped again, demanding, “You said you’d help me get home. I don’t understand why I’m off to work now like it’s no big deal.”

The laird turned slowly. “I’m doing everything in my power to precisely those ends,” he told her in an even voice. “So until which time we can divine this maze, I ask that you live as a member of this household. A tractable member, aye?”

“Tractable?” she sputtered. “How’s this for tractable? You find the maze and I’ll get out of your hair. I don’t understand how you can’t find the thing. It was huge.”

“If there were a labyrinth, root it out we would—“

“Are you saying there’s no maze?”

“Och, lass”--the corner of his mouth twitched up, as if amused by her outburst--“heed my words.” His gaze softened. Taking a deep breath, Ewen continued gently, “I understand there’s a maze. What I can’t understand, and what no man can, is the fickle way of the universe. Be it stars, or magic, I’ve no way to know. But I continue my search, lass. Meanwhile, I’ve also scouts looking for the witch woman. If there’s anyone able, it is Gormshuil who’ll lead us to the portal that will find you home.”

Ewen gave her an encouraging nod. “I gave you my word, and my word I keep.” Extending his

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arm toward the stairs, he added, “Now please come with me, Lil’.”

She paused a moment. She supposed she had no choice but to trust the man. “Okay,” she grumbled.

Lily ducked through the low doorway and momentarily forgot her indignation as she looked in amazement at the staircase below. It reminded her of something out of a horror movie. As they wound around and down the stairs, she had to steady herself with one hand along the gray walls, shivering at the clammy, damp stone underneath her fingertips. The passage was shrouded in darkness but for an eerie light that danced across the aged stone, emanating from the torch that Ewen had taken from one of the hallway sconces.

“This staircase is a part of the original castle keep,” Ewen explained in an uncharacteristically reserved voice. Putting aside her anger, Lily had to admit she was thankful to have the laird by her side. This place gave her the creeps.

If only the sound of his voice didn’t send such a shock of heat through her center.

“When it was first built, this was the maids’ stair; they used it as a way to get from the kitchens to the main bedrooms. So they’d not have to traipse through the rest of the keep carrying tea or whatnot.

“There’s also a passage to a wee dock off of Loch Linnhe, but that was sealed off by my grandmother when my own father was but a lad.”

They reached a small landing. “Most of it has been closed off, but for the library, and”--Ewen opened the door to a flood of sunlight--“John’s rooms.” Lily gasped at the stark contrast between the dark passageway and the lovely room in front of her. Unlike the original castle, this room had walls of a rich, coffee-brown wood. Above the wainscoting were small paintings, hung atop swaths of a sunny yellow fabric. The paintings were all small oils, detailing landscapes, horses, the sea, and similar idyllic subjects. Lily was transported. It was what she imagined old England to look like--small, upholstered couches, a gaming table, chess board by the fireplace. The only thing missing, Lily mused, was a pianoforte.

Then the tranquility was shattered by an inhuman shriek...