

DEVIL'S OWN by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire, 1660

She wasn't chilled. Her back didn't ache. She wasn't in a barn, nor was she seated upon a three-legged stool. She wasn't in the milking room, and her cheek was most certainly not nestled deep in the thick, musty wool of a sheep's haunch.

No, Elspeth Josephina Farquharson was at a country dance.

Well, not really. But she shut her eyes, dreaming what one might be like. There would be laughter, big jugs of ale, girls with broad smiles walking arm in arm. The pipes would set into a lively reel. She swayed in time.

*The door creaked open. The room stilled. Footsteps sounded. The heavy step was confident, masculine.*

*It was him. He approached from across the room, his eyes only for her. He swept her into his arms.*

*The reel began again, and he pulled her, steady as the tides, into the middle of the dance floor. His breacan feile wrapped about her legs as he swung her. She gazed up, easy laughter on her lips, staring into his . . .*

Elspeth's hands froze on the sheep's teat.

*Brown? Emerald green? Gray as a storm-choked sky?*

*Nay, blue.*

She sighed, smiling.

She gazed up, laughter on her lips, at his blue eyes. He had a smile just for her. It was naughty.

"Elspeth, I say. Are you deaf, girl? That sheep's wrung dry."

She sighed again, heavily this time. Her eyes fl uttered open. It was her father who stood there, not the dream man.

"Now come up to the house," he said. "It's accounting time, and you know you're the one with the head for books."

Elspeth scooted back from the sheep, clapping her hands clean. "Aye, Father."

Even though the family farm was small, she the only child, and her mother long dead, her father needed her. And when he needed her, she always went. How he'd managed before her was a marvel.

"You know I don't have a mind for reckoning." He gave a loving poke to her temple. "Not like

my wee Elspeth.”

She smiled weakly. The day was coming when she'd need to sit her father down and have a serious talk. He'd sold five head of perfectly good cattle to start a woolen business. Without consulting her. And now she was the one left to milk the sheep and mind the accounting. But the books told a grim story, and it grew grimmer by the day.

She worried that they may not even have enough left to buy back their cattle, if it came to that.

They returned to their two-room cottage, and Elspeth pulled her chair close to the fire. Candles were dear, and the hearth was the only spot bright enough for reading.

“You're no lad, but still, how would I survive without you?”

She looked up, and despite the cut in her father's words, she found a rare smile on his face. Tenderness seized her heart. Her parents had been long married before they'd been blessed with their only child. When her mother died in childbirth, she'd left her newborn babe with a man old enough to be a grandfather.

Her father waited expectantly for a reply. His frizz of gray hair erupted up from his head like a halo, or a misshapen bird's nest.

No, he couldn't survive without her. Nor would she want him to.

“Good thing it shan't come to that.” The words pricked her, and she forced a smile. She'd spoken the truth: living without her would never be in question. Any dowry there'd been in linens and woolen goods had been sold off long ago. And what coin there'd been for making Elspeth's plain features more attractive to a prospective husband had gone to the beasts instead.

“Here's your things, then.” He pulled her wee worktable by the fire. It bore a sheaf of papers and her precious quill, and the sight of it automatically switched her mind to the business at hand.

“Thank you,” she said, already engrossed in her papers. She fished out that month's tally, squinting to focus.

With a *tsk*, he rose to stoke the fire higher. “Stubborn lass. I wish you'd allow yourself a reading glass. I've heard talk of a man in Aberdeen who fashions spectacles. They even have a wee ribbon to hold them to the head.”

She tilted her chin to bring the numbers into focus, skimming her eyes over the lines. They'd had this argument before. “You know we haven't the money.”

“But we've spent less this month. Or it should read so in that book of yours.” He came and hovered over her, and she shifted so as not to lose the light.

“Less? How is that possible?” She scanned the rows, and one number caught her eye. Growing stern, she put her finger to mark her place. “Da, how is it we have more left over this month, and

yet we're making less than ever?"

She craned her neck to stare a challenge at him. He'd sold personal items off before, and Elspeth wouldn't put it past him to do something foolish like sell off her mother's wedding band. She frowned, for it wasn't as though she'd ever have call to wear anyone's ring.

"I've begun to trade. With Angus." He paused, letting the farmer's name hang.

"Angus." Shaking her head, she looked back down. Her father dreamed of marrying her off to the man. "Not that again."

Though Angus Gunn was kind enough, and his neighboring farm profitable, he didn't make her swoon like all the great heroines swooned. And if Elspeth couldn't have a great love like those she read about in her novels, then she'd rather skip the whole enterprise entirely.

Besides, she knew of another woman who'd stolen Angus's heart long ago.

Elspeth shut her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "What, pray, have we to trade with Angus?"

"Our sheep's milk for his oats."

Her eyes flew open. "Raw oats? However will we mill them?"

"They're to feed the sheep."

She bit her lips not to speak the first words that came to her tongue. She'd simply have to talk to Angus herself. Perhaps arrange to trade for milled oats so they could fill their bellies instead of just the sheep's. "Very well, Father."

There was a knock at the door, and he bolted up, a wide grin on his face. "*Talk of him, and he doth appear.*"

Elspeth rolled her eyes. When would her father get it through his thick skull that she neither wanted Angus nor he her?

The farmer stood in the doorway and gave her father a stoic nod. He was so tall and so broad, he had to hunch to fit. "I put the oats by the barn."

He shoed Angus in. "Come in, come in. Say hello to Elspeth." He swept an arm in her direction. "Doesn't she look lovely by the firelight?"

"Oh, Da," she muttered under her breath. Little did he know that what men likely saw was a shy spinster, with plain features adorning a too-thin frame.

Spotting Elspeth, Angus slipped his bonnet from his head, crumpling it in his hands. "Good day, Miss Elspeth."

She put her papers down and gave him a warm smile. She didn't have feelings for the farmer—he'd been besotted with her best friend, after all. But that didn't mean she didn't think him a kind and dependable soul. "Good day, Angus."

An awkward silence filled the room.

"Very good, very good," her father said, looking from one to the other.

"If that's all then." Angus turned as if to leave.

Her father shot her a meaningful, wide-eyed look, nodding encouragement.

Elsbeth shrugged. She'd never been good at idle chatter. "Do bide a wee, Angus. We . . . we've just stoked the fire, and I'm afraid I've had enough of numbers this day."

"Very well." Angus went to the corner to retrieve another stool.

"What's the word from town?" her father asked jovially. "I hear the oldest MacAlpin girl has returned a widow. Lost her husband to a war wound, or some such." He looked to Elspeth. "You two were mates. What was the lassie's name?"

"Anya?" Was it possible her dearest friend had returned? Though sadness for Anya's loss pierced her, Elspeth couldn't help but beam. "Anya MacAlpin is back?"

She cut her eyes to Angus, feeling instantly guilty. He'd not weather the news so well. Long ago, Anya's sudden marriage had struck him hard.

Sure enough, he still faced the corner, standing frozen. She was certain Anya was the reason Angus had never married.

Her smile faded. Would that a man felt half for Elspeth what that farmer held in his heart for the oldest MacAlpin sister.

Anya hadn't wanted the marriage either, but it'd been forced upon her by her father. Seeing her heartbreak was what had hardened Elspeth's resolve so many years ago. The day she watched Anya carted away in tears, Elspeth decided either she'd marry for love, or not at all. And now to think her friend was already a widow, while Elspeth seemed destined to remain forever a maiden.

Her father seemed baffled by the tense silence, and filled it with mindless chatter. "Quite a year for that family. Cormac—and what a strange, dour fellow he is, aye?—he up and marries the prettiest girl. From Aberdeen proper, she is." He shook his head, marveling. "And now there's a rumor the brother's back, too. The twin. You remember the lad who was stolen? Aidan?"

"None would soon forget that name," Angus replied, his features once again a stoic mask. He pulled his stool before the fire.

Elsbeth put her hand to her heart. "Young Aidan lives?"

She hadn't known the MacAlpins when the lad was taken. But like every other villager on the outskirts of Aberdeen, she'd heard about the kidnap. Folk said he'd been mistaken for a poor climbing boy. Everyone had presumed him dead or worse, indentured to a faraway plantation.

Angus shook his head. "Not so young anymore."

The mysterious Aidan popped into her head, a shadowy, featureless silhouette. What came of a man after such an ordeal? And what would he look like? If he'd turned out half as handsome as his twin Cormac, he'd be handsome indeed.

"Aye, he's returned. But the family is keeping a tight lip about it." Her father leaned in. "He was a slave in the tropics, I heard. They say he was branded."

"Branded," she gasped. Owned like a common slave. And yet he'd escaped. And with secrets, no doubt.

She shivered, letting her mind wander. How on earth had he made his way back to Scotland, sailing all the way from Jamaica, or Barbados, or Hispaniola? Battling pirates, almost certainly.

Aidan MacAlpin would be dangerous, swaggering. Just like one of the heroes in her books. Would he speak a foreign tongue? Months on the open seas, his skin would be as smooth and brown as a cowry shell.

*The sun beat down overhead. The timber planks were hot beneath her bare feet. She stood, gazing across the endless sea. The afternoon was sultry. It loosened her muscles. She felt heavy with the heat. Wanton.*

*She sensed him, and turned. He was climbing up the ladder, his virile form rising from the cabin below. His sun-kissed skin glowed with the fine sheen of exertion, accentuating his rippling muscles. He called to his sailors, his voice commanding.*

*But then he saw her. Their eyes met, and the rest of the ship fell away. He stalked to her, his very being intent on one thing and one thing alone. Her.*

Elsbeth's breath caught. She put her hands in her lap, wringing her skirts. She hoped the men blamed the flush in her cheeks on the heat of the fire.

She pretended to listen to her father, all the while enjoying the wicked pattering of her heart, as she let herself imagine.