

Chapter 415

He moved around the house and out back, using the water trough to clean the worst of the sweat and dirt from his body and dunking his head in the cold water. His unruly black locks dripped moisture down his already wet body as he wrung his hair dry as best he could.

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Mackenzie quickly hurried inside his holding via the back door and dripped water all over the dusty wooden floors as he walked through the small living room and into his bedroom. Grabbing a cloth to dry himself, he selected his Sunday best, a pair of dark brown breeches with course cotton shirt and matching brown waistcoat. He dressed and ran a bone comb through his hair before tying it back and grabbing his best hat to hide the messy locks as best he could. *wŴw.(n)©⊙ëlw©m.côm*

It had been an age since he'd been to a proper barber. He couldn't really afford to visit one so he tended to hack away at his hair with his knife until it was out of his way enough to work. Mackenzie was conscious that the delicate creature outside waiting for him was far above him with her pretty green dress with its bright yellow brocade of silk and lace. Why she had come to visit him was a complete mystery.

As Mackenzie stepped out the front door, he was once again struck by the beauty of Maria Malone and could only stare at her in awe as she turned to face him. She shyly appraised him with her emerald eyes and a faint smile curved lips that appeared a bit wide for so delicate a visage.

"You dress quickly for a man, Jonah," she smiled. "Men always say it is ladies who take forever to attire ourselves but Papa always makes us late for a dinner party. Of course, our hosts always assume I am the cause of our tardiness but it is Papa. Only don't tell him I breathed a word of that fore I shall be in trouble if he were to find out."

Maria was aware she was chattering nonsense but her heart was fluttering wildly as she stared into Mackenzie's steel grey eyes. From the moment she'd grown tired of waiting for him to court her and decided to do the deed herself, it appeared her heart had had a mind of its own.

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Watching him stride back from the pasture, his manly chest glistening in the late summer sun, had almost made her swoon on the spot. The sweat and dirt were the signs of a good day's honest labour, something for which Jonah Mackenzie was renowned throughout town for. His hard muscles had bunched and flexed as he'd moved with a feline grace that had taken her very breath away.

It was watching him approach and his attempt at courtly manners that had convinced her she was right in what she was doing. Being in love with Jonah Mackenzie was a heady thing; something she had considered was possibly a daydream rather than genuine emotion. Now she was standing before him in his finery and she knew her emotions were true.

"I'm relieved to have met with your approval, milady." Mackenzie turned back inside and came out with his best table that he sat in the sunshine in the middle of the yard. He took the tablecloth covering the food in the basket and laid it over the table before Maria shooed him away. *uvww.π(©)Vellw©Rm.čom*

"I have cutlery but a chair or two would be helpful, Jonah."

Mackenzie watched her begin laying the food onto pretty china plates she retrieved from the basket and then headed inside to get two chairs. They weren't very good chairs, nothing fit for a lady, so he grabbed the hand embroidered cushion his Mama had made years ago and was his only remaining possession of hers. He noted, as he laid the cushion on Maria's chair, that it was a lighter green than her dress and appeared perfect for the occasion.

"Why thank you, Jonah. That's most thoughtful of you."

The petite beauty's praise made him blush and he looked down at his boots wishing he'd taken an extra moment to shine them properly. Truth be told, he was way out of his league with this lady and had used up most of what he remembered about the manners his Mama had taught him.

"Sit, Jonah, and please stop calling me milady. My name is Maria and I'd count it a great honour if you would address me as such."

"Certainly, mil...Maria." Mackenzie sat down, wishing on one hand the ground would open up and swallow him, while on the other, he was mesmerised by the pretty brunette sitting across from him.

One more glance into the sparkling emerald of her eyes, one more soft curving of her sweet, delicate mouth and he knew his life would never be the same after this day.

"She sounds lovely, Mac."

Lily's soft words broke him out of the memory and he was surprised to realise he'd told his mate the story of his first real meeting with Maria. He'd never shared that moment with anyone before. It was special to him and his now dead wife.

It felt good talking about it, remembering Maria in all her simple beauty, the elegance of her movements, her demure genteelness. It didn't feel wrong sharing it with Lily and from the tender expression on her face, it hadn't upset her or her wolf.

"She was," he sighed softly, taking Lily's hand in his and running his thumb over the back in slow movements. "I think I fell in love with her that day. It was very difficult not to love Maria, the whole town did. I expected her father to object to us courting, as I wasn't wealthy like he, but Maria had a strong backbone when she wanted something and she wanted me. I still don't know why, to this day, she chose me when there were so many other more prosperous bachelors around."

"Maybe she saw the same in you that I do?" Lily answered with a small smile curving her lips. "You're one sexy male and you have an integrity that shines out for all to see. You are just so easy to love, Jonah Mackenzie."

She rolled the name on her lips, amazed that her mate had hidden his full name from the world for so long. Jonah Mackenzie. It had a lovely ring to it and she wondered if maybe Maria had been the only person other than his family to call him Jonah. Perhaps that memory was so special to him he didn't want to taint it by having others use his birth name.