

The Beauty of Braemore

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Written 2007
Printed 2008

For my wife

PROLOGUE

It is said he only needed one glimpse of her to be solemnly knocked off his feet. It is said he wanted to have her the second he laid eyes upon her. It is said he found her beauty so striking he could not deny it.

Helen Gunn was an only daughter and so attractive a woman she was known as the Beauty of Braemore. In the year 1425 she was to marry her childhood sweetheart, a fellow Gunn. But the latter had a rival, a powerful one: the factor of the district, a Keith. Helen turned down his flirtatious advances, too crude for her person. But this Keith was not to be deterred. On the eve of Helen's wedding, several Gunns gathered. A group of Keiths burst into the festivities, murdered all those who opposed them, including Helen's fiancée, and, to the dismay of the survivors, kidnapped beautiful Helen.

Helen, mourning the loss of her lover, tried her hardest not to give in to her kidnapper and devised a plan of her own to escape Ackergill Castle. One day she asked her guards if she could see the lands she was supposed to be calling her own. They brought her to the roof of the tower, thinking no harm of it. But if they thought Helen could not escape, they were sorely mistaken, as beautiful Helen threw herself down, thus freeing herself of the shackles of the Keiths.

The Gunns and Keiths were at war for several decades with bloody clashes at frequent intervals. At one point in the 1460s, both clans decided to settle their differences: they agreed to meet with twelve horsemen each at the Chapel of St Tears. The Keiths treacherously tricked the Gunns by mounting two men on each horse. Whilst the Gunns were praying in the chapel, the Keiths fell on them, killing seven or eight of them – history is not clear. Blood remained visible on those chapel walls for many years following the battle.

The bloodshed between the two clans gradually diminished, until it ultimately faded out.

Some 800 years later, a new Beauty of Braemore was born, a new Helen Gunn who was seized by a Keith once again. The Gunns retaliated. They were not to be tricked again. This

time it was their turn and they chose the setting. They opted for a one-on-one battle, one Gunn against one Keith. The Gunns struck back hard. All for the Beauty of Braemore.

I.

Luke Gunn

I come from a long line of swindlers. It is in my blood to trick people out of their money. My dad did it; my granddad did it; my great-granddad did it; my great-great-granddad probably did it as well. And personally, I think every generation is getting better and better at it. I learned a lot from my old man, but I am already better in certain ways. But aye, indeed, it is all the same blood. Maybe it is because we are all allergic to workies and prefer a lifetime on the buroo. Well, at the age of thirty, I can proudly announce I have never done an honest day's work. I have made all my money through my pure charm. And I am a charmer. I have not met the woman I cannot wind around my wee finger and even men are often blinded. Aye, I am a star. I swindle from the rich, the not-so-rich, the stupid, the smart, the whole lot! Do not think there is honour amongst thieves. We are not like those on the telly who will carefully make out their mark: some rich and dishonest bugger. Well, things do not work out like that: we get what we can. And there is plenty to get. Just open your eyes: money is there for the taking. Why not grab as much as you can?

I grin at the man in the mirror: tall, blond, blue eyes, perfect smile. I could fool myself! Who can resist me? Who can escape my charm? I am irresistible, a true Adonis. If I were a Chippendale, people would pay to see me. I have to smile now: people do pay to see me! They always pay in the end. Life is such fun. What a game!

Then again, once in a lifetime, the game is temporarily put on hold. Every Gunn has to prove his worth. My granddad tried and he failed. My dad made the second attempt and he nearly succeeded. Now it is my turn. The battle between the Gunns and the Keiths. And I swear I will do better than having some rich left-footer beat me: Luke Gunn, the ultimate charmer. Better, I will finish this. I will wipe the floor with my mark and this time there will be no coming back. They will think twice about denying the Gunns, messing with us and daring to feel bloody better than us, with their awful Kelvinside

accents and too rich coats. The lot of them are a bunch of pompous balloons and once I am done with my Keith, the balloon will be popped. I will be feared and respected. I will be the man! I will be the Gunn who beat the Keiths. At last!

“Shit, that is an expensive room, Luke. Can we afford that?” April asks.

I turn round and smile at her.

I cannot blame her for thinking like that. The poor lass shares only half my genes – missing the most important ones: the Gunn genes – and was raised by my mother. It is a very odd combination. My other – full – sister turned out alright, although she is lying low for the moment after that last stunt she pulled. Still, she cashed in big time. She can afford to lie low for a while. But April, no, without those Gunn genes she is just a wee naive lass, not stupid, just very, very naive.

And talkative at times. Really, everybody knows about the vendetta between the Gunns and Keiths, but there April was: talking and talking about how she found it odd that the daughter of that rich bastard Keith was all the way up North the country. It is as if the lass does not know what happened between my dad and fat bastard Keith. I cannot imagine Mum has never told her anything. Or maybe April thinks it is all in the past. Well, it is not in the past: it is here and now. And I will take revenge for what happened to my old man... and to my granddad. Aye, I will right this wrong. I will do more than that.

I place my hands on her shoulders. I have to be patient with April. She found me my mark and I am indebted to her, my sweet, wee half-sister. As I stand so close to her, I am amazed how wee she is. Man, her old man must have been tiny to produce such a wee lassie like that. My other sister is twice her size.

“I don’t intend to pay for this, dear Sis. You just wait.”

Her pale brown eyes are filled with surprise. Aye, she has a lot to learn, my wee sister.

“Humble apologies,” she mutters.

I pass her, grab my luggage and throw it on the bed. I have to get ready. I take a deep breath and walk to the window. I do not like what I see. Worse, I miss Glasgow already.

“What a Godforsaken place,” I grumble, “What is she doing up here anyway?”

Could this Keith woman not have stayed in Glasgow, or just gone up a wee bit? But no, all the way up she goes, to bloody Braemore, so pathetic a place, I have to choose a hotel in neighbouring Dunbeath, which is equally miserable and cold and bloody awful! It makes me angry I have to travel such a distance. April had better be sure about this. Talkative is one thing, but she had better be telling the truth.

On the other hand, the road up North made me even more determined. When April told me about Keith’s daughter, I was unsure at first. You see, my old man was older when he hit out and so was my granddad. And they did not make it. Worse, my dad had to visit his old man in gaol and at the age of eleven, I could visit Dad and Granddad in the same building. Bloody idiots. Dad’s definitely the bigger idiot. He should have known you cannot underestimate a Keith, and definitely not one driven to the edge. That is when they are the most dangerous. I will not let that happen. I am smarter than that. In a few days’ time I will be rich and only then I will start a family of my own. Nobody will be visiting me in gaol.

“Remember she’s an archaeologist,” April replies, “And this place has some archaeological sites.”

“Aye, aye.”

What a damned word: my tongue stumbles over it every time I try to get it out of my throat. I will have to work my way around it. That will be no problem. She is a woman after all. And there is not a woman I cannot charm. Just watch me.

“Right, let’s get this baby rolling.”

I get out a fresh shirt, nicked the other day, and grab my toiletries. I have my natural charm but a clean shirt and some perfume cannot do any harm, can they?

I comb my hair back again and finish off with loads of gel. The lassies love me. I look at my reflection. Aye, I am ready for the kill... or at least a wee bite ... today.

“So, what now? How will you know where to look?”

The naivety of the poor lass, it is amazing. How big is Braemore? How hard can it be to find one forty-something-

year-old woman with a Glaswegian accent... with her hands digging in the earth?

“Dear Sis, I can smell a Keith from a mile off, from many miles off.”

And if my instincts were not enough, I know what this Keith looks like. I have a picture of her. Granted, she will have aged by now, but somebody surely will recognise her: she cannot be such a recluse she never ever leaves the house.

I get out the picture and proudly show it to April.

“What is that? Is that her? Is that Ellen Keith?”

“It definitely is, dear Sis. That is Ellen Keith in her twenties.”

April grabs the picture and takes it in, really examining it. But I do not want April with me today; not today. I work best on my own and this is my job. Once my mark is mine, once she is putty in my hands, April can come and play as well. I know April is eager to learn. She begged to join me up here. I know she looks up to me. Still I wonder if she has it in her, if her eagerness surpasses her ability. Then again, she will be trained by me. Something has to come of that.

“Hmmm, are you sure you want to go on your own?”

She hands it back. I throw her a nasty look and crush that hint of curiosity in her eyes. She still has to know her place.

“Hey, what’s this? You don’t trust your big brother now?”

“Aye, aye, but...”

April looks at me and then shrugs.

“Mmm, you just tell me how it went and then...”

Ah, that’s better already.

“It’ll work out just fine, dear Sis.”

She nods.

“Right, here we go. Watch the master.”

We leave the room. I lead the way, straight to the counter where a young lassie is waiting. I smile broadly at her. She casts her gaze aside, as if she has been caught thinking about me. Oh, aye, she is ready for the taking.

“Love, I was wondering if you could help me out here.”

“Yes?”

I lean with my arm on the counter, my face drawing nearer to hers.

“Here’s me in bonny Dunbeath and I’m a bit lost here. My old man asked me to look for a relative of mine and the only thing I know is that he thinks she lives in Braemore.”

She smiles at me, already thinking of all the people living in Braemore.

“I’ve got a picture of her. See?”

I elegantly display the photograph, placing it on the counter. I can tell she recognises my mark. I am heading for a home run.

“Ma? Can you come over for a second?”

Fine, I still have to pass all the bases.

“Hiya, I was just asking your lovely lass here if she knows this relative of mine.”

The woman casts her eyes on the picture first and then on me. Then she stares at April. Oh, could my sister just not spoil it? She has a weapon I could kill for, but the rest of her face can annihilate the effect those eyes of hers have. I have told April a thousand times she has to smile a bit more, but that pathetic face of distrust always prevails. No, she is definitely not coming with me today.

“Ah, you see, my old man asked me to find her, as he’s with my granddad himself. My granddad’s not well, you see.”

The staring shifts and the woman turns her attention back to me.

“Really? I’m sorry to hear.”

Well, he cannot be alright when he is serving life, can he?

“Ah, well, we hope he’ll pull through. But just in case, it’s better to have the family together, hey?”

I put my finger on the picture.

“She’s the only relative I have not been able to contact. I don’t want to stay too long, so I was hoping I’d find her soon.”

Mother and daughter look at each other, and I know that look. Aye, I am at the last base, ladies and gents.

“I don’t know her really. I was just a wean when this picture was taken. It was my dad’s. But she looks nice, doesn’t she?”

“She is nice,” the lassie responds impulsively.

We broke through the final barrier. Aye, I hear the applause!

I smile at her most innocently, brushing away the last reservations.

“She was my history teacher,” she blushes.

So April is right about the history thing.

“Was she a good one?”

“A very good one. She taught us a whole lot about this area.”

“Aye, that’s good then. Nothing worse than a boring teacher, hey?”

She smiles at me and throws her gaze down again. Then she looks up at her mother.

“That is Miss MacKay, isn’t it, Ma?”

MacKay, so this Keith changed her name. What did she think: that she could outrun the Gunns like that? She thinks wrong.

Ma takes the picture.

“Mmm, it looks like her. But she’s a lot younger on this picture.”

“Ah, well, this is taken some twenty years ago, love. Really, I was a wean still.”

The woman hands back the picture.

“That is Ellen MacKay. She teaches at Wick High School, two days a week.”

“Really?”

“The rest of the week she spends in her house. She’s got a wee museum of some sort built in it. It is open to everyone.”

“Ah, that’s nice. And where can I find our Ellen?”

“You just drive to Braemore. It is the first house you see on your left.”

The first house on my left, she has even made it easy. A home run and an easy escape; this is proving easier than expected.

“Aye, well, you’ve been pure help, bonny ladies.”

Now they are both looking sheepish. I am so good. If I can just pry one last bit of information out of them.

“One last thing, ladies, I think I remember my dad calling her by a different surname. She’s married then?”

Husbands always make the job a wee bit more exciting. But I will not be deterred, mind, I will not be deterred.

The lassie spontaneously breaks down laughing. Her mother restrains her and replies all seriously,

“No, no, she’s single. Has been since she came here. She’s always been a MacKay.”

“Ah, probably my dad’s mistake then. Thank you.”

I pull April outside and walk to the car. My brain is working overtime.

“Tell me, Sis, cos I don’t know much about the joys of honest labour, but teaching two days a week, that can’t be much for a living, can it?”

“No, that doesn’t pay enough, no.”

“Somebody’s feeding her. Daddy’s feeding his wee lass. Perfect.”

I grin at April.

“Let’s pay my relative a visit then. I’ll see you in a couple of hours, alright?”

Ellen MacKay

It is cold and sunny outside. Soon it will be dark again. It is a perfect December day with freezing temperatures and a sun keen on playing hide-and-seek behind the Maiden Pap earlier than expected. This is what winter is all about, Ellen thinks, and not like last year’s mock-up. She likes the cold outside, the warmth inside, the light in her living room, the stars she can count from her bedroom at night. And there are a lot of stars in Braemore. She is sure she is not done counting yet.

It has been quiet all day and Ellen does not expect anyone at all anymore. She does not often have visitors and certainly not this time of year, although she knows hotel and B&B owners will invariably send guests her way when they want to know something about the area. Ellen is considered an

authority on local knowledge. Just because she dug in all those years ago. Maybe she is still digging in.

So once in a while she gets strangers inside her house, sometimes those who seem to be stranded in the area and are looking for something to do, sometimes people really interested in the archaeological sites nearby, and once in a blue moon the odd-ones-out who have a keen interest in the subject. But today is quiet and since it will be dark pretty soon, Ellen thinks it will remain so. She likes this end-of-year period when she can bury herself in the natural colours of night.

Ellen is just finishing a paper when she hears the door open. She looks up. Her surprise is increased when she takes in the young man confidently marching through the room. He does not seem the type to accidentally end up in these parts and as far as sharing an interest goes, he does not look the type... at all, and that is putting it mildly.

“Hiya, love, I’m Luke.”

No, this is not her average tourist, and for some odd reason it immediately unsettles her.

“Good afternoon, how can I help you?”

“This is some place you’ve got here, love, impressive!”

She knows what her place looks like and it is anything but impressive. This public part of her house is sober and possibly interesting for some, but not impressive. She would like to sigh deeply, but does not. She has a fake charmer in her house and she will have to bide her time for now.

Luke picks up some folders and pretends to read them. She can clearly tell he does not have a clue what is in them. He is not the brightest light that has ever bedazzled her.

“You wrote all of that, love?”

She really does not like his calling her love. She is nobody’s love... anymore.

“Aye,” she nods.

She would like to keep her distance, but Luke is drawing nearer her corner.

“Mental.”

Maybe it is his Glaswegian accent that immediately puts Ellen off, she does not know, but she really does not like the man.

He stops right in front of the table she is working at: revising papers she has written earlier.

“I’m sorry, love, but I didn’t get your name.”

That is because she has not given it yet and he knows that damned well. But there is no point keeping it from him: it is written on most brochures.

“Ellen.”

“Ah, aye, I see it here: Ellen MacKay... PhD. Wow, it’s doctor MacKay I’m talking to.”

She really wants to kick him out. She is severely allergic to this sort of charade. What is he playing at? What does he want from her?

“I mean it. I’m impressed.”

She gets up, but since she is about half his size it does not change much.

“Thanks. So how can I help you?”

“Are you from Glasgow, love?”

She does not like the way this is going.

“Aye.”

“I thought I recognised that accent! So what is a Gleski doing all the way up here?”

“Taking a break.”

“A break? How long have you been here, love?”

“I’ve extended my break,” she replies dryly.

“You’ve extended it? Nearly two decades and you call that extending a break? You’ve got a sense of humour, you have, love, really.”

He knows something about her. There is a sense of alarm hammering in her. How does this Glaswegian man know she escaped their home town nineteen years ago? And what does he want? There is nothing here he could possibly want.

Ellen sits down again, thinking of how to get Luke out of her house. She spontaneously grabs her pen again, as if she can just get back to her papers. But she cannot, can she? All these years, nineteen years she has been in Braemore and never has she felt this scared, just because of one young man who must have been a child when she moved north. He cannot have anything to do with the past surely. How old is Luke? Thirty?