

# **The Quarterer & the Lengor**

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Also by this author:

Sgeulachd Castle (2003)  
The Short Grioghal (2005)  
The Beauty of Braemore (2007)  
The Stained Family Tree (2007-2008)  
The Marlets' Nest (2008)

For fantasy's sake



## **Prologue**

*The Quarterers were a class of respectable beggars. In return for free lodgings they would bring news, all kinds of news. Some told stories of thieves and robbers, Highland caterans or real clan battles. Others brought tales of another world, of fairy creatures and mythological monsters, ghosts and witches.*

*Television and newspapers replaced one set of stories. As far as the other ones are concerned, people don't believe in them anymore. But they're still there. I know they are.*

*Not so long ago, a family of three, a father, a mother and a son, went out with their boat on a Highland loch. All of a sudden the son saw a strange beast by the shore. He called his mother, who could see it too. But the father, who had the sharpest eyes of all of them, was staring at the exact same spot and still could see nothing. He would see nothing.*

*I am that son. I want to see the Black Dog crossing the street without its paws touching the ground. I want to stir my porridge with my right hand, because my left might call the Devil himself. I want to believe the Quarterer. I need to believe the Quarterer.*

The last time we were all in the same place, was exactly eighteen years ago, at my father's funeral, which is rather ironic in itself. It was he after all, who had allowed for this to happen. No, he made this all happen. He had envisaged a grand future for his daughter, but ended up engineering a complete farce. I often wonder if he ever realised he was played with by the same people I've been. Because he was. My father was nothing more than a pawn. And so am I. I feel trapped in their game. They change the rules, move me around and keep me in the dark. I wish for the intelligence to outsmart them, but I don't believe in wishes, free gifts or unconditional kindness from strangers anymore. I believe in preservation, I think. I feel I'm failing there as well, since my own blood already started taking over. Do I let the next generation take over?

I lost my mother when I was still very young. I have no memory of her at all and whatever I know is what I've been told. She was beautiful, kind and generous. She was the mother I'm trying to be myself. Because I was still so very young, and because my father was not the man to live on his own, he remarried and chose as his wife a woman who resembled my mother so much, some people didn't even know she was not my mother. But she was not. She was cold and mean, like Cinderella's wicked stepmother. She tolerated me for the sake of my father, but I cannot remember there ever was a hint of affection. On the contrary, she drew my father's attention away from me and made him look at her own daughter, frighteningly alike me, at least on the outside. Father loved to dress us like twins when we were young and just to please my father I let him. Until one day I had enough of it. I refused. Father was angry with me; Charlie used his anger to her full advantage.

Charlie MacKinnock got away with everything I could not; she still does. She would daringly do all the things I wanted to do, or had done and was forbidden to do again, just to prove to me what she was capable of. The perfect charmer with a towering intelligence, Charlie dares, shocks and emerges unscathed. At my wedding she made a surprise appearance with her girlfriend of whom my father had never even heard let alone seen. But eloquent, faked innocence turned my father's horror into rapid acceptance and an hour later all was bliss and Charlie's grin bigger than ever. Later that year my father even bought her an apartment, even though she didn't need it at that point. She was still in her final year studying law. It was only to prove to me she could make my father do whatever she wanted, even with her wild behaviour. Everyone knew she slept around, with men and women. Father still bought the happy couple a place of their own: their private love nest. It's a known party tent nowadays. It has been for the past eighteen years, during which time Charlie succeeded in establishing herself as a successful lawyer, feared by the prosecution. She manages to get the perfect jury to free any client, no matter what he or she did. It seems Charlie is a law unto herself, unchallenged and unrivalled. If not her ultimate charm, then surely her infinite knowledge of every detail in law will see her claim victory every single time. Meanwhile, her parties are notorious in this town and many an important and less important man or woman has enjoyed the privilege of

Charlie's hospitality on the top floor of that apartment. And all this time she's been with her girlfriend, loyally standing – or lying – by her side. Charlie's life is one long series of success stories and she loves gloating over it. It was what she was doing at my father's funeral: blowing her own trumpet, boasting about how untouchable she was and how easy it was to convince the weak-willed of this planet. Many a person was offended; many more knew she was right.

Standing out in the room as well was my husband, Lord Damien Maxwell-Campbell, Earl of Tummel. As the third Maxwell son, he was never meant to be the heir to the 500-year-old earldom, but his two-year-older brother died from pneumonia in his teens and both his elder brother and his father died in a car crash when Damien was still a student. All of a sudden he was left with a title *and* an earldom close to bankruptcy, because the last Earls of Tummel were not exactly known for their ability to handle money. The late Lord Tummel was a real spendthrift and his forefathers weren't much better. Damien though is far worse than that: an incorrigible womaniser with a gambling addiction. He uses his talents to feed his weakness, with me as his steady source of income. Flirting just the once with me when we were both students, Damien went straight to my father to ask for my hand in marriage. My father was thrilled. It was a match made in heaven for both sides: ours provided the money; his linked the Earldom to our name. I became Helen Maxwell-Campbell, Lady Tummel, and in return Damien got his hands on half of my father's money. Damien's spent most of that by now. I still hold my mother's money, however. Had I known then that my mother had left me a sum far more considerable than father left both Charlie and me combined, I might have stood up against my father's wishes. Maybe. Would I? I don't know. I married Damien, even though I didn't love him then, and contrary to my father's well-wishes, I've never learnt to either. By the time I graduated I was pregnant with my first son and a few months after the wedding I gave birth. Less than two years later my second was born. The heir and spare, Damien calls them. You need a back-up, he will say.

Silently, but rather dominantly present to me was Lena Beaton, Charlie's partner. The first time I met her was at my own wedding and she immediately sent shivers down my spine and made my stomach contract. Charlie paraded her around that day

and Lena silently endured it. Eighteen years later she's more silent than ever, her dark, impregnable eyes scrutinising the very air she's breathing and her pride so colossal she's all but indestructible. Nothing seems to affect her. At my father's funeral, Charlie made a comment that shocked both my sons and me. It even stunned Damien. It did nothing to Lena. "Nobody fucks as good as my Lena." I'm sure Charlie had meant to provoke yet again, but for me Lena's response only added to the shock. Lena did not even blink; she didn't move a single muscle. If she enjoys Charlie's games, she knows how to hide her amusement. She looked me straight in the eyes, nodded and left, left me totally bewildered. I've often wondered what perverted mind could manage Charlie's games and enjoy them. Someone who has the edge over Charlie? How can one teach English to teenagers during the day and enjoy Charlie's sexual perversion at night? I'm sure she's the mastermind behind Charlie's constant provocative remarks. I think she feeds on our shock, horror and endless astonishment at the frequent games they play. She excels in this. Lena knows how easily a pawn can be moved.

My eldest son, Archibald, looked in horror. He was disgusted by Charlie, who was arrogantly claiming the place as her own, as if I didn't exist, as if she was an only daughter. He was ashamed of his father, who was drunkenly and openly flirting with everyone who would sustain him in his gambling addiction. Anyone was good enough to help him out, and certainly those with noble blood running through their veins. Archibald was saddened by the effect their behaviour had on me. He stayed close to me all afternoon, standing by me and taking over what his father should have been doing at my father's funeral. What topped it all off for Archibald though, was the prospect that after the summer, he would have Lena Beaton as his English teacher. He dreaded it. In the end, he had to admit she was a good teacher, but he never got over the discrepancy between what she was supposed to stand for and what she actually did once she closed her school books.

Gregory is different. Contrary to his brother, who will try to salvage, analyse and work towards a solution, Gregory can occasionally part with reason and vehemently stand by his impulsive decisions. Ever since my father's funeral, when he flatly refused to have anything to do with Charlie anymore, he hasn't spoken to her once. He had already started developing a



proper hatred for his father back then. Last year things only got worse. With Archibald studying in Edinburgh for his H-levels, Gregory felt he was the sole buffer between his father and me. Last month's violent explosion was an accident waiting to happen. Damien and I hadn't slept together since I had been pregnant with Gregory, but one drunken mood obliterated the threat I had made all those years ago. He burst into my bedroom. The subsequent row woke up Gregory in the adjacent room and he rushed to my help, only to be kicked against the wall by his father. He ended up with a broken arm and collarbone. He ended up forcing me to carry out my threat of divorcing Damien. Even though it is what I want, I still feel unable to shake off the idea that my own son is moving me around the board game.

And then there's Gregory's behaviour when around Lena. Despite the fact she's with the very person he despises, he seems to be drawn to Lena. At the end of my father's funeral I had to find he and Lena had spent hours talking together and when we were driving back home, his head was full of kelpies, trows and fairies. With Archibald no longer watching the two of them at school last school year, her influence has even increased. And there's very little I can do for now. He studied hard after the initial problems earlier this school term; he even finished his exams when his father broken his arm and collarbone. Lena had something to do with that. Am I supposed to be grateful? How long will it be before that other side of Lena's infests my son's mind as well?



## Day I

*The Blue Men of the Minch were one of three groups of fallen angels expelled from Heaven. One became the fairies who live under the earth, a second group became the Merry Dancers in the sky. A third group landed in the sea. They became the Blue Men. Most supernatural creatures possess something good, but the Blue Men do not. Their sole aim is destruction. They take fiendish pleasure in churning the waters, after which they will rise from the waves and forcibly drag a boat under. Only those with a sharp tongue can outwit the Blue Men and avoid losing their boats.*

Even though it's only been a month, Damien's absence has brought about a remarkable change. Gregory's boisterous attitude no longer borders on aggression. His silence may still linger, but sparks of contentment lighten the heavy atmosphere that has reigned over this household for as long as I can remember. I guess he's starting to resemble any odd teenager now, instead of the one having to protect his mother.

"Can I go up for a minute, Mum?"

I nod. He's never liked doing household chores, but with his broken arm and ditto collarbone, he found himself the perfect excuse. Moreover, I think he knows I want to give him some leeway.

"He's in a happy mood," Archibald remarks.

I sigh. I have no idea how Archibald will take what I am about to say.

"Charlie's girlfriend is coming over this afternoon," I break gently.

"The Rabbit?" he blurts out.

"Excuse me?"

"It's her nickname at school," Archibald grumbles.

Lena doesn't look like a rabbit. I've surely never heard Gregory use that name either. Then again, it doesn't sound too flattering, does it? Even better, now that I think of it; some months ago Gregory was involved in a fight and it was rumoured

it had to do with Lena. He refused to tell what it was all about though.

Archibald looks at me with frustration.

“I won’t use the f-word, Mum, but let’s say it has something to do with her sleeping and eating like a rabbit.”

“Eating like a rabbit?”

“Don’t ask,” he mutters and gets up.

“Tea?” he grumbles.

“Yes, thanks.”

He fills the kettle and prepares the blend. The way he throws the tea in the pot tells me he’s not taking it willingly.

“What does she want?” he complains.

“Gregory asked her over,” I reply.

He wouldn’t say what it was about, however. I hope he won’t make me talk about the divorce. It’s odd that he hasn’t asked me a single word about it, because he so decidedly demanded the divorce last month. I do hope he didn’t call for Lena to talk about it together. Next I’ll be discussing my divorce with Charlie.

“Why?” I hear.

“I don’t know, son.”

What I do know, is that I can’t deny Gregory. He hasn’t asked for anything since the exams. He kept his end of the bargain; I kept mine. He agreed to study for his exams if I immediately started with the divorce. I didn’t think he would manage, because he was so furious about what had happened and I know what that fury can lead to. He was in quite a lot of pain as well. But he handled it splendidly. He studied hard and sat his exams every day. And since the exams are finished the silence has continued, much to my surprise. Not once has he asked what I have done already. It seems Damien’s absence suffices for now. At least, until he asked me to contact Lena and ask her over.

“I don’t want her over here, Mum. It’s bad enough you have to tolerate Charlie, but you have no obligations towards Beaton. None!”

Moral, no, but other obligations I do actually. And I haven’t told Archibald about this yet.

“I mean, what does Gregory want with her anyway?”

“Listen, son, I don’t know either, but let me tell you this. When you went away to Edinburgh, Gregory had a hard time managing things here and he became rather aggressive at school. His school results plunged, he didn’t care about anything

anymore and it seemed he was always involved in picking fights or insulting teachers.”

He looks at me in surprise, the kettle of boiling water in his hands.

“And it wasn’t much use that your father told him anything, because your father was precisely the reason he acted like that. He didn’t listen to me either. ‘You sort out your own problems first,’ he yelled at me.”

That was painful: my son ordering me to look at my marriage. I’ve always put my sons first, but at least one of them wasn’t happy with the way I handled things.

Archibald pours the water over the blend.

“I didn’t know that. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because before things really got out of hand, something changed. Suddenly Gregory went upstairs as soon as he came home and he was either studying or writing.”

“Writing what? Stories about kelpies and fairies and all,” Archibald protests, “It’s nonsense!”

I guess he thinks it’s not an improvement, but I felt the difference. And I prefer Gregory writing “nonsense” over picking fights and failing his school year.

“Whatever they may be, Archibald. You may not like his stories and he may shut us out of them, but I do know that he started studying again. His school results went back up and I no longer had any complaints from school. When I asked Gregory what had happened, he merely said that he had school work to do and that I should... Well, he told me that he had his things sorted out, so that it was maybe time for me to sort out my things as well.”

“Oh.”

It had felt like my teenage son was more mature than his mother that very moment.

“Exactly. It was like Gregory refused to talk to me about what was going on at school, because I refused to talk about... Well, you know.”

“Mum, he’s only sixteen. He was only fifteen then.”

Says my not even eighteen-year-old son. But I understand what he means. Archibald has always seemed to be the more mature one.

“So I went to school and asked the head teacher if he knew what had brought about the change and he immediately informed me that Lena had straightened him out.”

“As in Lena Beaton? As in the same person who’s living in this town’s biggest sex joint? What did she do? Tell him a story about how the Devil was going to get him?”

“Archibald.”

“Or did she tell him he could come up and play if he was a good lad?”

“Archibald!”

“I’m sorry!” he shouts and throws his arms in the air, “But I find it very hard to believe that Beaton simply told Gregory to behave and that he did. Who knows what’s been going on, Mum! You do know that those sex parties your dear stepsister and that other half of hers throw are common knowledge at school, right? Charlie’s toy boy is the head teacher’s secretary. He made comments about what was going on there often enough. Everybody knows what pervert Beaton is. What I can’t understand is that she’s allowed to teach! I know it’s all behind closed doors, but... Really! It still maddens me.”

I can’t understand it either, but I guess it’s hard to fire someone for something that doesn’t surface at school. Or does it?

He puts the teapot on the table and angrily gets two cups out of the cupboard, throws two spoons on the table and heads for the fridge to get milk.

“Archibald, I did try to find out. What do you take me for?”

He takes the sugar pot and finally grabs a chair to sink down on it. He finds my eyes. I can tell he’s at a loss. Like Gregory, he desperately wants to rid our lives of unhappiness, but he blames different people than his younger brother.

“Sorry. So you talked to Beaton?”

I take a deep breath. Whatever conversation that was.

“I asked the head teacher if I could talk to Lena and he sent for her at once.”

I remember my knees were trembling when I was waiting for Lena to come out of that classroom. When I was finally standing in front of her, I couldn’t get a proper sentence out of my mouth. I think I stuttered Gregory’s name and something that hinted distrust. I don’t know why she unnerves me so much. All I wanted to ask was what she was doing with my son, but the first sight of her made my entire vocabulary flee.

“I am Gregory’s teacher, Lady Tummel, nothing more, nothing less,” Lena finally spoke, her eyes the inaccessible pinnacle.

Lady Tummel; I don’t know if it’s total disdain, sheer mockery or a hint of respect. Maybe it was because we were having the “private” conversation a few feet removed from Charlie’s toy boy. I didn’t know he was Charlie’s toy boy. What a word. What an awful thing for teenagers to be confronted with.

Fact is that the few words we’ve ever exchanged were at school and maybe she prefers keeping the distance. I really don’t know.

I stuttered a few butts, so Lena calmly added another line.

“Your son is a designated writer, Lady Tummel. As his English teacher, I like to encourage that.”

I remember I stood there looking rather stupidly. My son a designated writer. What was that supposed to mean? Were we talking about the same person? When did that happen? What fight revealed that? Or did he engage in flyting contests? My son never struck me as the particularly eloquent type. On the contrary, when social skills are required, I find my elder son a true asset.

But then the secretary shook me awake.

“Lena, it’s Charlie on the phone for you,” he said, “She asks if you’re game for this night.”

The funny thing is that I can’t remember the phone ringing. Maybe it’s just the effect Lena has on me. So I watched Lena calmly take the phone, heard her answer with brusque ayes and nos and then saw her hand the phone back. Those parties are common knowledge, indeed. Neither Charlie nor Lena are ashamed to bring them into the school premises. Worse, they’re cause for keeping Lena off the school premises as well. I remember that the day after Gregory told me Lena was ill. That must have been some party.

Then Lena excused herself, in her own way.

“Excuse me, Lady Tummel, I have a class to teach. If you have any worries concerning Gregory, please let me know.”

She nodded and walked away. That was it: my conversation with the one who had straightened out my previously problematic son. I had a hundred questions and I had mentally prepared to ask every single one of them, but one look of Lena Beaton and all my good intentions vanished at once.