
THE CHAPERON

By Sarah Hilary

That morning William smelled the snow coming – a cold blue smell – and saw the sky becoming ochre. He wanted to leave, go to ground in an urban back-alley miles from all this extravagance.

Prudence said, ‘Monmouth wants us to stay. I think we should.’

William said, ‘I don’t want to spend the Winter here.’

She turned away, her profile pale and unassailable. In this setting, a medieval castle no less, she’d perfected the virginal pose. William wasn’t immune, despite their strict understanding. Had he been her brother, he might’ve slapped her frigid face and called her a gutless slut. As it was, he kept his hands to himself.

The castle was bad enough – its soft green shadows laid out like mantraps – without the prospect of being snowed-in.

He’d survived three Winters on the streets of London, monochrome with misery. That’s where she’d found him, his spine stuck to a wall like a tongue to an ice-cone, his teeth clenched against the chattering cold. Prudence singled him out for rescue; he’d always be grateful for that. Like an early thaw, she’d turned everything to slush. More snow fell soon after, a mad flutter against his face. Prudence followed her aquiline nose, and he followed Prudence. Here, to Wales.

The castle leaked draughts, its mullioned windows rattling in the wind which

whipped at the foothills of Snowdonia. William listened to the panes chinking like coins, loose in their latticework of lead. If Monmouth Lyle had money it was running away, a deluge of expenditure destined for the cracked slates and rotting drainage. ‘This place is a pit,’ William told Prudence. He’d seen the way she looked at Monty, her pewter eyes swivelling, head bobbing to one side. ‘It’s perfect,’ she said.

She let her pale-red hair hang loose, walking with the peacocks on the lawns – peacocks no less – preening, prim. The peacocks made a noise like a dozen kettles boiling dry. ‘They’re randy,’ said Monty, tipping William a wink.

As well as the peacocks, Monty kept peregrine falcons. They left pellets in the dry-moat that ran around the castle. Wads of feather and fur, fragments of bone and snake scales – everything the birds couldn’t digest. William watched them puking up the pellets after gorging themselves, and he thought of a boy he’d known on the streets who’d choked on his own vomit as London loitered past.

When Prudence shivered, Monty produced an old fur. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of mothballs, flipping her hair free of the coat’s heavy collar, bracelets chiming at her wrist. Monty had a film forming over his honeyed-brown eyes, like the first scum of ice. Hoar frost. William felt the fingers of Winter at his spine. When Prudence curtsied, simpering, he winced.

She doubted the power of her school-girl pose. That’s why she’d chosen him, rescuing him from the snow and casting him in this role as chaperon. Put bluntly, she was his pimp. Because she was afraid of attracting a man who was interested in her sexually. She was after a sugar-daddy who’d leave her unmolested. So she loosed William, her bagged quarry, to see which way the chase would turn. It was Monty’s large hand resting on William’s shoulder which sealed the deal at Castle Morwynion.

‘I like it here,’ Prudence said. ‘I think we should stay.’ William wondered if she’d forgotten where he came from, what he was. An alley-rat; cut-throat survivor.

Monty, keeper of falcons, understood about survival. Sprawled on a decimated sofa, its ratted silk showing a hunting party in full cry, he told William, ‘The medieval meaning of *chaperon* was “a hood for a hawk”, did you know that?’ And William decided Monty understood, that he’d seen through the charade and was on his guard against Prudence.

Monty was a big man; it was easy to imagine him invincible. Each of his thighs was wider than Prudence’s waist. His hands were the size of hams. William felt better in his company than he’d felt in forever: comfortable and cared-for. As for Prudence, she exulted, begging to be shown around the castle grounds.

‘I love the woods,’ she’d said, setting her hand on the red, squirrel-torn trunk of a tree. ‘They’re so silent. I think the smell of trees is better than perfume.’

Monty kicked leaves over the corpse of a bird lying wedged in the roots of Prudence’s tree, its legs pointing skywards. ‘These aren’t the real woods. You have to go much deeper to find those.’

‘Deeper than this?’ She turned to look, where the trees massed and grew dark. William saw her pupils contracting, the waxy lids of her eyes narrowing.

Monty said, ‘There’s a part of the wood that never gets dry. A wild wet heart the sun never reaches, where week-old rain runs like treacle down the trees and you can sink like a stone in the rotting velvet of moss and pine needles.’

Prudence giggled.

William winced, blushing. Monty looked vast against the writhing light, like some Pagan fertility god.

‘You sounded very Welsh just then,’ Prudence said.

‘You mean like Richard Burton,’ Monty exaggerated the accent, making her laugh, ‘You’re a very pretty girl, love.’

‘Oh don’t,’ she said, holding her sides.

William, his face fiery at the thought of Monty’s wild wet treacle-heart, turned away for fear of what they’d think.

The morning he smelled snow, William dressed at dawn. Outside, it was bitter. Winter had crept up on them in the night, the brown bonfire smell of last week bleached out by a white mist which burned his nostrils and made him cough. He turned left under the oldest beech tree and fought his way through a hedge of yew to a short, sloping field bordered by dry-stone walling. He followed its descent until, looking back, he could no longer see the castle, only an attenuated trail of smoke from its chimneys, echoing his breath.

The day was dry, its early sun hanging on a starched horizon. William felt a pang for the familiar vermillion-pink of a polluted cityscape.

All his life he’d known only false colours, from the cheap tinsel Christmases at the children’s home to the neon blaze of Piccadilly Circus, painting the faces of the boys as they sat on show, meat, in the windows of McDonald’s. Here, the shades were so subtle they made his throat ache. Dove-grey. Primrose. Even the puddles glittered, silver-plated by the high arc of the sky. He hadn’t known fear, or hate, or longing like this in ages. He put his hand on the wall, its crust of lichen prickling his palm, and pressed it there until it hurt. When he looked, he could see a pattern of tiny teeth-marks in his palm.

In the castle's kitchen, Monty was cooking sausages. The table was laid for three, each place marked with a large Imari plate, each plate holding a generous spoonful of marmalade. Prudence sat stirring milk into her tea. 'Where've you been?' she said.

'We were worried.'

'You look frozen,' Monty said. 'Sit by the stove.'

William did.

'It's Winter, for sure.' Monty jogged the frying-pan, making the sausages spit and sizzle. 'Some years it comes so suddenly it cracks a window. I'll need lagging for the pipes.'

He speared the sausages onto plates. Watching him cradle the old Imari in his tender giant's hands, William felt ravaged, ridiculous, with self-pity. At his side, Prudence sat waiting, one hand laid loosely on the table; a child's hand, slim and bloodless as the blade of the knife that lay next to it.

What was it Monty had said? 'A hood for a hawk.' If William left, would she be made to cast off: show her talons; shred this phony paradise to tatters? He saw entrails in his mind's eye, straggling like ribbons from her long hair.

The snow came, at last. In less than six hours the castle was unreachable by road.

Monty, shopping for lagging, was stranded in the market-town eight miles away.

William took the call. 'I'll stay the night at a hotel,' Monty said. 'Take care of Prudence.'

The snow did not let up.

It was noon when William climbed to his feet and stood, cold flakes kissing his face as he looked down at the ruined shape of the snow-angel: a rucked welt where they'd lain and struggled, the tips of its wings blackened by thaw. She'd clawed at

his face, drawing blood. A drop of it trailed from his torn cheek and found the snow with the tinny hiss of water striking a hotplate.

He buried her in the woods. Deep in Monty's treacle-heart, where the ground was still soft and black, untouched by white.

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