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Condemned by Love

By Iris Whiddon

Bessie Mason is my name, and I never knew God would allow love to bewitch me on more than one occasion. In my Presbyterian village, everyone knew that even a glance from the opposite sex could raise suspicion, yet I let his gentle lips traced my skin, his heat left goose bumps trailing up my arms. I gripped him tighter, as our bodies entwined like one heavenly being. A frigid breeze glided through the room, refreshing our slightly sweaty skin. I gasped for air as his fingers played with my hair. Alexander Beaton - my one and only true love- aside from my own husband of course!

I had never exactly seen Alexander's house from this view: the cottage walls were exquisitely carved stone, laced with clay and his cottage was private enough for us to carry out our lustful behaviour. The architecture was much more to my liking compared to my tasteless husband's house. At this moment in time, God was not on top of my mind, unlike the other Presbyterian women of the village. His overfamiliar eyes stared at me, as I giggled girlishly. This sin was one worth burning for.

"What fine day lies before us?" Alexander whispered in my ears.

"Aye, verily," I cooed playfully, a grin playing on my face. If I could, I would spend days in the warmth of his perfect frame, never escaping into the real world. I pecked him one last time, knowing it would be a while until I could lay my eyes back on him. I would certainly miss him. I sat up sadly, as my smile flickered then faded. He of course knew me, knew I had to go. I pulled my corset tighter, to look lady enough for the villagers liking and placed the scarf neatly back round my shoulders. What the village needn't know, would not harm them, I reminded myself.

I snuck out from Alexander's cottage. His house was on the edge of Kilconquhar, a small coastal town in Scotland. I ambled dreamily, down the path, as I listened to the waves crash violently, submerging the beach below. I did not necessarily want to be found here. It would be nice if Alex and I could escape to the city, to start a new life where no one would question my past decisions. And maybe...my thoughts were abruptly interrupted.

"Goody Mason," a familiar rough voice called after me. Patrick Lindsey, Sheriff of Fife, a stern looking man, sneered at me as he leaned against the wall as if he had been waiting for me to pass. Indeed, I did not like him very much and knew that I had to be careful around him, or my behaviour would be used against me if I gave him the wrong impression.

"The good time of day to you; 'tis a most beauteous dawning," I stated as lady like as I could muster.

"God give you good morrow, the sun rises with great promise," he responded, then insistently questioned me in a most threatening

manner, "To what purpose are you aboard so early and out on your own?" his voice was thick and tough.

"Truly, I could not slumber while the heavens show such glory. I walk to take the morning air; 'tis a tonic for the soul," I responded as naturally as I could, it was almost the truth after all. I smiled, then continued to amble on, I could feel his eyes burning into my back - still examining me - but I did not grace him with looking back.

I had arrived just in time to join the sea of bodies flowing into our old parish church. It was the day of Sabbath, meaning we had to go to church - it was now a legal requirement for us all to attend under new government and Presbyterian rules, so, like many, I was forced to follow or face penalties. I reluctantly entered the church to spend the day in prayer, catching up to my husband and damned him as he had already arrived and hadn't waited for me at the entrance, thus my lips were pursed to keep me quiet - what would our separate entrances look like to the other villagers?

I looked around, though not a devout believer, I always took a breath in as I admired the simple church interior: the sand stone arches curved round the ancient building, the whitewashed walls and plain windows made the room feel bare which always created a peaceful atmosphere for our worship -that is until the church elder starts to preach and then it was one long list of what we are forbidden to do in case we should upset God. The joy and lightness of living instantly dissolved.

The elder stopped and mentioned something that caught my attention. "Those involved in witchcraft are

under God's judgment (Lev. 20:6-7) and will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:20), though witchdoctors and sorcerers will be saved if they repent and trust in Christ (Act 19:18-19)..." I believed it was utter nonsense though. Grandma used to whisper about a lady name Janet Lochore who was punished and executed for healing a wife of a churchman. Janet was highly regarded within the village and beyond, then when the church arrived their preaching ruined lives and jealously was used to accuse people. When Grandma was alive, she always muttered in secret to me to put my trust in nature and never trust the word of man.

The elder continued, "By my troth, I am aggrieved to speak it, but the unholy presence has tried seek revenge again!"

What a load of nonsense, I knew it beyond all doubt.

"Confess now or God will send you down to hell, We have already caught one malefactor this morning - Alexander Beaton."

My Alexander! With that everyone gasped and the room filled with mutterings. Patrick Lindsay's eyes meet with mine as he silently sniggered. I bit my lips, trying not to show my extremes of emotion, and desperately tried to hold back the tears. I could feel my husband's shoulder stiffen.

"Alexander has preached the word of the devil."

My legs felt like jelly, as a wave of nausea hit me. Alexander was not like that in any way. Oh, how does thy mighty God, allow the court to blacken his name like that?

"All manner of persons who have knowledge of any sorceries, enchantments, or covenants with the devil, draw near and give

your attendance! At the stroke of midday, this high court shall condemn all such detestable slaves of the Devil. Then shall every secret maleficium be laid bare, and every witch brought down to receive the judgment of God." The elder boomed, "Relaidt now to thy homes and make all in readiness."

I walked as fast as my tight garments would allow me to, trying to think about where my Alex would be. Eventually, I found Alexander in the Tolbooth, where he was held prisoner until his trial would commence, then he would be released when they find him innocent. Alexander sat in the corner, looking agitated, his bracelets securing him - too tight on his hands. Our eyes met desperately, and I moved to sit close enough to be able to have a private conversation.

"Who charged thee?" I whispered carefully.

"God knows."

"But of course you did not write in thy devil's book," I stated agitated.

"We are both ensnared by sorcery and stand as sinners before the Lord," he said. If he said it, might it be true? Why would I be a wrong-doer? What foolish thing did we do?

"Let us fly, before they bring forth evidence of our guilt," he leaned toward me and kissed me tenderly, the tears finally rippling down my face. I should be innocent if the court only think him as being a sinner. Stupid, rules of life!

"I love thy forever," I sniffled, as he placed his arm around me. He hugged me nervously, almost as if he were saying goodbye and I

noticed that he could not look me straight in the eye. Strange. Was he feeling guilt?

Eventually but unwillingly; I left the grim stone structure, where my Alexander was held hostage, ready for the later procedures. I self-consciously strode around Market Street my feet feeling heavy against the paved stone. Indeed, I was not really afraid of the court. But...but I was somewhat dreading it. It felt like the people who I usually believed to be good, stared at me and now went behind my back to whisper. This was not a good thing. Whispering about me? About my sins? Why would God allow this to happen to a girl as tragically angelic as me? That snivelling... the thought dropped, as the clock tower struck its warning.

It seemed that the population of Kilconquhar had all entered the Tolbooth, treading carefully into the Burgh court on the first floor, everyone's whispers were ringing dauntingly through me like fire, burning a path of sins.

The bench, elevated at the front held the elders who glared back at us. They were a sour looking bunch and were glaring down at me. Lindsey's, cruel face, turned up in amusement. I would rip him from this world if I could!

The jury, to the left was filling up with about fifteen men, who would decide if my Alexander, was innocent or guilty. I stumbled toward my allocated section, but Lindsey must have crept up on me and grasped my hands - too tight - they ached. I screamed a muffled scream, as he pulled me to the front.

His voice cut through the chatter, "Thou art charged with high treason against the Divine Majesty of Almighty God, having forsaken thy baptism to enter into a filthy pact with the enemy of salvation." I cried out again, my legs flaying out under me. I tried to kick out. My attempt was useless. I was hurting myself more than anyone else, as Lindsey's grasp tightened toward my neck. Wincing, I stopped, my breath raced ragged, eventually, I brought myself to stillness, in order to hear what was happening amongst the uproar.

"Search her for the mark of the enemy," someone urged.

"She is a consulter with familiar spirits. Alexander Beaton has claimed it so," Lindsey reported. I could feel the tips of my cheeks tingling and reddening with my embarrassment. Confused, I wondered if this must have been part of Alexander's plan to save the both of us. We have played with the devil; Alexander did tell me that? Perhaps he had reasoned that if we confess, we can repent and offer our services to God for ever more. Surely, they would forgive us then?

I thought carefully on what to say, as every word would be monitored, one slipup could be used against me.

"Did thou compact with thy devil?" an elder said, his voice was fragile. My lips were sealed, not willing to say a word. The pen scratched across pages filling the silence as the judge's assistant took notes, his beady eyes tracking me, a bead of sweat trickled down my face, I gulped.

"Does she not show the character of a harlot?" Lindsey said almost like a threat.

The court room began to fill with murmurs. I took a deep breath in almost tasting my guilt in the air.

"I was enticed...Alexander enticed me," I muttered almost inaudibly. Faces in the audience turned into scorn.

"Do you not care what thy heavenly father teaches us?" another elder questioned.

I know my true opinion now and honestly was not afraid to voice it. "I pass not a whither I goe to hell or heavin!"

"But aren't thee thy devil's slave?" The droplet of a question was ready to break into a tsunami of pressure.

"I did indeed get enticed," I responded, "I love thy Alexander too much." I caught my husband's face, and it saddened me greatly. Although I did note that he had an air of relief around him. Relief he could get a more civilised woman? I did not care for him at all now and wondered if I really ever really had.

"So, you are Satan's cunning princess?" the elder responded.

"Ney," I hissed. "I..." I took a breath,

"I have never been compacting with the devil." I tried to sound more innocent so added, "I am a good girl, sir." I curtsied as ladylike as I could.

The elders whispered together as I stood frozen. Finally, Lindsey spoke, "You have a conflicting soul and doubt surrounds you. Bring in Alexander Beaton," he commanded, staring directly towards me and not breaking eye contact.

After a couple minutes, a local man came in panting and shouting, "He has spirited away, Alexander Beaton.. gone!" Slowly everyone's gaze was upon me. I cried out, "He promised me that we would be off to Edinburgh together before we'd get clapped at the stakes." Muttering erupted around me.

"A warrant has been issued for you to be taken immediately into custody, and you will reside at Tolbooth prison, 'till you are proven guilty," Patrick Lindsey said smugly. I blinked. Did I hear correct? I was so confused. Are they charging me as a witch or adulterer rather than having been bewitched by Alexander? But why would my Alexander leave without me?

The Tolbooth prison was a daunting as ever place, especially now that Alexander's spirit had left it empty. The putrid smell of betrayal clung to these walls. Alexander was gone. Gone! This thought penetrated my now fragile body. He knew what to do and I did not. He had escaped and run away-the coward.

All sense of time had seemed to freeze in prison. Had it been five minutes or a day? The dripping of a leak echoed through the room empty... driving me crazy. The walls were closing in... Where was the fresh air? I could not breathe. I would suffocate before the witch testing would begin. The darkneses of the room; its wet hand grasped me, shaking me. Shadows danced through my vision, blurred, and disorientated. A tapping noise... a squawk... a raven's beady eyes glared into mine. Its yellow eyes... smiling... Death... I was being burnt. They were burning me! I cackled as screams flooded in... madness...

insanity! Strangulation then burning. Creak! Tap! Squawk! Tap! The flames encased me. Was that the way I died or will die?

With that, my tired eyes jolted open as the prison cell door swung open-I was still alive for now. But now, I... I was possibly a witch in the villagers' eyes. Alexander was mine, because I was a witch, at least that would be what the people would be gossiping about now. Who was going to stop the flames from licking me?

My eyes adjusted to the light revealing Patrick Lindey standing in front of me. I swayed like a drunken person, as I felt ill, poverty was not to my liking. Silently, Lindsey examined my ruined state, contemplating. A shadow loomed behind him.

"Good morrow, they call me John Kincaid," said the man lingering behind Lindsey. He was rather broad, compared to the usual locals in my village. His eyes bored into mine, his eyes were filled with the darkness of having seen many things before. He muttered something, as I laid discombobulated in the corner of the stone wall, not willing to move. A snarl, tracing my lips.

"Make hast, thy idle women, for we take our leave!" Lindsey growled, at me as he strutted back and forth ready to pounce. I did not dare move. With that, as quick as a flash, he slapped me. Shock surged through me, I stumbled to my feet, whimpering. How dare that carbuncle, lay his hand upon me. I was outraged but was too weak to act. He dragged me to the town square, a crowd gathered, gossiping without me, about me!

The ground slipped away as they tried to prop me against the Mercat Cross, which was the undisputed heart of the town. This plain landmark was a simple stone pillar, with a layer of stairs. The Local Magistrate had built this as a place to honour heroes and a place for public announcements, however now it would be used for my shaming. With more time and power, I would have made a bold mark upon the world, never to be forgotten nor neglected.

The bell man rang the Tolbooth, meaning it would be mandatory for all villagers to watch my downfall, and act as a reminder that the church and those in the courts had the ultimate power - men had the ultimate power.

John Kincaid was surprisingly gentle removing my outer kirtle, until my bare skin was on display to all. I shivered as the frigid wind kissed my body. John smiled an almost gentle smile, yet it stung like a punishment. He held his metal bodkin in his fingers, gently slipping it back and forth across my shoulder. The blade protruded about seven inches making me flinch. The minister and the congregation prayed for my wretched soul, yet they appeared to be craving entertainment - it was certainly more interesting than attending church.

The bodkin handle lay carved with beautiful symbols of fire curving around its spine. However, something caught my eye, in minuscule writing lay an unfamiliar word which looked like ancient hieroglyphics; though I could not read I interpreted it to mean "Double-dealing".

With that, John Kincaid's rough fingertips glided across my curves and edges. My voice was hoarse from the cold, I refused to scream

and instead I released a malevolent cackle, making some of the crowd shudder.

He sought a witch's mark. And he did. Those cold brown spots on my shoulder where the enemy had gripped me. He drove the needle into my skin, however, the steel bodkin needle found no blood - and I felt no pain. I glanced at the bodkin as he hurriedly wiped it clean and placed it in his pocket. As the needle had touched my skin it had retracted into the wooden handle. He was using a false bodkin. The needle had never entered me - but to the crowd it had looked authentic. The bodkin was dry and silent, just like me.

I peered at the crosses, hatred overshadowed my grief. The cackle echoed from my mouth again, hysteria mounting from the awestruck crowd,

"The Devil hath sealed her for his own!" Lindsey's eyes meet mine condemningly. The pressure felt like a tonne of bricks, collapsing me knocking the air from my lungs. To the crowd I had not passed the test. I had been declared as a ... witch. Somehow these bitter words stung me more than the salted air. And now I would face the price of it.

The crowd erupted as joy broke through them; the guilty will always be found. My death would be their entertainment. The world was a stage, and I would have my last performance on it.

John continued, stating, "Thy tempter, hath woven his snares through her very soul; she is but a puppet of wood in his clutches, dancing as he holds the cord."

The world twisted a little slower, around my fragile body, a pulling in my stomach grew colder, forcing me to the ground. I could already envisage the flames coiling around my legs, ready to return me to the earth. I could already feel the fearful grasp of the noose suffocating me.

Lindsey, full of scorn, dragged me back to the Tolbooth by my hair, my feet dragging like a corpse. My fate.

The golden sun crawled across the straw rooftops, dark shadows crept across the dank path until it snaked across the raised wooden platform. The crowd drew a breath as one before the excitement of the day took hold of them. The roped noose hung ominously, creaking, keenly awaiting the present of my bare neck. Back and forth. Back and forth it swung gently as if hypnotising the audience to feed it more souls.



I had refused the black hood. I wanted to stare at my accusers in the face. Lindsey, once again, roughly dragged me up onto the platform. I could feel my legs trembling but was determined to

remain defiant. I willed my body to resist the strangulation. The noose was placed around my neck. There was no ceremony.

“Anon!” Lindsey ordered.

The trap door swung open beneath me. The crowd cheered and then silence spread as the hum of death called. The noose tightened - squeezing my skin, crushing bones. It was too tight, too tight. My breath became ragged. Then my strangled breath elongated to gargles. My hopes fell to nothing. My vision faded. Darkness danced with me. The devil finally embraced me with the face of Alexander Beaton and a smile played upon my lips.