



Christmas Silks (The Silk Trilogy)

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Category: Historical

Description: A novella set in the world of Mary Jo Putney's Silk Series

Will a chivalrous military officer win the heart of a desperate lady on the run?

After years in the Indian Army, David Cameron is finally on his way home to Scotland, eager to see family and friends again over the winter holidays. As he nears the border, his trip is interrupted by a mad young woman who steals his horse and flees into a blizzard.

Desperate to escape her enemies, Caitlin Wallace flees to her home and prepares to defend herself if necessary. When the handsome officer from the inn makes his way to her kitchen door in the midst of the storm, she isn't sure whether he's an enemy or an ally. His calm acceptance and ability to listen appeal to her as attraction flares between them. Then danger returns and only if she and David stand together might they survive to build a future together...

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Cambay, Northern India, Summer 1844

Captain David Cameron entered his bungalow after an afternoon of drilling his men under the brutal sun. With a sigh, he removed his hat so he could wipe his face with one of the small towels hanging on a rack by the door. "If the day was any hotter, my pith helmet would be melting off my head."

His friend, Captain Alan Roberts, who shared the bungalow, lay on a wicker chaise under the huge fan, its fabric-covered vanes slowly turning, powered by a servant stationed on the verandah outside. Eyes closed, he murmured, "I don't mind if I get sent to hell when I die. It can't possibly be hotter than this. By the way, you have a nice fat letter from home."

Pleased, David collected the letter from the tray that held correspondence and sank into a chair that was also under the fan. The letter was from his older brother Ian in Scotland. He accepted a cool glass of lemonade from the house servant with a murmur of thanks, then opened the letter.

Greetings from cool, rainy Scotland! By the time you receive this, it will be high summer in Cambay and only slightly cooler than the hinges of Hades. I think of summer in India whenever I feel inclined to complain of too much rain. Without rain, Scotland wouldn't be so green, after all!

A surge of memory swept away the heat and dust of the day, filling David's mind with mist and cool green dreams. The younger brother of a baron, David's father had

become a diplomat so his children had spent years living in exotic desert kingdoms. But they'd been sent back to Britain for schooling and spent long holidays with their uncle, Lord Falkirk, on the eastern coast of Scotland.

All parts of the world held beauty, but Scotland had captured David's heart from his very first visit. His mother said he had a Celtic soul, and she was right. His vague plan for his future, if he didn't die in the meantime, had been to accumulate enough worldly goods to buy a home of his own in Scotland.

The dream had strengthened after his brother Ian unexpectedly inherited the Falkirk title, married, and left the Indian army to return to Scotland. David didn't want the title because that would mean his brother was dead, but he'd envied Ian's return to Scotland. He'd also envied Ian for finding a warm and wonderful wife.

A fierce, unexpected idea seared through David like a lightning bolt. He was almost thirty. Since he wanted Scotland and a family, why wait? He was too much a Scot to live extravagantly, so he'd used his savings to export Indian luxuries like jewels and silks to Britain. Reinvesting his profits over the years had gradually built a comfortable fortune. Enough to leave the army and return to Scotland if he wished.

The realization that he could achieve his dreams now was breathtaking. He began to make mental calculations. It would take some weeks to resign his commission and wind up his affairs here. How long before he could leave for Scotland?

When he came out to India, it had been on a sailing ship around the Cape of Good Hope and the six month journey had been considered a speedy passage. Steamships had changed that. He could take a paddler to Suez, overland to Alexandria, then another steamship to England and be home in two months or so.

A slow smile spread across his face. A rational man would ponder and weigh the pluses and minuses of leaving the army and returning home, but David was a Scot,

which meant he was only rational some of the time. The biggest decisions of his life tended to be made in a heartbeat, and he hadn't regretted any of them. This felt right .

He moved to his desk and began a letter to Ian and Laura.

I've decided it's time to sell out and return to Scotland. Barring the unforeseen, I'll be home for Christmas. If you see a nice Scottish lassie you think might suit me, invite her to Falkirk for Hogmanay!

Home for the holidays....

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Northumberland, December 18th, 1844

Tomorrow he'd be in Scotland. David had been tempted to press on, but the short northern day was almost over and a storm was coming, so he decided to be sensible and stop for the night at this small coaching inn. This far north, inns were scarce, and the George looked like a pleasant place. His journey from India had gone smoothly and he could easily reach Falkirk in time for Christmas. Then Hogmanay since Scots celebrated the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new.

His room was small but clean, so he settled in and washed up and headed downstairs for dinner. He reached the tap room just as the front door opened with a gust of icy wind and snowflakes that blew in three travelers. The storm was worsening because the cloaked figures had snow clinging to their clothing. They were a middle aged couple and a young woman assisted by the older man.

David was thinking they were lucky to have arrived before the storm worsened when he heard a metallic clanking. His gaze sharpened and he realized that under the hooded cloak the young woman was gagged and her wrists were manacled.

As he stopped and stared, the girl broke free of the man and pivoted violently, swinging her chain as a weapon. The man dodged back, swearing as the swinging chain smashed into his upper arm.

Her hood fell back revealing tangled red hair and frantic dark eyes. She looked like a madwoman as she swung at the man again.

David instinctively stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders and waist, trapping her arms and immobilizing her. "Peace," he said softly, " peace"

Speaking as he would to a frightened animal, he continued, "You're safe now, lassie. Safe . No one will hurt you here. Just relax."

She wasn't short, but she felt delicate as a frantic bird in his arms. She became still, but her slim body trembled. She twisted her head to stare up at him and he saw the wildness in her face. Cautiously he released his hold, alert for another outburst, but she didn't move, just continued to stare at him with huge amber eyes.

"Is it necessary to have her bound and gagged?" he asked with a frown. "It's enough to make anyone frantic."

"Our cousin bites," the female half of the couple said sourly. She held up a bandaged hand. "We're Mr. and Mrs. Dawson. We don't want to hurt Catherine, but she makes that very difficult."

"And she screams vile, filthy curses," Mr. Dawson added. "Not fit for female ears." He glanced toward the innkeeper's young daughter, Sally McKay, who was watching wide-eyed. "We're taking the girl to an asylum and want to get her there safely."

Reluctantly David accepted that. He'd seen madness and knew that even a frail looking female could possess violent strength. "How does she eat?"

"We tie her to a chair and take the gag off while she's fed," Dawson explained. "It's a messy business, but if she's hungry enough, she eats."

David saw that underneath her thin cloak, her plain gown was stained with food. The girl was a tragic sight, but her cousins seemed to be doing their best to care for her.

"Is the asylum where you're taking her skilled at treating such unfortunates?"

"They have a good reputation," Mrs. Dawson said heavily. "We can but pray they will have success with poor Catherine. She hasn't always been this bad so we hope she might improve." The older woman took a firm grip on the girl's upper arm. "Come along now, dear." Catherine jerked away, looking dangerous again.

"We'll need two rooms," Mr. Dawson said.

Mr. McKay hesitated. "I have only one room left, sir. You and your wife can have it, Mr. Dawson, but your cousin will have to stay there with you."

Dawson frowned. "I fear for our safety if that happens! She's sly as well as dangerous."

"Papa, I can make up a pallet for her in the small pantry," the landlord's young daughter suggested. "It can be locked and the poor lass won't be upset by other people."

Mrs. Dawson considered, then nodded. "That will do. Can we feed her now in the kitchen? Then she can be locked up while my husband and I dine and retire for the night."

"Of course," the landlord said. "This way to the kitchen. Sally, take bedding to the pantry and make it as comfortable as you can."

As the Dawsons headed to the kitchen, their cousin between them, Mr. McKay turned to David. "Would you like to dine now, Captain Cameron? We have beef and onion pie tonight with fried potatoes on the side."

Realizing how hungry he was, David said, "That will do very well, along with a

tankard of ale."

The landlord's wife appeared and seated him in the taproom, then served him before vanishing back into the kitchen. With the storm raging outside, the taproom was almost empty, but a warm fire and hearty dinner made for a pleasant meal. David enjoyed the beef pie, which was good British food well suited to a bad British winter.

He'd finished his dinner and was considering another tankard of ale when Sally McKay came to his table. "Would you like a sweet, Captain? We have a nice baked apple pudding with cream tonight."

David was about to agree that sounded good when a heart breaking female cry sounded from the direction of the kitchen. As it was instantly cut off, Sally shuddered. "Poor Miss Caitlin! Such a tragedy the way she is now."

"Miss Caitlin?" David asked.

"The young lady the Dawsons brought in all chained up," Sally explained. "Her real name is Caitlin Wallace, but they call her Catherine because that's the English form of her name. Maybe they think that will make her behave better. After her parents died, Miss Caitlin came to live with her uncle Wallace at his estate not far from here. She was wild as a hawk, but always kind and friendly. She didn't seem mad to me."

"Do you think it was grief that changed her?" David asked.

Sally nodded. "Losing her parents and then her uncle must have been too much for her. The Dawsons came up to help her through such a hard time, but it was no use. She'd already run mad."

"A tragedy indeed," David said quietly. He'd seen how devastating great sorrow could be. He hoped that it was possible for the girl to recover from grief, but perhaps her

earlier wildness had been a sign of instability.

He was ending his meal when Sally's father approached his table. "Captain, the Dawsons have fed the young lady and are ready to lock her into the pantry for the night, but she's fighting like a mad thing. Mr. Dawson asked if you could come help since you were so good in helping her calm down earlier."

David nodded and stood, following Mr. McKay into the kitchen. The girl was still manacled and had been gagged again, but she stood wild-eyed with her back to the wall as she held a wooden chair in front of her. The legs were raised threateningly and a scowling Mr. Dawson was rubbing his arm and swearing under his breath. "I hope you can subdue her, Captain Cameron. She's a menace!"

David collected himself so he wouldn't frighten her further. "You need rest, Miss Caitlin," he said calmly as he stepped within range of her chair. "You've had a long, tiring journey."

She blinked as she heard him call her Caitlin, then swung the chair viciously. He caught the two upper legs, his palms stinging from the force of impact. The girl was strong. He held the chair still. "This does you no good, Miss Caitlin. The pantry will be a warm, comfortable place to sleep."

Her wary gaze holding his, she slowly lowered the chair. "Come along now," David said as he offered her a hand. After a long hesitation, she accepted his hand, the manacles clinking as she reached out.

Sally came to her other side and she and David escorted the girl through the kitchen to the pantry behind it. Mr. McKay led the way and selected a key from the large jangling key ring he carried. When he opened the pantry door, some fiddling was required to persuade the old lock to open.

The door opened to reveal a small, dark space with shelves on three sides and a floor covered with blankets and a pillow. McKay said, "This pantry backs up to the kitchen so it's warmer here than in the upper rooms."

Caitlin made a choked sound behind her gag, then turned and scrambled up David like a monkey climbing a tree, her hands clawing his clothing. He staggered a little, then put his arms around her, feeling her shaking terror. "There's nothing to fear, Miss Caitlin," he said in his most soothing voice. "It's a warm, safe place."

Sally suggested, "She may be afraid of the dark."

After a moment's study, David said, "The door isn't fitted very tightly so light should come in around the edges if there's a lamp here in the kitchen." With Sally's help, he gently peeled the frightened girl off him. "It might help to remove that suffocating gag."

Mr. Dawson had followed and he said sternly, "No! She might bite herself badly if you do that. She has in the past."

David was reluctant to interfere with the guardian, so he opened the pantry door and scanned the interior. There were bags of potatoes and onions and other foodstuffs. Nothing that was likely to allow the girl to harm herself. But when she looked inside, she began to struggle again, manacles jangling.

"There now," David said as he placed a firm hand on her shoulder. "It won't be so bad. Less drafty than the bedrooms."

Caitlin turned and gave him a blazing glance. He wished he could read what was in those dark amber eyes. Then she gave up the struggle and stepped into the pantry, slamming the door behind her. Mr. McKay locked the door and left, his face sad. The Dawsons followed him.

David and Sally exchanged an exhausted glance. As Sally set a lantern on the deal kitchen table so there would be some light in the pantry, she said, "Maybe Miss Caitlin will be able to pull the gag off. She'll sleep better if she doesn't have that nasty thing around her mouth.

"I hope you're right." David sighed as he thought of the long day's travel he'd had before arriving at the inn. "We could all use some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

But as he climbed the stairs and settled into his bed, he wondered if the physicians would ever learn to heal madness.

The first thing Caitlin did once she was alone in the pantry was drag off the gag so she could breathe properly. She rubbed her cheeks, which were numbed by the tightness of the gag.

After that she sat quietly on the blanketed floor until there were no sounds of human activity. As her eyes adjusted to the faint light that showed around the edges of the door, she examined the folding pocket knife she'd stolen from the army officer. Stealing it was a poor return for the kindness he'd shown, but she needed the knife more than he did.

She wondered if he would have helped her if she'd been able to tear off the gag and explain how the Dawsons had kidnapped her, but that had been too great a risk. The Dawsons had done too good a job of convincing everyone that she was mad.

She was in luck. The pocket knife was an expensive one and besides the usual folding blade, there was a thin metal spike that also folded out. Perhaps intended to act as a toothpick? Whatever the original purpose, it was well suited to picking open the locks on the manacles. With a sigh of relief, she twisted her wrists, glad to be free of the weight and the noise.

She got to her feet carefully. From the sound of the wind, the storm was a strong one. Not a good time to escape, but this was her last, best chance.

Wielding the pick on the captain's pocket knife, she started work on the pantry's crude lock. She'd rather die in the storm than be murdered by the Dawsons.

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David came awake instantly at the sounds of shouting. Another instant to realize that he was in a British inn, not a rocky ambush in northern India. Recognizing the voice of Mr. Dawson, he rolled out of the bed, reaching for his clothes. A quieter voice, probably Mr. McKay, attempted to calm the uproar.

David dressed quickly and headed downstairs, hoping the mad girl hadn't killed herself. He'd always had a soft spot for vulnerable creatures, and poor desperate Caitlin Wallace was one of those.

"What's happened?" he asked in his officer's voice when he reached the inn's entryway.

"That damned mad girl has escaped!" Dawson snapped. "Are you sure you locked her up properly?"

"We did." David said firmly. "How did she get out of the pantry?"

"I'm not sure," the landlord said. "There were scratches on the lock and she took the manacles off and left them on the floor. Those locks were scratched also."

David gave a soft whistle as he realized that his right pocket felt lighter than it should. He checked and it was empty. "She grabbed hold of me before we put her in the pantry, and she seems to have stolen my pocket knife. She must have used that to free herself." Clever girl, he thought, but he didn't say it aloud.

"Then this is all your fault!" Mr. Dawson said, outraged.

Ignoring that, David asked, "Can she be hiding somewhere inside?"

Looking worried, Mr. McKay said, "No, she left the inn." He paused before adding uncomfortably, "She went to the stables and stole your horse, Captain."

David sucked in his breath. "Sahib is a fine horse but challenging to ride. Unless the girl is a very good rider, he'd have thrown her almost immediately."

Sally McKay had joined the group in the entry hall and she said quietly, "Miss Caitlin is a good rider, sir. Very, very good."

Hoping that was true, David ask, "Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

Sally and her father exchanged a glance. The landlord said worriedly, "She's likely heading for her uncle's estate, Braewood. 'Tis not a bad ride in decent weather, but trying to reach there in a storm like this would be madness."

"But she is mad! She may already be dead in a snowdrift!" Mrs. Dawson said piously. "Perhaps this is God's will. Catherine would have resisted the asylum and perhaps hurt herself or the attendants, so this may be for the best."

The woman could barely conceal how glad she was to be spared the trouble and cost of dealing with her troubled young cousin. A good thing David had been raised to never strike a female.

He also couldn't stand aside and allow a young woman to die if there was a chance to save her. "Sally, can you draw me a map of the way to her uncle's estate?" He turned to face her father. "Mr. McKay, do you had a good sturdy horse I can buy?"

Everyone around him gasped. "Captain, you mustn't!" the landlord exclaimed. He turned and opened the front door. A vicious blast of wind and snow surged inside, almost tearing the door from his hand. "Going out in this would be suicide!"

David looked into the storm, felt ice particles stinging his face, and remembered blizzards in the high mountain passes of northern India. Closing the door, he said, "I've seen worse."

Reluctantly McKay said, "I've a good sturdy horse I can lend you. No need to buy him."

"I'll buy it," David said. "In case I don't return."

Both McKays looked appalled. "I'm not planning to die out there," David said reassuringly. "If I find no trace of Miss Caitlin, I'll continue on into Scotland to my brother's house. I should be there before Christmas."

Sally said anxiously, "Please let us know if you survive!"

"I'll send a message when the roads clear," he promised. "Can you put together some food for me while I pack?"

The landlord nodded. "That plus a hot breakfast before you leave."

"Thank you. That will be much appreciated." David turned and headed up the stairs to pack his saddlebags. He changed into his sturdiest winter clothing, which included a long, heavy wool scarf he could wrap around his head and neck.

He was just finishing when a knock sounded on the door. He opened it to find Sally McKay. "I wrote down the directions to Braewood and included a bit of a map," she said. "It's not a difficult route, but it will be hard to see the landmarks in this storm."

"Thank you." He studied the map. "How long a ride would it be if the weather was clear?"

She thought. "With a good strong horse like Benjie, maybe two hours?"

So probably at least twice as long as that, assuming he didn't get lost. "Are there any villages or farms along the way?"

"Almost nothing, sir, so you be careful!" The girl's face twisted. "I do hope you can save Miss Caitlin. She's a grand girl."

"I'll do my best," David promised. On impulse, he dug into his saddlebag and pulled out a shimmering Indian scarf patterned in scarlet and blue. "Here's a small gift of appreciation for what you've done for Miss Caitlin and for me."

She gasped as the silky fabric spilled over her hands. "It's so beautiful! You shouldn't give this away."

"I spent many years in India, so I sent several trunks of Indian fabrics and crafts to my brother's house in Scotland," he said. "But I packed a couple of scarves in my saddle bags in case I wanted to give a gift along the way."

Sally draped the scarf around her neck and stroked the richly colored fabric. "I will cherish this forever." She raised her gaze to David. "And I'll pray that you and Miss Caitlin stay safe."

"All prayers gratefully accepted," he said seriously. "Sometimes miracles happen."

Then he hoisted his saddlebags and headed down the stairs. He'd seen a few miracles in India, and he was ready for another one.

David took advantage of a dip in the road that reduced the wind to give himself and his stalwart mount, Benjie, some protection from the storm. In the burning heat of Cambay, he'd yearned for a cold northern climate and he'd certainly been granted his wish!

He pulled out Sally's map, using the end of his scarf to protect it from the gusting snow. It was a good map with small sketches of landmarks which made it easier to follow. He'd just turned off the main road onto a narrower, steeper track that led into the hills. He guessed that he was about halfway to his destination, assuming he didn't get lost.

Days were very short this far north and at this season. He wondered if he could reach his destination House before full dark. If not, he'd have to find a protected spot for himself and Benjie because the trail would be treacherous at night.

He hoped to God that Miss Caitlin was at her uncle's house. He'd watched the edges of the road and hadn't seen any frozen bodies, but with the drifts piling up, it would be easy to miss a small crumpled form. He hated thinking that a tormented young woman might have died alone in the bitter cold.

This trek was equally tiring for both man and beast. After patting Benjie on the neck, he set the horse into motion again. "Time to get moving again, my lad. Here's hoping we find shelter for the night."

When Caitlin reached Braewood, her first action was to stable her stolen horse and make sure that he had food, water, and a blanket. She felt a small pang of guilt for the theft, but only a small one. She might not have made it home if he wasn't such a fine mount.

Then she entered the house through the kitchen door because she knew where the key was hidden. It was stone cold inside but she was out of the wind and home.

She made her way to her uncle's study and retrieved the pistol hidden in the desk and carefully loaded it. She would collect the long guns after she rested. It was unlikely that the Dawsons would follow her in this storm, but if they tried to recapture her, they'd be sorry.

She had just enough energy to stagger into the cook's room that adjoined the kitchen. The narrow bed was bare but the blankets had been neatly folded and set on the foot of the mattress.

Mercifully a fire had been laid before the house was closed, though her fingers were almost too numb to strike a light. As licks of flame added a bit of warmth to the room, she pulled off her boots, collapsed onto the bed, dragged the folded blankets over her shivering body, and slept like the dead.

It was nearly dark when David made out the rambling outline of a sizable house ahead. There were no signs of life but even if Miss Caitlin hadn't come here, at least there was shelter for him and his weary horse.

The stables were behind the house. No footprints showed in the snow that led to the entry door, but with this wind, any prints would have long since vanished.

He hauled the door open against the drifting snow and smiled when he heard the whicker of a horse. Sahib! The lady had made it safely home.

Giving a silent prayer of thanks, he spent a few moments greeting Sahib, who was happy to see him. The horse had been properly cared for. Caitlin might be mad, but she knew how to treat her mount. That made sense if she was an excellent horsewoman as Sally had said.

As he settled Benjie in the adjoining stall, he thought how Miss Caitlin Wallace had stolen his pocket knife, escaped, stolen his horse, and safely made a dangerous trek

through a vicious winter storm. She was becoming increasingly interesting.

Wrapping his scarf around his face again, he left the stables and made his way through the blowing snow to a door at the back of the house. He guessed that it entered the kitchen, and swing marks in the snow showed that it had been opened recently. He tried the knob and found that the door was unlocked. It took effort to open it against the wind, but he managed.

The room was indeed the kitchen. He stepped inside--and found himself facing an ice-eyed young woman who was aiming a rifle aimed right at the center of his chest. Her red hair was wild with curls and she wore trousers, a heavy knitted jersey, and several layers of oversized shirts, topped off by a very large man's jacket.

She was adorable, in an unfortunately threatening way. He'd assumed that when he left India, he'd left strange adventures behind him.

Obviously not.

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After returning home, Caitlin had slept like a felled tree for several hours. When she woke, she dressed in layers of her warmest clothing, then unlocked her uncle's gun closet and pulled out a rifle, a shotgun, and ammunition. She checked that the weapons were clean and ready, then loaded each and set them on the kitchen table along with extra ammunition.

The next most important matter was food. As she'd hoped, there were root vegetables in the cold cellar, a well seasoned ham in the pantry, and jars of herbs she'd raised and dried herself. She gave thanks that the house hadn't been broken into and robbed, but her uncle had been much loved by the people on his estate. She was sure that Fergus, his best friend and closest neighbor, had been keeping an eye on the house and livestock and was hoping for her return.

After his death, when the Dawsons had taken Caitlin away, people had assumed that she would be back soon. She'd thought the same. She swore under her breath at the memory of how she'd been betrayed.

She put together a simple savory soup and left it simmering over the fire. Then she lit a lamp in the kitchen because it was nearly dark and returned to the bed. Once more she fell into exhaustion.

The sound of the door opening and a blast of icy air brought her to terrified wakefulness. She dived from the bed and raced into the kitchen, grabbed the rifle, and aimed it at the door, her heart pounding. A man's broad shouldered, heavily swathed silhouette. If it was Dawson...

She barked, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

The man halted and raised his hands. "May I close the door?" he said in a deep voice with a slight Scottish burr. Not Dawson. "No need to invite the outside in."

"Move slowly," she ordered.

He obeyed and blocked the wind and icy particles. As he turned back to her, he drew down the scarf that had covered most of his face to reveal an unshaven jaw and wind-reddened cheeks.

It was the officer from the inn. Captain Cameron, he'd been called. He'd treated her gently despite what the Dawsons had said.

She'd been so frantic to escape that she hadn't noticed how damnably handsome he was. Strong, regular features, dark hair with glints of auburn, a face tanned under sunnier skies than Britain's, laugh lines around his grey green eyes, and an aura of peaceful strength.

He said, "If I promise I'm not here to drag you back to your cousins, will you lower that rifle?"

"Why did you come after me?" she asked sharply.

His gaze was steady on hers. "I'm a soldier. My job is to protect the innocent, so I'm incapable of standing by when someone is in deadly peril. I decided to see if I could find you. Sally McKay thought you might come here."

"A pity she was so helpful," Caitlin snapped.

"Let's declare a truce. Is there any chance of a cup of hot tea? After a dozen years in

India, I'm no longer used to British winters."

Warily she said, "You risked your life to help me after I'd stolen your pocket knife and your horse?"

He gave her a swift smile. "Besides the general need to protect, I found your actions...intriguing."

He didn't seem inclined to seize her and she could use a cup of tea herself, so she lowered the rifle. After moving the weapons across the kitchen to a corner where she could grab one quickly if necessary, she turned to the kettle of water that had been simmering on the hob. "I don't have any milk, but I do have sugar."

"Tea with sugar would be very welcome," he said fervently.

She hadn't eaten since the evening before, so it sounded good to her as well. She pulled the china teapot that has been her mother's from a cabinet and measured in the tea leaves. After adding boiling water, she asked, "How did you find your way up here?"

"Sally McKay's map had the landmarks sketched in. She was very worried about you." He pulled off his greatcoat and hung it on a hook by the door, then sank wearily into a kitchen chair. "I'm impressed that you could ride Sahib. He's a grand horse, but not what is usually considered a lady's mount."

"I'm not what is usually consider a lady." She bit her lip. "I should apologize for stealing your horse, but I can't. He was the best mount available and I knew I'd need a really good horse to get up here in a blizzard. I had to have a serous discussion with him before he agreed to let me ride him."

The captain nodded knowingly. "In other words, he threw you."

She had to smile. "Yes, but he was very polite about it. I landed in a pile of hay. So I explained to him how much I needed his services. After that, he allowed me to mount and we headed off into the storm."

"Sahib is a very intelligent horse, and he can't resist helping a damsel in distress."

"You and your horse have come to resemble each other," she said with a hint of amusement. "What did you ride to get up here?"

"A sturdy gelding called Benjie. I bought him from Mr. McKay since I wasn't sure if I'd be returning to the inn."

Deciding that the tea had steeped enough, Caitlin poured it into two sturdy mugs and stirred spoonfuls of sugar into each. She set them on the table. "Would you like a bowl of soup? It's very simple but it's hot, and there are ship's biscuits in the larder."

"Better and better!" he said. "What can I do to help?"

"There are bowls and cutlery in that cabinet," she replied. "You can clean up after we finish." She watched to see if he'd look appalled to be asked to act as a scullion, but he only swallowed a large, near scalding mouthful of tea before saying, "Only fair."

She was really beginning to like this man. She ladled soup into two large bowls. It did smell lovely. She was glad she'd added the handful of dried herbs when she was making it.

After setting the bowls on the table, she returned to the larder for one of the metal boxes of ship's biscuit. The thin hard slices were just flour and water and a bit of salt and they'd been baked four times to prolong their storage life. They didn't have a lot of flavor, but they lasted indefinitely.

She handed several pieces of the biscuit to the captain, then sat down, feeling ravenous. The biscuit softened nicely when dipped into the soup. She ate two bowlfuls and the captain had three.

As he finished his third bowl, he said, "I'm not sure if the soup is outstanding or if I was just famished, but this was a very fine meal on a very cold night."

She nodded agreement. It was full dark by now. Gusts of sharp wind were still rattling the house, but Caitlin was home and relaxed and safe for now.

The captain poured more tea for them, then leaned back in his chair. "Now that hunger has been satisfied, will you tell me the real story of what's been going on?"

She froze, her mug of tea halfway to her lips. "What do you think has been going on?" she asked warily.

"You may have criminal tendencies, but you're obviously not mad," he said, his gray gaze holding hers. "My guess is that the Dawsons were abducting you for some reason, most likely one involving money since it's doubtful anything else would cause them to go to such effort."

She took a long swallow of tea to steady her nerves, then set the mug down, still warming her hands on it. "You're very astute, Captain Cameron. How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Several things," he said slowly. "The determination of the Dawsons to keep you from talking to anyone. The harshness of their behavior when they seem to have no compassion or sympathy for your situation. How did that benefit them?"

With a sigh, Caitlin waved her hand in a gesture that encompassed the house and the estate. "My parents died when I was young so I was raised by my father's older

brother, James Wallace, the Laird of Braewood. He was a grand old man. Since he had no children, he raised me as his own." A smile flitted across her lips. "As if I was his son, actually. He taught me how to run the estate and made me his heir. His last wish was for me to find a husband and have a hatful of bairns."

"How did he die?" the captain asked quietly.

She swallowed hard. "Of a swift, vicious cancer. His nearest other relations were the Dawsons, second cousins once removed, I think. They came to Braewood to help, and they actually were rather useful during his illness. Then Uncle James died." Her voice broke before she continued. "Right after the funeral, I became horribly ill, out of my head. The neighbors were all very concerned. My uncle was...much loved and they liked me as well."

"I suspect this is where things went badly wrong," the captain said in a soft voice.

She nodded, so grief stricken and furious that she could barely talk. "The Dawsons live in Newcastle and they volunteered to take me to a physician there. They said he was brilliant and might be able to heal me." She laughed bitterly. "Their physician was certainly an expert in using drugs."

The captain's eyes turned to pure steel. "So they drugged and imprisoned you and tried to force you to sign the estate over to them."

Caitlin stared at him. "Captain, can you read minds?"

His gaze softened. "No, but having met the Dawsons, I realized that they were snakes in human clothing. They thought they could break you. They were wrong."

"Right again, Captain. But how did you know that much about me when I really was halfway to madness?"

He smiled a little. "You remind me of my sister Juliet, who is also a redhead and looks equally at ease holding a rifle."

She thought about that for a moment. "I'd like to know more about your sister, but now is not the time for distractions."

He nodded agreement. "What were the Dawsons' plans when you wouldn't break?"

"To take me back to Braewood in chains and sorrowfully show me off to the neighbors, saying that their physician hadn't been able to cure me," she sat flatly. "Then I would die mysteriously in the night. After they mourned my tragic death, they would produce the will I had allegedly written."

"One of the Dawsons was good at forgery?"

"Mrs. Dawson. They thought that if I died in Newcastle, suspicions might be raised here so they brought me back to show that I was still alive. Then they'd kill me with their damnable drugs."

The captain looked murderous. "Diabolical! But you were too strong and clever for them."

"I was neither strong nor clever," she said wearily. "Merely desperate. I just wanted to come home. But it's not really home without Uncle James and I'm only safe as long as this blizzard lasts."

"I'll keep you safe," he said in a voice of absolute promise.

As she gazed at him, she realized that he was speaking in dead earnest. The determination that had been keeping her going shattered and she began to weep as grief and fear rushed through her. He wouldn't think her strong any more, but that

was all right because he'd said he'd keep her safe, and he would even though she was a craven, soggy mess.

Then warm arms came around her and the captain scooped her up and settled on the chair with her in his lap. She buried her face against his shoulder and surrendered to her grief and terror.

He said nothing, merely held her and stroked her back as she cried herself out. He produced a handkerchief from somewhere and tucked it into her hand. When she ran out of tears, she straightened and blew her nose. "As you see, I'm not strong at all."

"Everyone has a breaking point," he said, his deep voice resonating in his chest as she lay against him. "You stayed strong as long as you had to, and I'm sure you'll be strong again very soon."

She made a face. "I appreciate your optimism, Captain."

"Sorry, I can't help being optimistic, it's my nature."

She had been optimistic once. She hoped she would be again someday.

Knowing that it was none of her business, but wanting to understand more about this man, she asked softly, "Have you ever reached a breaking point?"

His arms tightened around her and there was a long pause before he answered. "Because my siblings and I spent most of our growing years in foreign places with no other children to play with, we became very close. In particular, I looked up to my brother Ian, who was oldest. I wanted to be just like him. He's a good part of the reason I joined the Indian Army. At first we were posted in different parts of India, so eventually I transferred to Cambay, where he was stationed. The work would be more challenging and I looked forward to seeing more of my brother.

"When I arrived at Cambay, Ian was off on a diplomatic mission in Central Asia. He was sometimes sent on those because of his language abilities. I'd done similar things and come back safely and I assumed he would, too."

When he fell silent, Caitlin said, "But that time he didn't?"

"Word came that he'd been imprisoned in Bokhara, the capital of Uzbekistan, and had almost certainly been executed." The captain drew a harsh breath. "Such things happen in that part of world. I mourned greatly, of course, but accepted that he was gone. Then after enduring months of horrendous captivity, he returned to Cambay looking like death, having been rescued by our sister Juliet and her husband."

"Your sister?" Caitlin said incredulously.

"Very intrepid woman." The captain smiled a little. "As I said, you remind me of her. Ian stayed with me for a few days in Cambay before setting off on a task he'd promised to fulfill. He returned with a lovely young wife, Laura, and resigned his commission when he learned that he'd inherited Falkirk. He and Laura set off to fulfill the last wish of her late Russian uncle before returning to Britain. In the course of that mission, he ended up single handedly holding off an Afghan invasion of India."

"Good heavens!" Caitlin gasped. "Your family's motto must be 'Intrepid!'"

"That's certainly true of Ian and Juliet," he agreed. "I'm the boringly average member of the family."

Caitlin doubted that, but was sure that he was unlikely to tell heroic tales about himself. "So Ian not only survived a dreadful captivity, but performed a stunning act of heroism. He's a brother well worth admiring. I assume that he and his wife were then able to return safely to Britain?"

"Nothing so straightforward," the captain said, his voice tight. "The mountain pass was so narrow that the Afghans were climbing single file, so Ian stationed himself in a mountain cave where he had a clear shot at the invaders and it was very hard for them to return fire. He's an excellent shot and held them off for many hours, but eventually he was exhausted and running out of ammunition. Ian had sent Laura riding off for help, and by sheer luck she intercepted me leading a troop of reinforcements, so we galloped off to find him, praying all the way."

Caitlin whistled softly. "Fate or divine intercession?"

"I'm not sure which," he said. "As we neared the site where Ian had stationed himself, I was incredibly relieved to hear shooting because that meant he was still alive. We were within sight of his cave when the Afghans brought up a piece of artillery and started blasting." The captain's voice broke before he continued in a flat voice, "We saw the mountain collapse on Ian's cave. It was...devastating."

Caitlin caught his hand and squeezed because she had no words equal to such a horror. After a long pause, the captain said harshly, "That was when I reached my breaking point. After all Ian had been through, to see him killed in front of our eyes...! I wanted to fall to the ground and howl to the heavens, but I couldn't because I was responsible for Laura and my lancers and we had to prevent a war."

"Dear God!" Caitlin breathed as she tried to imagine herself in the position of the captain and his brother's wife as they witnessed the catastrophic death of a man they both loved. This breaking point was different from what she'd endured, but equally excruciating. "I imagine you managed to keep going and do your duty, but how?"

His voice lightened. "There was a miracle. The avalanche had blocked the pass and stopped the Afghan invasion, but it turned out that the mountain was riddled with caves. Laura, who is as intrepid as you and Juliet, insisted that we search the mountain. I thought it was hopeless, but it was better to be doing something than

nothing. We crawled for hours through the bowels of the earth and were about to give up when miraculously we found Ian, battered but more or less intact."

"What an amazing story!" Caitlin released her breath. "But I don't think even a miracle dissolves the pain of having been broken. Did you ever have a proper chance to drop to your knees and howl to the heavens?"

He stroked her back. "You're very perceptive. Yes, once I returned to Cambay I drowned my sorrows in true army officer fashion, meaning that for the second and last time in my life, I got falling down drunk, then slept the clock around. Very unlike me. After that I was able to carry on normally, except for the occasional nightmare."

She shuddered. "I'll never forget my breaking point, Captain, but having survived being broken is making me stronger in the mended places, I think."

"I feel the same, though I wouldn't wish such an experience on anyone!" He gazed down into her eyes. "Now that we've shared our horror stories, I think we've reached the point where we should use given names. Mine is David. With your permission, I'd like to call you Caitlin."

David . She'd heard that in Hebrew the name meant beloved . A good name for him for he was clearly much loved. "I'd like that, too, David. But after such wild adventures on the other side of the world, what brought you to the George Inn last night?"

He smiled. "I'm on my way to visit Ian and Laura at Falkirk, the family estate a bit north of Edinburgh. My siblings and I summered there during our school days, so this is like going home. Ian didn't expect to inherit, but he did and I have no doubt that he's an excellent master of Falkirk. After he learned that I was coming home, he and Laura decide to host a grand family house party from Christmas through Hogmanay and beyond. I'll be able to see everyone at once after too many years away."

She returned his smile. "So you're the prodigal son returning! Will there be a fatted calf?"

He laughed. "Perhaps. Certainly there will be haggis and unmanly hugs all around. Being Scots, we're a rather emotional lot, except for Juliet's husband who is English but otherwise a very decent fellow. I haven't seen her and Ross since their wedding, which was..." he paused to calculate, "fifteen years ago. Half my lifetime. I'm looking forward to seeing everyone, including two very small nephews I've never met."

"Will you return to India?"

He shook his head. "Though I've lived in many places, Scotland has always been home. I've resigned my commission and I'm back to stay."

"It sounds wonderful," she said, unable to keep a note of envy from her voice. She had very little family.

He must have heard that because he didn't speak, just cuddled her closer. In a distant corner of her mind, she realized how improper it was to be in the lap of a man she barely knew, yet she felt as if she's known him forever.

She really should get up before she fell asleep. Soon....

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David studied the sleeping young woman in his arms, glad that she was finally resting. What a nightmare she'd been through! She was enchanting in a very Scottish way. He remembered how he'd ended his letter to Ian, telling him to keep an eye out someone who might suit David as a wife.

It was absurd to think that he'd found the right woman when they'd only met the day before, yet his soldier's intuition, which had saved his life more than once, was saying This one! He was more intensely attracted to Caitlin, to her strength, her courage, her beauty, than any other woman he'd ever met.

The idea seemed absurd, until he remembered that his sister Juliet and her Ross married almost immediately, and Ian had proposed to Laura within days of their first meeting. Perhaps love at first sight was the Cameron way.

David was usually less impulsive than his siblings, but just now he was feeling very impulsive. He reminded himself that Caitlin needed to recover after all she'd been through, so he must control that impulsiveness and wait to see what developed between them.

He carefully stood, holding her in his arms. It was only a few steps to the adjoining bedroom which probably was meant for the cook or the housekeeper. The bed was ruffled up, so he gently laid her down and pulled the covers over her. In the dim light, he studied her face which had relaxed into peacefulness. When he'd looked his fill, he allowed himself a light kiss on Caitlin's forehead as he whispered, "Sleep well, my lady. You're safe now."

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared up at him, their gazes locking as emotion pulsed between them. Not breaking that gaze, she slowly lifted her hands to his head and pulled him down into a kiss. She was warm and lovely and compelling.

Her lips parted under his and with breathtaking suddenness, sweetness flared into passion. She pulled him down onto the bed with her and he wondered dizzily if it was possible to feel himself literally falling in love.

Struggling to be sensible, he whispered, "Caitlin, this isn't wise!"

"But it feels so very right." She slipped her arms around him and drew him against her for another scorching kiss. Their bodies strained against each other, yearning to unite despite the barriers of clothing and blankets.

It was a madness David never wanted to end, but when he found himself dragging the covers down, he realized how close they were to taking an irrevocable step. He wrenched himself away and swung around to sit on the edge of the bed as he buried his head in his hands, panting.

Caitlin reached for him. "Come back here, please!"

He caught her hand, stilling her movement. In the dim light of the fire, she was enchanting, her hair a bright tangle, and her expression yearning and vulnerable. "I think we need to slow down, lass," he forced himself to say. "I'd already decided that once your life is sorted out and safe, I'll ask permission to court you. But after all you've been through, this seems too soon. I don't want you to lie with me, then regret it."

She glared at him for a moment before tugging her hand away, her expression rueful. "Very well. You did say you were the practical sort. That's a decidedly mixed blessing!"

"I know," he said solemnly. "It's one of my most annoying traits."

"Yes, but you're not wrong. It is too soon." Her expression turned thoughtful. "You crossed the border into Scotland on the way up from the George Inn. Since we're in Scotland, we could do a handfasting and lie together legally."

For a moment he caught his breath, entranced by the thought of being married to Caitlin. Then sanity returned and he shook his head ruefully. "You're a hard woman to win an argument with! This isn't about legality or lack thereof, Caitlin. It's because you've just escaped from captivity and the threat of death, and I'm telling myself that I can't possibly be falling in love with the very first Scottish woman I've met since returning home."

She caught her breath, startled by his words. "That does sound rather...hasty. But appealing!" Her gaze held his before she said shyly, "It might be too soon to become lovers, but will you share my bed tonight? For warmth and companionship, nothing more."

The idea was dangerous but irresistible. "I'd love to hold you all night and hope we're both too tired to lose all sense."

"The unexpected benefit of exhaustion," Caitlin said with a wry smile. "Please join me, Captain, for a very proper night."

"It will be my very great pleasure," he said formally.

He stood and stripped off his outer garments and laid them over a chair, then added more coals to the bedroom fire so it would burn all night. Behind him he heard the rustling sounds of Caitlin changing from her male daytime clothing into nightwear.

After hearing her slide into the bed again, he turned and climbed into the opposite

side so he could draw her into his arms. She gave a soft, contented sigh as she settled against him. They fit together as they had been designed to be perfect mates. "Sleep well, lass," he whispered.

"And the same to you, my captain." She wriggled closer before releasing her breath in a long, contented sigh.

Together, they slept.

Caitlin woke slowly, warm and comfortable, only gradually realizing that she was sharing the bed with something large and warm. Not something, but someone!

The thought jerked her awake like a bucket of ice water as memories rushed through her. Uncle James was gone. The vile Dawsons. Drugs and chains and the threat of death. Now she was home and sharing a bed with an army officer she'd only just met.

A very handsome and rather irresistible army officer. She opened her eyes and contemplated Captain Cameron for a few pleasurable moments. Her intuition told her that he was as strong, kind, and honorable as he seemed to be. Good husband material, in fact. Though it was surely too soon to be thinking of such a thing, they'd both been thinking exactly that.

He'd risked his life in case she needed to be rescued from freezing to death. She'd rewarded his efforts by aiming a rifle at him, then collapsed sobbing into his arms. After which she'd boldly asked him to join her in bed.

Bold she might have been, but that had actually been one of her better ideas. She couldn't remember when she'd had a more restful night's sleep. She liked that David hadn't taken the opportunity to grope her. Unlike Dawson, the swine. Her horrible cousin had stopped trying after she'd kicked him where a man least wanted to be kicked.

Reluctantly she slid from the bed, her feet landing on the rag rug that offered protection from the icy floor. The room was biting cold, but she'd been splendidly warmed through the night.

David shifted and his eyes opened. He gave her a smile of pure pleasure as his gaze slid from her tangled hair to her bare feet with a thoroughness that made her blush. "What a lovely sight to start the day!"

He swung from the bed and stood, giving a leonine stretch. Until now he'd worn bulky winter clothes, so the sight of him in a loose shirt and drawers revealed how very fit and appealing his body was. Wide shoulders, lean muscles, and the grace of absolute physical mastery.

While she was admiring him, he circled the bed and drew her into a warm and very thorough hug. The embrace dissolved any potential awkwardness. Though passion was only a hair's breadth away, this friendly hug was a perfect way to start this day.

After several long pleasurable moments, he stepped away. "Time to stop before temptation overcomes good judgment!" he said with a wry smile.

The room was suddenly too cool. She drew a deep breath, then managed to say mildly, "I'm guessing that for you, good judgment usually wins over temptation."

"Usually. Not always." His gaze traveled down her in a way that made her heavy flannel nightgown feel transparent. That look from a different man would have embarrassed or offended her. Coming from David, it made her want to purr.

He collected his garments and boots from the chair where he'd left them. "I'll get dressed in the kitchen and build up the fire. Then I'll go out and tend to the horses."

"Would you like porridge for breakfast?" she asked. "And tea, of course. I can also

heat some shaving water if you'd like."

"I would love some proper Scottish porridge! It was available in India, but not at all appealing in that heat." He ran a hand over his bristly jaw. "Shaving is also a fine idea. After I see to the horses."

She liked how he'd gently arranged a smooth start to their morning that allowed them each privacy. After he collected his clothing and moved into the kitchen, she donned her warmest garments, then finger combed her hair before plaiting it into a simple braid.

By the time he returned to the kitchen, the porridge was cooked and water was simmering for the tea. His heavy coat was open and his wool scarf lay loose on his shoulders. "The storm has mostly blown itself out and the temperature is rising. The roads should be passable fairly soon."

As she served the porridge and tea, she said, her gaze down, "And you'll be off then."

It was a statement, not a question, but he shook his head. "I won't leave until your situation is secure. Do you think the Dawsons will come after you?"

She sighed. "I wish I believed that they'd given up, but I don't. Braewood is too rich a prize for them to surrender easily."

David frowned. "I did sense that from them. What do you think they'll do?"

She ate several spoonfuls of porridge while she considered. "My best guess is that they'll get the highest official they can find to support their claim to be my guardians, then they'll come up here with documents saying that I'm mad and must be captured and drugged for my own good."

David looked thoughtful. "Wouldn't there be a question of jurisdiction? The Dawsons are English while you and your property are in Scotland."

"They might not have any legal authority, but if they come, they'll have plenty of documents and bluster to make their case." She waved her hand to indicate Braewood. "This is a substantial property and there's a fair amount of money as well, all of it left to me. The Dawsons want it all and have convinced themselves that they're entitled to claim it because I'm 'a weak female who is incapable of running an estate like this,' " Her voice dripped with scorn.

"If they're brandishing the law," David said coolly, "brandish the law right back at them. You're a substantial land owner and women have always had more rights in Scotland than in England. I imagine you know the relevant authorities in this part of Scotland?"

She thought a moment. "Some of them, and I can find the names of others. My uncle was well known and respected. I'm sure his friends would stand by me."

"What if the Dawsons come with force as well as legal documents?"

"They'll have a hard time getting me out of this house!" Caitlin said. "The walls are solid stone and I'm well supplied with weapons and ammunition."

David frowned. "I hope this doesn't come to a pitched battle. That could go badly wrong."

"I'm sure you know more about such things than any sane person would want to know," she replied. "I don't want a pitched battle, either. But if they try to take me by force, they'll regret it!"

David gave her a slow smile. "If my brother Ian can hold off an Afghan army, you

and I can vanquish a pair of criminals and their hired thugs."

His words sent a warm glow through her. "You're assuming I'm a good shot."

"Having seen how you hold a rifle, I know you are. And as I said, you remind me of my formidable sister Juliet."

Thinking of all he'd said about his family, she said, "I think I should be flattered, but your Clan Cameron sounds rather alarming!"

"They're actually quite pleasant and only alarming when facing danger," he assured her.

Caitlin wondered what David was like when facing danger. Quietly formidable, she was sure.

She was about to pour more tea when hard knocking sounded on the kitchen door. Could the Dawsons be here so soon?

There was only one way to find out. Grimly she rose to her feet and headed toward the kitchen door.

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As Caitlin crossed to the door, David collected his pistol, checked the loading, and followed her, the weapon concealed under his coat. He hoped it wasn't the Dawsons, but if it was, they'd regret it.

Visibly bracing herself, Caitlin opened the door--then fell into the arms of the sturdy silver haired man outside. "Uncle Fergus!"

"You're home and safe, lass!" he exclaimed, hugging her with equal fervor. "It's that worried we've been!"

"Come in and I'll give you tea and tell you what happened." She looked past the newcomer. "And is that Andrew I see?"

A beaming young man who looked much like Fergus entered the kitchen and also hugged Caitlin. "We saw smoke coming from the chimney and wondered if you'd returned. We even brought your horse Maeve because we hoped you were here. Welcome home, lass!"

"Wonderful! Thank you so much for taking care of Maeve." She hugged Andrew back. "You and Jenny should be married by now?"

"Aye, we were tired of waiting," he said apologetically. "We both wished you could have been there."

She smiled ruefully. "So do I."

As the three entered the kitchen, Caitlin said, "It was a great comfort to know that you'd be looking after the livestock and the house while I was gone, Fergus."

"Of course we did, but you were gone so long that we were getting really worried." Fergus spotted David and his bushy brows rose. "And who might this be? Another Dawson?"

Caitlin had protective friends. Good. "No, my name is David Cameron," he said. "I happened to be staying in the George Inn when the Dawsons brought in Caitlin gagged and in chains, claiming she was mad. She escaped into the middle of the blizzard that night, and I went after her in the mistaken belief that she might need rescuing." He smiled at Caitlin. "She didn't, but she gave me credit for trying."

"I stole Captain Cameron's horse," Caitlin said wryly. "But he's been quite reasonable about that."

Fergus's thoughtful gaze moved between David and Caitlin. Probably he was drawing some accurate conclusions. "Where were you heading that brought you to the George Inn?"

"To my family home in Falkirk after too many years in the Indian Army," David said. "But when I learned what Caitlin had endured, I told her I'd stay until her situation was sorted out."

"Time to tell us what happened, lass!" Fergus ordered. "Preferably over a cup of tea with perhaps a wee dram for extra warmth."

Caitlin put more water on to heat and produced a jug of whisky from a cabinet. When they were all settled at the kitchen table with their augmented tea, she tersely explained how the Dawsons had kidnapped and drugged her with the goal of killing her so they could inherit Braewood.

Her friends were suitably horrified. Fergus let loose a string of Scottish profanities that took David back to his childhood when he'd heard the Falkirk blacksmith cursing after a draft horse stepped on his foot.

When Fergus had finished swearing, he said furiously, "Tomorrow I'll go to the Jedburgh tolbooth to explain what happened so constables can be sent out to deal with the Dawsons!"

Caitlin hesitated. "That might be premature since we don't know what, if anything, the Dawsons will do now. If they're still in England, they're out of Scottish jurisdiction. They may have given up their plan to capture me again."

"Do you think they'll will?" David asked.

"Probably not," she admitted. "But we don't know yet what they'll do next and the constables wouldn't be able to arrest them. We'll have a better idea of what to do a few days from now when the roads are in better shape."

Fergus frowned. "I'd much rather administer some old fashioned border justice!"

"No!" Andrew said firmly. "Mum wouldn't like it if you were hanged or transported."

"I expect you're right," Fergus said regretfully. "Caitlin, would you and your captain like to ride over to Dunglass to get some fresh supplies like eggs and milk and bread? My Anna will want to see for herself that you're all right."

Caitlin glanced at David. "Would you like to do that? It's not far and it would improve the eating here."

"It would be pleasant to get out and the horses could use the exercise," he agreed. He finished off his tea and stood. "I suppose the house will be safe for an hour or two."

"Better not to leave the house empty even for that long," Fergus said. "Andrew can stay here until you return."

Andrew agreed so David and Caitlin headed out to the stables with Fergus. Caitlin and Maeve, a good looking chestnut, greeted each other enthusiastically. As David saddled Sahib, he said, "Sahib likes your Maeve. I can tell."

"He should. She's the finest mare in the Lowlands," she said as she lifted her own saddle. David didn't offer to help her since clearly she didn't need or want help.

"Anna will be that glad to see you, lass." Fergus chuckled. "Be prepared for puppies. Bessie recently had a litter and now that your uncle's Old Bobby is gone, you need another dog. The pups are a bit too young to leave their mum, but you can choose one now."

"What an irresistible prospect!" Caitlin glanced at David. "Old Bobby died the same day as Uncle James. I think they escorted each other to heaven."

"It wouldn't be heaven if dogs aren't allowed," David said as he slid his new double-barreled pistol into his saddle's built-in holster. Then his rifle in the other holster. Both weapons were loaded and ready. He didn't expect trouble this soon, but one of his first lessons as a soldier was to always be prepared. Caitlin had also had a holster for her own pistol.

Fergus noted the weapons and gave a small nod of approval. If the Dawsons arrived early, they'd be ready.

David enjoyed the ride to Fergus's estate. The weather had warmed to the point that snow was starting to melt, thin sunshine was breaking through the clouds, and the roads were clearing more quickly than expected.

The rolling hills of the Lowland countryside were lovely. Caitlin gazed hungrily around her, absorbing the familiar sights. "I was afraid I'd never see any of this again," she said quietly to David as they reached Dunglass.

He smiled at her. "There's no place like home. Now that I'm back in Scotland, I have trouble remembering why I ever left."

"Scots have always been adventurers," Fergus said. "And if they're lucky, after their adventuring they come home again!"

As Ian had done, and now David was doing. He gave Caitlin a sidelong glance. His mental image of coming home had always included finding a wife, preferably a Scotswoman. He hadn't specifically imagined a fiery redhead who knew how to handle a rifle, but now he couldn't imagine anything else.

Caitlin was smiling when they left Dunglass. "It's so good to be home! The Dawsons are beginning to seem like a bad dream."

"They were all too real." He frowned. "I'd really like to think they've given up, but greed is seldom rational."

"Though the roads are starting to clear, I refuse to worry about the Dawsons for at least another day." Caitlin patted her saddle bag. "It will be several days before my housekeeper returned to do the cooking, but until then, Anna's supplies have given me more choices."

"I'll enjoy whatever you prepare, but even more important than the food is the company," he observed.

She grinned at him. "I could not agree more!"

He hoped that meant she'd be willing to share her bed again tonight. In a friendly way, no more, but holding her the night before had been as restful as it had been enchanting. With her, he knew he'd come home.

They were riding side by side up to the double doors of the Braewood stables when four horsemen abruptly swung around the corner of the building right in front of David and Caitlin.

And in the lead was Mr. Dawson.

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Caitlin froze as panic blazed through her at the sight of her enemy. Beside Dawson was Mr. Phelps, the horrible drug expert, and two brutal looking armed guards.

Dawson said in a commanding voice, "Catherine, I'm so glad to see that you made it home safely! Remember Mr. Phelps? He's here to support my guardianship to ensure your safety. I have the legal documents right here." He pulled several folded papers from inside his coat.

She felt David's tension as he silently evaluated the danger. In a burst of mad inspiration, Caitlin reached over to catch David's left hand. "No need to concern yourself about me any longer, cousin," she said in a bright, cutting voice. "Captain Cameron and I are now married. If I need a guardian, which I don't, it would be him."

"Married? That's not possible!" Dawson stared in shock. "You only met him two days ago! There's been no time to read the banns, much less marry him!"

Recognizing why Caitlyn had claimed they were wed, David squeezed her hand. "We're hand fasted, which is entirely legal in Scotland." He smiled dotingly at Caitlin.

She smiled back. "It was very simple, Cousin. We clasped hands like this and I said, 'I, Caitlin Jane Wallace, take thee, David Cameron, to be my wedded husband, forsaking all others until death do us part, and thereto I plight thee my troth.'" As she gazed into his eyes, she felt something deep and true blaze between them.

Holding her gaze, David said in a strong clear voice, "To which I replied 'I, David Lewis Cameron, take thee, Caitlin Jane Wallace, to be my wedded wife, forsaking all others until death do us part, and thereto I plight thee my troth.'"

"That's no wedding ceremony!" Dawson sputtered.

"In Scotland it is," Caitlin said crisply as she withdrew her hand from David's. "Those words change everything, so get off my land, Cousin! And keep far, far away from me in the future!"

Dawson's expression changed from confusion to furious determination. "Bedamned to your bloody sham Scottish marriage! It changes nothing!" he roared. "Shoot them both!"

Before Dawson had finished speaking, Sahib reared up with a fierce stallion trumpet of rage. The other horses squealed and jerked away, briefly unbalancing their riders.

As Sahib's forefeet struck the ground under his master's control, there was a lightning flurry of violence that happened too quickly for Caitlin to consciously follow.

The guards raised and cocked their pistols, aiming at David and Caitlin and they were so close that their shots couldn't miss.

David whipped his pistol from its holster and shot the right hand guard, his bullet blasting the pistol from the man's hand in a spatter of blood and screams. He instantly shifted his weapon and disarmed the other guard with equal efficiency.

A raging Dawson yanked his own pistol from his coat and aimed at David.

Caitlin's hand jerked from the recoil as she shot Dawson before he could fire his weapon.

Scarlet blossomed on Dawson's chest. Disbelieving, he gasped, "You little bitch!"

He crumpled and slid to the ground as the acrid scent of gunpowder filled the air and echoes of the shots ricocheted from the stone farm buildings.

It was all over in a handful of heartbeats. Shaking, Caitlin lowered her pistol and steadied her horse, on the verge of fainting. She didn't even remember drawing her pistol. Surely she hadn't just killed a man! But she couldn't deny the sight of Dawson's lifeless body sprawled on the icy cobblestones. Since David had used both barrels of his pistol and hadn't had time to reload, if she hadn't acted it might have been his body on the ground. The thought was gut wrenching.

The only unwounded visitor was Mr. Phelps, who was fighting for control of his frightened horse. "What are you doing? " he cried in terror, "You really are mad! Both of you!"

David had already reloaded so he trained his weapon on Phelps, his hand steady. "Didn't you notice that Dawson ordered his thugs to shoot us? It was self defense." His hard gaze moved to the wounded guards. "Be grateful that I wasn't shooting to kill."

Swearing viciously, one of the men snarled, "You bloody ruined my hand!" as he tried to calm his horse, his right hand a scarlet mess.

"At least you're still alive," David said, still holding his pistol at the ready as he watched the guards. "Murdering innocent strangers is no way to earn a living."

Caitlin couldn't wrench her gaze from Dawson's body. "I didn't mean to kill him," she said in an agonized whisper. "But when I saw him aiming at you, it...it just happened."

"It's difficult to kill another human being even to save a life," David said quietly as he reached over to catch her right hand while holding his pistol steadily in his other hand. "But Dawson would have been hanged for kidnapping and attempted murder so this was justice delivered early. Do you know this Mr. Phelps?"

The question steadied her nerves. "He's the physician who drugged me till I was unconscious, then supplied the Dawsons with the drugs they planned to use to murder me. Surely that's a hanging offense in England and Scotland!"

Phelps gasped. "You were fighting and screaming like a mad woman! The drugs were to calm you down so you wouldn't hurt yourself!"

"If you had been kidnapped, gagged, and chained for no reason, wouldn't you scream and fight?" she snapped, her furious gaze holding his.

He shifted uneasily on his horse. "When they said you were mad, I had no reason to disbelieve them. You'd just lost your uncle and delicate young females have been known to be driven mad with grief. But I was very careful to explain how to dispense the drugs so they wouldn't give you a dangerous dose."

"They used that information to calculate how much would be lethal," Caitlin said flatly. "They planned to bring me back to Braewood and murder me here because that would arouse less suspicion than murdering me in Newcastle far away from everyone who knew me."

Phelps paled. "You're lying! I consulted with the Dawsons because they were so concerned about you. I would never participate in a murder!"

"Perhaps not knowingly," David said dryly. "Did it never occur to you that the Dawsons were lying about their goals?"

Phelps hesitated, looking ill. "My patients have always sought cures or reduction of pain. Sometimes family members might have wanted to end the pain of a dying loved one. That is...not a subject that is ever discussed. I certainly never would have been party to the deliberate murder of an otherwise healthy young woman!"

"Do you believe him, Caitlin?" David ask, his gaze as steady as his weapon.

She frowned as she considered his question. "He didn't come often and I remember him warning them not to give me too much of the drugs he supplied. He may not have meant to help them murder me, but he was mostly interested in selling them his vile concoctions for outrageously high prices. He had no interest in me as a person or patient."

David gave her a quick glance. "So not a man of great character. Shall I shoot him for you?"

As Phelps gasped, Caitlin looked at Dawson's sprawled body and shuddered. "No. Mr. Phelps was stupid and arrogant and greedy, but not a murderer, I think."

"Should we let him go?"

When Caitlin nodded, David made a dismissive gesture with his pistol. "You can tell Mrs. Dawson that her husband is dead, killed as he attempted to murder Caitlin and me. In the future, treat patients with more compassion and intelligence, Phelps, and give thanks that Miss Wallace is so fair-minded."

"I will," the physician said in a choked voice before wheeling his horse around and bolting toward the road that led away from Braewood.

Fergus's son Andrew came running from the direction of the house, "Caitlin!" he called out. "Are you all right?"

She saw that he'd brought her shotgun, which she'd left in her kitchen. Voice unsteady, she replied, "Well enough considering that my vile cousin just tried to kill David and me."

Andrew swallowed hard as he noticed Dawson's body and the wounded guards. "I...I see. Now what?"

"Does your father have a secure place where the guards can be held until they can be taken to the chief constable in Jedburgh?" David asked.

Andrew nodded. "Yes, there's a cellar store room with strong locks that can hold them until the roads are clear enough to transfer them to town."

"Very well. We can tie Dawson's body to his horse and take him and his thugs to Dunglass." He glanced at the sky. "There should be time enough to go there and return before it gets dark. Caitlin, do you want to stay here and rest?"

The thought was tempting, but Caitlin shook her head. "I should go. At Dunglass we can write our statements to send to the Sheriff's Court along with the prisoners."

"That's a good idea," he agreed. "Andrew, did you see enough of what happened to also bear witness?"

"Yes, I was in the library reading when I heard gunshots. I grabbed Caitlin's shotgun and came out in time to see most of what happened. You and Dawson's brutes were all so close to each other that it's amazing you and Caitlin weren't injured. " He nodded at David. "That double-barreled pistol of yours is a bonnie weapon!"

"I bought it in London when I passed through on my way home from India." He grimaced. "I didn't expect that I would need it so soon."

David began organizing the next steps. His quiet natural authority was a fine example of leadership in action, Caitlin realized. He had surely been a very good officer.

David and Andrew worked together to lash Dawson's body to his horse's saddle. David personally bandaged the wounded hands of the prisoners while asking that Caitlin keep her eyes and her pistol on them. They were surly but resigned.

They all mounted and set out. As she rode beside David. Caitlin said, "I'm guessing you trained Sahib to rear up and threaten the enemy?"

David smiled. "Sahib likes learning new tricks. That one has been very useful, along with his steady nerves when there's gunfire."

No wonder he'd brought his splendid horse all the way from India. Sahib deserved oats for his supper after they returned home.

"What do you think will happen to Dawson's guards? Will they be hanged?"

David shook his head. "I don't think so. They threatened us but didn't actually cause harm. My guess is that they'll serve some time in prison, or possibly be transported. We can hope they've learned the error of their ways."

"Unlikely." After a long silence, Caitlin said, "I shot Dawson because you'd emptied both barrels of your pistol and there was no time to reload. But you're a seasoned soldier. Could you have avoided his shot without my help?"

"Perhaps, but I'm not sure," David said slowly. "Everything was happening so quickly! I'm very grateful for your swift action and steady hand. You have warrior reflexes."

"Then I'm glad I shot him." She shuddered. "And I'm glad he's dead. I don't think he

would ever have given up trying to get his hands on Braewood."

"Probably not," David said. "Will Mrs. Dawson want vengeance?"

Caitlin considered. "I don't think so. The Dawsons were united in greed, but I don't think they actually liked each other very much. They seemed quite well off, so she won't starve. I should be safe now."

"I'm very glad to hear that," he said warmly.

After that, there was little conversation, but the silence was peaceful. She was deeply grateful for David's steady, understanding presence at her side.

She thought back to the horrific moment when David's life was in danger and realized with rising wonder that she seemed to have fallen in love with him. Though they'd only just met, danger and honesty had dissolved the usual barriers and brought them together.

At least she thought that was what happened. She'd never been in love so she wasn't entirely sure what love was like. But as she glanced sideways at David's calm profile, she felt that she was learning fast.

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Fergus was properly horrified when they arrived at Dunglass and he and Anna heard the story. The guards were locked up in the cellar storeroom and Dawson's body was left in a cold shed.

After the three witnesses wrote out their statements about the day's events, Anna fed them supper and Caitlin cuddled the adorable puppies, picking one to be hers when the pup was old enough to leave her mother. Puppies were a wonderful way to relax after a difficult day.

As David and Caitlin rode back to Braewood, he could feel her bone deep fatigue, but she didn't wilt or complain. It was near dark when they reached their destination. "I'll take care of the horses," David said as they reached the back entrance to the house. "Maybe you could brew us some tea?"

"An excellent idea." Caitlin dismounted and handed Maeve's reins to David, then entered the kitchen.

After he fed and settled the horses, he spent extra time with Benjie so the gelding wouldn't feel neglected. When he entered the kitchen, Caitlin was adding a dash of whiskey to the steaming tea in the mugs. "I'm glad Anna fed us supper since I have no energy for serious cooking," she said. "But the shortbread she sent will go very nicely with the tea."

Caitlin had released her hair and the coppery locks fell charmingly around her shoulders. She looked beautiful. Exhausted. Vulnerable. Indomitable.

Irresistible.

David didn't even try to resist. He crossed the kitchen and drew her into his arms for a gentle hug. She relaxed into him and rested her head on his shoulder with a ragged sigh. "It's been a hard day," he said quietly, "but at least you no longer need worry about the Dawsons and their murderous plans."

"That's such a relief! I can't thank you enough for all you've done." She stepped from his embrace and turned to put a number of pieces of shortbread on a plate and set it by the tea mugs. After they were both seated, she raised her mug in a toast. "To peaceful times ahead!"

"Amen to that!" He clinked his mug against hers and they both drank. "Tea and shortbread. I'm so glad to be back in Scotland."

"There is no place like home." Her expression suddenly solemn, Caitlin studied his face. "How married are we?"

He became very still. "Even though we made our vows as a way to disconcert Dawson, we made them in front of witnesses. I'd say...we're as married as we want to be?"

She swallowed hard. "That's an interesting thought."

"I'd already stated my intention of courting you once your affairs were sorted out," he said quietly. "Now they are."

"Traditionally a hand fast was for a year and a day, wasn't it?" She bit her lip. "So we could try marriage to see if we like it?"

David felt as if Sahib had kicked him in the stomach. He began to laugh. "I'm not sure

whether to be delighted or appalled! I would dearly love to for us to be truly wed, but it's alarming to think that for a year and a day I would be on trial. What if you decide on the last day that I am too dull and annoying to keep as a husband?"

She gave him a smile that was half rueful and half mischievous. "I don't think that will happen. I would dearly love to lie with you tonight. If we do, we can see how we feel about marriage tomorrow morning?"

The power of what she was saying took his breath away. "There is nothing I would like better! But first I need paper, pen, and ink."

"Why?" she asked, startled.

"I need to write out a quitclaim, a statement saying that I will have no marital claim on your property. You're a considerable heiress and Braewood is yours," he explained. "I don't want you to ever think that I married you for your inheritance."

"Oh!" She frowned. "I wouldn't think that about you, but since we're not yet entirely sure that we want to be married forever, it's best to be careful. I'll get the writing supplies from my uncle's desk."

When she left the room, David stood and began to pace around the kitchen, needing to sort out his thoughts. When Caitlin returned, he sat down with pen, paper and ink and wrote a brief statement renouncing all marital claims to Braewood and all other property belonging to Caitlin Jane Wallace.

When he was finished, he signed and dated the quitclaim, then turned it toward Caitlin. "You should sign and date this also, and perhaps hide it in some safe place."

Looking unnerved, she did that, then stared at the quitclaim. "This seems so...so legalistic. Is that what marriage is about?"

"Legalities are part of marriage, but not the most important part." He stood and rounded the table and caught her hands to raise her to her feet. "The important part is love, and I love you, Caitlin Jane Wallace. I can't imagine ever loving another woman as much as I love you."

He pulled her into a kiss, gentle at first, but as she responded, he released all the yearning and desire he'd been suppressing since they'd first met. She matched her heat to his, her mouth opening with swift passion and her fingers biting into his back.

"Ah, David, my braw brave lad!" she breathed when she broke the kiss. "How can you love a wild lass like me who stole your pocketknife and your horse and lured you out into a blizzard that might have cost you your life?"

He laughed and drew her close. "I love you for all those things, mo chridhe, because they're proof of your courage and cleverness! Not to mention that you like puppies and my horse likes you..." he paused to kiss the end of her nose, "...and you are so beautiful that when I look at you, my heart melts. I give thanks that my journey home brought me to you."

She raised her face, eyes bright with tears. "You say the loveliest things, my darling David! I've admired a lad or two in my time, but I've never fallen in love. Until now." She caressed his cheek, her fingertips tracing from cheekbone to jaw. "To love someone as much as I love you is...frightening. And yet I know that with you I'll always be safe and loved."

"You will." He raised her hand and kissed the back of her fingers. "Shall we adjourn to your bedroom and celebrate this marriage we have made?"

"Yes! There is one last thing I must do." She lifted the quitclaim from the kitchen table, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the fire.

He caught his breath. "Are you sure?"

"When I was a wee child, my mother said that marriage is a leap of faith." Smiling, she caught his hand. "And I want to make that leap with you!"

It was a night of wonder and laughter and magical intimacy. David had built up the fire in the bedroom so there was warmth and enough light to see as they disrobed each other. He had a beautiful body, strong and fit as a soldier should be, tender and passionate as a husband should be. She loved his touch, loved touching him as they explored each other with wonder and sometimes laughter.

She'd known that she loved him, but she hadn't expected the stunning intimacy of becoming lovers. After as they lay in each other's arms, she said, "I feel very married!"

"So do I," he said with a soft laugh. "Do you have the energy to discuss a few practical matters?"

"Do you mean where we'll live?" she asked. "Here, of course. I'll never leave Braewood."

"Nor would I ask you to." He lifted a loose lock of her hair and used it to stroke her throat in a pleasing way. "I'm reasonably prosperous. For years I assumed that when I returned home, I'd buy a piece of Scotland for my own. Is there any land adjacent to Braewood that I might be able to purchase to add to yours?"

She considered. "There might be. Do you know much about farming?"

"Not a lot, but I can learn. I'm something of a merchant already. While in India, I created an exporting business to send beautiful Asian goods back to Britain. I have a partner in India who takes care of buying and shipping, and I was planning on setting

up a shop in Edinburgh and perhaps London later."

"That sounds lovely. May I have first choice of what you import?"

He laughed. "As you wish. Speaking of that...." He rolled from the bed.

"Come back, please!" she requested. "This bed is too cold without you!"

"This will only take a moment." He added more coal to the fire, then knelt beside his saddlebags, which he'd brought in earlier. After a brief search, he made a satisfied sound and returned to perch on the side of the bed, close enough that she could stroke his thigh.

He caught his breath. "Yes, please, more touching! But first a gift for you." He opened a flat packet and a shimmering length of fabric spilled out in a riot of gold and amber and scarlet. "It's a silk scarf, one of the sort of things I import."

She gasped and involuntarily reached out to touch the fabric. "It looks beautiful!" She caught a handful of material and brushed it against her cheek. "And feels wonderful!"

"It's a wedding gift for you," David said. "Because you are also beautiful and wonderful."

She pulled the wide scarf around her neck, loving the touch of the sensuous fabric on her bare skin, then raised her face to his for a kiss. "I swear and vow that I will cherish this gift and you for all my live long days, David."

The kiss brought him into the bed for more laughter and passion. When their sated bodies settled into a peaceful embrace again, he said, "You know that I was traveling to my family home at Falkirk to celebrate the holidays with my family. Will you go with me so they can all see what a lucky man I am?"

She tensed. "Your terrifying sister Juliet will be there?"

"Yes, and I expect that you'll become fast friends." He chuckled. "Probably."

"That is not an encouraging comment, but yes, it will be my pleasure to go with you. My duty as well since we're now mates! I'll ask Andrew and his wife Jenny if they'll stay here at Braewood until we return."

"Perfect." He kissed her forehead. "As perfect as you are, my wife."

She laughed. "I'm far from perfect, but I'll do my best." She settled down alongside of him, her arm around his waist. "I love you, David."

"As I love you, Caitlin." He drew her close against him and whispered, "Now and forever, amen."

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Christmas Eve, midday

Falkirk, Scotland

"T here it is! Falkirk Castle!" David's voice bubbled with excitement as they rode into view of their destination. They'd spent several days on an unhurried ride up the Scottish east coast, with the weather mild for late December. Now they were arriving about the time they'd planned--which was surprising for Scotland in winter.

"Goodness, it really is a castle!" Caitlin said as she studied the massive stone and turreted structure that stood above the North Sea.

"The oldest bits are 15th century, but there have been many changes and improvements over the years," David explained. "The more recent lairds have made the family living quarters more comfortable. I look forward to seeing the improvements Ian and Laura have made. I'm sure that Christmas, Boxing Day, and Hogmanay will all be celebrated properly."

She pointed. "I assume that small mountain of logs and kindling will be the Hogmanay bonfire?"

"Yes, and a grand sight it will be!"

"After Hogmanay we can go home if I survive that long," she said in a grave tone that was only partly joking.

David halted his horse so she did the same. Catching her gaze, he said quietly, "It really won't be that bad, love. My family will be more than willing to welcome my bride for my sake, and once they get to know you, they'll be over the moon."

Her smile was not quite steady, but she knew his words were sincere. She was just uncertain if his rosy view of his family's welcome was accurate. But the intimacy and honesty they'd shared in their marriage bed had brought her to a level of love and trust beyond anything she'd ever imagined. Even if the Camerons were less than enthralled by David's choice of a wife, surely they could all manage to be civil for the fortnight of the holidays.

As they neared the castle stables, she remarked, "From what you say, the place must be packed to the rafters with guests. How long has it been since you've seen your mother?"

David thought, then winced. "Fifteen years. The family managed to get together when Juliet married Ross, but then we all headed to different corners of the empire. Ian and Laura are the ones I've seen most recently, a mere three years ago."

"A blink of the eye by comparison," Caitlin agreed. Despite David's efforts to reassure her, she was still anxious. She'd never had a large family and now she would be drowning in Camerons! "You're sure no one will sneer at my riding clothes? I want to look respectable for my first introduction to your family!"

"Not necessary." He grinned at her. "Respectability is not a very valued quality among Camerons."

She hoped he was right. They reached the open double doors of the stables and were greeted by a weathered old man who had the look of a head groom. "Captain David!" the man exclaimed. "His lordship said you were coming, but I said I'd believe it when I saw it!"

"Believe it!" David dismounted and caught the old man's hand. "It's grand to see you again, Auld Duncan! Have you thought about how within the next few years there will be trains running up the East Coast of Scotland?"

"I'll believe it when I see it!" Auld Duncan said with amusement. "We'll still need horses, laddy boy, and that's a fine pair you and the lady are riding."

David grinned. "They're fine indeed! Now let me introduce you to my very fine wife, Caitlin Wallace." He turned and helped her from Maeve. She didn't need the aid, but she welcomed his touch.

"A Scottish lass?" the ostler said with interest.

"As Scottish as you are, Auld Duncan," Caitlin said cheerfully as she offered him a hand. She'd always been grateful that Scotland was less formal than England.

"I'll take care of your horses while you join the gathering," the groom said.

David introduced the horses by name, then handed over the reins. As they headed toward the nearest castle entrance, he rested a comforting palm on Caitlin's lower back.

"If you're wrong and they hate me, I'll never forgive you, Captain Cameron!" she said, not quite able to suppress a note of anxiety in her voice.

"I'm not wrong." He stopped and pulled her into a quick kiss. "And you'll forgive me because I adore you and you're finding that you like being adored."

She had to laugh. "Yes, but I do hope I won't spend the night sobbing with humiliation."

He kissed her again. "I would never subject you to possible humiliation, mo chridhe .

Now come along and we'll get the introductions over quickly."

The door led into a small entry way which contained boots, a broom, and several pegs for hanging garments. David removed his winter coat and hung it up so Caitlin did the same. She spent several moments adjusting her beautiful new silk scarf which lay in elegant loops around her neck. Even the primmest of female relations wouldn't be able to find fault with that!

They joined hands and climbed the stone steps. At the top stood a pair of tall carved doors that had surely seen many generations of Camerons. Voices and laughter could be heard from the other side. "It sounds like most of the family is in the main reception room on the other of these doors," David said. "Courage, mo chridhe !"

In for a penny, in for a pound. Jaw set, she entered beside him when he opened the doors. The hall was warm with fires roaring in two fireplaces, garlands of greens hung around the room, and in the center was a very grand, very English Christmas tree that sparkled with decorations and added a tangy pine scent to the air. A number of people, many of them with different shades of red and auburn hair, ambled around the room or sat on comfortable looking chairs and sofas.

For a moment, the newcomers weren't noticed. Then a female voice called out excitedly, "It's David! Our lad has finally come home!"

There was a burst of exclamations and a tidal wave of Camerons swept down on David, led by a woman whose speed belied the silver in her auburn hair. Surely that was his mother embracing him, weeping.

Close behind was a tall, rather diabolically handsome man with dark auburn hair and a piratical eye patch. That would be his brother, Ian, Lord Falkirk. At his side was a lovely dark haired woman with a warm smile and exotically tilted eyes.

Dear God, there was his alarming sister Juliet, it couldn't be anyone else with that

height and bright hair! She wasn't alarming now as she embraced David with joyous laughter. He hugged her back delightedly.

A gentle hand caught Caitlin's arm and drew her back. "I'd best save you from being trampled," an easy male voice said. "Don't worry, they're just Camerons being Camerons."

She looked up, shocked speechless at the sight of the handsomest man she'd ever seen in her life. His stunning blond looks were as English as his well-bred voice. After a dazzled moment, she said, "I'm guessing that you are Ross, English husband to David's sister Juliet?"

He grinned. "Yes, I'm the quiet boring one every family needs. You have something of a look of Juliet, actually. Are you skilled with a rifle?"

She blinked at the question. "I'm considered a tolerably good shot."

"The resemblance increases. I must congratulate David on his taste in wives."

"Indeed David's taste is excellent," observed a tall dark man with a slight, indefinable accent. "I'm Mikahl and neither I nor my wife Sara are actually members of the family, but we are tangled up with Camerons in various ways so we are invited to these most enjoyable gatherings." He slanted an amused glance at Ross. "Don't believe Ross when he says he's boring. He's the most dangerous Englishman I know."

"Only accidentally dangerous," Ross protested. "I've just had the bad judgment to travel to wild distant places that turned out to be infested with lethal tribesmen and dangerous mountains and deserts."

Something clicked in Caitlin's memory. "Surely you're Ross Carlisle, the explorer and travel writer? I love your books!"

He beamed at her. "Thank you! Clearly you will fit right into this clan of Camerons."

She made a face. "I'm feeling like a very plain squab in the midst of a gathering of eagles and peacocks!"

Both Ross and Mikahl immediately assured her that only did she fit in, but that she was an excellent addition to the family. She sensed that the men had a long and deep friendship, and they were distracting her with banter so she wouldn't feel alone and awkward. It was working, too.

They were joined by a petite blonde with serene eyes who tucked her hand around Mikahl's arm. "It's lovely to meet you, Caitlin! I'm Sara, wife to Mikahl, cousin to Ross, and long time friend to Juliet. I'm here to verify that the Camerons are the most welcoming of clans. They've even accepted an undersized blond Englishwoman like me, so a proper redheaded Scottish lass like you is a delight!"

"You're exactly the right size," Mikahl said with a warm smile as he patted the hand that clasped his arm.

The clamor had died down after all his family members had greeted David. Now he approached Caitlin with a tall older woman whose hair was a mixture of auburn and silver. One look at her handsome face showed where the family looks had come from.

David said, "Mother, it's my great pleasure to introduce you to my wife, Caitlin Wallace,"

Since Caitlin was wearing trousers instead of skirts, she couldn't curtsy so she improvised with a half bow. "It's my honor to meet you, Lady Cameron. Thank you for raising such a splendid son!"

"The honor is mine, Miss Wallace." The older woman embraced her. "It's every woman's dream to see her children married to excellent spouses!"

Caitlin couldn't prevent herself from saying, "How can you know that I'm excellent when we've barely met?"

Lady Cameron laughed. "Because I have excellent maternal intuition, and David has excellent judgment. I'm sure he gave you this glorious scarf." She lightly touched the folds of silk that shimmered around Caitlin's throat and shoulders. "He was always the sanest of my children."

Ian Cameron grinned. "I would protest that except that she's right." He offered his hand. "I'm your host, Ian Cameron. Welcome to Falkirk!"

His handshake was warm and strong. "I'm delighted to be here, Lord Falkirk," Caitlin replied. "My apologies for my informal attire. David swore that no one would mind."

"And he was right," the dark haired woman at Ian's side said cheerfully. "The first time I met Juliet, I was wearing my oldest gown and crawling around under a table collecting flowers that had been knocked over by the castle tomcat. Juliet swept into the room looking quite magnificent, knelt down beside me to help collect the flowers, and we've been friends ever since." She gave her sister-in-law a fond glance.

"We Camerons are never formal if we can avoid it," Juliet said with a warm smile. "I'm glad you're a Scot since you'll understand us better."

Caitlin caught her husband's hand and drew him to her side. "You were right about how wonderful and accepting your family is, David!" She looked around at the group with a smile. There weren't as many of them as she'd thought at first, but they were still far more family than she'd ever had. "Thank you so much for marrying me, mo chridhe !"

He kissed her rather more than casually. "The pleasure is equally mine, my love."

Lady Cameron's brows drew together. "I thought you'd only just arrived back in

Britain, David. How long have you been married?"

They exchanged a glance. "Four days, I think?" Caitlin replied.

Ian's brows arched. "How long had you known each other before?"

"Two days, I think?" David said. "Or was it three?"

"How on earth did you manage to fall in love in such a short time?" Juliet gasped.

Ross murmured, "It took much less time than that for me to fall in love with you, my dear. It was the length of one dance, as I recall."

Juliet's cheeks turned pink as her gaze dropped. "I'd have said two dances."

Ignoring his sister's comment, Ian said, "Tell us the story of how you met and fell instantly in love, David."

David's expression turned thoughtful. "I was certainly impressed by Caitlin's thieving skills when she slipped my pocket knife from my coat, and even more impressed when she stole my horse and managed to stay on his back as she galloped away into a blizzard." He gave Caitlin a laughing glance. "But I knew I was in love several hours later when she aimed a rifle at me after I arrived at her kitchen door. That's when I knew Caitlin was the only woman for me!"

Caitlin blushed scarlet, now understanding Ross's question about her skill with a rifle. Her answer clearly qualified her to become a Cameron.

David's words produced a chorus of surprised exclamations. Laura asked with interest, "That explains why he fell in love with you, but how did you fell in love with him?"

Caitlin caught David's gaze and felt a flare of intimacy and absolute certainty. "Once I met him, how could I not love him?"

David smiled and brushed a light kiss on her lips. "It was fate, mo chridhe."

Laura nodded approvingly. "Now we must learn the whole story! I'll order refreshments so we can gather around to hear your tale."

The family did exactly that with David and Caitlin seated in the middle of a circle of chairs and sofas. All the couples sat with their mates, Caitlin noticed. Ross and Juliet linked their hands, Laura was tucked against Ian's side, and Mikahl had his arm around Sara. They all looked like happy people.

Holding Caitlin's hand, David did most of the talking with her making additions as she thought needed. When he finished, he asked her, "Did I miss anything important?"

Caitlin hesitated as a powerful conviction swept through her. "As you explained, we had fasted on impulse in order to disconcert a potential murderer."

He squeezed her hand. "But a true marriage nonetheless. A story to tell our grandchildren." He thought a moment, then chuckled. "Or perhaps not."

Caitlin stood and caught David's hands so they stood facing each other. Solemnly she loosened the long scarf and wrapped one end around his neck so they were joined by the shimmering silk. "I'd like to end our tale by saying that now that we've joined this family holiday gathering, it's the perfect time to marry in the kirk with all of you around us." Her gaze met David's. "Will you marry me again, my darling David?"

"Of course, mo chridhe !" His expression joyous, he embraced her with tenderness and delight.

As applause broke out, Caitlin whispered, "Your family is the best Christmas gift ever, David!"

He smiled tenderly. "And you're my gift to them, my love. We'll please them best by living happily ever after!"

She smiled into his eyes, and knew that they would.

Now and forever, amen!