



Highlander's Caged Rose (A Highland Ruse of Love #7)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Ye were made for me, Moira, don't ye see?"

Moira MacDonnell is trying to escape from a past she can't outrun. When she collapses on the land of a brooding Highland laird, she will do whatever she needs to survive.

Laird Niall MacCraith trusts no one, especially not a beautiful stranger with secrets in her eyes. But desire is a dangerous thing, and Niall is a man who protects what's his.

Clan politics brew, lust ignites, and deadly secrets are uncovered. Should Moira keep lying, or risk everything for a love that could destroy her?

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PROLOGUE

Moira entered her bedroom with a feeling of sick dread, hoping against hope that her husband, Roy MacDonnell, was drunk. He and a group of friends had been drinking as always that evening. She had heard the riotous commotion, the kind that only a crowd of inebriated men make, from her parlour, and knew that a great deal of whisky and wine had been swallowed that evening!

Moira wished he would save her the trouble of fending him off if he was feeling amorous. He had a room of his own, but he tried to spend as many nights in Moira's as he could.

He was a cruel man, both in word and in deed, and Moira bore the bruises and scars to prove it, yet she had been forced to marry him. Indeed, she had been sold to him to settle her equally cruel and heartless father's gambling debts, so she had effectively been thrown out of the frying pan and into the fire.

He had managed to have intercourse with her only once, on their wedding night, but it had been such a horrific experience that she had vowed never to let it happen again. She would have used a weapon to keep him at bay, but he was much older than she was. Because of this, nature took its course, and his age, as well as the fact that he spent much of his time completely under the influence of alcohol, rendered him incapable anyway.

However, he took out his frustration on Moira with his tongue and his fists; although he was impotent, he was still strong, and he hurt her very badly sometimes even though she fought back with all her might.

Moira was hoping to creep into the room unseen. She was not holding a candle, but there was a little light from the full moon, drawing a line of light across the floor from a gap where the curtains did not quite meet. By its feeble light she could see that her bed was empty, and she breathed a sigh of relief, then yawned and took a step towards it, intending to tuck herself beneath the blankets and sink into a blissful slumber. She had been walking and riding all day to avoid Roy McDonnell, and now she was completely exhausted.

However, Moira never made it to the bed. Her foot landed on something soft and lumpy, causing her to stumble and almost fall to the ground. When she looked down, Moira drew in a startled breath as she dimly made out her husband's pale, skeletal face.

She felt a wave of relief. He had passed out, so she was safe for a while. She began to get to her feet, but something stopped her, and she looked down at him, perplexed, for a moment, before kneeling beside him again.

Suddenly, with a jolt of fright, she realised what was wrong; her husband was not breathing. Moira put her shaking palm on his chest to feel for a heartbeat, but there was none, and when she pulled up his eyelid to see if there was any reaction, his skin was cool, although not quite cold yet.

Was he dead? For a few moments, she was assailed by a mixture of emotions, which included a wicked pleasure that her husband would never trouble her again.

After that came a rush of almost paralysing fear. If she was caught bending over her husband's corpse, whoever found them would assume that she was responsible for his death, since it was no secret that Moira hated the man.

Moira jumped to her feet, and looked around herself in sheer panic, as if she expected to find someone about to discover her. Her stomach was boiling with terror, and her

heart began to beat a wild tattoo. She had begun to tremble all over. However, she could not allow herself to succumb to the panic that was beginning to overwhelm her, since time was of the essence.

She looked around her, trying to stay focused. I must get out of here, she thought fearfully. Pull yourself together, Moira!

At that moment, the door opened, and Moira let out an involuntary scream of fright, backing away from the corpse and instinctively searching for a weapon.

“Don’t come near me, or you will be very sorry!” she cried, her voice trembling.

However, she need not have worried. “Mistress,” said a soft voice. “Dinnae worry. It’s only me, Jean.”

A woman stepped into the light—a short, plump, elderly woman with a kind face who smiled at Moira before looking down at the body of the Laird. She was Moira’s personal maid servant, who had worked for her for years. Moira felt a wave of relief sweep over her.

“Is he deid?” she asked, peering down at the body on the floor. She did not sound horrified or surprised, merely curious.

“Yes,” Moira replied, then added hastily: “But I did not kill him, Jean—you have to believe me!”

“I believe ye, hen,” Jean said reassuringly, then her voice became grim. “But I am glad somebody did because he was a monster, an’ he deserved tae die.”

Moira was astounded. She had known Jean for years, and had always been such a generous, calm and loving person. Moira had never heard her raise her voice in anger,

and the bitterness in her old servant's voice shocked her.

She was just about to voice the thought when Jean spoke again.

“Time ye were somewhere else, hen! I was comin’ tae tell ye that I saw master’s servant leavin’ a wee while ago. Now I realise why the rush in the middle of the night. He is off tae tell your brother-in-law.” Her voice was grim and determined as she grabbed Moira’s shoulders and looked her in the eye. “You must flee!”

She quickly lit a candle, then began to pull the plainest and most serviceable of Moira’s clothes out of her mistress’s wardrobe and stuff them into a large cloth bag, which she usually used to carry laundry in.

While she was busy, Moira collected all the coins she had in a leather pouch. She had no idea where she was going, but she knew that she would have to work that problem out somewhere along the way. Now there was no more time to lose; everything was packed, and although she was terrified, Moira knew that she had to be on her way. Time was of the essence.

She turned to embrace Jean, who hugged her tightly in return. “Change your name,” she advised firmly. “An’ go as far as ye can, hen. God bless ye. I will be thinkin’ o’ ye.”

Moira could see that Jean’s eyes were glittering with tears, and knew that hers were too. “Thank you, Jean,” she said gratefully. “I will miss you so much. Goodbye.”

She raced outside and looked around for anything to take her away. A saddled horse was tied to a tree close to the estate entrance. She quickly mounted and took a deep breath. It was now or never.

The sky was absolutely clear that night, and it was bitterly cold, but Moira was

wrapped in a thick woollen cloak and hardly noticed as she galloped away from her prison. She was absolutely focused on her mission; she had to get away, and this time she was determined that no one was going to stop her. But where would she go?

She thought she had enough coin to last for a few months, but she had not had time to count the silver, so she could not be sure. With no aim and no direction in mind, all she could do was move forward and hope for the best.

Perhaps she could get a job as a governess, she thought. She was reasonably intelligent and could speak French and Italian fluently. Yet, she had no real experience of dealing with children, and could produce no references.

Maybe she could work as a lady's companion, then. She knew it would not be a very exciting life, but then, beggars could not be choosers. At least she would be out of danger, especially if she travelled southwards to the busy, bustling cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. She was sure there would be more opportunities there, although she had always lived in the quiet of the countryside, and it would be a challenge.

The realisation that she was finally free of the vile man hit her. Moira began to feel a little happier, and started to make some plans. She was not stupid, she knew, but she was not too proud to take work as a tavern wench or a chambermaid if the worst came to the worst. At least she would have enough to eat.

Suddenly, Moira felt a prickling at the back of her neck. It was a feeling she had experienced many times in her life; a forewarning that she was in imminent danger from something or someone. She had never ignored it, and she did not know either, but spurred her horse into a canter to escape the invisible threat.

However, despite the moonlight, the road was hard to follow in the dark, and she could see only a few yards ahead. It was this that enabled the bandits who were waiting for her to spring out from the darkness and surround her.

Moirra could barely see them, but she could certainly hear them as they circled her. As the host of thugs surrounded her, shouting filthy obscenities, terror took over her.

She felt greedy hands reaching out for her and batted them away, at the same time turning her horse in a circle to confuse them.

However, she was outnumbered.

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“Come on, lads!” The voice of one of the men, presumably the ringleader, rang out gleefully above the din of horses’ hooves striking the earth and the cries of triumph from the other men. “What a beauty we have here! Get her!”

One of them stretched out and grabbed the reins of Moira’s horse, but she reached into the pocket of her dress to grab a small knife she had stashed there at the last minute before she left. She swiped it sideways and slashed the man’s hand, causing him to scream in pain. His horse reared in panic and almost collided with Moira’s, but she managed to dodge him at the last possible second.

However, in doing so, she rammed the side of another bandit’s mount. He reached over and knocked the knife out of her hand, then grabbed her hand and tried to haul her towards him. The pull was so strong that she felt as if her arm was being wrenched out of its socket. Moira felt herself slipping out of the saddle and pushed back as hard as she could, knowing that if she fell onto the ground, she was in danger of being trampled to death.

Yet however hard she tried, the man was too strong, and Moira felt herself slipping inexorably towards the earth. Then, just as she had given up hope, a shout came ringing out of the darkness and more horses rode into the fray.

Moira’s heart sank, and she let go of the reins and fell onto the ground. The last thing she remembered was the sight and sound of dozens of hooves drumming around her, making the ground shake.

She had stopped caring, though. She was going to die, and there was nothing she could do about it. She closed her eyes and rolled into a ball, then waited for the end to come.

Alerted by the screams of a woman who was obviously in great distress, Finn Morrison, Captain of the Guard at Baltyre Castle, urged his stallion into a gallop and rode with his nightly patrol towards the sound.

Just then, his Laird, Niall McPhee, came galloping up behind them and paused for a split second behind Finn's shoulder, but when he saw the woman falling from her mount, fury flared up inside him like a raging fire.

He despised men who terrorised women, and now he plunged into the fray, causing the bandits to scatter into a disorganised mess. Niall rode a great black stallion called Logie who had a fiery temper and was now rearing up and using his great hooves to knock the bandits off their mounts.

He and Niall made a terrifying team. Niall had a very long reach and a huge broadsword which he wielded to great effect, stabbing it viciously, slashing it sideways, causing some men to fall off while trying to avoid it. There, they were either trampled by the horses or severely dealt with by the rest of the guards.

Niall drove the point of his sword into one of the bandits' shoulders, and the man screamed, but somehow managed to ride away. Niall would have followed him, but was distracted by a blow to the back of his arm. Without thinking, he slashed his sword backwards and was rewarded by an ear-splitting scream before the bandit fell from his mount, blood spurting from his neck.

The patrol managed to capture a few of them, but most escaped, and Finn made a resolution then and there to get rid of the scourge of their terror once and for all as soon as he could.

Now, however, there was another matter to attend to, something much more urgent. The woman on the ground was moaning in pain. Niall dismounted, then instructed one of his men to tie a piece of rope above a wound on her knee as a tourniquet. After they helped her onto his horse, they proceeded to ride back to Baltyre.

The young woman had lapsed into unconsciousness and was limp and lifeless in his grasp. He could dimly see her fine features, but after the ordeal she had gone through, her clothes were torn and tattered, and she was covered from head to foot in mud.

By the time they reached the castle, he was beginning to fear she wouldn't make it. However, just as they reached the gates, her eyelids fluttered open. She looked around in panic and found herself in the arms of a stranger on the back of a horse that was not her own.

"Where am I?" she asked fearfully.

On every side, there were heavily armed mounted men, each one of them menacing and terrible. "Take my coin, take my jewels!" she cried desperately. "But please don't hurt me! I will not tell anyone what happened here. You have my word, just let me go!"

She thought that the bandits had captured her, and she was being taken to their headquarters. For a moment, Niall imagined what would have happened to her there.

"Don't worry," Niall said reassuringly, feeling infinitely sorry for her. "We are not bandits. We scared them away. I am taking you to Baltyre Castle, and you will come to no harm from anyone there. I will take you to our healer as soon as we are inside."

The woman looked unsure whether to believe him or not. Perhaps she was thinking this was another ploy to fool her into trusting him, while she was genuinely being carried to safety. Yet even if she was being carried into danger, there was nothing she

could do about it.

It was at that moment that she screamed in agony, as though a bolt of excruciating pain shot up. She thrashed around in Niall's arms till once more she passed out.

Niall ordered one of his men to ride ahead so that the healer would be ready to treat the young woman when they arrived, then he looked down at Moira's leg and grimaced. The tourniquet had worked for a while, but it had loosened during Moira's struggles and blood was now leaking from the injury. He could not risk going any faster because of the darkness, and the risk of making things worse, so he gritted his teeth and rode on.

When Moira opened her eyes again, she felt well-rested, and although her leg still hurt a little, it was nothing compared to the agony she had been in earlier. She looked around at her unfamiliar surroundings, confused for a moment, before her memory returned. She had a vague remembrance of coming through a huge set of metal gates, hearing the clatter of hoofbeats on flagstones and the rumble of men's deep voices.

A young woman bent over her, smiling. "How are ye feelin', hen?" she asked, as she put a hand on her forehead to judge her temperature.

"Better, thank you," Moira answered hoarsely. She rubbed her eyes and blinked in the daylight which was streaming through the window. Where was she, she wondered?

"Ye dinnae have a fever, anyway. An' your wound seems tae be healin' well—there is nae infection."

Moira sighed with relief. "I am so glad to hear that." Infection was one of the many causes of an agonising death after an injury. "How long am I here?"

"Well, after I bound and cleaned your wound to stop the bleeding, I sedated ye. Ye

fell into a deep sleep for two days.”

When Moira’s lower lip started quivering from panic, the woman quickly added, “Dinnae fret, hen! I spared no effort to assure that ye would make a full recovery.”

“Thank you, really.”

She was snuggled under cosy blankets and the healer came up to her and raised a glass of water to her lips, which Moira sipped greedily.

“What is your name, hen?” the healer asked curiously, with a slight smile.

“Moira.”

“I’m Sandie Aitken. I’m the healer in this Keep,” Sandie informed her. “Ye were in a terrible state, but the Captain saw to it that your leg was bandaged so ye didnae bleed tae death.”

Moira was stunned. “I had no idea it was so serious,” she breathed.

“Dinnae worry,” Sandie said soothingly. “Ye are fine now, hen.”

“Am I, though? I don’t even know where I am. Whose Keep is this?”

“We are in Baltyre Castle, home of the McPhee family.”

Moira felt a stab of fear, having heard that the Laird was a fearsome man. Even if his Captain saved her, and brought her here, did not mean the Laird had the best of intentions for her. A Captain must do his work, after all.

“Now ye must eat somethin’ tae help ye get your strength back, then ye can have a

good long soak in the bath. How does that sound?”

“Wonderful.” Moira forced a smile, and felt her face stretching in an uncomfortable way, as though she had not smiled for months. Sandie helped her sit up, then sent for some soup and bread, which Moira devoured greedily.

“It’s best no’ tae eat a big heavy meal at first, hen,” Sandie told her as she took her tray away. “Let us get ye washed now. When ye are clean, ye will feel like a new woman.”

Moira felt sated and comfortable in a way she had not felt for a long while, but she had no time to relax because at that moment the door opened and a man stepped into the room. She had a feeling that she had seen him before, but surely, she would have remembered someone like this?

Moira was transfixed. This was not just any man, but the biggest, most masculine man she had ever beheld. His light-brown hair, streaked with strands of blond, fell to his shoulders in waves, and his eyes, the most intense green she had ever seen, met hers and held her gaze. For a long moment, it seemed that only the two of them existed in the deep silence that settled around them.

“M’Laird,” Sandie greeted him, giving him a polite curtsy, which Niall acknowledged with a nod.

He closed the door behind him and walked over to stand beside Moira’s bed, then looked down at her, frowning for a few moments. At last, he asked, “What is your name?” His voice was a husky rumble, and sounded as though it came from somewhere deep inside his broad chest.

“I’m Moira.”

The Laird smirked, but he was not amused. “Your full name, lass.”

“Moira... Jamieson,” she replied without thinking.

She had somehow, by some miracle, plucked the surname out of thin air, and now she looked back at the big man, terrified. What was he going to do with her?

“I am sorry to intrude like this, My Laird, but I promise to be gone as soon as I can.”

To her surprise, he shook his head. “There is no need for haste,” he told her. “You may stay for as long as it takes you to recover.” He leaned over the bed and looked at her keenly. “Why were you riding alone at night, lass? It seems like a very dangerous thing for a young woman to be doing.” He looked at her suspiciously. “Were you running away from something—or someone?”

Moira hesitated. Should she trust him? What if he was just another abuser like her father and husband? She had to be cautious; her husband’s brother was probably looking for her.

She nodded, looking down at her hands to avoid his alluring eyes. “Aye, My Laird. I was trying to escape from my betrothed; he is a cruel beast, and I am absolutely terrified of marrying him.”

Moira’s tone was bitter as she told her lie, but the emotion inside her was genuine as she thought of her husband’s treatment. Husband, betrothed—what did it matter? Cruelty was cruelty.

“He had me imprisoned in his house until the wedding was over, but tonight I was able to get away. I thought I had managed to escape before the bandits attacked me. I don’t know what would have happened to me if your men had not come along and rescued me. Thank you, My Laird, I think I owe you my life.”

The Laird studied Moira for a long moment before commenting. When he spoke, his voice was trembling with anger. "I am deeply sorry this happened to you, Mistress."

He watched as her expression turned to one of relief, but her eyes were full of tears, and he realised that she was in shock. He knew this because he had seen it many times in men who had come from a battlefield where they had seen blood spilled and violence beyond their capability to cope with it. It affected them whether they had seen it or inflicted it; indeed, he had suffered from it himself more than once.

Now he was gazing at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, looking almost like some magical creature from a fantasy story. He could not stop himself from staring at her pale, porcelain skin and silver blonde hair, her large pale blue eyes and full, Cupid's bow mouth that was begging to be kissed. It was a very long time since a woman had had such an effect on him, and he felt his traitorous male body begin to betray him.

Then he chided himself for being so stupid; after all, he had just met the woman. Her beauty might be covering a black heart full of treachery. She might turn out to be a spiteful shrew who was only interested in his wealth and status. After all, he had a lot to offer; wealth, property, and a host of servants at her beck and call.

He knew her story about the bandits was genuine because he had been there, but it was a very long time since he had been able to trust anyone. There might be a hundred things about her that he would find repulsive. No, she could stay under his roof for as long as it took her to recuperate, then he would send her on her way.

"Thank you," Moira said gratefully. She sighed and wiped away her tears with the heels of her hands, then gave him a shy smile. "I feel much better now."

At that moment, two manservants came in carrying a copper tub, which they placed behind a screen. The Laird stood up, and Moira was struck again by his size. He was

a sturdily-built man, but he seemed to take up more than physical space, as if he had an aura around him that made him larger than he actually was.

“I will leave you now,” he told her. “You are in very capable hands.” He gave her a slight bow, turned and walked away, pausing at the door to have a word with Sandie. She nodded and smiled at him before he left.

“What did he say to you?” Moira asked curiously.

“He told me tae let him know if your condition became worse,” Sandie replied. “He is a very kind man, although he does his best tae hide it. He seems very fierce, but he has a heart o’ gold. We a’ love him.” Then she winked. “An’ it is very nice tae have such a handsome Laird!”

Lying in the bath in the warm scented water, she was finally able to really relax for the first time in months. Were her fortunes changing at last? She hoped so. Then she thought of Laird McPhee. What if he mistreated her, or worse still handed her back to McDonnell? Once more, a tide of panic swept over her.

How far away was Baltyre Castle from her previous home? Had she ridden far enough for the two men not to be in the same social circle, or would they know each other? Moira’s heart began to beat so fast that the warm water no longer soothed her, and she started to panic, then wondered if she could possibly ride away that night. She took a deep breath and tried to calm down, then called Sandie.

“How soon will it be before I am able to ride again?” she asked.

Sandie’s eyes widened with disbelief, then her expression changed to a deep frown. “Nae less than a week, an’ even then I wouldnae advise it, hen,” she answered. “I would leave it for at least two.”

Moirá's heart sank. Two weeks! No, she decided. Healed or not, she would get out of this place as soon as she possibly could.

Outside, Niall called Finn, his face a mask of rage. "I want you and your best men from the garrison to round up those vermin infesting my land," he said furiously. "No one should ever have to be concerned about their safety in Baltyre. I will not stand for it!"

Finn looked at his master apprehensively. He knew this tone; when the thugs were caught—God help them!

After three days in the sick room, Moira was longing for a chamber of her own. The sick room was comfortable, warm, and clean, but there was no privacy, due to the constant comings and goings.

Meals were brought to her, but Laird McPhee had not come to see her again. She was grateful for everything that was being done for her. The Laird might be very good to look at, but he was still a man, and men were not to be trusted.

Moira rested as much as she could, and gradually the wound on her leg began to heal. Her only problem was boredom, since her active mind was impatient for some stimulation.

After another three days, Sandie inspected her injury and said in a satisfied tone, “Well, Mistress, ye are well on the way tae gettin’ better. This is healin’ very nicely. I will take the stitches out now.”

Moira flinched and drew in a sharp breath, but Sandie, seeing her, patted her on the shoulder and smiled at her. “There are only six stitches here, and it might hurt a wee bit, but it will only be for a wee minute. Stay as still as ye can now.”

Her tone was reassuring, and Moira swallowed nervously and closed her eyes tightly as Sandie cut the stitches with a small pair of clippers. She felt a series of sharp nips, but the pain disappeared almost at once, and she opened her eyes to see Sandie washing her wound before wrapping it securely in a clean bandage. There was no sign of any blood, just clean new skin.

“Ye will always have a scar there, Mistress,” Sandie said regretfully, “but I think everythin’ else is fine now, an’ ye should have nae more trouble.”

“Thank you.” Moira reached out to take Sandie’s hands in her own, surprised at how rough they were. Sandie obviously worked very hard. “Thank you, Sandie. You have been so good to me.”

To Moira’s surprise, Sandie blushed. “I am just daein’ my job, hen,” she said. “Nae need tae thank me.”

“You do it very well,” Moira said. “Laird McPhee is lucky to have you.”

“Ye are too kind,” Sandie protested, but she was smiling. “I love what I dae, so daein’ it well isnae too hard.”

“I wish I could do something like this,” Moira told her, somewhat bitterly. “It must be wonderful to know you are so useful.”

Sandie replied nothing, merely carried on with what she was doing for a while before looking up. She smiled at Moira. “I wish a’ my patients were like you. It’s nice tae be appreciated.”

Moira was astonished, and for the first time in a long while she felt warm inside. “Thank you,” she said, with a smile. The small compliment filled her with warmth, and she sighed with satisfaction. Could she possibly hope that her life was improving?

“Now,” Sandie said briskly. “I think we can move ye out o’ here an’ gie ye a room o’ your own because your leg has nearly healed up an’ doesnae need me tae bandage it every day. Come back if ye have any bother.”

“It sounds lovely,” Moira said gratefully. She had seen nothing but the same four walls for the last week and was seething with impatience and frustration. Now she could finally plan her escape.

Sandie was immediately called away to see to one of the stable hands, who had been injured by one of the horses. Moira washed quickly, combed her hair then looked at herself in the small cracked mirror, which was the only one she could find.

She had a fading bruise on her forehead, but the pain had gone, although she had more cuts and scratches elsewhere on her body. She looked passable, she thought, although definitely not her best!

Moira presumed that someone was coming to meet her to tell her where to go, but when she had waited for half an hour and no-one had shown up, she began to wonder if she had been forgotten. She did not know her way around the castle and her leg, although healed to a certain extent, was not yet able to bear her weight for a long period of time.

As well as that, she knew that if anyone did come to fetch her, and she was missing she would have no idea where to go, so she decided to move just a little way away from the sick room, but not so far away that she would miss anyone who was looking for her.

Moira was able to go a little way along the corridor outside the sick room, and was surprised to find herself looking out on the area where the guards were training from the window. As luck would have it, Laird McPhee was practising his martial skills with them that day.

She watched, wide-eyed, as he advanced towards one of his guards with a broadsword, admiring the way his powerful muscles flowed and bunched under his skin as he moved. The expression on his face was one of grim determination, his

green eyes shadowed by his heavy dark brows. He truly was a magnificent specimen of manhood; indeed, she could not take her eyes off him.

His opponent was forced backwards by the Laird's sheer strength and finally surrendered. After that, the two men laughed and shook hands, then moved on to other battles. Moira had always been of the opinion that men fought battles simply because they loved aggression and violence, while women did not.

However, she knew that there was a difference between this friendly rivalry and the kind of bullying to which she had been subjected her whole life. Although she was glad, she was a woman, she had often thought that she would love to try being a man for just one day so that she could have fought back against her husband and father. How she would love to have broken both their noses with a well-placed fist!

Then suddenly, as he turned, the Laird looked up and caught her eye. Their gazes held each other for a moment, as if unable to let go. For a second, Moira thought he was going to approach the window she was standing by, then he changed his mind and walked away in the opposite direction.

For some reason, Moira felt disappointed, then chided herself for feeling that way. Even if Niall McPhee cared to ask her how she was feeling, she reminded herself that he was a man, and men were never to be trusted. She dared not even think of the damage he could do to her.

She sighed and made her way back to the sick room, resigned to a long wait, but had not been there for more than a few moments when she heard the door opening. Expecting to see Sandie, she looked up and smiled, but her gaze met that of a kindly looking old man instead. He had receding grey hair and faded blue eyes, and had obviously been quite tall, but now he was a little stooped.

Moira frowned, puzzled.

“Mistress Jamieson?” he asked with a smile.

“Yes,” Moira answered. “And you are?”

“Gerald McNicholl,” he replied. “I am one of Niall’s councillors. He has invited you to stay as his guest, and has given you a bedchamber of your own. Let me show you.”

Moira’s leg was beginning to pain her again, but she obediently followed the man, who helped her climb stairs and open doors. At last, they arrived in a room that could not have been more suited to her had she designed it herself.

It was not too big, but was beautifully appointed, with a marble fireplace, silk brocade curtains and polished mahogany furniture. The bed was classically beautiful, its headboard and posts intricately carved, its mattress and pillows clad in maroon silk. Around the walls Moira could see a variety of paintings; portraits, landscapes, and still lifes, all rendered with great skill.

“Does it meet with your approval?” the old man asked, smiling.

“It does,” Moira replied, smiling happily. “It’s one of the most beautiful rooms I have ever seen.”

McNicholl ushered her into a seat by the window and Moira sat down, feeling somewhat awkward as he took the chair beside her. What did he want to say to her?

“Niall told me about the beast you are running away from.” His voice was a growl. “Such creatures cannot be called men.”

Moira nodded slowly in agreement. The subject of her “betrothed” was making her deeply uncomfortable. Why did everyone want to know about him?

“What is his name?” Gerald asked. “And what did he do to you? Perhaps Laird McPhee can help you to mete out some justice to him.”

Moira almost panicked as she looked into the old man’s grey eyes. He seemed to be furious on her behalf, but then she hardly knew him. How could she know how sincere he was?

She looked down at her hands, which she had been twisting nervously in her lap. She could not make up a name for a person who did not even exist! As well as that, if she told one lie, she would have to tell more to prop that lie up, and before long she would become lost in a wilderness of them. It was best not to start on that journey.

“I would rather not talk about him,” she replied, unaware of how bitter her voice sounded. “I want to forget him and his name. I want to wipe everything about him from my memory.”

McNicholl did not pressure her to tell him any more about her non-existent fiancé.

“I understand,” he said kindly. “And how are you, lass? You have been through a very upsetting experience.”

“The healer says my injury is mending well,” Moira replied with a slight smile. “It is certainly not as painful as it was when I first came here.”

However, that did not satisfy the old man. “I was a warrior once,” he told her. “I was also wounded many times, but the worst injuries were the memories and the nightmares. Are you suffering from those?”

“No, fortunately not,” Moira lied.

In fact, she had had a very bad nightmare just the previous night, imagining that both

her evil husband and the bandits were chasing her through the darkness. However, on this night there had been no moon, and her horse had put her hoof into a hole in the ground and toppled over, throwing Moira into the path of McDonnell. She had woken up in a cold sweat, screaming, before Sandie came to her aid.

Now, Moira waited for a reaction from McNicholl.

“I am glad for you,” he said with a warm smile. “But now that you are here, you are quite safe. Laird McPhee is a very fine young man. He is very firm and takes no nonsense from anyone, but he is also very fair. He will never favour one person over another, and all his men respect him for that.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Moira answered. “Have you known him for a long time?”

“All his life,” Gerald answered, “which is why I am so confident about his character.”

“That is very reassuring,” Moira remarked. “When I first saw him, I was quite alarmed. He is a very big man, and he looked so angry.”

Gerald laughed softly. “You are right, Moira,” he agreed. “He may look very fearsome, and he certainly is. When he demands something, he always gets it. He is a hard man, fit for battle, but if you want my opinion, he needs a wife to show him some love and bring out his tender side. I know he has one, although he likes to keep it hidden. His parents are dead, and his sister, Glennie, is his only close relative. She lives here in the castle, and he is very protective of her. I am sure you will meet her before too long.”

She listened to Gerald’s words with keen attention. The word “protective” struck her forcefully. Her husband had used that word to rationalise his treatment of her, saying that he was keeping her safe from the outside world—in other words, she would be too scared to run away from him. As well as that, he wanted her to know that a wife

should always obey her husband, and he would not tolerate any disobedience.

“I hope so,” Moira remarked. “Sandie told me about her, and she sounds as strong as her brother. Perhaps I could learn something from her.”

Moira had been treated like a commodity by her father—sold to pay for his gambling debts, verbally and physically abused by both him and her husband. How could she trust another man not to do exactly the same thing?

“Thank you for seeing me to my chamber.” Moira stood up in a polite gesture of dismissal.

“No doubt we will see each other again,” McNicholl said, then he bowed and left.

Moira sat down again and quickly examined her leg, sighing. She was still in an extremely vulnerable position, since her dead husband’s brother was still on her trail. In this present situation, the only person she could trust was herself. McPhee might be a good man, but could she take the risk? She thought she could ride, since Sandie had done her work well and the wound was well padded. It was time to make her escape.

Sandie had given Moira a well-worn leather bag to replace the old one, which had been torn to shreds in the battle with the bandits. Now Moira stuffed her few belongings into it, being careful to fold her coin pouch and jewellery inside the dress that she had rolled up and placed right at the bottom. She looked regretfully around her comfortable new room before leaving.

The stables were on the outside of the castle, just behind the curtain wall, but it took Moira a long time to find them, particularly since she was trying to remain inconspicuous.

She reached them eventually. She looked around a little, and was surprised to see the

horse she had grabbed the fateful night she fled standing in a stall, munching hay from a net on the wall.

Moira approached the horse, and the mare turned and greeted her with a whicker. “How are you, my girl?” Moira asked as she put her arms around the horse’s dappled grey neck, then stroked her velvet nose. “Thank you for helping me. I am so glad you’re safe. I wish I had brought an apple for you.”

Just then, a young man came up behind them. He was handsome in his own craggy way, tall, with a wiry build and a head of fiery red hair. As soon as he saw Moira, his deep brown eyes widened in an expression of surprise.

“Who are ye?” he asked at once, walking forward to meet her. Evidently, he thought she was about to steal the horse, which was what she was about to do, although, of course, she was not going to tell him that.

“I’m a guest of the Laird,” she replied, and smiled at him. “Who are you?”

The young man blushed. “Ritchie Young,” he answered. “The head groom.”

He looked away from her as he reached to close another one of the stall’s gates. He was obviously using this as a distraction, since Moira had been aware of his gaze travelling up and down her body as they spoke. She was used to this kind of reaction from men, however, although she had never really understood it.

“I came to visit this horse,” Moira told him. “I was attacked by bandits, and she protected me. I am so glad to see that she is well taken cared of”

“The men brought her in just after you came,” Ritchie told her. “She was a bit shaken up, but she is a’ right now, are ye no’, wee lassie?”

“You love horses,” Moira observed, smiling at him.

He nodded and patted Katie’s neck. “Aye,” he replied. “They are lovely creatures.”

Suddenly, he looked up towards the entrance to the stables, and Moira saw a tall, well-built young woman striding towards them, every line of her body taut with anger.

She looked very familiar, Moira thought, but it only took her a moment to realise why. All her features, from her tawny hair, green eyes, full lips and sculpted cheekbones, were slightly more delicate, feminine versions of Niall McPhee’s.

So this is the sister, Moira thought, intrigued. She was as beautiful as Niall was handsome, and everything about her suggested the same physical and mental strength as her brother.

Then, it occurred to Moira that any chance she had had to escape was utterly ruined. First the groom, and worse still, the mistress of the castle had seen her.

As she stepped forward, Glennie's gaze raked down over Moira, and her lip curled in something that looked like disgust.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her eyes blazing with anger.

"I am Moira Jamieson," Moira replied in a disinterested tone. She had no intention of conversing with anyone in the McPhee family—she simply wanted to disappear as quickly as possible.

However, Glennie whipped round to confront Ritchie, who took a step backwards as her fierce green eyes met his. "So this is what you are doing behind my back," she snapped, poking a finger into his chest. "Sneaking around having secret trysts with other women!"

"I wasnae daein' any such thing," Ritchie protested angrily. "That lassie was here already. She was pettin' the horse an' I wondered what she was daein'. I thought she might be tryin' tae steal it. You always think the worst o' me!"

Glennie gave him a fearsome glare before Moira turned around and ran out of the stables into the courtyard. Glennie was furious with Ritchie, but even angrier with the woman he had been speaking to, since it was quite obvious that he was taken with her.

Moira could not move very fast, since she was still limping and her leg was beginning to hurt again, so it was an easy thing for Glennie to catch her up. She laid a heavy

hand on Moira's shoulder and spun her around, almost causing her to fall.

Glennie held her up, however, and kept Moira in place by gripping her upper arms tightly. She studied her adversary for a moment; she was looking at one of the most delicately beautiful women she had ever seen, and the sight of her made Glennie even more jealous.

She had never had to compete for Ritchie's affections before. Now this woman, who was probably a newly hired kitchen or laundry maid, had information about her that could endanger her relationship with the only man she had ever loved. She would not stand for it.

"Listen to me," she hissed. "If you breathe a word to the Laird about me and Ritchie, I will have you fired instantly, and I will spread the word to every other family around here that you are not to be trusted. And be warned, I never make promises I do not keep! Do you understand?"

Moira sighed, then laughed. "I do," she replied. "And I might be terrified of that prospect if I actually worked here, but I do not. Besides, I have absolutely no interest in Ritchie, and I am happy to keep your relationship a secret for as long as I am here. I take it you are the Laird's sister?"

Glennie was looking down at Moira, feeling a little foolish at having jumped to the wrong conclusion. "Yes, I am Glennie McPhee," she said, then she looked at Moira curiously. She could see why any man would find her attractive, since Moira almost looked like a creature from a fairy tale.

"Why are you here?" Glennie asked suspiciously.

"I was attacked by bandits, and the Laird's guards came to my aid. They rescued me, brought me back to the castle, treated my wounds and probably saved my life."

Moira decided that she might have misjudged the other woman's motives. She was clearly a person of some status; her dress, although somewhat the worse for wear, was well-made and looked expensive, and she was wearing gold earrings and a gold heart-shaped pendant. Clearly, she was a woman of substance.

"I'm sorry," Glennie said quietly. "I'm afraid I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I just love Ritchie very much."

Moira smiled. "I understand," she said. "There is no harm done, and I am happy to keep your secret."

"Come to dinner with my brother and me," Glennie suggested. "It's the least I can offer after this. We are having venison tonight."

Moira's mouth watered. She loved venison, and it was a very long time since she had eaten it. "I would love to," she said, smiling, although her plans had been ruined, and she would have to wait another day to escape. Still, the venison was a tiny consolation, and one more day was not long to wait,

"Good," Glennie patted her on the shoulder. "Now, excuse me. I must go and change."

Moira's eyes followed Glennie for a moment, then she went on her way. Now that Moira had found her horse, she could carry out her plan of escape. It should be easy enough to leave, she thought; after all, she was not a prisoner. No, she was not imprisoned, but she was lost.

Moira had not intended to turn back to her room, so she had not made a mental note of her route. She was so busy concentrating on this that she ended up straying into the courtyard, where she saw the Laird and a guard, engaged in some more combat practice. However, this time they were not fighting with swords, but with their hands

in a bare-fisted match which seemed would not end until one of them was lying on the floor.

Both men were naked to the waist, however, and Moira was mesmerised by them. Sandie had told her what the Captain of the Guard looked like. Now, she was seeing for herself. He was a wiry but strong man, and although he was a few inches shorter than the Laird, he was still holding his own.

However, Moira was astonished by Niall McPhee's sheer size. Without clothes, he looked even bigger, and his clenched fists resembled clubs. She shuddered, thinking of her father and her husband. Neither of them was particularly tall or well-built, but they had both managed to do her body a great deal of damage, as evidenced by the scars she bore all over her torso and legs.

Both had been very clever, though, having kept their blows from landing on any part of her that was visible. Moira had always been obliged to wear high-necked dresses to keep her injuries hidden.

Nevertheless, despite her apprehension, Moira could not help but admire the physique of the beautiful man before her, his broad shoulders, narrow hips, flat stomach and powerful muscles. He also sported quite a few scars though, some of them quite large, especially those on his arms, which looked like sword slashes. He must have been a fierce warrior!

Every part of his masculinity called out to her femininity, and Moira felt herself fighting against her weakness, even though what she was feeling was healthy and natural.

If only my life had been different, she thought, I might have been happily married to a good man. I might have been happy now, not fleeing a murder charge...

She stood looking at the two fighters but not really seeing them because she was immersed in her thoughts. However, her attention was wrenched back to them when a loud cheer erupted, and she saw Niall lying on the ground, having just been knocked over by his captain.

He was laughing and had his hands raised in the air, and as Moira watched, Niall got to his feet, laughing. “My turn next time, Finn!” he announced as he looked around at his audience. There was no animosity in his tone. In fact, it looked as though the two men had been playing a game.

Suddenly ,Niall caught Moira’s eye, and although she tried to turn and walk away, he called her name and came to stand in front of her.

He felt somewhat embarrassed, since he was bare-chested and sweating, and this beautiful woman, who was still a virtual stranger to him, was seeing him at his worst in this dirty, dishevelled state. However, he could not tear himself away from her; she was lovely, and quite unlike any woman he had met before.

Niall looked down at her slightly parted lips. He had kissed many women, and he longed to kiss this one because he had a feeling that it would be a sensual experience the likes of which he had never felt before.

Not only was Moira fascinatingly beautiful, but there was an aura about her that was almost ethereal, as if she did not quite belong on earth. Niall knew he was being fanciful, but he had seen the way the other men looked at Moira, and it seemed they all felt the same.

“How are you feeling?” he asked gently. “Are you still in pain?”

“Much better, My Laird,” she replied. “My leg is still a little sore, but nowhere near as bad as it was when you rescued me. I am so grateful to you. Your healer is a

wonderful lady and I could not have asked for better care.”

“I am glad to have been able to help,” he replied. “Now, I need you to answer a few questions for me. Come with me.”

Niall collected his shirt and put it on, then led her up a tall staircase and into a room that could only have been his study. It was a very masculine room that had an enormous desk and was lined with books on two walls. There were no paintings on the walls, and the rugs on the floor were made of plain brown wool.

Everything was as plain and utilitarian as it could be. Moira felt a little disappointed, but she supposed that since most of the work of running the Baltyre estate was done here, there should be as few distractions as possible.

He poured two glasses of wine, then handed one to Moira. She sipped it slowly, since she was not at all fond of it, but was too polite to say so.

Niall noticed Moira’s hesitation and asked, “Is the wine not to your liking?”

Moira shook her head. “It’s not this wine,” she answered, “but wine in general. I have seen too many people’s lives ruined by it.”

“What would you like then?” he asked.

Moira looked genuinely distressed, and he had no wish to upset her further, since he needed to speak to her quite urgently.

Moira hesitated for a moment, then said quietly, “A glass of milk, please.” She knew that Niall would likely think her very stupid, but she wanted to be completely sober and sensible when she made her escape.

If Niall was surprised, he did not show it, but sent for the milk at once. While they were waiting for it to arrive, he walked over to the window and looked out at the storm, which was gathering in the distance.

He closed the shutters and went to stoke the fire so that he would not have to speak to Moira, since he was still trying to think of the right words to say to her. For some reason, she made him feel as shy as a schoolboy again, and it was a feeling he was not accustomed to at all.

The milk was brought, and Niall sat down opposite Moira again, then gazed at her steadily. She blushed and looked away from him, wishing she could turn and run away. What did he want?

“Tell me the name of your betrothed, lass,” he said, as if he had read her mind. “Is he following you? Trying to get you to go back to him?”

Although Moira had expected the question, she could still not think of an answer. She had thought of making up a name, but then realised that he might be asking so that he could capture him, and that would set him off on a wild goose chase. As well as that, he might imprison her and send her back to Brody McDonnell.

Men were all the same, in her experience. She must not let him lull her into a false sense of security. After all, he had only just met her, so why would he try to save her? She meant nothing to him.

“Why do you want to know?” Moira asked. “I do not wish to talk about him, My Laird. I told your councillor the same thing. I want to forget that he ever existed.”

Niall had been looking closely at her while she was speaking. She felt he could detect her hesitation; something about what Moira was saying that did not ring true.

“I do not tolerate liars,” he said, an edge of menace in his deep voice. “I can see that you are dressed well, and the jewellery you are wearing is not cheap. Are you a noblewoman or a thief?”

“No, I am neither,” she replied at once, trying to keep her voice steady. “I told you the truth. I am running away, and I cannot bear to think of the beast who calls himself my betrothed. I will be gone as soon as I can, then you will be rid of me, and it will be as if this never happened.”

“Not quite,” Niall replied. “You see, I sent my men out to look for the bandits who attacked you. There are a dozen of them, and they have been in the dungeon for three days with no contact from any of us but the guards who deliver their food. I think they should have softened up enough to be interrogated by now.

What I would like to know is: are these your fiancé’s men? If they are, I want to speak to him, and twenty of my best men will join in the conversation. They will never set foot on my land again.”

He waited for a moment, watching Moira closely.

“I would rather end this conversation here, My Laird. Don’t make it any harder for me,” she said, then forced tears into her eyes.

Moira had simply not been able to stand any more of Niall McPhee’s persistent interrogation. He was only confirming what she already knew—he was just like all the rest. She knew that there must be good men out there somewhere, but she had never been fortunate enough to meet one.

Niall said nothing more, but watched silently as she rose and rushed out of the room.

She decided to put Laird McPhee’s suspicions out of her mind, for she had other

more important matters to think about, such as where she was going to go next, and what would she do to earn a living? Her coin would not last forever, and she had no wish to be a homeless beggar, or worse still, a woman of the streets. As well as that, she knew Brody McDonnell, her brother-in-law, would already have sent men out to look for her.

If he caught her, her life would be a living hell.

Niall felt wretched. Was he a heartless beast who had just made a suffering woman's predicament even worse? He decided to leave things as they were for the moment and give her a couple of days to finish healing, then leave. The last thing he wanted to do was stir up trouble with the other landowners around him if she was in a relationship with any of them.

Yet, Niall could not wrench Moira Jamieson out of his thoughts. Every time he looked at her, his body stirred, and he became aroused in a way that he could not remember experiencing before. He was not innocent; he knew he was attractive to women, and had taken advantage of that many times—in fact, he was a very experienced lover.

However, this woman baffled him. She was beautiful, yes, and what man would not find her appealing? Yet, there was something else, something he could not put his finger on, and he knew it was going to torment him till he found the answer because she had lit a fire in him that could not be quenched.

Glennie sat down at the long dining room table and poured herself a glass of wine, then began to gaze at her brother intently. There was something different about him today; he seemed thoughtful, unlike his usual lively talkative self around her. He normally had stories of his mock battles on the training fields to tell her, and he would usually show off his latest cuts and bruises, laughing as he did so.

Glennie would always laugh with him, saying that it was his own fault if he persisted in putting himself in harm's way. But then, he had always been a fighter. She remembered one particular time when he was about thirteen years old when he had been watching the men training with swords, and his face had taken on a determined expression.

"I want a sword," he growled.

His voice was beginning to deepen into that of a man, and already Glennie could see bristles on his face, but his muscles were not yet fully developed, unlike the men of the garrison, who looked absolutely huge to her.

"No!" she shouted, terrified. "They will kill you!"

"The swords are all blunt, silly," he answered with a dismissive wave.

Glennie had tried to hold on to his tunic, but she was not strong enough to stop him; Niall's stubbornness was the stuff of legend. He walked up to one of the guards, who was standing waiting for his turn to practise, and asked for his sword. The man

hesitated and shook his head, but Niall reminded him that he would be the future master of the castle, and the guard reluctantly gave up his weapon.

Returning her focus to the present, Glennie turned to look at her brother and held her glass up in a toast. “Slàinte Mhath,” she said.

Niall looked puzzled as he held his glass up. “What is the occasion?” he asked.

“We have a guest,” Glennie replied. “Her name is Moira Jamieson. I think you already know her.”

To Glennie’s surprise, Niall frowned. “Stay away from her,” he growled. “She is trouble, and I want her to leave the castle as soon as possible.”

Glennie frowned, puzzled. “Then why bring her here in the first place?” she asked. “I have never known you to invite guests into the castle without telling me first. Who is she really?”

“She was attacked by bandits not far from the castle,” he replied. “We managed to rescue her before they robbed her, but she got injured as she fell off her horse. We brought her back here, and I am letting her stay until her wound heals. For the moment, she is my guest, but I have a bad feeling about her. There is something she is not telling me.

She says that her father gave her hand in marriage to a cruel and abusive man who kept her prisoner in his house for a few weeks before she managed to escape. When she did, she had the misfortune to encounter these bandits. I asked her if they were sent by her betrothed to find her and bring her back, and she denied it, but what really puzzles me is that she will not even tell me his name.”

“Why not?” Now Glennie looked puzzled.

“She says that she wants to forget that he ever existed,” Niall answered.

Glennie took a sip of her wine. “I saw a long white scar on the back of her hand,” she said, “but it could have been caused by anything at all.”

Niall thought for a moment. Glennie was right, of course, and he could be getting suspicious over nothing. Moira Jamieson was working her way under his skin in the most profound and irritating way, and despite his attempts to turn his mind in another direction, it always came back to her.

“So what are you going to do with her?” Glennie asked curiously.

Niall looked both worried and angry. She had seen him in many moods over the years, of course, but this was different. He was reacting to this young woman in a way she had never seen before. He sounded as though he wanted to be rid of her, but there was an undercurrent of something else in his manner.

Niall shrugged. “Let her stay here till she recovers, I suppose,” he replied carelessly. “Then send her on her way.”

Why does he sound so reluctant? Glennie thought. This is not like my brother at all.

But Glennie had seen Moira’s delicate beauty, and could understand her appeal to many men, even her brother, who considered himself to have a heart of flint. Perhaps his reluctance was a form of self-protection.

“It seems she’s had a very strange effect on you,” she remarked, looking at him keenly. “Of course, she is a very beautiful woman. It would be easy for a man to succumb to her charms.”

“What are you suggesting, Glennie?” Niall demanded, glaring at his sister.

Glennie looked at him with wide-eyed innocence. “Nothing, brother,” she replied, then she smiled. “But if the cap fits, then by all means wear it!”

Niall shook his head and poured himself another glass of wine. “You know I don’t fall in love,” he said irritably. “I am not cut out for it. I will admit she is very pretty to look at, but that hardly means we are going to set up home together.”

Again, Glennie gave him a maddening smile; Niall glared at her and was about to deliver another outburst, but she held up a hand to interrupt him.

“It might be better if you calmed down, Niall,” she suggested. “Because I have invited her for dinner.”

Niall opened his mouth to protest, but at that moment the door opened and Moira stepped into the room. She was wearing a high-necked dress, an unbecoming creation with long tight sleeves and a skirt that was tattered at the hem. Its colour was a depressing dark grey, but it did nothing to lessen her loveliness.

As soon as Moira stepped into the room, her gaze locked with Niall’s, and he stood up without thinking to pull out a chair for her, then ushered her into it.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at him as she sat down.

His hand brushed hers as he pushed the chair back under the table, and he swallowed nervously as a jet of desire shot down his body. He was stunned. What was she doing to him?

Moira brought with her an aura of something not quite real, as if she was a creature from another world. He could not explain it to himself, but every time he looked at her pale blue eyes he felt as though he was immersing himself in a pool of clean, refreshing water. There was something magical about Moira Jamieson.

He found it difficult to tear his eyes away from her, but fortunately, at that moment one of the manservants came to the table with a bottle of wine which he held out for Niall's approval. Niall nodded, and the man poured a glass for all of them.

"So, Moira, tell me about what happened," Glennie said carefully. "But not if it's too painful, of course."

Moira took a sip of her wine. "I was ambushed, and would probably be dead by now if it were not for the Laird and his guards. I had a little coin, and wore some jewellery, but none of it was worth killing for—at least not to me, anyway. I think I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Glennie nodded slowly. "Where are you going?"

For a few seconds, Moira panicked, and her heart skipped a beat. What was she going to say? Then a great haunch of venison was delivered to the table, giving her a few moments to think. Nobody spoke about such personal things in front of servants if they wanted to keep them private, since servant's gossip travelled faster than a wildfire.

During the short time it took for the servants to put the food on the table, Moira thought of a scenario she hoped they would believe.

"My mother's sister lives in Aberdeen," she told them. "I think she will take me in, then I can find some employment and pay my way."

"What will you do?" Glennie asked.

Moira was gratified to see that she was genuinely interested.

"I thought I might be a lady's companion, a children's governess, something like

that.”

Glennie smiled. “You can be my companion,” she suggested. “I could do with a friend.”

Moira laughed, knowing she was not serious. Even if she had been, she thought, how could she possibly stay in this place where the Laird was the most beautiful man she had ever seen? She would have to watch him marry and have children, while she had no chance of ever having any of her own. Granted, she was not in love with him, but there was something about Laird Niall McPhee that drew her to him, something which she could not fathom.

As well as that, they were not too far away from her former home, and any visitors could recognise her, although somehow she thought that Laird McPhee did not entertain much. She was sure that a man who looked like him would have been snapped up by an eager young bride a long time before if he had.

“Thank you for the compliment,” she answered.

Glennie laughed. “It was not a compliment, Moira,” she replied. “That is not work I would wish on anyone!”

Moira giggled, and before long the two young women had become involved in an amiable conversation about Glennie’s friends and all kinds of other subjects that did not interest the Laird in the slightest. What astonished him, however, was how well they were getting on together.

Glennie had more to say, he noticed, while Moira listened, interjected occasionally and laughed. She seemed to be interested in absolutely everything Glennie had to say, and he noticed that their sense of humour was very similar; dry, satirical and merciless. It looked as though the two young women had hit it off immediately.

While it would be foolish to say they were good friends—after all, they had only just met—it seemed that they soon would be if Moira stayed.

Occasionally, Glennie made a joke at Niall's expense, and both of them dissolved into giggles like little girls. Despite his scorn for this kind of frivolous behaviour, Niall loved to watch the smile on Moira's expressive face. Her laughter was musical; her eyes twinkled and dimples appeared on her cheeks. He simply could not stop looking at her.

Yet, he was still puzzled, and no matter how attractive he thought she was, had an elusive feeling that Moira was still not telling him the truth. He ate his food steadily, listening all the time, and when he had finished, he looked up at both Glennie and Moira.

“Glennie, it's best you do not speak about friendship and companionship. Moira no doubt has other duties to attend to and people to see; she will be leaving us soon.”

Glennie looked outraged. “Let her stay for a while longer, Niall,” she begged. “I would value the company of another woman for at least a little while. It is so tedious being surrounded by men all the time.”

Brother and sister glared at each other for another moment, while Moira tried to ignore the palpable tension in the room. She looked down at her hands, seeing the long white scar that had bled for days after one of her “accidents”, remembering how she had had to treat it herself. Still, she reasoned, it was not serious now, although it had been painful at the time, and it was useful in its own way. Every time she looked at it, she was reminded of her husband and why she was running away, and it spurred her on.

Moira heard her name mentioned again and looked up. Glennie's face was furious as she shouted at Niall and poked him in the chest with her forefinger.

“She is now my friend!” she yelled. “And I am the mistress of this castle. I too have a right to say who can stay here and who cannot. You will not bully me!”

Niall laughed at her scornfully. “You may be Lady McPhee, but I am the Laird, and I have the power to throw you out if I want to.”

Moira could tell he would never do any such thing. She bet that Glennie knew it too, but she was furious nonetheless. He was treating her like a servant who had neglected her duties.

“And how can she be your friend when you only met her an hour ago?”

“Do not threaten me, Niall.” Her voice was menacing. “Or I might just oblige you and leave. You know that I have had proposals of marriage?—”

“From men I despise!” Niall shot back.

“You do not control me!” Glennie spat, then pointed to Moira. “Neither can you order Moira to do your will. We are both free to do as we wish.”

“I agree,” Niall said, nodding. “Moira will do anything to be free, even resort to lying.”

His green eyes were dark with anger as he turned to look at her, and Moira suddenly felt fury boiling up inside her. She resented the way both Glennie and Niall were talking about her as if she were not even present, and now the conversation was making assumptions about her that had no proof to back them up.

“I’d kindly ask ye not to speak about me that way,” she said, her voice throbbing with rage. “You have no idea what my life was like before I came here, so do not presume to know me. Since you have assumed the worst about me, I will stay out of your sight

until my leg is no longer in pain and I can ride. Believe me, My Laird, that day cannot come soon enough!"

She gave him one last venomous glare then rose to her feet, marched to the door and opened it, and left, slamming it behind her with all the force she could muster.

Moira was furious with Niall and with herself. He had been blunt and truthful, but also very hurtful, making it seem as though she had taken advantage of him when she had never had any such intention. He had called her a liar to her face, and insinuated that her injuries were somehow her own fault for running away from her betrothed.

She had been treated very well, Moira had to admit, but she could not stay here forever. Her leg was getting better by the day, even though she was still limping. She had yet to try riding, of course, but if she was determined enough, she knew she would manage it somehow.

As she walked towards her chamber, she thought of Niall's face. His brows were the shape of birds' wings shadowing his green eyes, his high cheekbones and square jaw, and lastly his full, well-shaped lips. Despite herself, she wanted to know how it would feel to kiss him, then she reprimanded herself. Was she mad? He was probably a tyrant.

Niall McPhee was so muscular and powerfully built that if he wanted to, he could snap her in two with his bare hands; she would not stand a chance against him. So what if his face was so handsome that she could hardly stop thinking about him? That would do her no good if he used his fists against her, he was ten times stronger than she was. His very body was a lethal weapon.

Yet, strangely enough, Moira could imagine herself falling in love with him. At first, it would be because of his looks and his deep, rumbling voice, which sent shivers down her spine. She was attracted to him to a degree that she had never felt before;

no man had ever done this to her senses, and it was almost unbearably delicious.

He would have to charm her too, of course, and although Moira had never seen that side of him, she was sure it existed. Granted, her experience with men had never been good, but she was sure there was a lot of goodness in Niall somewhere. Everyone else seemed to think so.

She sighed, irritated. Was she just becoming carried away by a pretty face? The last few moments with Niall McPhee had been deeply unpleasant. No. Moira had had enough of that.

Moira stopped and looked out of the window again, which was coincidentally the same one out of which she had seen Niall practising. It was twilight, and there were only a few guards there, most of whom were not really doing much except for quaffing ale and chatting amongst themselves. How she envied them!

It must be wonderful, she thought, to have friends around, people with whom she could tell jokes, gossip, and do all the things that other young women did. She would have loved to make friends with Glennie, but she doubted that her offer of staying as a companion was serious. Why would the mistress of a castle want to make friends with a nobody like her?

Moira's mind returned to her host—indeed, he was rarely out of it! Every time she thought of him, her body reacted in a way it had never done while she was thinking of any other man.

What was he doing to her? She wondered if she was supposed to feel this way. Was it natural, or was she experiencing something strange, weird, unique to herself? If she described her feelings to someone else, would they pity her? Laugh at her? Run away in fear?

Moira sighed; she had the beginnings of a painful headache, brought on by the strain of worry and the argument she had just had at the dining room table.

Then she had another thought; what would it be like to be the mistress of all this? She had met several Lairds' wives before, all of them polished and elegant, seemingly happy, but she had always wondered what went on in their marriages behind closed doors. Were they like hers, or was she merely unlucky? Surely, some of the couples she had met had married for love?

Neither her father nor Roy McDonnell were poor men, but Moira had never owned fancy dresses. She had been obliged to learn to dance by watching others, since she had never had a mother to teach her these womanly skills. There was Jean, of course, but she was an ordinary working woman who did not possess these skills.

Moira felt anger rising up in her as she visualised Niall's face yet again.

I must get out of this place before I go mad! she thought viciously. I should run away from this man before he uncovers the truth.

She sighed irritably, tired of going over the same train of thought over and over again. Just then, Moira felt a familiar trickle at the back of her neck, alerting her to the presence of someone behind her. She whipped around and almost fell down with relief when she saw counsellor Gerald McNicholl.

He came forward, gazing at her in a concerned manner, when he saw how his sudden appearance had scared her. "I apologize for startling ye, lass," he exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"I am fine," she replied, avoiding his eyes, but she could not help the tear that leaked from her eye as she tried to turn away from him.

“No, you are not,” Gerald said firmly. “Somehow I feel there is more troubling you.”

When Moira did not reply to him, he continued, “Whenever I was troubled I used to visit the wee loch at the bottom of the hill. It’s called Loch Begg, and it’s not too far away. I always found it very peaceful there, and it helped me to think through my problems and ease my mind. It’s strange how nature does that for you.”

He gave her a warm smile.

“I liked it when I was a wee boy and my summer days seemed to go on forever, but then everything seems better when you look back. Happy days!”

He laughed, but Moira thought how very few happy days her own childhood had contained. She could count them on the fingers of one hand. She pasted on a smile for him.

“Indeed they were,” she agreed. “I was very fortunate.”

After the fractious conversation he, Moira and Glennie had shared over the dinner table, Niall was restless and irritable, and thought that a ride might help him let off some steam. Since it was cold, he fetched his cloak from his chamber and went downstairs to the stables.

He knew that Logie would be eager for a gallop since he always had so much energy to spare, and he smiled at the thought. He had always thought that the stallion was just like an equine version of himself.

With that thought in mind, he moved to the entrance of the stables, then strode in but did not expect to find the object of his thoughts there. He stopped a few yards away from her, his body having a mind of its own. Hearing his footsteps, Moira turned, then her face darkened with anger as she saw him.

Niall chuckled as he watched her expression change. “Where are you going, Moira?” he asked.

“Out for a ride,” she replied, her tone hostile. “I take it that is allowed? After all, I am a guest, not a prisoner—or am I mistaken?” Her frown became deeper.

“I merely wanted to know where you were going,” he repeated. “In case you get into any trouble. It has happened to you before—or have you forgotten?” His voice was dripping with sarcasm, which infuriated Moira even more.

She stayed silent, although she looked terrified by his closeness. He was so much taller and stronger than she was, and he was looking down at her with fiercely lowered brows.

Moira swallowed nervously and took a step backwards, but Niall reached out and grabbed her hands, clasping them so tightly that she could not free herself. She tried to pull away from him, but his grip was too tight, and she gave up.

“Speak to me,” he ordered roughly. “Who are you running from? I do not want my family involved in any of your troubles. I do not want my clan to become entangled in any more battles. God knows, I’ve had enough of those to last me a lifetime.”

Moira tried with all her might to push him away, but Niall was too strong, and held on to her without any apparent effort. Then his mood suddenly changed.

He stepped even closer to her. Her nearness was disturbing, her soft musk, her shining hair, porcelain skin and pale blue eyes. Everything about Moira Jamieson attracted him, so why did he have so many doubts about her?

“Perhaps I should keep you here just for your rare beauty. I have never seen a woman like you before. The first time I saw you, I thought of the tales of elves and faeries

that I had heard from my nanny.”

He laughed at his own wit, but Moira obviously did not find his words funny.

“No!” she screamed. “No man is going to imprison me again!”

Niall shook his head, smiling at her overreaction. “I meant that as a compliment, Moira,” he said, frowning in puzzlement. “Surely, you did not think I was serious? I would never do any such thing.”

“Let me go!” Moira cried again, and this time she dissolved into tears.

Niall stepped back, still mystified by her reaction. He was longing to put his arms around Moira and comfort her, but he knew enough about her by now to realise that she would reject him instantly.

“Lass,” he said gently. “I did not mean to frighten you.”

He looked her up and down, thinking how much she resembled a deer who had run away from his bow and avoided becoming a meal. He had meant to cheer Moira up, and he felt wretched for upsetting her so much.

“Did your betrothed really hurt you? What kind of harm did he do to you?” He felt Moira’s hands trembling in his, and loosened his grip a little. “Please tell me. Perhaps I can help in some way.”

Moira looked up at him, unsure of what to think, then she realised she was allowing herself to be led into yet another trap. Men were always pleasant when they wanted something; it was only later, when a woman was under their roof, when they had her dowry, that they showed their true colours. She would be an utter fool to believe this man was any different just because he was so good to look at.

“You can help me by leaving me alone,” Moira cried.

She wrenched her hands out of his grasp and mounted her horse, then rode her out into the gathering dusk. In her haste, she quickly lost her bearings and had no idea where the loch was, but at that moment she did not care, she merely wanted to be out of the castle and away from the cursed place.

Niall stood watching her until she was out of sight, wondering whether to follow her or not. Moira Jamieson was like no other woman he had ever met, and he was utterly fascinated by her; he needed to know more.

Strangely enough, as soon as she had made the decision to go down to the loch, Moira's headache began to clear, and she felt the tension ebbing out of her body. That was until she had an encounter with Niall.

It was a clear, cold evening, but she had been cold before and survived, and no doubt she would again, she reasoned. There was still an hour or so till full darkness and a long twilight.

The stables were a safe space for her; warm with the heat of the horses' bodies, and although the smell of the animals was not exactly akin to eau de parfum, Moira loved it. She had often been able to escape from her cruel husband in the stables by hiding in the hayloft and covering herself in straw. That was why the atmosphere of the horses' abode was so dear to her.

Now, Niall had ruined that for her.

Moira began to wish she had put her cloak on, since she began to shiver. She thought about going back to retrieve it, but she had no wish to encounter Niall again. Two confrontations in one evening was more than enough!

Her wrists were still tingling from the pressure of Niall's grip, and although she could not see them, she knew there would be red marks there.

Her tears had dried, but a whirlwind of emotions coursed through her, the main one now being embarrassment at having allowed herself to become so emotional in front

of Niall. Now she had given him a stick to beat her with—a metaphorical one that he could cast up in her face any time he wished.

However, as she looked at her dappled-grey horse, she knew that if she made it as far as Loch Begg, she could make it out of Baltyre without too much trouble. After all, the bandits were gone, and if her horse was swift enough she could outrun most wild animals. Immediately, her confidence increased; she straightened her back and lifted her chin. She could do this.

Why should I care about Niall McPhee? she thought mutinously. I will soon be gone from this place.

The notion strengthened Moira's determination. She had been idle for too long; tomorrow morning there would be no more delay. She would not stop to break her fast or greet anyone. She would avoid all contact with Niall, Glennie and Gerald. She would simply slip away; in fact, had she thought of it before she would be escaping now, but she had none of her belongings with her.

Moira wished she knew in which direction the city of Aberdeen lay. She had made up her mind to go there and look for opportunities in the bustling city. There was no chance that she could find a place to work in Baltyre, it was too small an area and her husband's brother would be on the lookout for her.

Moira had hardly remembered Brodie McDonnell during the time she had been away, but suddenly the memory of him came surging back. He had been instrumental, along with her father, in arranging her marriage to his brother, Roy. It was he who had told him about Moira and how beautiful she was.

And suddenly, Moira found herself in her father's study, and knew that an altogether different future had been mapped out for her.

“Come in and sit down, Moira,” her father had told her. “I have some good news for you.” John Patterson had the kind of face that turned his attempt at a smile into something that resembled a wolf snarling, and as he smiled at his daughter, Moira felt a shiver of dread run down her spine.

Good news? She had never received good news from her father in her life, and she doubted if that was about to change.

Her father sat back in his chair with a satisfied air and said smugly, “I have found a husband for you. His name is Roy McDonnell and he is a prosperous fellow merchant. He will give you the finest things in life, you will be living very comfortably indeed. What do you think of that?”

Moira stared at him, horrified, then finally managed to ask, “Do I know him?”

Her father shook his head. “No, but you will have a while to get to know each other better,” he replied. “The wedding is to take place in a week, and I will have Roy come over every night so that you can have dinner together and talk. As you can imagine, he is a very busy man, and will not have any time during the day.”

He stood up and fetched a bottle of red wine from his desk drawer, poured two glasses, and held his up in a toast. Moira did the same, although drinking to her health under the circumstances was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Slàinte Mhath!” he said smugly.

“Slàinte Mhath.”

Moira’s toast was a great deal less hearty, but she dutifully swallowed her wine, even though it tasted like vinegar in her mouth. She had never drunk wine before, since her father had always been too strict to let her drink as a woman. Now, however, she was

too numb to protest.

Not only was she horrified, but furious. How dare he spring this awful surprise on her? Who was this man she was about to marry?

She was trapped, and when she met her future husband she was almost sick with disgust. He was at least thirty years older than her, with sparse white hair and a face with sunken cheekbones, thin lips and bushy white eyebrows that made his piercing black eyes look like caverns in his face.

She hated him at first sight, and when they spoke, his conversation never wavered from one subject; himself. Their wedding took place in the dining room of her father's house, and there were only half a dozen guests there. After the wedding breakfast, Roy McDonnell took her to their bedroom...

When she was taken to Baltyre Castle after the ambush, she had thought she was free, but now she was beginning to think she had escaped from one prison and stumbled into another.

Moira had become so distracted by her gloomy thoughts that she was beginning to lose all sense of direction. She knew that there was a wood at the foot of the castle which was not too thick, but the gathering darkness was making it almost impossible for Moira to make her way through it.

As well as that, she had not been able to explore the surrounding district due to the injury on her leg, so getting her bearings was a problem. Darkness had set in more quickly than she had anticipated, and the moon was no longer bright, having shrunk to a thin crescent. Moira had been so eager to escape from Niall that she had not brought a lantern, and she cursed herself for being a fool.

Every sound, no matter how faint, made her senses prickly. There were owls hooting,

leaves rustling in the wind, and the sound of small animals running through the undergrowth. However, Moira was most frightened of the wild boars, which she knew roamed the area and could occasionally be very vicious.

As she wandered, darkness fell like a black curtain, and soon it became almost impossible to see through the trees. After a while, Moira felt a breeze on her face, and emerged from the wood onto a stretch of grassland. She could smell, rather than see, water in front of her, and sighed with relief.

Then, abruptly, a long, drawn-out howl broke the stillness of the night. A wolf! Moira's horse screamed and reared up, then broke into a gallop to escape the animal.

When she hit the water, the horse panicked, then reared again. Moira hauled on the reins, trying desperately to keep the mare under her control, but neither her riding skill nor her strength was equal to the task. After another few moments that seemed endless, the horse threw her into the water before scrambling out and galloping away.

Moira was terrified. She had never learned to swim, and now she floundered helplessly in the icy water. The shock of its freezing temperature had made her inhale a great lungful of it, then her head dipped below the water, and she gulped in mouthfuls. The fear that filled her was overwhelming, but so was the urge to survive. She coughed and spluttered, kicked and flailed with her arms and legs, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not keep her head above the water.

As the icy liquid closed over her head, Moira's lungs were full of water, but her panic eased, to be replaced by a strange peace, and she resigned herself to death.

Niall knew he had no more time to waste. He knew that Moira was not likely to be in any fit state to ride properly yet, and she had little idea of what the countryside around the castle looked like. She had a head start of a few moments, and the time it took to saddle his mount seemed endless.

When Logie was fully saddled and bridled, Niall mounted and went after her. The path was well-used and very easy to see, but there were no fresh hoof marks on it. In desperation, he frantically began to explore the rest of the area to see if he could spot any sign of her. He knew it well, and could find his way even in the dark, but he had a feeling that Moira was now likely to be hopelessly lost.

He knew Loch Begg was nearby, and even if it was a beautiful sight to behold, at this time of the day, wild animals sought their prey. Even the most skilled hunters avoided the loch during the night. Many incidents of men losing their lives in its waters during darkness...

Niall spent what seemed like an hour searching for her before several things happened at once. He heard the plaintive howl of a wolf and the shriek of a panicked horse, then a few seconds later a woman's scream pierced the night air.

Niall's heart skipped a beat. "Moira!" he cried, then swung Logie around to gallop towards the lake. He was just in time, by the feeble light of the crescent moon, to see Moira's head disappearing under the water.

He did not think twice, but leapt from Logie's back, tossed his cloak aside and plunged into the water. He too inhaled a lungful of icy water, but coughed it back up again and swam towards Moira's limp body. As soon as he touched her, however, she reached out for him, and he slowly swam backwards to the shore, pulling her with him.

As soon as they reached the shore, Niall realised that Moira was still very much alive when she coughed up what seemed like gallons of water before gulping in great lungfuls of air. He sat her up and wrapped his cloak around her, then helped her stand up.

Later, Niall would reprimand himself harshly for his next words, but a mixture of

anger, fear and relief made him growl, “What the hell were you thinking, Moira? You could have drowned.” A moment later, he regretted his words sorely.

As soon as she was on her feet, Moira backed away from him. She was shivering from head to foot, and she could see that Niall was too, but he picked up his cloak from the ground and wrapped it around her.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “I should not have shouted like that, but I was worried about you.”

Immediately, Moira tried to take off the cloak, but Niall was not taking no for an answer. He stepped up and wrapped it around her even more tightly than before. She tried to back away further, but he held on to the cloak, and Moira’s strength could not match his.

“Come back with me to the castle.” His voice was gentle. “I cannot leave you here, Moira. This part of my land is full of boars and wolves, and you would be no match against them. Come back with me. I promise no harm will come to you, and you can leave in the morning if you wish.”

Moira stared up at him. In the almost complete darkness, he could see were tiny glints of light in her eyes from the waters of the loch. He could see nothing of her expression, but he was sure she was petrified. She said nothing, though.

After a few minutes of silence, Niall sighed. “I can tell that you are afraid of me,” he said sadly. “I know what it feels like to be scared, Moira. I have fought many battles and been injured many times.

I have even had to kill in self-defence, but I have never laid a hand on a woman in anger, and I never will. I can tell that something in your life has broken a piece of you because I see the same pain that I carry in me, and I know how much it hurts. Trust

me, Moira. I promise I will not let you down. Let me take you to safety.”

Moira hesitated. Could this be a trap? Some sort of game? Had he let her leave the castle just so that he could bring her back for some sadistic purpose of his own?

Yet as his wet clothes clung to him, she could see his muscular shape, and the way his masculine body differed so sharply from her own. Even in these strange circumstances, when she was quivering with cold and fright, she could still feel something pulling her towards him.

“I will come with you, but only because I have no other choice,” she said at last. “I could never find my way out of this place on my own.”

“Good,” Niall said. “I promise you, lass, you are doing the right thing. I am not the monster you seem to think I am, and I will take you to safety.”

Having said this, he helped Moira onto her horse, and they rode back to the castle. Niall tried to start a conversation several times, but Moira was too tired, cold, and frightened to reply, and eventually, he gave up.

As soon as they arrived, Niall took Moira to the sick room, where Sandie dried her off and wrapped her in a warm dry blanket, then gave her a thorough examination.

“I dinnae think there is anythin’ wrong, hen,” she said, “but ye must go straight tae bed an’ rest. I will send up some hot milk for ye. How did ye end up in the water?”

She gave Moira a puzzled frown.

“It’s a long story, Sandie,” Moira replied, yawning. “I will tell you tomorrow.”

Moira thought that Niall would have gone straight to his own chamber, but he was

waiting for her outside the sick room. He too was wearing a dry blanket, although his clothes were still wet.

“I wanted to see that all was well with you,” he told her. “What did Sandie say?”

Moira sighed. “She says everything seems fine,” she answered. “You should let her look at you.”

Niall shrugged. “I’m fine, Moira,” he said. “A wee dip in the loch will not do me much harm.”

Now that she could look at him properly, Moira could see that a bruise had formed on his forehead. “What happened?” she asked.

Niall laughed. “I collided with a low branch,” he replied. “No serious damage, my head is too hard to be seriously harmed by a bit of wood.”

“Thank you for helping me.” Moira looked down at the ground as she spoke. “You saved my life, I owe you a great debt of gratitude.”

“You owe me nothing,” Niall told her. He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face up to look at him. “I would have done the same for anyone, Moira. Now go to bed. And sleep well.”

“You too, My Laird,” Moira said, then she smiled at him for the first time in days.

Niall smiled back. “Goodnight, Moira,” he said, then he was gone.

Moira went to her chamber and lay down, then drank her milk and laid her head on her pillow. She was exhausted, but sleep would not come, and by dawn she was still tired, and far too hot.

The next morning, Glennie's maidservant came in to prepare her for the day as usual, but she seemed unusually quiet and thoughtful.

"Catriona?" she asked anxiously. "Are you all right?"

Catriona looked at Glennie with an expression that was half-smile and half-frown, then said, "I am fine, Milady, but that other woman—Moira—she isnae."

Glennie sat up in bed suddenly. "What's wrong with her?" she asked anxiously.

Catriona sighed. Like anyone else, she hated to be the bearer of bad tidings. "She had a bad accident last night an' fell in the river," she answered. "The Laird pulled her out an' brought her home but she isnae well."

"I must go and see her." Glennie scrambled out of bed and picked out her clothes, and dashed out of her door. She sprinted along the corridor and upstairs to Moira's chamber, then knocked on the door more firmly than she usually would have done.

Her knock was answered a few seconds later by Sandie, who looked pale and tired. "Milady," she said with a polite curtsy.

"How is she?" Glennie asked, her voice hushed.

"Well, she had a bad fever a few hours ago," Sandie answered, "but I gave her some willow bark tea an' her temperature has come down a wee bit."

“Do you think talking to her would tire her out?” Glennie asked.

“Will you two stop whispering about me?” Moira complained suddenly. “I’m fine.”

Sandie looked at her. “Ye can talk for a wee while,” she said sternly, “but if ye feel tired, Moira, ye must stop. I am goin’ for a wee rest.”

“I will be fine, Sandie.” Moira gave her a warm smile. “And you must rest as long as you need to. Thank you for everything.”

Sandie returned the smile then curtsied to Glennie before leaving.

“We are so lucky to have her,” Moira remarked.

“Indeed we are,” Glennie agreed, before turning to Moira again. “How are you feeling?”

She looked anxious, and Moira hastened to reassure her. “I am better now, thank you, Glennie,” she replied soothingly. “I will leave as soon as I can. I have taken up too much of everyone’s time already.”

She sighed, and Glennie, looking at her downcast expression, felt infinitely sorry for her. She took Moira’s hands in her own; they were so much smaller, and suddenly Glennie felt extremely protective. From what she had learned about this woman, she had endured a hard life before finding her way to Baltyre Castle. Niall had not believed her story of being abused, but Glennie had a feeling that he was beginning to change his mind, as she had.

Remembering the hostility she had felt and exhibited the first time she met Moira, Glennie had at first felt embarrassed and ashamed. However, as she came to know her, Glennie had discovered that underneath her wariness and distrust, Moira was

someone she could happily befriend and value.

Moira's white translucent skin had been rendered even paler, and Glennie felt anxious as she gazed at her, hoping that whatever ailed Moira was not too serious.

"You have not wasted anyone's time," she said gently, "and especially not mine. I do not want you to go away, Moira. I want you to stay here and be my companion, but not the kind of companion who is like a servant. I want you to be my friend.

Do you know what it is like to be the only woman among hundreds of men? There are maidservants, of course, but we don't mix, and Niall has never had a circle of friends, so I cannot be friends with their wives or sisters.

I have no female company here at all, but that is not the only reason I want you to stay here, Moira. I like you, and I believe we could rub along very nicely together. I could even make sure that you have your own suite of rooms because I know that a person needs their own space sometimes.

We have a good library here, and a music room that our great-grandfather insisted on." She laughed. "We are an interesting lot, if nothing else."

"Can you play an instrument?" Moira asked. She was trying to divert the topic of the conversation away from her staying in Baltyre.

Glennie shook her head, smiling. "I have no talents in that direction," she answered. "But I do not want to talk about me. I want to know about you, and I want to tell you about Niall."

At the mention of his name, Glennie saw Moira's expression change to one of wariness, and she took her hands out of Glennie's grasp and wrapped her arms around herself.

Even hearing Glennie saying Niall's name made Moira suddenly feel cold. She wanted to confide in Glennie because the burden of her secret was beginning to become too heavy, but she simply could not bring herself to do so. What if Glennie told him, and he sent her back to Brodie McDonnell? No, she could not take the chance, it was too dangerous.

Although Glennie could see that Moira was beginning to get upset, she knew she had to persevere. "Listen, Moira," she said gently. "My brother may look fierce and brutal, but he has suffered a lot. Our father was a cold and angry man, and our family had many fierce conflicts with other clans; as he grew up, he had to learn to fight, and it made him look tough and hard, but he is really not like that inside."

Moira was about to say, "So have I," but restrained herself at the last moment. The less Glennie knew about her, the better. She had no intention of going through her previous life experiences again. She would rather be dead.

Moira was still tired, but she needed to be alone to think and plan. She had no intention of staying at Baltyre any longer than she had to. Her previous attempts to leave had not succeeded, but she would not let that stop her from trying again.

Glennie sighed and stood up. "I can see that you need to rest, Moira, so I'll go. But please think about what I said."

"I will," Moira answered, with a weary smile.

Glennie stood up, then leaned over to plant a soft kiss on Moira's cheek. "Get well soon," she said fondly, then left.

Moira breathed a huge sigh of relief, glad to be alone again, but her reprieve did not last long.

Only minutes later, another knock sounded at the door, but this time the person who wanted to gain admittance simply walked in. It was Gerald McNicholl, who was carrying a pot of tea on a tray. It was a drink that had just been brought to Scotland and was gaining popularity.

The old man approached Moira's bed and set the tea down on the table beside the bed. He looked both sad and angry at the same time as he said, "Moira, please forgive me. I should not have told you about the loch. You do not know this place well, and I did not give clear directions. I never thought you'd want to go there. Please forgive me."

Moira pasted on a smile. "Of course I do, it was my fault for riding out after dark," she said at once.

The old man put his hand on his chest in a gesture of relief. "The Laird was furious with me," he said. "But I deserved it. I never should have suggested that you go to the loch. I tend to think everyone knows this place as well as I do. How are you feeling?"

"Much better than I did last night, thank you," Moira replied. "Sandie has been taking care of me, and she is a wonderful healer."

"The best there is," Gerald agreed, smiling. He poured the tea for her, then asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you, Gerald," Moira replied. "I just need to rest."

Niall had been on his way to see Moira, so, seeing Gerald coming out of her chamber, he went to inquire how she was.

"She is tired," Gerald replied. "She is pale and looks exhausted. I would not trouble her at the moment."

Niall stood, thinking, trying to make up his mind as to whether to heed Gerald's advice or do as he had intended to do. He badly wanted to see Moira, not only to reassure himself that she was all right, but also to fulfil a desperate need inside himself just to look at her again. He was desperate to lay his eyes on her porcelain skin again, to look into her pale blue eyes.

Gerald went on, "If I were in such a state, I would want peace and quiet, My Laird. Think of what she has been through." He stopped to put his hands on Niall's shoulders and looked into his eyes with a concerned frown. "I understand your concern, but let her recover a wee bit."

Niall sighed and nodded slowly. "Thank you, Gerald."

Gerald smiled and patted Niall's shoulder. "Moira is a strong lady, but she will never be as strong as a man. Let her rest." Then he turned and walked away, leaving Niall alone.

Niall had been so lost in thought, he didn't realise he had walked towards the door to Moira's chamber, and opened the door. He closed it softly, then stood looking at the bed for a moment before slowly walking towards it.

Moira's eyes were closed, her breathing soft and even, and Niall stood looking down at her for a long moment. However, gazing at her was not what he wanted to do at all. He wanted to scoop Moira up in his arms, press her against him and kiss her till they were both senseless. That was not all he wanted to do, of course, but he dared not let his thoughts go any further.

Niall sighed and reached out a hand to touch her cheek. Her skin felt as soft as he had imagined, and he smiled, then whispered, "You look beautiful in your sleep, Moira."

He was about to bend down and kiss her forehead when Moira's eyes fluttered open,

and she looked straight into his.

“I-I’m sorry,” Niall said regretfully. “I did not mean to wake you.”

“I wasn’t really asleep,” she replied. “Just dozing.”

He sat down again. “How do you feel?”

“Strange,” Moira replied. “As if the whole thing happened to someone else.”

She shook her head slowly, rubbing her eyes, then tried to sit up. However, when Niall leaned forward to help her, she shrank away, frowning.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was quiet, but had a trace of bitterness in it. Could he do nothing right for this woman? “Can I get you some warm ale?”

“Thank you,” Moira answered, and Niall got up to summon a servant to bring the drink, then he walked over to the window to look out. It was a wet and miserable day; the wind was howling through the trees, and rain was lashing the walls of the castle, being driven almost horizontally by the force of the gale.

Niall wished he could wave a magic wand and make this horrible storm go away. At the same time, he wanted to make the atmosphere in the room warm and calm, instead of full of the icy tension that filled it at that moment.

When the ale arrived, Niall sat down at the side of the bed and took a sip of the beer, looking at Moira all the while. She was studiously avoiding his gaze, however, until he said, “Why did you go into the loch if you cannot swim? That takes a great deal of courage, especially at this time of year when it is absolutely freezing.”

Moira looked up at him, mystified. “I had no intention of swimming. I just wanted to

sit and relax for a while. I would be really foolish to try swimming in the dark. I ended up there accidentally, my horse was startled by the howl of a wolf.”

He sighed irritably, visibly annoyed now. “Moira, you should have let me go with you, or taken a guard along, or not gone out at all. You could have been killed!” He had worked himself into such a state that his face had become red with fury.

Instinctively, Moira flinched and drew back, pulling herself as far away from Niall as possible. She looked terrified; they were alone, and the walls of her chamber were so thick no sound would penetrate them even if she screamed as loudly as she could. She looked trapped with no escape.

Niall realised, then, that he had said the wrong thing in the wrong way. He should have been less aggressive.

“What happened to you, Moira?” he asked gently. He reached out a hand to cover hers, but she recoiled from his touch. “Were you imprisoned? Trapped?”

Moira let out a trembling sigh. She had to satisfy Niall’s curiosity somehow, but she could not tell him the whole truth, or he might send her to Brodie McDonnell, which would be tantamount to a death sentence.

A sip of her ale gave her a few seconds to gather her thoughts and avoid Niall’s gaze, since she was afraid that if he looked into her eyes, he would see the damning truth.

“I-I was locked away for a while,” she confessed. “Because my father thought I might run away. He was a cruel man, and so was my betrothed. I managed to get away at last, though, but I had to steal a horse, so he will probably use that as an excuse to come after me. Now, I do not wish to discuss him any more. Would you want to remember cruelty if it was committed on you? Why do you keep asking me about it?”

While Moira was speaking, Niall had been staring at her with a ferocious frown. His jaw was clenched, and his hands were bunched into fists.

Despite her attempt to look defiant and unafraid, Moira stared at him with wide, fear filled eyes, wishing she could just disappear.

“Your betrothed locked you up,” he said, attempting to make his voice calm despite the rage that was boiling within him. “Do you think I would do the same? Do you seriously think I am that kind of man?”

Moira glanced at Niall for a moment, surprised by the question, then her eyes returned to her hands, which she was twisting on her lap. She nodded slowly, her whole body tense as she looked away from him. “Yes, I do. I know no other kind of man,” she replied.

Niall stared at her for a few moments, then he looked like something inside him had cracked and sent splinters of pain searing through him.

Moira watched him from the corner of her eye as he turned and left; something about him was different, but she could not quite put her finger on what it was. She could not possibly have hurt him because you needed to have a heart to have it broken, she thought, and as far as she could see, Niall McPhee had no such thing.

After his visit to Moira, Niall could not get her out of his mind. Ever since they had first met, thoughts of her had occupied many of his waking hours, but now he found that she was becoming an obsession. However, since she had told him exactly what she thought of him, he was almost crushed.

Was this how he appeared to Moira? To everyone? A great, fearful brute? He knew his stature was intimidating to some people, but he had never considered himself a brute, and certainly not terrifying.

No one had ever been so cruel to him, but then he had brought it on himself by asking her opinion, and she had given it to him honestly, so the blame rested entirely on him. However, that did not make it hurt any less.

Moira Jamieson was the only woman he had ever met who completely bewitched him, and yet he had a niggling, uneasy feeling about her. His mind could not trust her, but his body definitely wanted to. Every time he saw her slim, shapely form, the urge to sweep her into his arms and kiss her senseless became almost impossible to resist.

Yet, he could not fall in love with her; she had made it perfectly clear that his advances were not welcome, and she had never done anything to deserve his affection. He had tried to be kind to her, but at every attempt he made she backed away and rebuffed him. Perhaps she saw him the same way as she had seen the other men in her life—selfish bullies.

The only kind words she had said to him were “thank you” when he had rescued her,

and that set him to wondering why he had followed her the night before. He had had no idea at the time, but now it occurred to him that he might have had some kind of premonition.

Damn her! he thought as he left his study. What is she doing to me?

Niall threw himself into his work around the castle and the estate, but also his training in martial skills because it was the best way he could think to work off his excess aggression and frustration.

He went out to the courtyard to meet Finn, who was waiting for him so that they could have a good man-to-man bare knuckle boxing match. They began to fight, but Niall could not concentrate. His blows kept missing their target, but Finn's found theirs all too often. Before long, Niall was dazed and bleeding from a cut on his arm. It was not serious, but it stopped the fight.

Finn looked at Niall with a concerned frown. "Niall, ye are no' yourself today," he remarked. "Whatever is the matter?"

Niall sighed as Sandie bound up his wound. He knew he could speak in front of her with confidence; her mind was full of other people's secrets, and she had never been known to betray any of them. She was utterly dependable.

"It's Moira Jamieson," he replied. "I cannot figure out how she thinks. She believes I am like her father and her betrothed—men who brutalised and trapped her. Apparently I am possessive and cruel, but I cannot bear to believe someone would think of me that way." He ran his hand through his hair in a familiar gesture of agitation.

Finn stared at him, frowning for a moment. He had seen Niall, who was one of his best friends, upset before, but not like this. At first, he was alarmed, then he realised

that it was a typical man's infatuation with a beautiful woman. He had fallen victim to something like this himself once or twice, but he doubted that Niall had ever done so. His view of women was well-balanced; in his opinion, they were equal to men, with one delightful difference. To say that he was possessive was ludicrous.

He laughed at the ridiculous suggestion. "No, that is no' you at a' Niall," he replied. "I have known ye since ye were twelve years old, an' I never knew ye tae be like anythin' like that." He moved so that he was standing in front of Niall. "I think ye are a wee bit besotted wi' the lassie. She is bonny, there's nae doubt about it, but ye dinnae know her well at a', an' I can tell she doesnae know you if that is what she thinks o' ye. I think ye should pull yourself together. Ye know that ye are expected tae marry soon. McNicholl is bringin' his niece tae meet ye, an' ye must clear your head o' every woman but her. Moira will be gone soon, an' ye will soon forget her."

Niall pretended to think for a moment, then pasted on a smile and nodded. "You are right," he agreed. "I have probably just had my head turned by a pretty face."

Yet as he made his way to his chamber to change into clean clothes and bathe, his mind was still full of Moira. As he saw it, he had two choices. He could simply bow to the wishes of the clan and marry the woman they had suggested, or get to know Moira better.

But why did he even want to do that? He knew how she felt about him—or thought he did. Why did he want to change her mind? Perhaps he was just being vain, and did not want a beautiful woman to think badly of him.

Niall sighed as he climbed out of his bath. He knew he should concentrate on the work of running the estate rather than brooding over a situation over which he had little control. Granted, he could refuse to marry the clan's choice for him, but where would that leave him? He still needed a bride to produce an heir, and it was clear that Moira Jamieson did not want to be that woman.

He heaved another sigh, then went to his study, and by sheer force of will, began to bury himself in his accounts. He succeeded in banishing Moira from his mind for some hours, during which time he talked over financial matters and some tenants' affairs with his steward.

Having determined the best course of action for dealing with them, they arranged to go out that afternoon to meet with some of them and settle the outstanding matters. The last thing Niall wanted was discontent amongst those who worked on his estate. He had enough to deal with already!

He had always been surprised to find that his tenants had such a high regard for him, but his steward, Bruce Watson, had told him that it was because he had no favourites and always treated them fairly. This had pleased Niall to no end, and he was greeted with great friendliness by all of them. However, he was puzzled.

When he asked Bruce, who was slightly older than him, why this was, he chuckled. "People can tell who likes them," he answered. "Wait till ye have children, M'Laird, an' ye will soon see."

Children. Niall had succeeded in keeping his thoughts free of Moira Jamieson for a few hours, only to have them wrenched back to her again. Even in his elevated position as a Laird, he had rarely given much thought to having children, so why was he doing so now?

Because of her, he realised. Because he had to figure out his feelings for Moira, and for the first time ever, the word "love" jumped into his mind.

"Children?" He laughed. "I cannot imagine myself with children, Bruce."

"I have six, M'Laird," Bruce told him, "an' they are the joy o' my life. Ye will find the same thing when ye are a father yourself." His face beamed with happiness, and

for a moment Niall envied him sorely.

He tried to imagine himself with children, tried to see a picture of himself holding a tiny baby in his arms, play-fighting with a little boy of seven or eight and having a boxing match with an adolescent with a bad attitude!

And daughters. They were a whole different story, no doubt. Soft, fragile, easily hurt, needing a mother to show them how to be a woman. And who would that woman be?

The one face that swam into his consciousness at once was Moira Jamieson, and suddenly, he was not in the least surprised. Despite himself, Niall was edging towards a conclusion that he dared not name.

When he was left alone in his study and downed a large shot of whisky. It was not something he usually did, but today he was much more agitated than usual and needed something to calm him down. He stood by the window for a long time watching the guards below him practising their swordplay, archery, and boxing. He was in charge of all these men, but the weight of that duty had never felt heavier than it did now.

His marriage was coming to meet him, not like some celebration of joy, but more akin to a looming threat. He had never met his intended and would have very little time to decide whether he would love her or loathe her.

And what would happen if he hated her? Was there a procedure for annulling the marriage? Niall looked at the whisky bottle again. He was sorely tempted to pour himself another glass, but he had seen too many other men take that long-tempting road to hell.

Perhaps he should ask someone who understood and who better than another woman?

It was early afternoon, and at this time of day the usual place to find his sister was in her favourite small parlour near the stable eating a light lunch. Niall always laughed at the thought of the miniscule amount of food Glennie ate. He could have eaten ten times that amount and still had room to spare!

When he opened the parlour door Glennie looked up and smiled at him. “Have you come to join me, brother?” she asked. “Because I will have to order a wagon full of food to accommodate you.”

Niall laughed. He loved engaging with Glennie this way because not only was she his little sister, but his best friend, and they could talk to each other about anything. Now, however, he had something more important than food to discuss.

“I need to talk to you,” he said heavily, frowning. “There is something strange going on, and it is puzzling me.”

Glennie suddenly looked scared. She dropped her gaze to her food and poured herself some wine. “Would you like some?” she asked, keeping her eyes on her glass.

Niall shook his head. “I have just had a glass of whisky,” he told her. “You know I never mix those two.”

As he looked at her, he had a strange feeling that Glennie was hiding something from him, but decided he would discuss it with her later. Normally, Glennie would have smiled at this, since it brought back a funny memory of Niall being so drunk he passed out and had the hangover from hell when he woke up. However, now she concentrated on her food and continued to avoid his eyes.

“I wanted to ask you about Moira,” he said as he sat down. “I need to know more about her.”

Glennie frowned. “Why?” she asked.

“She worries me,” he replied. “She has told us a story about going to stay with an aunt in Aberdeen, but to be honest, Glennie, I don’t believe her, I don’t think she has anywhere to go after she leaves here.”

“Then let her stay, as I asked you to before,” Glennie replied. “It seems like the best solution.”

“And what if her family comes to find her?” he asked. “We have no idea who her betrothed is. He might be a powerful Laird, and send an army to attack us. I have done enough fighting to last me a lifetime, Glennie. I want no more.”

Glennie relaxed as she realised that her brother had not found out about her relationship with Ritchie, as she was sure he had. However, it reminded her to be extra careful in future. She knew what Niall’s reaction would be if he found out that the mistress of Baltyre Castle was having a romantic relationship with a stable hand!

“Has she told you anything about her past?” he asked, frowning deeply.

Glennie shook her head. “I know as much as you do, Niall,” she answered. “But I can tell you what I think of her. To me, she seems like a good, but troubled person. She finds it very difficult to trust people, especially men. I think she deserves a chance to be trusted and loved because it doesn’t seem like her family cares for her if her father wants to marry her to a brute. I like her very much, or I would not have asked you to let her stay.” She stood up, then took his hand and led him back to the table, where she looked deeply into his eyes.

“Does she ever ask about me?” Niall asked, but this time it was he who looked embarrassed, and he dropped his gaze to his hands, which he was clenching and unclenching on the table.

Glennie put her hands on top of his to still them.

“No, she has never asked about you, Niall,” she answered. “We rarely talked about you except in passing if your name cropped up when we were discussing something else.”

All of a sudden, Niall felt a sinking sense of disappointment, and he was not quite sure why. It was deeply confusing, since his feelings for Moira were a mixture of carnal attraction, pity, occasional annoyance and distrust, but there was something else there too.

He felt protective and occasionally very tender towards her. Was this love? He had absolutely nothing to measure his emotions against. The only person in his life he could say that he loved was Glennie, and that was, of course, not the same thing at all.

She studied him for another moment, then asked, “Why are you so curious, Niall?” her tone was concerned. “Do you have feelings for her?”

Niall could have kicked himself for asking the question at all; his thoughts and emotions were probably written all over his face, and he and Glennie were so attuned that they could read each other like books.

He sighed. “I really don’t know how I feel about her, or how she feels about me,” he replied. “She irritates me with the defiance she shows, but I pity her for all she has been through, and—I probably should not say this to my sister—but I find her very attractive in a physical way.”

Glennie laughed. “Why not? You are just like every other man, Niall.” She picked up her brother’s hand and squeezed it, then smiled at him. “And if you like, I can talk to Moira and find out how she feels about you.”

Niall felt his heart swell with hope, and he smiled at his sister. “Thank you, Glennie, but please be careful she doesn’t find out what you are doing.”

“I will be as subtle as possible,” Glennie answered. “She will never know what my mission is.”

“What would I do without you?” Niall asked as he bent down to kiss Glennie’s forehead.

Glennie cast her eyes heavenwards. “I have no idea,” she answered, as they both burst out laughing.

In truth, Niall felt much better now that he had left the matter in Glennie’s capable hands, and he managed to cope with the rest of the day without any further difficulties.

That night, he had the most restful night he had experienced for a long time. He knew that his problem was not yet solved, but he felt that the solution was on its way.

Moira spent the next two days in her sick bed, and Glennie visited her often, staying for hours at a time, during which time they chatted about every subject under the sun. They found that they had much in common. Both shared a love of horses and books, and they both had the same dry sense of humour.

Moira found herself relaxing with Glennie as she had never done with anyone else in her life, and wished that she had a sister just like her. However, it made her feel sad that she had never been able to enjoy such companionship before.

During this time, she saw nothing of Niall, and she did not know whether to be glad or disappointed. He had become such a large part of her life since she first came to Baltyre that she missed the sheer size of his presence and personality, whether it was good or bad.

Moira had been about to ask about him many times, but something always stopped her. She knew that Glennie would tell Niall if she did, and who knew what would happen then?

On the morning of the third day, she decided that she had had enough rest and was ready to face the world again, so when Glennie came into the room she found Moira in her bath.

“Oh, excuse me!” Glennie exclaimed, turning away so that she would not embarrass Moira by looking at her while she was naked, but Moira only laughed.

“Do I have anything different from what you have?” she asked. “Or should I have three breasts? I am not embarrassed, Glennie, so please don’t turn away.”

Glennie laughed, then sat down on the bed. “You look better today,” she remarked. “More like your usual self.”

“I feel better,” Moira told her. “And it has been lovely to have you coming to see me every day, Glennie. I’m sure it has helped me recover more quickly.”

Then Moira suddenly became conscious of the livid scars that her husband had given her; most of them were quite small, but still very noticeable. Sandie had given her a salve to help the scars shrink a little, but Moira had seen no difference as yet, and the thought made her uncomfortable.

However, if Glennie noticed the scars, she made no comment, but patted Moira’s hand and smiled at her fondly. “It has been very good for me too,” she admitted. “I have very few friends, and those I do have never come here. I always have to go and visit them.”

Moira frowned. “Why is that?” she asked, puzzled.

Glennie sighed. “A number of things,” she replied. “Niall is not exactly welcoming, and, well, it’s hard to say, but there is an air of ferocity about this place. I know I am making no sense at all, but all I can say is that there are not enough ladies in this place to soften the atmosphere.

My brother is a good man—don’t let appearances fool you—but he is not gentle, even though he does have a heart of gold. I hope his brusque manner has not made you dislike him because I know the real man, and he is a very good one. In fact, on the subject of you staying here, I think I may be turning him around to my way of thinking.”

“You mean he might let me stay here?” Moira asked, frowning.

Glennie nodded. “Yes,” she said simply.

“Are you sure?” Moira was baffled. “Why has he changed his mind?”

She gazed at Glennie for a moment, then, to her surprise, Glennie posed another, infinitely more awkward question.

“Tell me, Moira, are you attracted to him at all?” she asked, looking at Moira keenly.

Moira splashed some water on her face to give herself a second to think. She wondered why Glennie felt the need to defend her brother, and her last question surprised her. It was not as though he and Moira were going to be involved in a romantic relationship.

At last, she said, “No, but I can see why you would think so. He is a very handsome man.”

She picked up the soap and began to wash her arms, which were already perfectly clean. She could feel herself blushing, and knew that Glennie could see it too. She was attracted to Niall; fiercely so, and it would be extremely hard for her to leave, but she was going to. She had made up her mind, and her resolution was set in stone.

“It’s time I got up and dressed,” Moira said, changing the subject.

She looked at one of her two dresses that the maid had laid out on the bed for her and sighed. She was too proud to ask if she could borrow a garment from Glennie, but the ones she was wearing were becoming threadbare.

Oh, well, I will have to make do, she thought, standing up. Her maid came to dry her,

and a moment later she turned around to put on her worn dress, then her eyes suddenly widened with surprise.

Lying on the bed were two day dresses, one a deep dusty pink, and the other deep blue. Accompanying them were matching underwear, a jacket, a warm woollen cloak and a nightdress. Moira looked at Glennie, who was grinning at her happily.

“Did you do this?” she asked.

Glennie nodded. “I thought you would like to have some new things,” she answered. “If they don’t fit, we can have them altered. Do you like them?”

Moira moved to the bed and ran her hands over the garments. Both were made of fine quality wool and were soft to the touch, both had high necks and long sleeves, so they were clearly not ball gowns, but Moira loved them. More than that, however, she loved the thoughtfulness and generosity behind them.

“Oh!” she breathed as tears began to prick her eyes. “Glennie, They are lovely. Thank you. How can I repay you?”

“No need,” Glennie replied as Moira enveloped her in a tight hug. “Now, I would like you to come riding with me while the weather is fine. You can borrow a riding habit from me while yours is being made.”

“A riding habit too?” Moira asked in disbelief. “But Glennie, I will be gone soon.”

“Then you can take them with you,” Glennie said mildly. She did not voice the thought that she doubted whether her friend would ever leave.

The maid produced the garment, and although it was a little too big, Moira was overjoyed with it. She had never felt so comforted and cared for before, and it

warmed her heart as she followed her friend out to the stables.

The red-haired young groom Moira had met before was standing waiting for them, but he did nothing more than nod at Moira and wish her a polite, “Good morning,” before directing his gaze, and all his attention, at Glennie.

She returned his look, and even though neither had said a word, Moira felt as though she was interrupting a private conversation as she waited for her horse to be saddled.

“Ritchie is coming with us,” Glennie said, “for our own safety. He is a very good swimmer.”

Moira thought one of the guards might have been better suited to the task, but she said nothing, merely nodded and smiled.

At last the horses were ready, and they rode into a fresh, breezy morning with a haze of white cloud over the sun. Moira took deep lungfuls of the cool, invigorating air and felt her burdens lessen as she watched birds flying, rabbits scurrying among the bushes, and saw the first flush of spring flowers. It was magical, and she smiled widely as the wind blew her hair back, then she urged her horse into a steady canter.

Glennie was right behind her and steered them both on a course towards the loch. When they were a hundred yards away, she stopped. “Shall we go down to the shore?” she asked, carefully watching Moira’s face.

Moira was trembling inside as she looked at the shimmering water. It looked so innocent and harmless, but she knew that it could be vicious and merciless, and everything within her told her not to go near it. She was about to turn away from it before Glennie’s voice broke into her thoughts.

“The only way to conquer your fear is to face it,” she said gently. “We are all scared

of something, Moira. I am terrified of heights, but I am gradually overcoming it by climbing a little higher up on the battlements when I go there. We don't need to go too close, not enough to frighten you."

Her voice was soft and encouraging, but after a moment's thought, Moira shook her head. She took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I'm not quite ready yet. Perhaps it will take a little while longer."

She tried to keep her voice from trembling, and succeeded, but tears pricked the back of her eyes as she remembered the tenderness with which Niall had treated her when they had finally reached the riverbank.

Although she remembered the shock of the whole incident, the first thing she experienced was a feeling of profound relief as she found herself on dry land.

Then she recalled the feel of the strong pair of hands gripping her and pulling her out of the water. She remembered the look of concern in Niall's green eyes, and the way his hands had moved carefully over her to make sure she had not injured herself.

The gentleness on his face as he helped her to her feet passed through her mind as she sat down on the grass. It took her a long time to calm down and relax, during which time she closed her eyes and let the sounds of nature soothe her. The loch was not her enemy, she realised, merely the circumstances in which she had found herself that night.

Her reaction to Niall had been one of the reasons for that, but he had come to make things right again. She had no idea why, however. He could not have known she was going to be in such mortal danger. Perhaps he was a good man after all, she thought.

Moira began to stroll along slowly behind Ritchie and Glennie, and saw Ritchie put his arm around Glennie's waist as they meandered along, following the path of the

river. She saw as Glennie and Ritchie were drawn together in a loving embrace. She felt infinitely jealous as she saw the tender look that passed between them, and although she could not hear the words they were speaking, she knew they were expressions of the deepest love.

For a moment, she watched them, but as they drew apart she looked away, not wanting to invade their privacy.

Gradually, Moira allowed herself to lag further behind, unwilling to intrude on their privacy. She had been invited to ride with Glennie, but she had a secret suspicion that Glennie's real reason for the outing was so that she would have an excuse to be with Ritchie.

Moira had never experienced such a thing, but longed for it with all her heart. Glennie was an extremely affectionate friend, and no doubt when she married Ritchie—which Moira was sure she would—she would be a very loving wife and mother.

From time to time, Glennie looked back to check on Moira, but when she saw that all was well, she turned to direct all her attention back to her beloved.

Moira's mind drifted back to Niall again. Why had he rescued her? He could have let her die and no one would have been any the wiser.

Perhaps he is not like my husband and father at all, she thought. She felt hopeful, but if that was the case, she certainly could not fall in love with him then stay and watch him marry another woman.

It was at that moment that she heard hoofbeats behind her, and she turned to see Niall cantering towards her. Moira looked immediately towards Glennie and Ritchie. They had not yet seen Niall, but as soon as they did, they quietly but hurriedly made their

way into some nearby trees and disappeared from Moira's sight.

She had to stop him seeing them, she realised. If Niall knew that a mere stable lad was seeing his sister, he would be furious. Although Moira knew that Glennie was quite capable of defending herself, she had no wish to see Ritchie losing his job because of the sin of being in love with the wrong woman.

She stood up and waited for Niall to dismount, and when he did so, he walked towards her, wearing a strange half-smile, half-frown on his face. "I didn't expect to see you here," he said.

"I thought about avoiding this place altogether," Moira answered, "but something Glennie said changed my mind. She said that the best way to conquer a fear is to face it, so I decided to do just that." She looked out at the clear waters of the loch, which were shimmering in the breeze, and shivered.

"It looks so beautiful," she observed, "but I have a healthy respect for it now, and I will never dip a toe in it from now on."

"Moira." Niall's voice was deep and thrilling to her ears as he spoke. He turned her around to face him. "I know what it is to be afraid—I have been there many times—and recovering is a gradual process. Give yourself time, and you will succeed, I'm sure of it."

Moira stood looking up at him, mesmerised by his eyes, which were the same colour as the newly sprouting leaves on the trees around them.

Such beautiful eyes, she thought.

"I hope so," she said, with a faint smile.

Then suddenly she remembered Glennie and Ritchie, and almost panicked. Almost. She began to walk slowly in the opposite direction to where she had seen Glennie and Ritchie, and Niall followed her. After the incident a few nights before, he was still afraid for her safety.

Moira was trying to think of something to say to break the awkward silence between them, but nothing came to mind.

“Why are you here, My Laird?”

He eyed her intensely again, in a way that always made her heart beat faster. Instead of answering her, however, Niall pointed to a spot in the middle of the loch. Then, he leaned in and whispered in her ear, “Look, Moira.”

Curious, she turned to see a swan with five tiny cygnets, gliding majestically along the water. Her fluffy grey babies were following her in a straight line like a row of toy soldiers, and Moira was enchanted.

“Oh,” she cried, “how lovely they are!”

“Indeed they are,” he agreed, smiling widely. “I used to come down here as a boy fishing and see whole families of them building their nests, and watch the cygnets growing into swans, then learning to fly. I wished I could fly too.”

Moira watched him, looking at his bright smile and shining eyes as he gazed back into his past. She knew from what Glennie had told her that they too had not had affectionate parents, although they had not seemed to be as bad as hers.

“Was Glennie ever with you?” she asked.

He gave a short laugh. “Indeed she was. She loved fishing, she still does, and she

loves swans too. She always says they look like ships in full sail.”

Moira looked at the stately bird and her little children and smiled. “That is a very good description,” she remarked.

Once again, as she watched the cygnets, she wondered what it would be like to have children of her own, and suddenly a wave of sadness washed over her. She was sure being a mother was not in her future.

Niall watched Moira’s smile fade and her face took on an expression of deep sadness. He studied her shining hair, high, elegant cheekbones and full lips, her long neck and curvy womanly figure, then a surge of desire erupted inside him.

Why had he even doubted what he felt for Moira? He loved her fighting spirit, her stubbornness that was coupled with a deep tenderness and vulnerability that brought out all his protective instincts.

Moira had been admiring the swans, but she felt, rather than saw Niall’s eyes on her, and she turned to face him, realising that he was much closer to her than he had been a moment before.

“Moira,” he said huskily, his eyes on her lips as he reached out his hand to tilt her chin up so that she was looking at him.

For a few long moments, she was mesmerised by his bright, green eyes, and the earthy, manly smell of his body. A sweet pulse began to beat between her legs as he leaned into her, and his lips were slowly, inexorably descending towards hers. As he came closer, she felt the heat of his skin a hairsbreadth from her lips, and closed her eyes.

Awareness hit Moira like a slap in the face; she was here in this lonely place, letting this man to whom she was so desperately attracted kiss her. She was suddenly terrified of the thought that she might lose control of herself and allow him to do the kind of things that her body was begging her to let him do.

Why was she so attracted to him? Why was every feminine part of her body responding to him so fiercely?

Moira's instincts caused her to panic and push him away by putting both hands flat on his chest and shoving with all her strength. She could not give in to him now; she was too confused. Her mind told her to do one thing, but her body told her to do something else, and she knew that if she gave in to her emotions she would live to regret it.

Even though Moira had pushed him as hard as she could, she did not succeed in unbalancing him. He merely took two steps backwards, not even stumbling despite her best effort.

He frowned at her, but it was not an aggressive expression, merely one of puzzlement. "Moira, take a breath," he said gently, smiling. "I am not going to hurt you. I simply cannot stay away from you."

He took a step towards her, but Moira held up her hands, palms towards him, in a gesture of repudiation.

“Get away from me,” she said through gritted teeth.

Even as she did so, she felt ashamed of her body’s instinctive response to him. She should not be feeling this way, she reminded herself. Men were brutal, and she had no wish to be under the thumb of yet another one of them, completely subject to his will. That would never happen again, despite the urges of her body. They were only physical, and could be overcome, but she could never force herself to fall in love with this man.

“Why?” he asked. “Do you find me repulsive?” He looked down at himself, then back up at her, and once more she was mesmerised by his built—but only for a moment.

Moira was not going to answer the question because she could not tell him the truth; that she found him deeply attractive, but she was afraid.

“I am not falling into your trap,” she snapped.

Niall let out a peal of incredulous laughter. “What trap?” he asked. He was genuinely baffled by this woman, who reacted with hostility to his attempts at pleasantness and courtesy. If only he did not find her so damned beautiful!

“You want to seduce me,” Moira replied, trembling as she backed even further away from him. “And make me your mistress! Well, let me tell you, you will not succeed! I will not be used whenever you feel the urge. I will never consent to that!”

Niall could not believe what he was hearing. “Why do you think so little of yourself?” he asked. “And of me? Why would I ask you to be my mistress when I could ask you to be my bride?”

Moira was speechless and motionless with disbelief for a moment. Was this a

proposal? Surely not, he was making fun of her, but she was having none of it. She looked into Niall's eyes with utter contempt and shook her head.

"I am not the kind of woman for you, My Laird. You need someone with status, to bring you land and help you with alliances. I am a nobody. A runaway. The best thing I can do for you is to leave here and never bother you again."

She tried to turn away, but Niall reached out to grab her wrist and pull her close to him, so close that they were touching from chest to knee.

Niall could feel Moira's soft breasts pressing against his chest, her warm body heating him so that he was almost afire with desire for her. She smelled of lavender and woman. At that moment, if he had been a man of no honour or decency, he would have pushed her onto the ground and had his way with her, but he was not that kind of man, thank god.

As he looked into her pale blue eyes, Niall felt as if all his senses were trained on Moira, and the only people who lived in the world at that moment were he and the lovely creature he was holding in his arms. He had shut the rest of the world out as if it did not exist. He could have stayed there forever.

Moira was dizzy from Niall's closeness, the musk of his body, the firmness of his chest and his thighs pressed against her. How could she want him so much yet need to push him away at the same time? It made no sense, yet when Moira was near Niall, nothing made sense; he threw her completely off kilter.

"I have enough land," Niall said. His voice, that deep rumble from inside his chest, made her feel as though she could stand and listen to him all day. "You are better than any amount of land, Moira. But I want to taste you first..."

Before she knew it, his lips were on hers, and Moira was lost in a world the likes of

which she had never known existed. She had been kissed before by her husband, and that was an experience she wished to forget forever.

But this was as different as night was from day as Niall's moist lips caressed hers gently, sensually, and his tongue tip parted her lips to enter her mouth and stroke her tongue with his. She gave a little moan of surprise and delight; nothing had prepared her for this. But Moira was inexorably drawn into the kiss as if she had no will of her own, and at that moment she had none.

She was lost in a world of sensation she could never have imagined, and the pleasure was almost unbearably sweet. She plunged her fingers into the thick hair at the nape of his neck and sighed at its smooth, silky feel. She had expected to feel trapped in his arms, but instead she felt safe and protected.

Niall, too, was in a wonderland he had never been in before. He had kissed and lain with a lot of different women many times before. He knew he was a handsome man, although he never spoke about it, but he knew he should not be kissing Moira. She could be extremely insulting sometimes, and she had a will of iron, and yet, there was something about her that drew him in and would not let him go. He was baffled by her, but so enchanted that he thought she might have cast a spell on him.

Now she was in his arms, at his mercy, her soft, yielding body pressed against his with the inevitable result. And had he just asked her to marry him? He had been joking, of course—or had he? Now her lips were moving against his, as soft and delicate as rose petals. Was there anything about her that was not utterly delicious?

Moira felt herself sinking into a pool of lustful delight. The movements of Niall's lips were sending jets of pleasure straight to her core, and she was almost unconsciously rubbing her hips against his. The pulse between her legs had become stronger, and she felt warm and wet and wicked, but she was in paradise.

Then, abruptly, reality forced its way back into her consciousness. She could not allow Niall McPhee to have his way with her. Moira once more pushed Niall away, but this time she accompanied the shove with a resounding slap across his face which made her palm sting.

She saw Niall put his hand to his face and watched his eyes widen, and his mouth drop open in surprise, but he was rooted to the spot with sheer astonishment. Moira took the chance to run to her horse and mount unaided faster than she had ever done before.

Less than a minute later, she was gone, while Niall had barely moved except to rub the livid, hand-shaped mark on his cheek which was throbbing and stinging furiously.

What did I do to deserve that? Niall thought, feeling a boiling rage growing inside him. He was tired of Moira Jamieson treating him like something filthy she had scraped off her shoe. He determined that when he reached the castle, he would seek her out and have a final showdown with her.

The kind of violence and disrespect she had just shown were unacceptable, and he would tell her so in no uncertain terms! And after that, she would likely disappear.

It cannot happen soon enough, he thought. I am sick of her.

However, as he mounted Logie and started back to the castle, he knew he was lying to himself. Moira was in his blood; if she wanted to leave, he could not stop her, but he could not bring himself to look forward to the prospect. He knew he would miss her desperately.

Suddenly, he remembered something—something extremely important that had almost slipped his mind because he had been so preoccupied with Moira. There was a council meeting that afternoon, and it was imperative that he was there.

Niall cursed and wanted to spend the entire journey back to the castle calling Moira all sorts of foul names, all the while knowing that he did not mean any of them.

She brought out the worst in him, Niall thought savagely, then his mind went back to their kiss; how could he possibly be angry with her when she made him feel so good, so protective, so masculine?

When Moira arrived back at Baltyre Castle, she sprinted all the way from the stables to her bedchamber without stopping, then threw herself on her bed. Her head was spinning, and her whole body still thrilled with Niall's touch. She could still feel his lips on hers, his big hands around her waist, and most of all, the touch of his hard erection against the most sensitive spot on her body.

She could still feel his silky hair running through her fingers, her breasts pressing against the hard muscles of his chest, the tingling of her hardened nipples.

For a brief moment, Moira cast her mind back to her wedding night. It had been unbearably painful, but had not lasted long, thank god. Yet, she still had nightmares about the agony she had suffered, but it was the leer on his face as he took her without mercy that upset her most.

It had been the worst experience of her life, but he had fallen asleep straight afterwards, and that was the moment that Moira had decided to escape by hook or by crook. Her nightmares had lessened in frequency somewhat as time went on, although sometimes it took her a moment to recall where she was when she woke up in the morning, and when she did, she was swamped with blessed relief.

Then she felt again the touch of Niall's lips on her own, and her whole body began to thrum and throb with desire. She was not a virgin, but she knew that making love with Niall would be vastly different.

Through her clothes, she touched the part of herself that had rubbed against Naill's hard arousal, and was surprised to find it as tender and sensitive as it had been before. Tentatively, she raised her skirts.

As she thought about him, still touching herself, she remembered the kiss, and suddenly a glorious feeling she had never experienced before exploded from that sensitive place to spread over her body. She shuddered with shock and delight, and although she had never felt it before, she knew that the blissful sensation came from her thoughts of Niall.

Moira imagined waking up to him every morning, looking into his green eyes as she took her first breath of the new day, smelling the musk of his manly body, rubbing her palms over the rasping bristles of his beard's new growth.

Niall had done some magic on her to make her long for him so much, she thought, laughing softly. Yet, she could not stay here forever; sooner or later, McDonnell would find her. But until that time, could she throw caution to the wind and let Niall make love to her?

How she desired him! But if she gave herself to him, he might think that he had won his prize and lose interest, or treat her the way Roy McDonnell had, and Moira could not bear the thought of that.

As soon as Glennie heard the noise of horse's hooves crashing through the bushes, she was seized by a sudden feeling of alarm. This part of the riverbank was one of Niall's favourite spots, and if he found her here alone with Ritchie, he would be furious. She knew that there was a council meeting later on, so he would not stay long, but they would have to make themselves scarce, and right away.

"Come on!" Ritchie hissed. He grabbed her hand, almost pulling her off her feet as she did so.

They moved as quietly as they could towards the horses, then they led them away instead of riding them. Neither said a word the whole time for fear of being overheard, but when they were a safe distance away, Ritchie turned to Glenn and said anxiously, "Do you think Moira will tell him we're here?"

After the intense look, Glenn gave him, he sighed, shaking his head. "Ye know her better than I dae, I guess," he told her.

They mounted up and rode back to Baltyre, where Ritchie went into the stables first and signalled Glennie to come in a little while later. Glennie knew that as long as she had any say in the matter, he would not lose his job at the castle because she would not permit it. However, she wanted him to be comfortable and not have to look over his shoulder all the time because he feared Niall's wrath.

She also knew that they would have to marry without Niall's consent, but she was resigned to that fact; she was old enough not to need his consent, although she would

have liked his blessing. However, at that moment, she was more worried about Moira. She had come to like and admire her, and wanted her to stay beside her so that they could develop their friendship.

Glennie smiled as she thought that Moira could be the sister she never had. She had always longed for a female friend because although she loved her brother, he could never understand her needs. Only another woman could do that, and she hoped that that woman could be Moira.

Moreover, Niall needed to have someone to support, and love him, too...

She felt a certain amount of trepidation as she thought of McNicholl's niece. Having met her on one occasion at the wedding of a mutual friend, Glennie had been struck by her aloofness. She stuck to her family and two close friends the whole evening, shunning everyone else.

She had given Glennie a polite greeting then ignored her for the rest of the night, and she had a foreboding that Beitris Maxwell was not the kind of woman who would keep Niall happy. Niall needed a wife who would be warm and companionable, who would make intelligent conversation and laugh with him. Someone like Moira?

When she had safely made her way into the castle, Glennie went to her chamber and spent the afternoon trying to concentrate on a book, with no success at all. She would have loved to go to find Ritchie and sneak him up to her chamber so that they could enjoy each other for a while. However, there was too much chance of them being found out, since the castle was stuffed full of members of the McPhee Clan, who were all present for the council meeting.

Glennie had no intention of speaking to any of them. They were all old, boring, and had nothing in common with her. Niall was with them, so it was just she and Moira who would be eating together. Glennie smiled at the thought, and decided to give

Moir a little treat. As well as that, she owed Moira an apology for almost dropping her in a very deep puddle of trouble!

Accordingly, she sent one of the maidservants to invite Moira to dine with her in her bedchamber, and had a bottle of wine brought up for them to enjoy with their meal. It was a very special bottle of a fine vintage that Niall had given to her on her last birthday, and she had been waiting for an occasion to taste it.

Moira arrived a short time after being summoned, and Glennie noticed that she looked a little distracted, as if something was troubling her. As soon as she was inside the room, Glennie surprised Moira by embracing her tightly and kissing her cheek.

“I almost got you into trouble with Niall this morning,” she said regretfully. “I am truly sorry, Moira. It was the last thing I wanted to do.”

“Oh, Glennie.” Moira smiled and shook her head. “I know that.”

“Did Niall find out we were there?” Glennie asked nervously.

“No,” Moira answered. “I think I distracted him long enough for you to get away. We walked away in the other direction.”

Glennie sighed with relief. “What a treasure you are, Moira!” she said, smiling widely. “Now, I have sent for a very special feast for us tonight, with all the food I know you like best.”

Moira felt a warm glow of gratitude wash over her. Glennie would make a fine friend, but there were so many obstacles preventing her from staying here, the biggest one being Niall. Yet, why should she worry? It was not as though she were in love with him.

At the thought, Moira's heart skipped a beat, and she pasted on a smile then looked at Glennie again.

Glennie poured her a glass of wine, but Moira felt like recoiling from it. She always drank ale, since she associated wine with her husband and father, but she took a sip out of politeness.

"Are you all right, Moira?" Glennie asked, frowning. "I sense something is bothering you."

Moira took another sip of her wine to delay the moment when she would have to look at Glennie again, but when she looked up, she found Glennie's green eyes—so like her brother's—waiting for her. Glennie reached over to take Moira's hand, but Moira drew back before they touched.

Glennie looked a little hurt, then said, "I will understand if this is too difficult for you to talk about, Moira. I was just trying to help."

Moira sighed in frustration. "It's I who should be sorry, Glennie," she answered. "I have been worrying about something for days, and—" She clenched her fists on top of the table and screwed up her face in an expression of agitation. "I have a problem I cannot solve."

Glennie looked at her with sympathy for a moment, then asked gently: "Is that problem called Niall?"

Moira's eyes widened in surprise, giving her secret away at once. "Yes," she answered. "How did you know?"

"I sensed it." Glennie smiled. "I have known Niall all my life, and I have never known him to act the way he does now, except when you are there. My brother has

been intimate with more than a few women, Moira, as I'm sure you have guessed, but he is different with you. I sense something when you look at each other that I have never seen or felt before.

Niall and I have always been very close, and I can usually read him like a book, but when he is around you, he is completely absorbed by you, although he never makes it obvious. I can tell that something is amiss, although I have no idea if that is good or bad. All I know is that it has never happened before." She frowned. "I get the feeling that there is something between you. Am I right?"

They paused while the food was delivered, giving Moira a chance to think of what to say next. When the maidservant had gone, Glennie started to dish food for herself, but Moira merely sat looking at the delicious meat and savoury pies, her mind a jumble of thoughts, none of which made sense.

Finally, she said, "I am so confused, Glennie. You are right, there is something between us, but up until this morning I thought it was only from my side."

Glennie frowned. "What happened this morning?" she asked.

"He—he kissed me." Moira covered her face with her hands and sighed. "Glennie, I am so mixed up. I know I have to go, but I have never felt like this before. Niall is making me want to stay, but I am terrified. I am terrified of men, to be truthful. I have never met one whom I could trust.

None of them have ever treated me as anything better than a pawn or a body to warm their bed. Niall seems to be different, but how can I be sure? It's much better that I go and make a new life for myself in Aberdeen."

"I see." Glennie gently pried Moira's hands away from her face. "Niall is a good man, Moira, and he will never hurt you."

“You are his sister, Glennie,” Moira pointed out. “You’re bound to speak up for him out of loyalty.”

“I speak from conviction,” Glennie said firmly. “I know him better than anyone, Moira.”

“What if the clan chooses a bride for him?” Moira spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. “If you are suggesting a romantic relationship between us, the wedding will have to be called off. His fiancée would come from a rich and influential family, whereas I am nobody. It could upset the whole balance of power in the area, and I don’t want that on my conscience. No, Glennie, it is best that I leave.”

“Even if there is a betrothal, I am certain that he would choose you.”

Moira’s heart stopped. “So, there is one already set? Niall is getting married?” Moira laughed, but no amusement shone in her eyes. She needed to break something. “I must leave immediately.”

“What will you do in Aberdeen?” Glennie persisted. “You said that you had relatives there, and that you could find employment, but is either of those statements true?”

“I have distant relatives there,” Moira conceded, “but I hardly know them, and I doubt whether they will want to shelter me.”

“And after you find a place to live,” Glennie went on, “what will you do for employment? How will you feed yourself?”

“I don’t know,” Moira said quietly.

She was truly in a quandary—damned if she left and damned if she stayed. It seemed that there was no right way to go.

“Eat your food,” Glennie instructed. “Then go to bed and sleep on it. Remember, Moira, there is always a home for you here. Whatever happens, I will make sure you have a roof over your head.”

“Thank you, Glennie.” Moira smiled, “I am so lucky to have you in my life.”

However, after she had eaten and left Glennie’s chamber, her head was still spinning with confusion.

Moira was walking back to her chamber very slowly, her mind preoccupied with her problems. The corridor in which she was walking was dark and filled with shadows, as it usually was in the late evening. As well as that, she was so lost in her thoughts that she bumped into a figure walking the other way.

“Oh!” she cried, recognising Gerald. “Excuse me. I was miles away.”

Gerald laughed softly, putting a hand on her shoulder. In the half-dark, he looked a little fearsome, with his eyes shadowed by his shaggy brows. “I was too, my dear,” he confessed. “I have just come out of the council meeting, and to be honest, I need a stiff whisky to calm me down a wee bit.”

Moira’s heart skipped a beat. “What’s happened?” she asked, alarmed.

Gerald gave an irritated sigh. “There was almost a riot,” he answered. “The Laird does not like to be told what to do. He’s in a difficult position, since we are being threatened by the Dornans, who are disputing the ownership of some land on the south side of the River Begg.

Niall does not want to go to war again, and says he would rather negotiate. He argued very fiercely for that, but he was not backed up by other members of the council. They want him to stick to their original plan of marrying Beitris Maxwell. For some

reason, Niall is against that plan, although I have no idea why. My niece is a lovely girl, and will make him a good wife.

So, my dear, Niall lost the argument, and he is getting married to Beitris a month from now.”

“I hope it brings peace,” Moira said, trying to sound calm.

“I do too,” Gerald replied fervently. “Goodnight, Moira.”

“Goodnight,” she replied faintly.

She trudged back to her chamber, her heart a lead weight in her chest. As soon as she entered her room, she stirred the fire, then sat down to think for a while.

If Niall married this Beitris, staying would not be an option. If Moira became his lover, she could hardly live in the castle under the watchful eye of his wife. A woman’s intuition was a fearfully strong thing, and Moira knew that she and Niall would give themselves away every time anyone looked at them, no matter how hard they tried to hide their affair. Anyway, she would have been a fool to believe what he told her down at the loch.

The situation that night had been wild and desperate, and they had both spoken in the heat of passion.

To add to her problems, she knew that she would be living on Glennie’s charity, and she could not bear the thought of that. Glennie had already given her new clothes and was having more made. What else would she have to provide for her comfort and well-being?

Granted, she would never have to worry about food, obviously, but there were many

other material things she would need. She could not bear the thought of being under obligation to someone and having to go begging them to give her whatever she required.

How many times had she told herself she had to go, Moira asked herself? Yet, every time she summoned the determination to do so she had been hindered by one person. It was Niall. Always Niall. He was the biggest reason she wanted to get away and the biggest reason she wanted to stay.

Damn him to hell! she thought viciously. I wish I had never met him! Moira tutted irritably as she turned to her bed to try to go to sleep. She had a sinking feeling that she would not rest well that night, however, having too much on her mind.

She had just turned the covers back when a loud knock sounded at the door, and thinking it might be her maid, Moira went to answer it. She was about to chastise her for making such a racket when she opened the door and found that the person standing on the threshold of her room was not her maidservant. Her eyes widened with shock as she beheld someone much bigger.

“May I come in?” Niall asked politely.

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Moira stared at him, open-mouthed with shock, for a moment. “It’s late, My Laird. Whatever it is, it can wait till morning.”

However, before she could shut the door in his face, he almost casually raised his right hand, palm first, and stopped the door’s closing arc. As she had found before, there was no point in trying to beat Niall in a contest of strength; he was simply too powerful.

“Are you afraid of me, Moira?” he asked gently, with an expression of deep concern on his face. “Because there is no need to be. I will never harm you. I promise you that.”

“I am not afraid of you,” she snapped. “I am sick and tired of you. You are torturing me. Why did you kiss me when you know you are marrying another woman in a matter of weeks? Why do you not just leave me alone? I will be gone as soon as I possibly can anyway. Get out and leave me be!”

Moira was just about to try to push him again, but quickly realised the futility of doing such a thing. Instead, she glared at him, but his eyes, which she had always found so mesmerising, were her undoing. She could not tear her gaze away from him.

Niall heard the rage in her voice and immediately knew it for what it was; jealousy. He realised that Moira could only be jealous if she had feelings for him—after all, what other reason could there be?

Niall backed her against the wall, and realised how ethereal and insubstantial she was compared to him. She resembled his idea of an elf, with her pale, translucent skin and eyes like hazy blue-white clouds.

As he thought of this, his gaze dropped to her lips, so full and ripe, and he felt his manhood surging into life.

Is there not an inch of you that is not absolutely gorgeous? he thought.

He was nearly unable to think straight, but then realised with astonishment that Moira had not tried to get away from him, and as he closed the space between them, he suddenly realised why.

Moira's eyes fixed on his lips. She was fighting the urge to pull Niall's head down to hers and kiss him with all her might.

Why should I resist this? It may never happen to me again. Do I not deserve all the pleasure I can get? I am leaving soon, so if I lie with him, the memory might last me for a lifetime. Should I not enjoy it just this once? What harm can it do?

Moira opened her eyes wide and tilted her face up to Niall's. She opened her mouth to speak, but he pressed his forefinger against her lips to stop her. When he spoke, his voice was throbbing with need.

"Do you know what you do to me?" he asked. "I think about you every minute of every day, Moira. Ever since the first moment I saw you I've wanted you. You are driving me mad. I'm even thinking of calling off my betrothal. Do you know how that feels?"

"Yes, Niall," she replied. "I do because I want you too."

Niall's eyes widened with surprise for a moment, then he smiled. "Good," he whispered, before his lips descended on hers in a kiss of smouldering passion.

The last time they had kissed had been passionate but gentle, but this was something else altogether, and Moira moaned aloud at the sensual onslaught of Niall's lips on hers.

She could only call it one thing; possession, and for the first time in her life, she was happy to give herself to a man, but only this one, special, beautiful man. Moira's body was telling her so, too; she was moist and throbbing in the special place between her legs, and her nipples were hard and tingling.

At last, they drew apart, and after one last lingering glance, Niall drew Moira away, took her hand and led her towards the bed. He sat down on it and pulled her gently onto his lap then folded his arms around her, taking a deep breath to savour her heavenly scent. He had dreamed of this, just holding Moira, letting her lean her head on his shoulder while they heard nothing but each other's breathing.

But he could not help himself from going further. He kissed her again and stroked her cheekbone with his thumb, then his fingertips travelled down the sensitive skin of her throat.

Moira's mind had been completely jumbled and blurred by every new sensation Niall was arousing. She felt as though she had deserted the world and gone to another, one where all that existed were the two of them and the thick atmosphere of sheer pleasure Niall had created for her. At that moment, she was the only woman in existence, and if the world ended now, she would die happy.

"You are perfect." Niall's voice was a husky whisper as he moved his hand down to cup her breast, feeling the little pebble of her hard nipple under his palm. He cursed the fabric of the dress that separated them, but moved his mouth down to suck it into

his mouth and tease it with his tongue before biting it in a gentle, teasing way.

The sensation of pleasure was so acute that it shot straight to Moira's core, and she gave a little scream as she fell back on the bed, her whole body throbbing. Niall ran his hands over her breasts, her stomach, her thighs and said, "You are the loveliest woman I have ever seen, Moira. You do things to me that no other woman has ever done. You make me want to be a better man just for you."

"You don't have to be better," Moira murmured, then smiled. "You're perfect just as you are, Niall. There is only one thing wrong with you."

Niall frowned in disappointment. "What is it, Moira?" he asked fearfully. "Tell me and I will make it right."

"You have too many clothes on," she replied, smiling wickedly.

Niall laughed and began to undress while Moira watched him. Yes, she too was throbbing with need, but she wanted to see the unveiling of her lover's magnificent body as he peeled off his clothes.

She watched as he took off his shirt, revealing his broad shoulders and chest, which was lightly dusted with hair. His arms were as muscular as Moira had imagined, and his abdomen was toned and firm. However, his skin was liberally sprinkled with scars, and Moira felt sad as she looked at them. There were two huge ones on his hip and his thigh, both made by the vicious blades of broadswords.

"I see that you are admiring my battle scars," Niall observed ruefully.

"I have plenty of my own," Moira remarked sadly. "So we have something in common."

“It doesn’t make you any less beautiful in my eyes,” Niall said, his voice infinitely gentle. “My mother died giving birth to Glennie, and my father was a tyrant who beat me for the slightest offence. Between him and the battlefield, I lost a lot of blood, and gained many scars, and I never want to wield a sword in anger again. I have never experienced tenderness, but I want to feel it with you. We are birds of a feather, you and I.”

“We are,” Moira murmured softly. She gulped nervously as she watched him unbuckling his kilt, then gasped at what she saw when he removed it and tossed it away.

Niall’s hips were narrow, but his thighs were hugely muscular and looked bulky enough to contain the power of three men. However, it was what was between them that both frightened and fascinated her.

The shaft of Niall’s manhood was both long and thick, and although she had only seen one other naked man in her life, his had looked nothing like this magnificent specimen.

Niall watched Moira’s face as he let his kilt drop to the floor, and was happy to see her eyes widen in amazement. He knew what she was thinking because he had seen the same look on the faces of other women before.

“Come here,” Niall reached out and pulled her to her feet. Then kissed her softly before he began to unbutton the back of her dress, peppering tiny kisses down her spine as he did so.

Moira drew in a breath, hoping that the sensation of Niall’s lips would not be her undoing, since she was already almost melting with desire. She had no idea why she was not terrified after her previous experience on her wedding night, but somehow she knew that being with Niall would be quite different. She had no need to think

about it—her whole body was telling her so.

When Niall let her dress drop to the floor and cupped his hands around her breasts, she let out a long moan of pleasure. He began to tease her nipples by twiddling them between his thumb and forefinger, at the same time kissing his way up the side of her neck.

“I cannot stand any more of this,” she said, as she turned to face him. “I need you, Niall, and I cannot wait any longer.”

He smiled at her, then scooped her up and laid her tenderly on the bed before climbing onto it himself. He knelt beside her for a few moments, feasting his eyes on her.

“You are a goddess, Moira. Every inch of you is lovely, ethereal, perfect, and I want to worship you. But I need to be sure that this is what you want?”

Moira looked into the deep green pools of his eyes and almost wept with joy before pulling Niall into her arms. “I want you more than anything else I have ever wanted. Take me, Niall. Make me yours, don’t make me wait any longer, please.”

When Moira felt Niall’s palm on her sex, she was so wet and sensitive that she gave a little squeal of shock. Niall laughed softly.

“You are so wet, you are as ready as I am,” he said huskily. “I have dreamed of this, for so long, Moira.”

He dipped his head to her breast and sucking her nipple into his mouth. As before, he played with her other nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and she moaned with delight.

Moira had never felt anything like the sensation of Niall's ministrations. Nothing had prepared her for being caressed, teased, almost driven out of her mind with delight. Nothing in the world existed at that moment, only him and his skilful hands that were roaming all over her, making her dizzy with delight. Did all men know how to do this to a woman?

Just then, Moira felt the tip of Niall's finger touch the sensitive nub at the core of her body, and she cried out at the jolt of pleasure that shot through her. But something better was to come, and Niall raised his head and gave Moira a wicked smile before he dropped his head to kiss his way down to her navel. There he stopped to swirl the tip of his tongue around the little sensitive spot, making Moira giggle.

But he was not finished yet. He kissed his way from her navel down to the top of her thighs, then he gently parted her legs so that her most secret place was open to his view. Moira's instinct was to close her legs at once, but she could not do so because Niall's hands were holding her, and they were too strong for her to fight against.

Niall looked into her eyes and saw the doubt there. "Don't be afraid of me, lovie," he murmured. "I would never do anything to hurt you. Do you trust me?"

"Yes, Niall," she whispered.

He kissed her lips tenderly, then did something that Moira could never have imagined. It was shocking, but utterly delightful.

Niall swept his tongue through Moira's womanly folds once, twice, three times, then looked up at her to see her reaction. She had thrown her head back and was moaning in delight, and Niall smiled mischievously as he bent to his task once more.

This time he applied himself to her sensitive nub, treating it as he had treated her nipples, sucking and gently biting it, all the while pushing two fingers in and out of

her entrance in imitation of what he would do presently with another part of himself.

Moira was writhing on the bed as waves of pleasure washed over her again and again. She fisted her hands in Niall's thick brown hair, desperate for something, anything to cling onto.

"What are you doing to me?" she gasped, hardly able to speak.

Niall raised his head to look up at Moira, then he lifted himself on his elbows and eased upwards so that he could look into her eyes.

"Are you ready for me, my love?" he asked softly,

"Am I your love?" Moira asked, once more lost in his green eyes.

That was the moment when Niall knew that he loved Moira more than he had ever loved anyone in his life. "You have bewitched me. Be mine, Moira."

He waited for her to speak.

Moira hesitated for an agonising second or two because a lot rested on her answer. If she told how she felt, and he still married Beitris she would be devastated, but she had to face the truth. The marriage was already set in stone, so she might as well tell Niall how she felt. Her heart would be broken whatever she did.

"I'm yours," she whispered, and pulled his head down for another searing, smouldering kiss.

When they drew apart, Moira reached down to take him in her hand, and Niall gave a gasp of surprise as her fingers closed around him.

Moira had never felt anything so strange—soft, velvet skin on the surface with some much firmer flesh underneath, and suddenly, she felt a surge of need.

“Take me,” she whispered.

Niall needed no second bidding. He positioned himself at Moira’s entrance, then, looking into her blue eyes all the while, he surged into her, and Moira cried out his name as she felt him fill her.

It was glorious. She lifted her hips up as he thrust, and they began to move together in a rhythm that was as old as time itself. Feeling his flesh rubbing against and inside hers made Moira feel wild and wanton, and she dug her fingers into the hard muscle of Niall’s arms as he moved on her. In the morning, he would have little bruises, but they would not be marks of anger, but of love.

Strangely enough, the pain increased his desire and his thrusts became harder and faster. He had never felt so potently male before, but then he had never been with Moira before. It was heavenly.

Moira felt as though she was climbing, reaching for something that seemed inaccessible, and the harder she strained to reach it, the farther away it seemed to be. But every movement of her body, every thrust of Niall inside her, brought her closer and closer, and the pleasure increased, becoming more and more intense, till finally it exploded and washed over her in a tide of ecstasy.

“Niall!” she screamed, and threw her head back, writhing under him.

Nothing could have prepared her for this unbelievably glorious experience, and it had been given to her by the man she loved more than anyone else in the world.

Niall too had a climax unlike anything he had ever felt before, and he called out

Moira's name as he reached fulfilment, then swiftly withdrew from her and spent himself.

Niall wrapped his arms around Moira and drew her into a warm embrace. At that moment, the world was perfect, and no one existed except the two of them.

Moira lay in the cocoon of Niall's body and thought that she could have stayed there forever, wrapped in love and held in safety.

"Thank you, Moira," he whispered. "That was the most wonderful experience of my life."

"No, thank you, Niall," she replied with a contented sigh. "I will remember tonight forever."

When Moira opened her eyes the next morning, she was shocked to see a sleeping Niall beside her, then she remembered what had happened the night before. At the thought of it, a wave of warmth swept over her, something both physical and emotional. As she looked at his handsome face, she could not believe that a man like this would look twice at her, scarred and imperfect as she was. She had nothing to offer him, and had been honest with him about that, but he had not cared, he still wanted her.

Then she became suspicious. Had he merely wanted to enjoy her body, then discard her? However, deep inside herself, she knew that was not true. What had happened between them the night before had not been the act of two strangers who had come together for a passing fling, but a true connection of souls.

Moira had seen the depth of love in his eyes, and felt the tenderness with which he touched her. She was not just someone who could be used and thrown away; she was his, and he was hers.

Moira studied Niall as he slept, noting how calm and relaxed he was compared to the rigid, authoritative posture he adopted as a Laird. She suspected that she was seeing the real Niall, the man who lived inside the formidable exterior he presented to the outside world. Behind closed doors, his heart of gold could shine brightly, and Moira was infinitely glad she had seen it. She would never look at him in the same way again.

Sadness overcame her when she thought that she could not stay and explore what was

between them more. However, she had nothing to offer him, whereas the woman he was going to marry had wealth and status. If it came to another battle between the McPhees and other families, could Moira produce an army to fight for him? No, it was impossible.

Then Moira smiled as she thought how happy she was that she had seen what he kept hidden under his clothes! Even the thought of his powerful body, which was so close to hers, was arousing her again, and she chastised herself for her wantonness. Yet even though she knew it was a natural response to the nearness of this beautiful man, in a strange way she was enjoying the feeling of wickedness.

Just then, Niall opened his eyes. For a few seconds he looked rather startled, then he smiled at her and kissed her lips softly.

“Good morning.” Moira greeted him with a smile. “Did you sleep well?”

“Better than I have for years,” he replied, yawning and stretching, showing Moira the expanse of his beautiful body once more.

Unbidden, a memory of her husband’s scrawny frame came into her mind, but she shooed it away, and revelled in the sight of the truly magnificent sight before her. The contrast was like night and day.

At the sight of him, Moira realised she was naked, and hastily drew her bedsheets up to her chin, but Niall merely laughed and pulled them gently down again.

Moira, my love,” he said, “don’t be so modest. After what we did last night, there is absolutely no need to be. Sharing your lovely body with me was the greatest gift I have ever been given.”

“But I have so many scars,” Moira protested. “I feel so ugly.”

“No more scars than I have,” he said. “And you are certainly not ugly. In fact, they only make you more lovely in my eyes because I know you have been through the same hurt and pain as I have. We share that, so we understand each other, and I would never have dreamed that someone as fierce as you would be shy. I’m seeing another side of you now, and it makes me love you even more.”

Tears pricked Moira’s eyes as she gazed at him, this man she loved more than life itself. He leaned in to kiss her and his chest touched her breasts, almost setting them both on fire again.

“I wish you could stay with me like this forever,” Niall said sadly. “We could wake up in the morning and kiss each other, make love whenever we wanted. I could have beautiful dresses made for you, and we could have lovely children who look like you.”

Moira smiled. “I never had an example of a good mother to follow, and neither did you. If we ever had children, would we even know how to bring them up properly? I would hate to give them a childhood like ours.” Then she shook her head. “But that will never happen, Niall. It is a fantasy—a beautiful fairy story. Your bride is arriving any day now, and I must be gone before she gets here.”

“How do you know when she’s coming?” Niall asked, frowning.

“Glennie told me,” Moira replied.

Niall laughed. “Glennie!” he said fondly. “I should have known. But you know that she wants you to stay, too. She has told me countless times.”

“I know.” Moira wiped her eyes. “She is the only friend I have ever had, Niall.”

“Then stay.” He cupped her face in his hands and looked deeply into her eyes. “I

would do anything to keep you here with me.”

Moira gave a gasp of fear as her mind leapt back to her husband’s treatment of her, but Niall quickly saw his mistake. “No, Moira! I would never imprison you here,” he said tenderly. “But I wish there was some way I could make it possible.”

“You and I are not destined to be together.” Moira’s voice was firm, but sad.

“And what are you going to do when you leave here?” Niall asked, frowning. “You said something about an aunt in Aberdeen.”

Moira sighed. “She is my father’s sister,” she replied. “I just wanted you and Glennie to stop asking me questions, so I told you that to satisfy your curiosity. I will never go there, believe me. I would not be welcomed with open arms.”

Niall gazed at her, taking in Moira’s sad and desolate look. He guessed rightly that Moira wanted to stay at Baltyre as much as he desired her to. As well as that, he wished that he could call off his wedding, or go through it with a different bride.

He imagined Moira coming down the aisle towards him, looking as fresh as a spring flower in a pale blue satin dress. She would be dedicating her future to him, putting her whole life in his hands, and he would welcome it, cherish it, and join it with his forever. If only. If only it could really happen, he would be the happiest man on earth.

Could he somehow make it so? He had to find out what she wanted to do next; perhaps he could come up with a better suggestion, something that would keep Moira here beside him, although her determination to leave seemed implacable.

“So if you are not going to your aunt’s,” he said, stroking her shining blonde hair gently. “Where are you going? Do you have any kind of plan?”

This was the question Moira had been dreading. Her mind had been so full of Niall that she had not been able to think of anything else, and she was up against the same problem as before; money, or lack of it. Still, she thought, she had enough to get by for a little while, and during that time she would think of something, even if she had to work in a tavern or become a chambermaid.

“I do have a plan,” she replied. “But it’s best that you don’t know about it, Niall.”

He looked at her, exasperated, wondering why Moira was always so secretive. Surely, she knew by now that he meant her no harm. On the contrary, he would protect her with his life. And after the night before, he had shown her all the love that was in his heart. Why was she still so hesitant? What was she holding back from him?

“If you do leave, sweetheart,” he said tenderly, “know that you will always have a place here in the castle. I will always protect you, never fear.”

“Remember what you told me about not wanting trouble with the other local Lairds?” Moira arched a brow mischievously as she looked at him.

“That was before I came to know you, Moira,” he replied. “Do you not trust that I would do anything for you? If you leave, I will be heartbroken.” His expression was infinitely sorrowful.

Moira smiled at him sadly for a long moment. “Niall.” She sighed and shook her head slowly. “There is no ‘if’, only ‘when’. I do not want to fight with you over this, but I have told you dozens of times now that I cannot stay. I want to, more than anything in the world, but it is just impossible. Anyway, what would your wife say when she saw me? How are you going to explain my presence to her? You could call me Glennie’s companion, I suppose, but I doubt that story would convince anyone for too long. Face it, Niall. We are not fated to be together.”

Niall got out of bed and paced restlessly to the window, looking out at the stormy morning. Moira watched him, admiring his tight buttocks and muscular thighs. There was another livid scar halfway up his back, but it only added to his manliness, in Moira's opinion. It was a sign of bravery and determination, and said much about his character. How she loved him!

"Then I will call off the wedding," Niall declared firmly. "I made the bargain with the Maxwells under duress because it seemed that there was no better choice, but there must be some other way to secure our alliance. I'm not even sure if Beitris is keen on the marriage. Perhaps she is as reluctant as I am. Maybe I can persuade her not to marry me, and we can work out something else."

He was frowning deeply and ran his hand backwards through his thick hair in a gesture of extreme agitation.

Moira sighed and rose to her feet, then padded across the room to stand behind him. Niall turned and put his arms around her, then drew her close so that their bodies were pressed together from chest to knee. He sighed and laid his cheek on Moira's hair, then said, "You were made for me, Moira, don't you see?"

Moira felt her eyes begin to prickle with tears, and her throat became choked with the effort of not weeping. Made for him? Yes, she knew that. If ever two people on earth belonged together, it was Niall and her, but there was no way that would ever happen.

Niall felt Moira's nearness affect him at once as his manhood hardened against her, and for a short while he tried to resist her, telling himself that he needed to be in his study. He had to start work for the day and could not allow himself to become distracted, no matter how alluring and lovable Moira was.

Yet, he had a very capable steward who would quite happily do his job for an hour or two, and what if he never had the chance to be alone with Moira again? This might be

their last chance.

Moira sighed and kissed his neck, and Niall gave a moan of pleasure and tightened his arms around her. “You temptress,” he whispered longingly.

Moira laughed. She could happily have stood in his arms for hours, but she knew he was a busy man and had little time to spare. Yet, she could not bear to tear herself away from him, knowing how little time they had together.

Niall put Moira away a little to look into her eyes again. “You know that we will shortly both have broken hearts?” he asked. He wiped away a tear from her eye. “So why do we not make the most of this stolen time? I am still a free man, and you are a free woman, so why can we not make love as we both want to?”

Moira hesitated, not wanting to seem too eager, until Niall took her hand and wrapped it around his shaft, which was hard and eager.

She smiled lovingly at him, then stood on tiptoe to kiss him, softly at first, then, as she tasted his lips, her own arousal surged into life. She was becoming lost in him again before sanity returned, and she gently pushed him away.

“You have to go,” she said regretfully. “My maid will be here soon, and you will not be able to sneak out. If you’re found here, the news will be all over the castle in a few minutes.”

Servants’ gossip was notorious for spreading like wildfire, and the story of the handsome Laird in the bedroom of a woman who was not his intended was scandalous indeed!

“I am the Laird here, and I say where I can go in this castle,” Niall said angrily, then he let out a heavy sigh as he went back to the bed and sat down on it, once more

drawing her onto his lap. He looked at her searchingly. He felt as if he was trying to read her mind through her pale, ethereal eyes.

“Moira, what are you not telling me?” he asked, frowning in concern. “What is your secret? Tell me and I will help you to find a solution to your problem. I told you that I would call off my marriage if you asked me to, all you have to do is let me know what is troubling you.”

He watched her carefully for a few moments and could almost see the thoughts chasing each other through her mind. He had no doubt that she was considering his offer.

Moira looked down at her hands to avoid his eyes. She was so tempted to tell him the truth that she actually opened her mouth to do so, but closed it again quickly. Despite the fact that she loved him, she could not tell Niall about her husband for fear that he might think that she had murdered him. Even if he took her side and decided to protect her, it would always come between them.

“Niall, I am not worth the trouble of a broken betrothal,” she said at last. “Please don’t ask me again because my answer will be the same, and I have no secret to share with you. I am just another ordinary woman.”

“You are anything but ordinary to me,” Niall replied, before he stood up, picked up his kilt and began to dress again. When he was finished, he moved over to stand in front of Moira again. “If you change your mind, Moira, come and tell me. I am here for you at every hour of the day and night.”

Moira nodded because her throat was too choked with tears to speak. She watched Niall close the door behind him, then threw herself on the bed and cried until she had no tears left.

Niall had just left her chamber when Moira heard a quiet knock at the door. “Come in, Heather!” She called.

Moira’s maid servant was a young woman called Heather MacFarlane with the characteristic red hair of many Highland girls. She was only eighteen years old and had not been in service too long; she had been given her position because Glennie, on a visit to the village of Baltyre, had seen her begging in the street.

Upon inquiring, she found out that her parents had died, and she was looking after her three brothers and sisters, so she had hired the young woman on the spot out of pity.

Heather was a dutiful maid who did her job conscientiously and efficiently. Moira was reluctant to ask her about her family life, but they did share tidbits about life in the castle. They got along well together, and often laughed at the same things, although there was still an invisible barrier between them. Moira might not have been a lady, but she was still a few steps higher up on the social ladder than her maid.

She entered carrying some fresh wildflowers. Moira smiled in appreciation. “Thank you, Heather,” she said happily. “These are lovely! I love daffodils.”

“I thought ye might like them, Mistress,” Heather smiled, and her hazel eyes sparkled. She poured water into a vase, arranged the flowers, then turned back to Moira again. “Would ye like a bath?” she asked.

“I would love one,” Moira replied.

She had to wash Niall's scent from her body in case Heather noticed it. It would cause even more gossip and speculation if the servants knew she had a lover, and if they knew it was the Laird, all hell would break loose.

She went to the window and looked at the land around the castle, thinking how sad she would be to leave it, because of Glennie and Niall, of course, but also because it had become home. Moira had never had a proper home before, somewhere where she could relax, think, read to her heart's content, go out riding and enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Hers had always been a prison, sometimes even a torture chamber.

It was only now that she was realising how much had been denied her all these years. She was even envious of the servants, some of whose children lived with them in the castle. Moira wondered what her children with Niall would look like, then tossed the thought out of her mind angrily. Now was no time to be fantasising; she had to organise her few possessions to leave as soon as she could.

The bath arrived a few moments later, and Moira lay back in the scented water trying not to think about Niall, which was almost impossible now that they had been as close as a woman and man could possibly be.

Suddenly, she realised how hungry she was, and asked Heather to go and get breakfast for her.

"I can hear your tummy rumblin', Mistress," Heather said, laughing as she opened the door.

She took a few steps along the corridor towards the kitchen, and a man stepped out in front of her, stopping her in her tracks.

It was Gerald McNicholl, and he smiled at her in a friendly fashion before his eyes narrowed, and he asked, "Do you have any news for me?"

“Aye,” Heather answered. “But we have tae talk somewhere else. I cannae be seen wi’ ye.”

McNicholl nodded, and they walked a few steps along the passageway until they reached a small storeroom. He entered and Heather followed him. It was very dark, and she was afraid of this strange old man, but he was paying her for information. Despite what she earned as a maid, she needed more money. The three siblings were fictitious; the truth was that she had an illegitimate child and a drunken father with gambling debts.

Gerald had seen the young woman begging too, and hearing that Glennie had given her employment, saw an opportunity to find out intelligence about Moira after he heard that she was to become her lady’s maid.

“He has taken Moira Jamieson as his mistress,” Heather told him. “I saw him sneakin’ out o’ her chamber this mornin’, an’ when I went in tae see her, there was somethin’ different about her.”

Gerald punched one of his hands into the palm of the other in a gesture of extreme anger. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“There is naethin’ wrong wi’ my eyesight,” Heather snapped. “An’ he looked very pleased wi’ himself.”

Gerald growled and let out a few choice expletives before he asked, “Do you have any other news for me?”

Heather looked doubtful for a moment. “Aye, but I dinnae know the truth o’ it,” she answered.

“Tell me,” Gerald ordered irritably. “I will make up my own mind about the truth.”

Heather sighed. “Well, there is a lot o’ talk in the village,” she said, “about a woman who poisoned her husband then ran away. It is told that her beauty is exceptional; blue eyes, fair skin, and hair. Her husband’s brother, Brody McDonnell, is lookin’ for her. He is a very fierce man, so I am told.”

Gerald’s mind was piecing together all the pieces of the puzzle. Moira Jamieson could very well be Moira McDonnell; he was sure of it. He patted Heather on the back and dropped a half-crown into her hand. It was more money than she could earn in a month.

Her eyes widened. “Thank ye,” she said gratefully.

“Keep up the good work or there will be no more,” he threatened. “Now, if you know anyone who can find Brody McDonnell, I would like to arrange to meet him. Do you think you can find him?”

“It will be easy enough tae find him. He is on a hunt, paying whomever has some intel,” Heather told him. Then, seeing a chance to extort a little more coin, she asked, “But if ye want a meetin’ it will cost ye a crown because that is a lot more work.”

“A crown?” Gerald’s voice was high with indignation, but Heather merely shrugged.

“Unless ye would rather get somebody else tae find him,” she suggested, raising her eyebrows. “Like Laird Niall...”

This was blackmail, Gerald realised. Heather’s source of income would be cut off, but he would lose all hope of keeping his mission secret.

He huffed. “You win,” he grumbled. “As quick as you can, mind.” Then he walked out in the other direction, and went out to go and find himself a whisky. He sorely needed one.

It was imperative for Niall to marry his niece so that he could gain more power and influence, and if Moira was who he thought she was, he knew just how to get what he needed.

When Moira left her chamber, she immediately went to find Glennie. She was unsure of whether to tell her about what had happened between her and Niall, but somehow she thought that Glennie's sharp intuition would pick it up. Moira smiled at the thought that after such a short acquaintance, Glennie could read her like a book!

Moira made a thorough search of Glennie's usual haunts, and was just about to give up when a thought occurred to her. She might be in the stables.

She made her way there, studying every detail of the castle as she passed to commit as much of it to memory as she could to store it up for the long lonely days ahead. Memories would be all she would have to console her.

When she entered the building, she saw Glennie at once. She was standing with her arms looped around Ritchie's neck while he placed a tender kiss on her neck. They were talking to each other in whispers, and she could not hear what they were saying, but their love was like an aura around them.

As she watched them, Moira desperately wished she could share this kind of experience with Niall. She sighed, then turned and walked away from the loving couple, feeling guilty at having spied on them in their private moment.

She had walked only a few steps when she encountered Niall, who was about to enter the stables to fetch his horse. There, he would no doubt find Glennie and Ritchie, and a battle royal would ensue.

Niall smiled widely at Moira and asked, "Would you like to come hunting with me?"

Moira thought frantically about what to do next, trying to keep calm while her heart was beating nineteen to the dozen. She dangled another suggestion in front of him, hoping he would not refuse it.

“I don’t like hunting,” she said at last, then gave him a wicked smile. “But I can think of much better things to do.” She would seduce him as a means of escape, but at least she would thoroughly enjoy the deception.

Niall raised his eyebrows as he caught her meaning, and laughed. “Do you have no self-control when you’re with me, woman?” he asked. “You are shameless!”

“Guilty as charged!” Moira admitted, giggling, then she grabbed his hand and led him down a maze of dark corridors to a part of the castle that was rarely used.

There was an odour of staleness and dust in the air, but neither of them cared about anything as long as they were alone and together. There was a small chance of them being found, of course, but it only added to the thrill in a strange, dark way.

“I cannot stop telling you how beautiful you are, Moira,” he said huskily. “You have bewitched me, and I am completely under your spell.”

Moira reached up to trace the shape of his lips with her forefinger. “And you have a wonderful imagination,” she said softly. “There are no such things as witches.”

“Oh, yes, there are,” he replied. “Because I am spellbound.” His voice, deep and husky, sent waves of pleasure straight down to Moira’s core, and she tilted her head back to let Niall kiss his way down her neck. Then, growing impatient, she pulled him in for a heated kiss. They were familiar with each other now, and each knew exactly what the other wanted and needed. When their lips met and caressed each other passionately, and their tongues teased each other, they were both driven into a frenzy of delight.

Niall gradually eased Moira backwards until she was leaning on the wall behind her, and he pressed himself against her, gently forcing himself between her thighs.

“Are you ready for me, my love?” he asked. “You have so much to learn, and I am so willing to be your teacher.”

Moira cupped his face in her hands and drew his face down for another soft kiss. “Teach me,” she whispered.

“Gladly.”

He pulled up her skirts and touched the sensitive spot between her legs, and a bolt of bliss shot through her so strongly that Moira cried out Niall’s name and thrust her body forward.

She was pressed even harder against him, and she felt the hard ridge of his erection, which drove her almost insane with need. When she felt him insert his fingers into her opening, she screamed, but he had no mercy on her as he pushed his first two fingers in and out of her channel, stretching her for his entrance.

Moira could feel his heat, smell the musk of his body, a mixture of leather, soap and something that was just him, just Niall. It was the most erotic, arousing scent she had ever smelled.

She could wait no longer. “Niall, please!” she cried desperately.

“Please what?” he asked in a growl.

“Please take me,” Moira replied. She was hardly able to speak or think, all her senses were full of him.

Niall said nothing more, but lifted her off the floor, still pressed against the wall. Instinctively, Moira wrapped her legs around his hips and cried out as he filled her, grunting with satisfaction.

“You are mine,” he murmured, as he thrust into her with as much force as he could manage. This was not going to be a gentle experience, but wild, unchecked and passionate, almost primal.

Moira was hardly able to believe this was happening to her. Once again, she was climbing, trying to reach the peak of the mountain where she knew she would find ecstasy. Yet, that was not all. What mattered most was that the man she loved was wrapped around her, was inside her, and was expressing his love for her. It was absolutely glorious.

Then, all of a sudden, she was there, and Moira’s body was overtaken by wave after wave of a sensation so rapturous she could hardly believe it was happening to her. She clung to Niall for purchase because if she had nothing to hold on to, she felt as though she might be blown away by this tide of rapture.

Niall, too, was in a very special place where he had only ever been once before, and that was with Moira, and he knew that without her, he would never go there again. His climax slammed into him with such force that he let out a fearsome yell, and his arms tightened around Moira so that she was almost breathless.

After a moment, they drew apart, and Niall set Moira down on her feet again and freed her from his embrace. He rested his forehead against hers, breathing heavily with exertion, then cupped her face in his hands and kissed her softly.

They were silent for a while, but it was a sacred silence, since at that moment there was nothing to say. Both were utterly sated with love, and earth and everyone in it might not have existed at all. Here, in this dark and gloomy place, they had found

heaven.

Yet, both knew that they would have to go back to the real world eventually. Glennie would be looking for Moira to go out for a ride, and Niall wanted to hunt some fresh meat for dinner. The normal concerns of everyday life were pressing in on them; it was time to back and face them.

Moira looked up into Niall's leaf-green eyes and sighed. "I wish we could?—"

"Do that again?" he finished for her, with a wicked laugh. "So do I, Moira, but I'm only a weak and feeble man and I need time to recover."

He tried and failed to look pathetic, and Moira giggled. The more she knew of Niall, the more she loved him; his kindness, generosity, and wicked sense of humour.

"You are about as feeble as the stud horse in the stable!" she told him.

The stallion was a huge grey with a furious temper just like Niall's horse Logie and a wild appetite for mares in season.

"You are a little mad," Niall said as he looked down at her. "But I suppose witches are, especially beautiful white witches who practise good magic."

Moira laughed a little sadly. "That is a very strange compliment," she told him.

"I wish you could stay." Niall's voice was wistful as he looked into Moira's lovely face.

He would never find such a woman again. There had to be a way of keeping her with him. He was damned if he was letting her go now!

When he left Moira, Niall decided to abandon his plan to go hunting. The weather was closing in, and it promised to be an afternoon of torrential rain and gale force winds. Sadly, this kind of weather was all too common in the Highlands, and Niall wished that his lovely witch, Moira, could wave her magic wand and make it disappear.

He laughed inwardly at the thought of the name he had given her. Little witch, or, because they were Scottish, Wee Witch.

As well as the weather, however, there was one more reason he wanted to stay in the castle. He needed to think. He needed to piece together the parts of Moira's story that he knew and see if he could put together a whole picture because not knowing was driving him mad.

It was too early for wine, so he had his manservant bring him warm ale and oatcakes, then summoned Finn to his office. While he was waiting, he began to stride restlessly back and forward across the room, his mind full of images of Moira.

He saw her face again as her climax hit her and heard the heartrending cry she had given. It resounded in his ears as he paced, and although he had only said goodbye to her a short while before, he wanted her again.

I will never get enough of her, Niall thought. He sighed as he leaned his head on the mantelpiece and stared into the fire in the grate. Nothing will be right without Moira, and I can never love another woman, even if I'm forced to marry her. There is no

space in my heart for anyone else.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Finn stepped in, removing his helmet as he did so. He was already soaking wet from the rain that had begun to lash down outside, and looked grumpy and irritated.

“Ye wanted tae see me?” he asked.

Niall nodded at him, frowning, and beckoned him over to a seat by the fire where he could warm up and dry off his clothes. He handed Finn a cup of ale and offered him some oatcakes, and then they sat down.

Finn looked at Niall quizzically and waited in silence for him to say something. He had never known his friend to be so quiet—it was extremely unusual.

Niall sipped his ale, still wearing his brooding frown, and when he finally looked up at Finn, he said, “I need your help, Finn.”

“Tell me what ye need an’ ye shall have it,” Finn said without hesitation. “I cannae think o’ anythin’ I widnae dae for ye.”

Niall looked at his friend and smiled. Finn had been a loyal friend since Niall’s boyhood and had never let him down once. Now that Niall had a problem to solve, Finn was his first port of call, since he was utterly reliable. However, this was a favour unlike any other he had ever asked for, and now, as he looked at his friend, he was struggling to find the right words to say.

“I need you to find some information for me,” Niall told him.

“What kind o’ information?” Finn’s brow furrowed in irritation. “Spit it out, man, I havenae got a’ day!” He picked up his ale and took a great swig, then wiped his lips

with the back of his hand and glared at his laird.

Niall laughed. Finn was the only person in Baltyre who could speak to him like this with impunity, and he knew it. “I want you to find out if there is anyone around here who is looking for a runaway fiancé,” he replied. “I know it sounds crazy, Finn, but I have to find out if anyone is hunting for Moira.”

“Have ye asked her?” Finn’s voice suggested that he thought Niall was being stupid by not doing so already.

“What do you think?” Niall asked angrily. “A hundred times over. Every time I ask her for his name, she puts up a ten foot wall of silence around herself.” He jumped to his feet and began to pace again. “She is suffering, Finn, and I cannot bear to see it any more. I have to stop it somehow.”

“I see,” Finn said thoughtfully. “An’ why does that concern ye, Niall? I have seen the way she looks at ye an’ I can guess how ye feel about her, but remember ye are betrothed tae somebody else. Have ye thought o’ a’ the trouble it will cause if ye back out o’ your marriage now?”

Niall grunted, then nodded and went over to the window to look out at the brewing storm. “I’ve thought of nothing else,” he replied, then turned back to face Finn. “But I need Moira here with me where I can protect her.”

Finn stood up, then walked over to Niall to put his hands on his shoulders. He looked deep into Niall’s eyes and said, “I have never seen ye like this before, man. Dae ye really love her so much?”

“With all my heart, Finn,” he replied with a heavy sigh. “And it would break my heart to lose her.”

Finn studied his friend's face closely. He could see the pain in his eyes and understood it, having lost his own beloved once, years before. He nodded slowly. "But what about your bride, Niall?" he asked. "This will put a cat among the pigeons—nae doubt about it. The Maxwells are no' a family tae be trifled wi'."

Niall sighed irritably. "I know, Finn," he agreed. "But I will think of some solution, there must be something I can do."

"Dae ye no' think ye would have thought o' it by now if there was?" Finn asked. He was truly worried about his friend, and hated to see him so angry and distressed. He carried the weight of the whole estate on his shoulders, and Finn worried that it was all becoming too much for him.

"Perhaps I wasn't as desperate before I knew I loved her," Niall replied.

Finn nodded slowly and turned away to sit by the fire again. "I hope ye know what ye're daein', man," he said. "This could a' go wrong, ye know."

"But it won't," Niall replied. "Not in your capable hands, Finn. I trust you."

Finn finished his ale, staring into the fire thoughtfully for a moment. "I will dae as ye ask, Niall, as ye knew I would, but are ye sure?"

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life," Niall replied firmly.

"Then I will dae what ye ask o' me," Finn told him. "But if ye change your mind?—"

"Then I will send for you," Niall assured him.

Finn gave him a searching look, nodded once, then left.

Niall sat down and put his head in his hands, trying to focus his mind on something else; his work, his horses, the tenants' problems, but the only problem he could concentrate on was Moira's situation.

Am I being a fool? he thought desperately. Beitris might be a lovely woman and I may be making the biggest mistake of my life.

He went back to the window again and looked down at the surrounding land. He saw clumps of dark pines, emerald green grass on which sheep and their new lambs were grazing, and in the distance, Loch Begg, where Moira had almost met a tragic end. He shuddered at the thought of that terrible night.

It always amazed, and in some ways terrified him, that all this belonged to him. As a boy, he had known that he would be responsible for it all one day, but the reality of it had not hit him till his father died, leaving him to cope on his own. Well, not entirely because he had a capable steward.

Yet, he needed something—or someone more. He needed a woman to stand by his side and give him the love and support he was so sorely lacking, someone to listen to him, advise him, and comfort him in times of trouble. Could that woman be Beitris?

Then he laughed aloud. No. It could not be anyone else but Moira, the woman he needed as much as he needed the air that he breathed, and he needed her more than ever right at that moment.

Two minds were thinking about each other at that moment. Moira was lying on her bed, going over her two passionate encounters with Niall. They had been heavenly, but if she stayed with him, would they always be like that, or would their relationship become stale and tedious?

It was not worth thinking about, Moira decided. It would never happen. She had

given her maid servant the day off so that she could pack her things in her small bag and take a look around the castle one more time before she left. This time, she was determined that Niall would not persuade her to stay, but a lingering doubt still persisted at the back of her mind. Would he imprison her to keep her at Baltyre?

At once, she dismissed the thought. Both she and Niall knew what it was like to be abused, and he was not likely to inflict that pain on her.

Moira turned to answer the door to her chamber as a loud knock sounded on the door. She smiled, since there was only one person who knocked as firmly as that! She opened the door, and was immediately enveloped in Niall's arms and pulled into a tight embrace.

"Back again, Niall?" Moira asked, laughing.

He put her away to look into her eyes, but he was not smiling. "I cannot get enough of you," he told her.

Moira moved out of his arms and walked to the window. "There is nothing I would like more, than to stay here," she answered sadly. "I want to be in the Highlands. After all, it is my home. I know nowhere else, but it cannot be."

"Yes it can," Niall moved over to kiss her, once more wrapping his strong arms around her. He kissed her lips softly. "Stay with me," he ordered. "I will make you so happy, Moira." He kissed her again. "We will be so happy together." He kissed her again, then she gently pushed him away.

"Would that not be wonderful?" Moira's tone was wistful as she looked at him longingly. "We agreed to enjoy each other for a while, but I would love it to be forever. I can imagine children running about here getting into mischief and driving us both mad! Long days down by the loch fishing and bringing home trout for dinner,

making love for hours... but this is nothing but a beautiful dream, Niall. What will I do when your bride comes? Pretend to be a maid servant? Glennie's best friend? No, this can never happen, but not because I don't care about you. I do."

Niall leaned his forehead against Moira's, then said softly, "If we have such a short time to enjoy ourselves, perhaps we should start now."

Moira pretended to be shocked. "We have already 'enjoyed ourselves' twice today!" she exclaimed.

"Are you saying no?" Niall asked, feigning disappointment.

"Definitely not!" Moira replied, giggling. "We have no time to waste!"

Niall laughed and swept her off her feet, then deposited her on the bed and looked down at her as he knelt above her, feasting his eyes on the beautiful woman who was sure she would never be his. But there was still time. Perhaps he could change her mind because once on a mission, he was never one to back down.

Niall unbuttoned Moira's dress and pulled up her chemise, kissed her softly on the lips then all the way to her navel, at the same time nibbling her flesh lightly so that the pleasure mixed with a tiny nip of pain shot straight to her core. She had never felt anything so wonderful, and arched her hips off the bed, clamping her lips together to stop herself from screaming.

Moira was wet and aching with pleasure as Niall parted her thighs, using his thumbs to open the folds of her womanhood to his gaze. He looked his fill for a moment, then smiled at her, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

Moira nodded frantically, unable to speak. She was throbbing and pulsing, and when she felt Niall's tongue sweeping through her folds, she gripped fistfuls of his hair to

keep herself anchored to the earth.

When Niall began to nibble and tease her nub with his teeth and tongue, Moira cried out, but Niall silenced her by briefly moving to her lips and giving her a searing kiss. Then he returned to pleasuring her most sensitive spot, listening with satisfaction as her moans and cries grew louder.

Presently Moira reached her peak, and as ecstasy spread from her core to every nerve end in her body, she screamed, “Niall,” while she shuddered and clung to him until the last spark of pleasure died out.

When Moira opened her eyes, she found Niall’s green eyes gazing into hers, shining with love. He laid his head on her shoulder and sighed. He was hard and eager, but this moment was all about Moira, not him. He would take care of himself later when he was alone.

Then Moira said, “It doesn’t seem fair that I had all the pleasure, and you had none.”

Niall laughed softly. “Oh, but I did,” he replied. “I had the satisfaction of making you come and seeing your face afterwards. That is pleasure in itself, Moira.”

Moira caressed his cheek. He had been too busy to shave that morning, and she loved the rasp of his growing whiskers under her palms. If she had not been so thoroughly sated, she would have dragged him back to bed and begged him to touch her again.

“You know that’s not what I mean,” she replied. “I want to give you what you gave me.”

Niall raised his eyebrows in surprise. “It would be my pleasure.”

She flipped up his kilt and was once more astounded by the size of him, now lying

stiff and hard against his stomach. Moira wondered briefly if it would fit in her mouth, but she could only try.

She grasped him in one hand and gently pumped up and down, stretching the soft skin over his hard inner core. A little bead of moisture appeared from the tiny hole at the tip of his shaft, and she licked it off, causing Niall to twitch and writhe.

“You are killing me,” he groaned.

“Shall I stop?” Moira asked with mock anxiousness. “I would hate to hurt you.”

For an answer, Niall took her hand and wrapped it more tightly around himself. “No,” he growled. “You’ll kill me if you stop.”

“So I will kill you either way?” Her voice was mischievous as she concentrated on her task again.

Moira pumped him with her hand for a few more moments, then, greatly daring, took him in her mouth. He was so big that he filled her completely, and for a few seconds she almost panicked, fearing he would choke her.

Then Niall, unable to wait any longer, pushed the back of Moira’s head and arched his hips to ease himself further into her mouth. Gradually she acquired the rhythm and began to enjoy his moans and grunts as she brought him closer to completion.

Niall could not remember the last time a woman had done this to him. Except for making love, it was his favourite form of stimulation, and to have the woman he loved and pleasure him this way was glorious. He held back for as long as he could before crying out as his climax hit him, and he exploded, pulling out of Moira’s mouth just before he spilled his seed.

Moira was rather proud of herself as she looked at the expression on Niall's face. He looked as though he had been thoroughly loved, as indeed he had been, and he beamed at her as he drew her into his arms.

“That was wonderful,” he said huskily.

“I am so glad you enjoyed it,” she replied. “I have never done that before.”

“I would never have guessed,” Niall replied. “I thought you were an expert.”

They laughed together, then laid in each other's arms for a while before they heard the sound of a number of carriages, their wheels rattling loudly on the cobblestones as they entered the castle.

Niall stood up and looked out of the window, and his face fell. Gerald was helping a woman out of a carriage, which bore the Maxwell crest on the door. He felt a stab of dislike as he saw the satisfied expression on his face, then his heart sank.

“Beitris,” he said, groaning. “Oh, god. Why now?”

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For a short while longer, Niall stood looking down at the woman he was about to marry, aware that the one he loved was watching him. He screwed his hands into fists in sheer frustration, then thumped them against the wall.

Damn! he thought furiously. Why now? Why did she not wait a week longer?

Yet, he knew that whenever Beitris arrived would be the wrong time because he simply did not want her; even if she proved to be the sweetest girl in the world, she would never do because she was not Moira.

Moira watched him sadly. She could read him well now and his body was telling her that he was frustrated and furious, and when he turned to her again, she knew exactly what he was going to say.

She was standing buttoning up her dress when he came and knelt down on one knee by her feet, then reached out to grasp her hands.

“Moira—please, please, please don’t leave,” he begged. “I truly do not know what I’ll do without you if you go. I would be very happy to call off the wedding with Beitris. Please, Moira. I will do whatever it takes to make you stay.”

His expression was so agonised that Moira was almost tempted to give in, throw herself into his arms and say that she would do as he wished. But that would have been her heart speaking. Her rational self stubbornly resisted, and she had to give him the same answer as she had given him time and time again.

“Oh, please don’t make this any harder than it already is, Niall,” she replied, burying her face in her hands. “We can never be together. You have no idea how much I wish we could, but we will never be able to. Please go to your bride now. She’ll be waiting for you.”

“I don’t care about her!”

Niall’s voice was throbbing with fury as he moved Moira’s hands away from her face and looked into her eyes. Moira flinched at the rage in his face, since it was an expression that reminded her of her husband, and she drew back from him involuntarily.

Niall immediately saw what he had done and said gently, “I’m sorry. I should not have spoken like that, but I need you to understand that if you leave this way, you will break my heart.”

Moira said nothing because she was simply unable to. Niall waited for another moment, then said, as calmly as he could, “Moira, I will not ask again. If you leave, you will never come back again. I will be forced to marry Beitris, and that is something I really, really do not wish to do. What do you say now?” He gazed at her steadily, willing her to give him the answer he wanted.

But Moira could say nothing. She stared at the floor while Niall dressed, tears streaming down her face. She looked up once to see him gazing down at her as he tied his belt around his waist, then she stood up and turned away, hearing the door close as he left.

Niall usually walked with a long stride that ate up the ground at a speedy pace, but now he dawdled, trying to put off the evil moment when he would have to go to meet his future bride. Every step he took brought him closer to her but further away from Moira, and the thought that she was so close to him yet so far, away was driving him

insane.

Why did she not agree to stay? he wondered for the hundredth time. What is she hiding?

He walked as slowly as he could until he reached the courtyard. However, Beitris and her uncle had already been shown into the castle itself, and were seated in a spacious reception room, to which he was directed. Glennie was absent, and Niall inwardly called her every bad name under the sun as he realised he would have to deal with Beitris on his own.

“Moira!” Glennie was tapping on Moira’s bedroom door and wondering why she was taking so long to answer. At last, Moira opened the door and Glennie entered, then her eyes widened in complete shock as she took in Moira’s state of dishevelment.

Her eyes were red with weeping, her hair was a tousled mess, and her dress was a mass of wrinkles, but there was something else wrong, something Glennie could not put her finger on.

“Moira, what’s wrong?” Glennie asked, taking her friend by the shoulders as she looked into her tear-stained face. “Tell me, please. Perhaps I can help.”

“Nobody can help.” Moira said heavily. “I must go, Glennie. Staying here is becoming harder and harder, and I will not be able to endure it for much longer, especially now that Niall’s bride is here.”

Glennie nodded grimly. “So you saw her arriving. I came to tell you, or rather warn you.”

“I looked out of the window,” Moira explained. “And saw her arriving.”

“My brother has no feelings for anyone but you, Moira,” Glennie assured her gently.

“I know that,” Moira agreed. “But he has to do his duty, and I’m getting in the way. I must go, Glennie.”

Glennie hesitated for a moment. “I have to go and meet her, but tell me you won’t leave before I get back.” She looked doubtful and a little scared.

“I would never go without saying goodbye,” Moira assured her, then, on an impulse, she hugged her friend. “I am so glad I met you, Glennie. You have been so good to me, and I will never forget you.”

Glennie smiled. “No matter where you go, we will keep in touch because you are my best friend too, Moira,” she said reassuringly. “Now, I must go, but I would give anything for you to stay. But I must do my duty and go to meet my sister-in-law, but let me assure you I’m not looking forward to it!”

She looked grim as she turned to walk out, then she reached out to give Moira’s hand a squeeze. The look in her eyes was one of deep tenderness, and when she had gone, Moira realised that not only had she lost her love, but she had lost a sister too.

Glennie had not been joking when she told Moira how she felt about Beitris, but she decided that perhaps, since they had such a short acquaintance, perhaps she was judging her future sister-in-law too harshly. Maybe she would improve with time as they came to know each other, although Glennie could never imagine being as fond of her as she was of Moira.

She made her way downstairs and into the reception room where they were all sitting. She saw Beitris before the other woman turned to see her, so Glennie had a few moments to size her up.

Beitris was tall and willowy, with light-brown hair that was piled on top of her head in an elaborate crown of curls. Her eyes were a dark blue, and her features were regular and pleasing, with high cheekbones and a cute, slightly turned-up nose.

She might have been beautiful, Glennie thought, had it not been for the near-constant expression of slight disdain she wore. It disappeared when she smiled, but Glennie had the feeling that the expression was false, and that she assumed it to appear pleasant to everyone else while she secretly looked down on all of them.

Glennie took a deep breath and stepped into the room, and Beitris looked up and saw her. The two women smiled and curtsied to each other, then Glennie said, “It is so good to see you again.”

Beitris looked baffled. “Have we met before?” she asked.

“Yes,” Glennie replied. She was furious inside, but kept her voice calm with a great effort of will. “At Janice’s wedding?”

Beitris stared at her for a moment. “I am so sorry, perhaps I had one too many glasses of wine that evening, but I don’t remember you at all. Forgive me.”

However, Glennie could tell she was lying in order to make her look small. She sat down and glanced across at her brother, who was seated across the room with a totally blank expression on his face, and she got the impression that he was trying to look as if he was not there at all.

As he had walked as slowly as he could towards the meeting with his bride-to-be, Niall’s mood had changed from one of anger to one of depression and impending doom, and he wished he could turn and run away—anywhere, just so that he could avoid the destiny that awaited him. However, he could not; his fate was sealed, and there was nothing he could do but face it.

He stood just behind the doorway for a moment to compose himself, then took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and went inside. When Beitris looked up and saw him, her face broke into a smile of genuine pleasure. Niall bent down to kiss her hand and said, “A pleasure to see you, My Lady. Did you have a good journey?”

He despised all the meaningless pleasantries, but they had to be endured for propriety’s sake.

Beitris beamed at him. “Indeed I did, My Laird, and thank you for asking.”

Niall stretched his face into a smile and sat down with an inward sigh. He looked at his betrothed and felt nothing—absolutely nothing. She was an attractive enough woman, he supposed. Perhaps he could lie in the marriage bed with her and be fairly satisfied; they might even have children, and he was sure he would love them, but they would not be his and Moira’s children. He and Beitris would never have what he and Moira had shared the night before. He could not imagine in a million years that the woman opposite him would play the kind of silly game they had just indulged in.

“May I ask what you do for amusement around the estate, My Laird?” Beitris asked.

“Hunting and fishing, mainly,” Niall replied, trying to keep the boredom out of his voice. “But of course, the tenants take up a lot of my time.”

Beitris frowned. “Do you not have a steward to do that kind of work for you?” She sounded shocked.

Niall poured out some wine while he composed himself enough to give her a civil answer. He despised this kind of snobbery. “I do,” he replied, then took a sip from his glass. “But my tenants like to see and talk to their Laird. They know they can come to me with their problems, and they know I will always help them.”

Beitris stared at him for a few seconds, and Niall could see what was going on in her mind. She had already judged him and found him wanting because he had committed the heinous crime of mixing with and giving assistance to people she considered to be on the bottom rung of the social ladder.

Niall knew that this attitude was not uncommon among his peers, but it was one he despised. He changed the subject abruptly.

“Glennie and I both like to fish,” he said, smiling at his sister. “We often bring home trout and other fish for the table, and our cook has some excellent recipes.”

Beitris looked as though there was a bad smell under her nose. “A woman fishing?” she almost glared at Glennie. “I have never heard of such a thing before!”

Glennie bristled, then managed a tense smile. “You have now,” she said. “It is a very productive way to spend time. After all, what can be better than providing your own food?”

She shot Beitris a challenging look, and Beitris shrugged, trying not to look disgusted.

“I am sure you’re right,” she conceded, although the expression on her face said that she did not agree at all.

“What do you like to do in your spare time?” Glennie asked her.

“Needlework, a little drawing, that kind of thing.” Beitris replied. “And I spend a lot of time in our chapel praying for those less fortunate than myself.”

Glennie was so angry that she felt every hair on her body stand on end. She was about to cry out what a sanctimonious idiot she thought Beitris was, but she heard Niall

clearing his throat, and she saw him give an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

She backed down reluctantly, unclenching her fists and letting out a long slow breath to calm down. The thought that she would have to live in the same home as this complete hypocrite was unbearable.

Moira lay on her bed for a long while, then looked outside. The carriage had obviously been taken into the stables, and there was no one in the courtyard but the guards. She sat down on the bed, then thought for a moment.

She decided that it would console her a little to know that Niall was marrying a worthy woman. And despite the fact that the sight of Beitris Maxwell was going to hurt her heart even more, Moira was eaten up with curiosity. She dithered for a moment, then changed her clothes and crept downstairs.

It took her a while to find the right room, but she traced it eventually by the sound of voices, and stood out of sight, listening to the conversation.

She picked out Niall's deep rumble at once, although he was contributing very little to the conversation. Moira knew every intonation of both his and Glennie's speech, and it seemed to her that both of them sounded strained, as if trying to keep calm, and when she heard what Beitris had to say for herself, she was not surprised.

The woman was condescending in the extreme to Glennie, but spoke to Niall in an almost obsequious tone, and although Moira could not see her, she knew the kind of look that went with it. Her husband had used it when he needed favours from other men. Moira felt sick. She would have found it hard to part with Niall if he was marrying a good woman, but this creature was not one of those.

Presently, Glennie stood up and said, "Excuse me for a moment," then left the room and came straight to Moira.

Moira jumped, startled. “How did you know I was here?” she whispered.

“I could see the edge of your skirt,” Glennie replied. She drew Moira away from the doorway a little. “Come inside with me, I want you to meet her.”

Moira was about to ask why, but Glennie was tugging her hand and leading a slightly dazed Moira into the reception room. Moira saw Gerald McNicholl looking at her with a deep frown that signalled extreme hostility.

“Lady Beitris Maxwell, this is my friend, Moira Jamieson,” Glennie said politely. Reluctantly, Moira curtsied. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, My Lady.”

Beitris gave her a brittle smile and said: “And yours.” Then she turned away to speak to Niall, not even sparing Moira a passing glance. “My Laird, will you take me for a tour around the estate? I would like to see the place where I will be living. I will, after all, be Lady McPhee.”

Niall only just stopped himself from refusing and giving this snobbish young madam a piece of his mind. “Of course,” he replied because he had no choice.

“Glennie—may I call you Glennie?” Beitris asked.

“Of course, Beitris,” Glennie answered, without asking permission to use her given name.

“Would you come too?” Beitris asked.

“I will have to change, so I will meet you in the stables in a short while.” Glennie pinned on a smile for Beitris and looked at Moira, who was quite unsure of what to do next.

Moira really did not wish to accompany them, and she was about to follow Glennie and tell her so. However, she felt Beitris's hand gripping her arm and looked up to see her hostile glare. Glennie had walked away and was already out of earshot, so she did not hear Beitris when she addressed Moira in an icy, condescending tone.

"Your presence is not needed," Beitris told her coldly. "Stay away from my betrothed. Now that I am here, you need not bother him again. You may go."

For a second, Moira contemplated answering Beitris with a stinging rejoinder, but decided not to waste her time. She would be gone soon and Beitris would be the mistress of the castle. What difference would anything she said make now?

Moira had no idea if Beitris was going to say anything else, but at that moment Gerald came towards them with an expression of extreme annoyance on his face. Beitris turned and walked away, leaving them together.

“I think it would be better for everyone if you left now, Moira,” he said softly. “You are a good lass and I know you want Niall’s happiness, so for his sake and the sake of the clan, I think you should be on your way. I know that this is hard for you, but it’s for the best.” He gave her a sympathetic smile and patted her shoulder gently.

However, he had no need to worry, since Moira was emotionally and physically exhausted, and wanted nothing more than to be on her way.

She nodded stiffly and walked away, saying nothing. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck prickling and knew that Gerald was still watching her, but presently, she rounded a corner and passed out of his sight, then headed for her chamber.

She knew now that she had definitely overstayed her welcome and that it was long past time she left Baltyre Castle and Niall McPhee. Beitris Maxwell had put her on notice that her presence would not be tolerated any longer, and Moira could see that she had a mean and spiteful nature. It was obvious that she would take any chance she could to wound and humiliate her.

Moira threw herself on the bed and tried to empty her mind of all thought for a while, but the harder she tried, the more difficult it became, and at last she gave up. There was a lot to do before she could go. Granted, she had not much packing to do, since

she possessed very few clothes, but she had to organise a horse and food for the journey.

As well as that, she needed to find some sort of weapon to take with her; she had found out the hard way that she needed one last time she had set out on her own. She had taken a little knife with her on that occasion, and it had done little good. She now thought an axe might be better!

Moira packed her few belongings and looked around at her bedchamber. Her gaze fixed on the bed, where she and Niall had driven each other wild with delight. There, they had pledged their love for one another with their bodies and words of tenderness and passion, and she felt a wave of sadness so strong that she almost burst into tears. But she would be gone before he came back, and she would never see him again.

Moira moved over to the bed and bent down to bury her face in the sheets, which still bore the earthy scent of Niall's body. She took a deep breath in and closed her eyes, trying to imprison the sensual musk inside her so that she could take it with her when she left. Tears were still threatening, but she somehow managed to hold them back. She could weep later.

On a sudden impulse, Moira tore a strip off the sheet, rolled it up and stuffed it in her bag. She might have ruined it, but now she would always have a little piece of Niall with her that she could remember him by, and she was quite sure he could afford another sheet!

Moira checked once more to see if she had packed every one of her few possessions, then counted her coins. She thought she might be able to survive for some weeks, although it might involve sleeping under the stars for a few nights.

I am a strong woman, she told herself. I can bear it.

She took a last look around the room that had become such a haven for her and held such wonderful memories, then opened the door, walked out and strode along the corridor with firm, deliberate steps. She would not look back, she told herself.

Having visited the kitchen to collect some food for the journey, Moira decided to take a last look around the castle, safe in the knowledge that Baltyre was a vast estate, and it would take Niall and his party a while to return.

She had no intention of being present when they returned, and she hurried up to the turrets to take a last look over Baltyre Estate. She marvelled at Niall's ability to manage such a huge piece of land and all the people who lived there, and her admiration for him was boundless, as was her love.

She turned away sadly and made her way to the stables, where she intended to take the horse that had brought her here and leave once and for all.

Again, she looked around herself as she progressed along the corridor, memorising everything, storing it in her mind for the future when times might be much rougher and harder to bear. Memories were untouchable; no one could take them away from her.

As she entered the stables, Moira expected to see the stable boys grooming the horses, but there was no one around, which she found very strange. But she didn't give it much more thought. At any rate, she had no time to waste, so she made her way inside to fetch her mount.

Just then, a heavy hand landed on her shoulder and a familiar voice said, "Moira!"

Moira whipped around to see Brody McDonnell, her husband's brother, glaring at her. He was older than Roy, and no less ugly, with sunken brown eyes, a long pointed nose and thin lips. She hated him almost as much as she had hated Roy, and she

feared him in equal measure. His face, as he looked at her, had the appearance of a predator about to strike its prey, and she instinctively backed away from him.

Moira stared at him. “What do you want, Brody?” she asked, trying to keep her voice from trembling with fear. This monster was capable of doing anything to achieve his ends: lying, stealing, cheating, killing—it made no difference to him.

If he spoke to Niall and told him the lie about how Roy McDonnell had died, Niall might send her back to her former home, then she had no idea what would happen to her. She only knew that it would be nothing good.

Moira felt utterly helpless, and she could see by the gleam of triumph in his eyes that he knew it.

Brody leered at her and tapped the side of his nose. “That is confidential,” he told her. “Suffice to say that if you do not cooperate with me, something very bad will happen to someone you hold very dear.”

He paused, then unsheathed the dagger he carried in a sheath on his hip. He held it up, so that daylight gleamed on its lethally sharp edge. “No harm will come to you if you do as I say.”

Moira’s heart sank. She should have known better than to think she could get away so easily. Roy had been cunning, and Brody was too. It was obviously a family trait, and she had been unfortunate enough to become tangled up with this tribe of criminals, thanks to her treacherous father.

Pure hatred burned like a fire inside her as she stood looking at him, and in a tone that made her flesh creep, he said, “Now listen to me, Moira.”

He stepped closer to her, watching with evil satisfaction as she tried to back away,

but was stopped as her back came into contact with the wall behind her.

“What do you want?” she asked fearfully.

He took a step closer to Moira and thrust his face into hers so that their noses were almost touching, “I have your maid, Jean, in my possession and if you do not want anything bad to happen to her, I suggest you cooperate with me. I believe she is very dear to you.”

Moira’s eyes opened wide with horror. “No!” she cried in horror.

Brody shook his head, smiling with evil satisfaction. “Aye, my dear Moira,” he told her. “I am not. She is safe, at the moment, but that can always change.”

His eyes never left Moira’s terrified face as she gazed at him, unable to find a single word to say for a few seconds.

At last, Moira found her tongue again. “What do you want from me?” she asked in a strangled voice.

Brody narrowed his eyes and looked at her for a moment, then grinned. “You are coming with me,” he replied as he grabbed her arm in a grip so tight that Moira flinched with pain.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, curious despite her terror.

“That is for me to know,” he replied grimly. “Now, come with me. I have a horse for you, but I need to make sure you cannot escape.” He produced a length of cord and quickly tied her hands together.

Moira looked around frantically to see if she could raise anyone’s attention, and

almost opened her mouth to scream, but Brody anticipated her intention.

“It will be very bad for you and Jean if you scream,” he growled. “Be very quiet because my men are loyal to me and if I tell them to, they will quite happily go and end your friend’s life. Would you like that on your conscience?”

Moirra shook her head, now quite terrified.

Brody gave her a feral grin. “I thought not. Remember, her life is in your hands, and yours is in mine.”

Finn was exhausted, angry and worried. He had carried out the mission Niall had given him, and was deeply disturbed by what he had found about Moira. Now he clattered over the courtyard into the castle, but stopped in his tracks as he saw four armed men escorting Moira out of the castle. Her hands were tied in front of her, and as he watched, one of them lifted her and put her on a horse which was standing, already saddled and waiting for her.

Finn was fully armed, and was about to run up and challenge them, then he saw that the man assisting Moira had a large dagger in his hand. It would take him only a fraction of a second to strike a lethal blow, and Moira would be no more.

If this young woman was killed because of them, there would be hell to pay—Niall would never forgive him. Finn was never usually an indecisive man: he was a leader, and could not afford to be, but now he was helpless.

Presently, the man holding Moira saw him and gave him a savage grin. “Do not follow us, or try to rescue her,” he threatened. “One stroke of this dagger will finish her.”

Finn was about to answer with a foul insult, but stopped himself at the last second. He

could take no chances with Moira's life. As he looked at the thug, he realised who he was, he must be Moira's foul brother-in-law, the one looking for her.

Moira glanced back at him, and the look in her eyes was one of pure terror, but Finn stood immobile and impotent, keeping his fury inside while all his instincts were telling him to chase after the kidnappers.

However, he knew that Niall would be back in a short while, then Finn could lay the burden on his shoulders. Yet, that was small comfort now; now he was frustrated and tortured by guilt.

Niall felt that something was wrong as soon as he got to the castle and looked around himself. Finn strode up to him and said, “I have somethin’ tae tell ye, Niall.”

Niall, looking at the expression on his friend’s face, felt that he knew what was coming. “You’ve done the job?” he asked.

“Aye,” Finn replied. “But I need tae talk tae ye in private—it’s very important.”

Niall looked at the expression on his face and realised that something was desperately wrong. “My study,” he said firmly.

They sat down and Finn launched into an explanation of what had happened. He took a deep breath and started, “I found out that Moira’s name isnae Jamieson. It is McDonnell. She was married tae a merchant called Roy McDonnell, a man that was much older an’ a cruel drunkard. He was found dead on the floor o’ his house by his brother Brody. They think Moira did it, an’ they were lookin’ for her.” He paused, then looked Niall straight in the eye. “Moira is no’ the woman we thought she was, Niall. She has deceived ye.”

The news that Moira had lied to him caused Niall’s heart to ache. He was deeply hurt that she had been dishonest with him since the first moment she had met him. He had lost count of all the times she had refused to tell him the name of the man to whom she had been betrothed, but now it appeared that she had not been betrothed, but married, all the time he had known her. Why had she lied to him?

Yet, he could not believe she was a killer. He felt that he would have known if she was, for he had met murderers before, and had always sensed the violence and hatred that they hid inside them. Niall had killed before, but only in the heat of battle or in self-defence, and it had scarred him deeply, but he had never carried violence off the battlefield into his daily life.

Nevertheless, someone had murdered Moira's husband, and if she had not done it herself, then who could have committed the crime? Roy McDonnell sounded like the kind of man who would have collected many enemies in his life, so it could have been one of many people who wanted revenge on him, or repayment, or both.

Niall's mind wandered back to his and Moira's last encounter—was it only that morning? It seemed like a lifetime ago that they had teased each other on her bed. Their lovemaking the previous night had been one of the most sublime experiences of his life, and now he was determined that it would not be the last time they were together. By hook or by crook he would have the woman he loved in his arms, in his bed, in his life.

"I cannot believe Moira is a killer," he said to Finn. "You and I are warriors, Finn. We know how killers behave, and Moira is not like that. She may be stubborn and angry sometimes, but there is no badness in her."

Finn was reluctant to venture an opinion, since he could see that Niall was completely besotted with Moira, but as far as he could tell, the matter of her guilt was still an open question. Niall was biased and blind to her faults; he could see no evil in her at all, but Finn still had his doubts. Moira seemed like a good person, but he had no idea how she behaved when no one was watching.

"I want you to do something else for me, Finn," Niall said as he poured them both a large measure of whisky. He felt he needed something stronger than ale. "I want you to ask some more questions for me, and use some of your other trusted men if you

have to.

I need to find out who killed McDonnell. You said he was a gambler. It might be someone he owes a great deal of money to. If he left someone poverty-stricken, that person might want revenge, and what better revenge than ending his life once and for all?"

The moment Finn had been dreading had arrived. He stood up and took a deep breath, then watched as he saw Niall's whole body tense as though he were expecting a blow. He received one, although not of the physical kind.

"I have somethin' else tae tell ye, Niall," he said heavily. "Some men came here an' took Moira away at knife point. There was nothin' we could dae. They threatened my men they would kill her if we tried tae stop them. One move fae any o' us an' they would have slit her throat."

Niall was so stunned, there was all he could do was stare at Finn for a second before he exploded. He thumped the flat of his hand on the desk and glared at him, his eyes blazing. "Nothing?" His voice was a roar of rage. "There are eighty men here. You must have been able to do something!"

Finn dropped his gaze to his hands, which were resting on top of the desk. "If I could have stopped them, dae ye no' think I would have done it?" he asked.

He felt deeply ashamed, but at the same time angry that Niall had not recognised how impotent he and his men had been.

"They even locked up a' the stable hands. I told ye already there was naethin' we could have done. We were helpless!" He was beginning to get angry, and his face flushed as he stared at Niall.

Niall felt shame wash over him, and he shook his head, sighing. "I am sorry, Finn. I'm so furious. Now we have to figure out where she is and how to get her back." He stood up and paced agitatedly across the room to the window.

Why did I have to fall in love with you, Moira? he asked himself. However, he already knew the answer to his own question. It was because it was his destiny because they were meant to be together.

Niall was beginning to feel quite desperate. Where was Moira now? Why had her kidnappers taken her? There could be only one reason: to extort a ransom from him. He could afford to pay a ransom, of course, he would pay anything to have Moira safe and sound in his arms again, and once she was under his protection she would never have to worry about her safety again.

"I know who the swine is who took her," Finn said grimly. "It is Brody McDonnell, the one who has been lookin' for her a' this time. I have seen him in the village when I dropped intae the tavern, an' he is a nasty piece o' work."

"Who let them into the castle?" Niall asked, puzzled and furious. "Because I cannot believe my men would just let them walk in. Do you know?"

"The men said it was Gerald McNicholl," Finn replied. "He told them they were friends o' his an' had come tae visit. They said they were a' very friendly an' polite."

Finn felt a surge of fury erupt inside him. He thumped his desk and let out a roar that hurt Finn's ears. At that moment, he could have put a gruesome end to Gerald's miserable life and smiled while doing it. He tossed back the rest of his whisky and wrenched the door of his study open, then stopped short as he saw a very startled Beitris. She gave a little squeal of fright and took a hasty step backwards the second she saw him.

“What are you doing here?” Niall demanded furiously.

His face was a mask of rage, and Beitris cowered in fear as she slowly backed away from him.

“I-I was just coming to find you,” she stuttered. “Everyone is waiting for you to come to dinner.”

“No,” Niall countered. “You were not. You were eavesdropping, My Lady. You were being underhand and deceitful, and I will not stand for it!”

Beitris shook her head. “Niall—” she began, but he stopped her.

“It is ‘My Laird’ from now on,” he told her grimly.

Beitris nodded in acknowledgement. “My Laird,” she said, then took a deep breath. “You must think of your clan, and you need an heir to secure your position. Surely, you would rather its mother was a woman of quality like myself rather than a murderous peasant like Moira McDonnell?”

At the mention of Moira’s married name, Niall frowned even more deeply, and took another threatening step towards Beitris. “How do you know her name? And who told you she had murdered anyone?” he demanded.

By this time, Beitris’s back was almost touching the wall behind her, and she was visibly trembling with fear. However, she was not ready to give up yet.

“My Laird,” she began again, “you have so much to offer a lady of substance. Any noblewoman would be glad to marry you, and give you many babies. If they were sons and looked like you, they would be very fortunate indeed.”

Niall had never struck a woman, and never would, he despised men who did so, but at that moment he wished Beitris was a man so that they could have a fair fight.

“You trapped Moira, did you not?” he asked angrily. “You have taken her away from me, hoping I will never find her! Well, you are wrong, My Lady. I will search to the ends of the earth. I will move mountains because that is how much I love my Moira. Now tell me who told you this, and tell me where she is!”

He took one more step towards her so that they were separated by inches, and Beitris’s eyes were round with fear as she looked up at him. For a moment, Niall felt ashamed that he was frightening her so much and almost turned away, then Beitris blurted out, “My Uncle Gerald found Brody McDonnell and told him where Moira was.

Truly, My Laird, I had no idea he had anything criminal in mind. I just wanted to be rid of her so that you and I could marry and be happy. I-I care for you very much.”

“Ha!” Niall gave a scornful, derisive laugh. “Care for me? You hardly know me, My Lady! All you care for is my wealth and power, and I care nothing for you. Go back to your family and see if they can find you another suitor who is less choosy than I am. Goodbye.”

He strode away, leaving Beitris to follow him with her eyes until he was out of sight. Now he was about to confront her uncle, and she felt a savage stab of satisfaction. He had talked her into this plan, and now that it had fallen through, he was going to get his comeuppance. How she wished she were a fly on the wall!

Niall’s footsteps thundered through the castle as he strode along the corridors to find Gerald. Servants looked at his furious face and hastily jumped out of his way, since it looked as though he had murder on his mind.

They had never known their Laird to be violent towards them, but at that moment it looked as though someone would be on the receiving end of some dire punishment.

Baltre Castle was vast, and Niall had no time to waste searching all its miles of corridors and hundreds of rooms.

Niall tried to put himself in Gerald's place, wondering where he would be, but at that moment the man himself appeared.

His eyes widened with fear when he saw Niall's ferocious expression, but he tried to school his face into a sickly and unconvincing smile.

Niall strode forward and caught Gerald by his collar, pulling him towards him so that they were almost nose to nose.

Gerald's eyes were wide with fear, and Niall's voice was dripping with disgust when he said, "I know what you did, you miserable swine. You brought Brody McDonnell here so that you could ruin my relationship with Moira!

Well, let me tell you, your plans have come to nothing. Beiris is on her way home to her family, but you are going to be enjoying some different and less comfortable accommodation in my dungeons. Brody McDonnell has kidnapped the woman I love!"

Gerald shook his head, and opened his mouth to say something, but Niall's warning glare stopped him. Niall felt like giving him a hefty kick, but restrained himself. Instead, he grabbed his wrist so tightly that he begged to be let go.

"Did you know what they were going to do?" he asked, thrusting his face into Gerald's so that they were almost nose to nose.

Gerald swallowed nervously, then nodded in resignation. “Yes, I did,” he replied.

“Where did he take Moira?” Niall asked. “It would be better for you to tell me because I might have a little more mercy on you.”

Gerald was silent, then Niall shook him so violently that his teeth rattled. “Where is she?” he roared.

“I don’t know!” Gerald answered, his voice hoarse with fear. “He just disappeared. If I knew, I would tell you!”

Niall stared down at him, then slapped him once, twice, with the front and back of his hand hard across his face, before flinging him with all his might towards one of the guards.

“Put him in the cell at the end—the darkest one,” he instructed. “Give him enough food and water to keep him alive, no more.” Then he addressed Gerald. “I will have mercy on you and put a couple of rat traps in there with you, you’ll need them! If anything bad happens to my Moira, I can assure you that the same—or worse—will happen to you!”

He beckoned to two other guards, who marched up and hauled their prisoner away none too gently. The last Niall saw of Gerald was his terrified face as he glanced over his shoulder. He felt a stab of vicious satisfaction, but he had no time to gloat. He had to find Moira because he needed her as much as he needed the air that he breathed.

Niall ran to the stables and saw Ritchie Young standing with Glennie. They were holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes, and although he would have reprimanded them at any other time, Niall had no time to be angry just then.

“Get to work, you,” he snapped tersely at Ritchie, and he and Glennie sprang apart,

looking guilty. Niall gave his sister a look that said, I'll deal with you later.

Then he went to find Logie, who had already been saddled for him.

Glennie came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Niall," she said gently.

He whipped around to face her, ready to give her a piece of his mind, but when he saw the expression on Glennie's face, his expression softened.

"Where are you going?" she asked anxiously.

Niall took a deep breath. "A situation has arisen on the estate that I need to take care of," he replied, "but it's nothing to worry about. I'll be back soon."

His reply was evasive, and not very convincing, but he could think of nothing else to say to her, having been unable to think of a suitable lie. He kissed her cheek softly, then turned and strode away.

Glennie watched as Niall mounted Logie and rode down to the gate. He was not taking the entire garrison with him, only a few of his best and most experienced men. Glennie watched as they rode out of the gate, and burst into tears as soon as the riders were out of sight, but Ritchie was behind her, and he folded his arms around her.

"They will be back soon, hen," he said soothingly. "There are no' many men that go up against your brother an' come away unhurt. He will be fine."

Glennie wished that she could be so confident.

Brody looked back as they rode away from Baltyre castle and smirked in triumph. “Well, that was a lot easier than I expected,” he said. “To be truthful, I feel a little disappointed. I expected a bit more resistance from McPhee’s men.”

If he wanted Moira to speak up, he was disappointed. She said nothing, and stared resolutely in front of her, refusing to meet his eyes.

She was terrified, but was doggedly refusing to show it, since her fear would be another weapon for Brody to use against her. What was Niall doing, she wondered? She hoped against hope that he was following her with a rescue party, but how could he if he had no idea where she was going? Her situation seemed hopeless.

Her thoughts were racing, however. Her hands were tied in front of her to make it possible for her to ride, but she would be unable to run; she needed her arms and hands for balance and drive. No—that would be impossible, and she would never be able to outpace a man, especially wearing her long skirts and petticoats.

Moira tried surreptitiously moving her hands to test the tension of the ropes, but they were too tight to allow her hands to slip out, although not painfully so. If she had time and somewhere to hide, she was sure she could untie herself, but she had neither of those things. She was helpless.

Perhaps trickery? Could she perhaps pretend to faint with shock, as so many ladies did? Maybe she could find a way out if she pretended to be unconscious, but the more she thought about it, the less likely it seemed as an option. Anyway, she might have

to fall off her horse and injure herself, then she would indeed be doomed!

Moira looked down at the horse they had chosen for her. Moira could tell the mare was fairly old and not very fast, so trying to outrun the bigger mounts of her kidnappers was also impossible. She sighed irritably, knowing that she would have to face whatever fate awaited her.

Another thrill of fear went through her as she saw that they were about to enter into the dark shadows of a pine wood, where the trees were so close together she could hardly see. All her married life, Moira had been wary of the dark, mostly because her husband had often lurked in shadowed corners to frighten her.

However, there was one bright spot on the horizon. Jean would be there, someone who loved her would be there, and she would do everything to protect Jean. Moira tried to cheer herself up with this thought, but as they moved over the narrow path through the dark pines, she was trembling with fear.

Brody had been keeping up a continuous stream of nonsensical talk all the way along their route, mostly boastful lies about his own abilities and achievements, and Moira's attention had soon wandered.

To Moira's intense relief, they emerged eventually onto a grassy field where a flock of sheep and lambs were grazing. A small rundown farmhouse with an equally ramshackle barn stood there, and Moira shuddered as she looked at it and realised that this was their destination.

The first signs of dusk were beginning to show in the sky, and night would soon be closing in. Moira dreaded what McDonnell had in store for her. Would she be tried for her husband's murder? She hoped not, otherwise her life would be done.

However, when one of Brody's men dragged her off the horse, she squared her

shoulders and tilted her chin up, refusing to show how frightened she was. Brody would never make her beg for mercy, no matter how badly he treated her. She would always fight back, as she had been doing for years.

“Do you like your new home, Moira?” Brody asked with a malicious smile.

Again, Moira remained silent, but Brody was tired of being ignored. He thrust his face into hers, and Moira recoiled at the foul stench of his breath. “Answer me!” he hissed.

“Yes!” she cried in terror at the savage fury in his face.

He gave her a venomous look, then he stepped forward to open the door with a large key that he took from a deep pocket in his jacket. He grabbed Moira by the arm then practically flung her through the doorway so that she landed on the floor face down. She had flexed out her hands to break her fall, and the resulting pain of the impact stunned her and took her breath away for a moment.

When her head had stopped spinning a moment later, the stench of rotten straw, mice, and manure hit her, and she covered her nose and mouth with her hand to try to block it out.

Then she heard a familiar and beloved voice, and looked up to see Jean rushing towards her. She reached down and helped Moira to her feet, then cried, “Mistress! I am so glad tae see ye!”

Her homely face was full of concern, and Moira hastened to reassure her.

Moira tried to smile. “Jean!” she exclaimed. “Thank god!”

She was about to embrace Jean when she realised that her hands were still tied, and

she turned to ask Brody to free her. However, Jean had anticipated her request and had begun to untie the rope from Moira's wrists. It took her a few moments, but eventually Moira breathed a sigh of relief as the cords fell away. She rubbed her wrists, which were raw and sore.

"I suggest you do not cause me any more trouble, Moira," Brody warned her grimly. "I have stationed two guards outside to stop you escaping, and they are not the kind of men you should trifle with. I want you all in one piece, I have plans for you."

He paused, watching and enjoying the fear on Moira's face. Then his own countenance took on an expression of sickening satisfaction as he said, "You see, my brother had all the things I wanted. He had you and your rare beauty." He gave her a leering smile. "When my father died, Roy, being the elder son, inherited all his wealth, which he did not deserve. He was a wastrel, a drunk, and a gambler, so it was easy to pay someone to drop a little something in his drink and put him to sleep forever. Now I have his fortune, which he would likely have gambled away anyway, and I have you. We will be married as soon as I can arrange it."

Moira was so horrified at this news that despite her fear, she yelled, "I would rather die than marry you!"

However, Brody had been expecting something like this, and was thoroughly enjoying the sense of power he was experiencing as he stepped over to Jean and held the dagger to her throat. He gave Moira an evil smile. "Be very careful, Moira," he warned. "If you continue to resist me, I will kill her."

Jean was wearing an expression of sheer terror, and the lethal blade was only inches from her throat. Moira instinctively went on the attack, pushing Jean out of the way of danger. However, as she flew past Brody, his knife sliced along her left arm, causing her to scream in pain as a deep gash opened.

Brody grabbed a fistful of her hair, then growled, “Stop fighting me, or I will kill both of you!”

He had no time to say another word, however, for at that moment the sound of horses’ hooves and the roar of men’s voices shrieking in rage could be heard outside, as well as the noise of clashing metal as swords struck swords.

Brody let go of Moira and jumped to his feet, making for the door, but hearing the noises of battle outside, he hesitated. He knew that Niall’s guards’ fighting skills had been honed to perfection, and had no wish to die at their hands. He had never fought a battle in his life, and knew he had little or no chance of survival.

He dithered for another moment, wondering if he could find another way out of the barn. However, a second later the door flew open and hit the wall of the barn with a resounding crash, then Niall burst in.

He looked even bigger than usual in the small dark space, and was truly a terrifying sight. He was carrying his enormous, lethal broadsword and his expression was murderous as he looked at Brody, his teeth bared in a ferocious scowl.

Brody raised his own sword, trying to appear defiant, but even before a blow was struck, it was clear that he was outmatched. He was smaller and lighter in build than Niall, whose arms had a much longer reach, and he was frozen with fear.

Niall advanced towards him threateningly, holding his sword out point first towards Brody’s chest. He could see the other man trembling, and he knew he was the superior fighter of the two, but Brody was standing only a few paces away from the prone figure of Moira, and Niall was taking no chances. Brody could reach over to threaten Moira with his own weapon, or even hurt her by accident.

He cast a glance over to where an older woman was holding Moira in her arms,

reassured to see that Moira's eyes were open and she was watching him.

At last Brody moved, raising his sword to bring it down on Niall's shoulder, but he swept it aside easily and began to edge sideways so that they were moving away from the two women.

Up till that moment, Niall had been careful with his adversary as he lured him away, but now he let loose with all his strength and the skill that years of experience had given him.

Brody's eyes widened with fear as he struggled to stay upright against a foe that was twice his size and strength, and when Niall's sword pierced his heart, he went down without a sound.

Niall wasted no time in rushing to Moira's side. The other woman had folded a piece of cloth torn from her skirt and was pressing the thick wad onto the deep gash on Moira's arm, at the same time murmuring soft words of comfort.

"We need tae get her tae a healer as soon as we can, M'Laird," she said anxiously, for surely Niall couldn't have been anything less than a Laird in poor Jean's eyes. "She is losin' a lot o' blood."

Moira was groaning in agony, and Niall could see that the cloth was already bright red. He wished with all his heart that he could take her pain away and bear it himself. This was what it felt like to truly love someone, he thought, and he knew that if Moira died, a part of him would die too; that was how much she meant to him.

At that moment, Finn came in, looking sweaty, dishevelled and blood-spattered, but uninjured.

"My men have sorted out McDonnell's men," he stated grimly. "They can walk back

tae the castle wi' us."

He looked down at Moira and frowned in concern, then left hurriedly to organise his men for the trip back to Baltyre. He had plenty of experience with wounds, and he knew that Moira's was serious.

Moira looked up into Niall's leaf-green eyes, and her heart swelled with love. "Thank you," she whispered. "I don't know what we would have done if you had not come. He threatened us both and?—"

Niall smiled and placed a soft kiss on her cheek. "I love you," he whispered. "I will never love anyone but you, Moira, and I will never let anyone hurt you—ever again. I promise. You mean everything to me."

"And you mean everything to me too, Niall," Moira answered, "and I..."

She began to voice another thought, but as she spoke his face began to blur before her eyes then darkness descended, and she remembered no more.

Niall looked at Moira, horrified. She could not be dead, could she? He felt the pulse at her throat and almost wept with relief when he found it strong and steady.

"Thank god," he whispered.

"She is a tough lass, M'Laird," Jean assured him. "I am sure she will be fine, but we must hurry."

Niall cupped Moira's cheek and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I hope you're right," he said. "Because I could not live without her. Look after her."

He instructed, then sprang to his feet and ran outside to get help. His heart was

racing, he had never been so afraid.

When Moira opened her eyes, she realised that she was back in the castle in an unfamiliar room. She was lying on the soft mattress of a canopied bed, and her head rested on a soft feather pillow. For a few moments her mind was blank, then the events that had happened just before she lost consciousness came rushing back to her in a jumbled blur of realisation.

Moira squealed with fright as the memory of the dagger came back to her. She tried to sit up, but a bolt of sheer agony shot up her arm from the injury she had sustained, and she flopped down on the pillow again with tears streaming from her eyes.

“Mistress!” The voice belonged to Sandie, who rushed to her side and took both of Moira’s hands in her own. “Dinnae worry, ye are safe now.” She took a length of bandage and wiped Moira’s tears away gently.

“What-what happened?” Moira asked fearfully. Her heart was beating nineteen to the dozen, but she breathed a huge sigh of relief as she realised that there were none of Brody’s men around her, and no sign of Brody himself. Had Niall killed him? She hoped so. A quick death was more than he deserved.

“The Laird brought ye back fae the village the night, before last,” Sandie replied. “He has been sittin’ by your bedside a’ night, but I told him tae go an’ get some sleep. He is fair worried about ye, Mistress.”

“Have I been asleep all this time?” Moira was shocked, but Sandie smiled.

“I gave ye a wee somethin’ tae help ye,” she answered. “Ye were in such a state when ye came in.”

Moira vaguely remembered Niall’s anxious eyes looking down at her as he carried her upstairs, and the sensation of being laid gently on the bed. She remembered nothing about the journey to the castle, however. She looked around herself.

She was in a very plain room. The furniture was made of an assortment of different kinds of wood, and nothing matched anything else. There was a mahogany table in the corner with oak chairs next to it, and the armoire was oak. A writing table made of ebony stood beside the bed, which was also fashioned from oak, but in a completely different style.

The walls were pale grey, as was the coverlet and drapes on the bed, and were adorned with only one painting above the fireplace, the rest being bare. It was the chamber of someone who was uninterested in frills and furbelows, and had a starkly masculine feel.

“Whose room is this?” Moira asked curiously.

Sandie smiled. “The Laird’s,” she answered.

“Where is Jean? My maid?” Moira asked anxiously.

“Dinnae fret, Mistress. She is preparing some food in the kitchens for ye as ye speak!”

At that moment, the door of the chamber opened and Glennie stepped in.

As soon as she saw that Moira’s eyes were open, her face lit up, and she cried, “Moira! I am so glad you are awake!”

She rushed over to the bed and was about to throw her arms around Moira, but Sandie stopped her at the last moment. “Careful, Milady,” she warned. “The arm is no’ yet healed and is still sore.”

Glennie immediately looked contrite. “I am so sorry, Moira,” she said. “I am just so glad to see that you’re awake and looking so well.”

Moira laughed. “I am not exactly at death’s door, Glennie.” She looked at her friend’s face, which was so like Niall’s, but in a feminine way, and thought about how much she had grown to love Glennie. “And it is I who should be sorry. I was deceiving you about my name and the fact that I was married, and I was about to run away without telling you, and not even leave a note. You deserve better. Please forgive me, Glennie.”

Then she put her face in her hands as she remembered something she had done that was even worse. “And I deceived Niall too, but he still came to rescue me. What a good man he is, Glennie, the best I have ever met, but now I am ashamed to face him.”

This time, Glennie leaned forward and folded her arms around Moira in a gentle embrace. “He loves you so much, Moira,” she said warmly. “As I do too. And if you lied to me, it was to protect yourself, and I forgive you. I regard you as my sister now. Indeed, you are the only sister I will have because Niall is not marrying Beitris, thank god. I can’t stand the woman.”

“Oh, I am so glad to hear you think of me as a sister,” Moira said, smiling. “Because I feel the same about you, and I am really not at all fond of Beitris.” Then she frowned. “But Niall is really not marrying her?”

“No,” Glennie replied. “He found out that Gerald McNicholl had manipulated her to gain more power and influence in the clan. The man had spies everywhere, even

bought Heather off to keep an eye on you! I dismissed the lass without punishment, thinking of her situation, but it will be hard to forgive her betrayal.

Niall was furious when he found out because he does not like her any more than I do, and once he found out the truth, he simply could not go through with it, especially since he loves you.”

Despite herself, Moira felt sad for Beitris. She had never really liked her, but she knew what it felt like to be used, and it was not pleasant.

“Where is Beitris now?” she asked curiously.

“She has gone home to her family,” Glennie answered, and Moira’s heart gave a leap of joy. “She left in very bad grace. She did not even say goodbye to me, nor Niall, but I doubt he cared one bit for anyone other than you.”

Glennie smiled fondly at Moira and kissed her cheek. “Now, I will send for him. He will be overjoyed to see you.” She gave Moira one last hug and turned at the doorway to smile at her. “Good luck,” she said.

Niall had just woken up after an extremely restless night’s sleep in one of the spare bedrooms when he heard a knock at the door. He had sat at Moira’s bedside until the early hours of the morning, ignoring Sandie’s instructions to go and rest.

Now he was only half-awake and irritable, with the beginnings of a throbbing headache. He wrapped a blanket around himself and went to open the door with very bad grace. When he saw his sister, he groaned.

“What do you want, Glennie?” he asked, rubbing his hands over his eyes as he glared at her.

“Good morning to you too,” Glennie said dryly, frowning. “I came to tell you that Moira is awake.”

The effect on Niall was instant. He rushed back into his room and almost threw his clothes on in his haste to get to Moira. His heart was beating a wild tattoo, and he began to sprint down the passageway. As he came closer to his room, though, he slowed down then stopped and took a few deep breaths, realising that Moira would not appreciate seeing him in such a state.

He walked the rest of the way calmly, although he was hardly able to contain his impatience and excitement. When he reached his chamber, he opened the door and looked straight into Moira’s beautiful eyes.

“Moira!” he cried, then rushed across the room to throw his arms around her.

However, at the last moment, Niall saw the heavy bandage on Moira’s arm and stopped beside the bed, instead reaching out to cup her face in his hands and give her a soft kiss on the lips.

“How are you, my lovely enchantress?” he asked gently.

Moira’s heart swelled with love and joy as she gazed at Niall. Noting the anxiety in his eyes, she hastened to reassure him.

“I am fine, Niall.” She put out her good hand to stroke his cheek, and Niall placed his own big hand over it, then sighed in relief and satisfaction.

Niall closed his eyes and kissed her palm, and the smile he gave Moira was the most loving one he had ever given her. He had not realised how worried he had been until he saw her face again, and now that he was sure she was safe, all his pent-up emotion threatened to spill out.

Then something else occurred to him. “Moira, did he hurt you?” he asked anxiously. “Or touch you in any way that was... not right?”

Moira shook her head and gave him a reassuring smile. “I am well, Niall,” she assured him tenderly. “He insulted me and threatened my old maid but nothing else. Truly, I have come to no harm apart from the scratch on my arm.”

Niall frowned. “It looks like a bit more than a scratch to me!” His voice was furious, and there was a fierce frown on his face.

“Sandie has given me a salve and draught for the pain,” Moira told him. “Don’t worry, Niall. It will heal.”

Niall gave a soft laugh, and shook his head in a self-deprecating manner. “I only worry about you, Moira,” he said. “If anything happened to you, I don’t know what would happen to me.”

Moira looked into his emerald eyes and saw the deep well of love in them—love for her. What had she done to deserve it, she wondered? Suddenly, she was nervous. She had no idea what the future held for her yet, but she had to leave the past behind her, and that meant coming to terms with the truth.

“Niall, did you find out what Brody knew about what happened to Roy?” she asked. “I have been worrying about it.”

Niall sighed somewhat irritably, since it was a matter he had not wanted to speak about during this precious time with Moira. “Yes, I did,” he replied. “Actually, Finn found out. He has a few paid informants among the bandits that infested the estates around here, and one of them brought him the identity of the man who killed Roy McDonnell. Apparently, the man was paid by Brody to do the deed.

I have him in my dungeon, as well as Gerald McNicholl, that apparently innocent old man who seemed like everyone's doting grandfather instead of the deceitful schemer that he was!" His voice was bitter.

"I know I should not be glad that Brody had Roy killed," Moira said sadly, "but I am. Am I wicked, Niall?"

He smiled. "If you are, then I am just as bad," he answered. "We are glad that a drunkard, a gambler and a violent abuser was murdered? No, I would say we are both normal, decent human beings, unlike Roy."

Moira gazed at him, hardly daring to believe that this handsome, honourable, generous man loved her, scarred and abused as she was.

His mood changed abruptly as he caught her hands in his, then raised them to his lips and kissed them before he said, "Moira, please don't lie to me again. I understand why you did it, but there is no need for any more lying now. If you promise to always tell me the truth, I will promise the same to you."

"I promise," she replied, smiling.

"It is not a true promise until it's sealed with a kiss," Niall said, his eyes twinkling.

He sat down on the bed, then very carefully folded his arms around Moira. For a moment, he did nothing but hold her, and Moira felt herself melting into him. She was safe in the shelter of his arms, and the musk of his skin, warm and earthy, was now so familiar to her that it brought even more comfort. Indeed, she could have stayed buried in the nest of his body forever.

Niall tilted her face to his and pressed his lips to Moira's with infinite gentleness. His entire body was throbbing with need for her, and he felt his shaft stiffening as he held

her.

He parted Moira's lips with the tip of his tongue, then plunged it inside to taste her sweetness, all the while running his hands gently over her. It seemed like an age since he had caressed her lips with his; they tasted of sweet wine, his favourite drink. She was intoxicating.

Moira was lost in a sensation of warmth and sensuality; it seemed as though Niall had taken her to a special place in heaven, where all her senses were heightened and attuned only to him. It was glorious, and she never wanted it to end, but of course, it had to.

When they drew apart, he sighed deeply and said fervently, "God, I needed that."

Moira laughed softly. "As did I," she told him. Then her face became serious. "There is just one thing I would like you to do for me, Niall."

He had no hesitation in replying. "Anything," he replied, smiling. "I will do anything for you, Moira."

"I would like you to have mercy on Gerald," Moira said. "He is old and probably does not have much longer to live, Niall. The dungeon is not a place for a man like him. He made a mistake, granted, but he has not killed anyone. Forgive him as a gesture of good faith and make an ally out of him. Nobody, no matter how strong, can ever have enough allies."

Niall looked at Moira in wonder and chuckled. "You're already thinking like the mistress of the castle."

Moira gave him a sad smile, "I am a nobody," she replied. "I have nothing to offer you. I will leave soon, and you can find a lady of quality to marry."

Niall looked at her gloomy expression and downcast eyes. He tilted her chin up and looked into her face. “Moira, I have already found myself a lady of quality—you. And never say you are nothing because you mean everything to me, and you can prove that to everyone when you are Lady Moira McPhee.”

Moira’s eyes widened in shock, and her mouth dropped open in amazement. When she had heard him declaring his love for her in the barn the previous evening, she thought she was dreaming. The whole situation had been so blurred and confusing.

Yet here he was, looking into her eyes—asking her to marry him. Had she heard him right? Moira shook her head in disbelief and his face fell; he thought she was refusing him.

Then she smiled, and Niall’s face lit up. “Are you saying yes, Moira?” he asked hopefully.

Moira decided to have mercy on him. “Yes, Niall,” she answered. “But only because I like the thought of being Lady McPhee. It has a lovely ring to it.”

Niall laughed. “Well, speaking of rings, I will give you another one—a wedding ring! One of the things I love about you, Moira, is that you make me laugh, and I have not had enough laughter in my life for a very long time.”

“I am so glad,” Moira whispered, and kissed him softly.

Niall drew her into his arms again and sighed contentedly. “Thank god I found you, Moira, because I love you more than my life. Never leave me.”

“I never will,” Moira murmured.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:25 am

The wedding was to be held two weeks later to give Moira's arm a chance to heal and to have a dress made. Niall had observed that the bridegroom only had to show up for the ceremony, nobody cared what he looked like. It was the bride and the dress that the guests came to see!

Moira had asked Glennie and Jean to suggest the colour of her wedding dress, and they had chosen light blue to match her eyes, with a gold sash around her waist. The design of the garment was very simple, a long-sleeved satin creation with a short train and a plain round neckline. It had no frills or fussy embroidery, and the only jewellery Moira wore was a heart-shaped gold locket which Glennie had given her.

Glennie presented the jewellery in a small velvet-covered box just after Jean—who had officially become part of the staff in Baltyre—had fastened the last button on the back of her dress. When she opened it, Moira beamed with pleasure.

“Oh, Glennie, this is lovely,” she said happily. “Thank you!”

“It is much less than you deserve,” Glennie replied. “You have made Niall so happy, and me too. I have always wanted a sister, Moira, and now I have you. In a few hours, you will officially be part of the family in the eyes of god and the law, and I am overjoyed at the prospect!”

Moira felt a surge of happiness inside as she looked around at the little gold heart, allowing Moira to fasten it around her neck.

“Perfect!” Glennie said, clapping her hands. “You look almost like a queen, Moira.”

“Almost?” Moira laughed.

“Ye need a crown, hen,” Jean told her, then she brought forward a little circle of bluebells, daisies and gold ribbons which she placed on Moira’s head, tying it at the back with a pretty bow. “Now ye’re a queen, Your Highness.”

Along with Glennie, she gave Moira a deep curtsy, and they all laughed. The two women stood back and looked Moira up and down.

“Do I look all right?” Moira asked nervously.

Glennie stepped forward and took her arm, then smiled at her fondly. “I wish I looked as beautiful as you do today,” she said. “Niall will love that dress, but you know that he adores everything about you anyway. In fact, he is so besotted that I think he might understand why I love Ritchie so much.”

Her voice became wistful.

“I will do my best to make him see your point of view, Glennie,” Moira promised. “After all, we sisters must look after each other!”

A moment later, they arrived at the castle chapel, then Glennie smiled and leaned over to kiss Moira’s cheek. Moira felt weak at the knees, and her heart was racing, but she took a deep breath to steady her nerves and stepped into the church for the last time as a single woman.

And there was Niall, standing waiting for her dressed in his clan finery, this big, handsome man of her dreams who was so fiercely in love with her that he had fought for her and risked his life for her. At that moment, Moira thought she was the most fortunate woman in the world to be joining her life with Niall’s for as long as they lived.

Niall watched his bride coming into the chapel, and his heart swelled with love and joy. Moira looked like the ethereal white witch, he had always imagined her to be, and at that moment, he felt only pure love and admiration. He was amazed that he had captured the heart of this wonderful woman and resolved to treasure it all his life.

When Moira reached him, Niall held out his hand, and she took it, then raised it to his lips for a soft kiss.

Moira had been enchanted to know that the minister, Reverend Iain Campbell had been newly called to his vocation, and it was the first time he had conducted a wedding ceremony.

Now he smiled at both of them and then addressed the congregation behind them.

“Does anyone have any objection to this marriage?” he asked.

It was a customary part of the wedding service, but because of the circumstances that had led to their marriage, both Niall and Moira were terrified. What if they had come so far only to be stopped at the last possible moment?

For a few seconds they looked at each other in tense silence, waiting for someone to speak up, but there was not a sound from the people behind them, and at last, the minister began the ceremony.

They began with the loving cup, which was a vessel with two handles filled with ale. They both drank from it, then it was time to say their vows.

Niall, obeying tradition, went first, and held Moira’s hands as he said, “Moira, I love you with all my heart, but I want to assure you that when you are my wife, my love will not be a cage for you. You will be free, but my love will be with you everywhere. Will you take me as your husband?”

Moira could hardly speak, but she managed to say, “I will, Niall. And I promise to be the best wife, and if we are blessed with children, the best mother that I can be, and be faithful only to you for the rest of our lives. Will you have me as your wife?”

“I will, Moira,” he replied, then he took her left hand and gently slid a slim gold ring onto her third finger. “My mother’s ring,” he whispered.

The smile they exchanged was one of pure joy, pure love, before the minister took a length of cloth and loosely tied their hands together. Then they each took one step backwards, tightening the knot and symbolising the strength of the love that bound them together.

After a final blessing, Moira and Niall turned to walk back down the aisle hand in hand, both of them smiling and radiant.

“I can hardly believe this,” Niall said as he looked down at Moira. “My lovely white witch who cast a spell on me as soon as we met is now my wife, my Lady McPhee.”

Moira giggled. “You talk such nonsense,” she said fondly.

Niall put his arm around Moira’s waist and pulled her close to him. “I cannot wait to be alone with you,” he told her, his eyes full of wanton desire.

“It won’t be long now,” Moira assured him, her whole being throbbing with need.

They went into the Great Hall to a chorus of cheers and took their seats at the head of the table, with Moira seated at Niall’s right hand. The meal was served, then the dancing began, and the bridal couple were the first to take to the floor, joined shortly thereafter by the other guests.

They all took part in the lively strathspeys, reels and quadrilles that made Scottish

dancing so enjoyable, but halfway through an Eightsome Reel Niall saw Ritchie and Glennie dancing together, looking lovingly into each other's eyes.

He frowned deeply, and asked, his voice loaded with anger, "Who invited him?"

"I did." Moira laughed. "You know, you look terrifying when you do that with your face."

Niall turned to her and shook his head, smiling. "Wait till I get you alone, woman," he said in a mock-threatening tone.

"I can't wait!" Moira answered, laughing.

She thought she had managed to divert Niall's attention away from Glennie and Ritchie, but when the dance ended, Moira could see that he was about to go and pick a fight with them.

She caught his arm and turned him to face her, then stood on tiptoe to plant a soft kiss on Niall's lips.

"Let them be, My Laird," she said gently. "Ritchie is a common man, and I am a common woman, yet you made me your wife. They love each other very much, so give them a chance to be happy."

A slow smile spread across Niall's face. "You have been covering for them all along, haven't you?" he asked.

"Yes," Moira replied simply. "And I would do it again."

"I am so glad you're mine," he said, sighing in satisfaction. "But we can discuss all that later." Then he looked around the hall. "Can we slip away?" he asked. "Because I

can't wait for us to be alone."

Moira saw the gleam in his eyes and her senses began to sing. "Do you know a sneaky way out?" she asked wickedly.

Niall chuckled. "This place is riddled with secret passages," he replied, "but I don't think we need one today."

He looked around to see if anyone was watching them, but now that the excitement of the wedding was over, most of the guests were busy chatting and drinking, and no one paid them any attention as they left.

Outside, Niall swept Moira off her feet so suddenly that she squealed in fright, then marched across to the big staircase in the centre of the atrium and began to sprint upstairs as though Moira were weightless in his arms.

She loved the feeling of being jogged up and down in his confident grip, and had no fear at all that he would drop her. When they reached his chamber, they found the door ajar, and it was only when they stepped inside that they realised why.

Niall carried her across the threshold into the room where their married life would truly begin. He set her down on the floor, and she looked around in delight.

This was not the plain and functional room it had been before, since it had been festooned with flowers in crystal and silver vases, and the air was filled with their fresh perfume.

"Glennie has been here," Moira said, laughing softly.

However, now nothing was important but Niall, who was gazing at her with a fierce passion in his eyes.

“At last,” he said huskily, closing the distance between them and wrapping his arms around Moira. “I’ve been longing for this, Lady McPhee.” Then his lips descended on hers, and he kissed her as if his life depended on it.

Moira clung to him, and all the love she had stored inside her poured out of her as her body melted into his. Suddenly, it seemed to her that all the trials and tribulations she had undergone in the last few months were worth it, for she would endure them all again if she had known they would lead to this moment.

When they drew apart, he smiled at her, a smile of such tenderness that it brought tears to her eyes. “Now, My Lady McPhee,” he said with a businesslike air. “We have not yet consummated our marriage. Should we take care of that now?” His eyes were twinkling, both with mischief and love.

Moira giggled. “You make it sound like such a hardship. Oh, well, let’s get it over with.” She looped her arms around Niall’s neck and pulled him down for another kiss.

He turned her around to undo the back of her dress, cursing at the complicated fastenings. When he had finished, the dress fell to the floor, but Moira was still clad in her chemise. After unlacing all the ties on the dress, Niall was not inclined to fuss with any more of them. He simply took the neck of the flimsy garment in both hands and tugged, rending it down the middle. He pulled it from her shoulders, then disposed of her drawers and stockings and looked at his handiwork with satisfaction.

“Beautiful,” he breathed, almost devouring her with his eyes.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he felt his kilt dropping to the floor, and in less than a minute, he was standing naked before Moira. She dropped her hand to his erection and began to pump him gently, and Niall closed his eyes and let out a long breath of pleasure.

He gently backed Moira towards the bed, and she fell backwards onto the soft mattress, then he knelt in front of her, positioning himself between her thighs. He took her legs and draped them over his shoulders, then bent down to sweep his tongue once, twice, three times through her folds, before he turned his attention to the little nub at her core. He teased it with his tongue tip, then scraped it gently with his teeth, sending bolts of sheer pleasure from Moira's core all the way through her body. It was torture of the sweetest kind, and she loved it.

She arched her hips up and Niall eased backwards to look into her eyes, smiling wickedly. He stood up and Moira took the opportunity to suck him into her mouth and tease him with her teeth and tongue.

Niall was in heaven as he plunged his hands into the golden mass of Moira's hair and groaned in sheer bliss. He had been with women before, but none of them had ever made him feel like this. The difference was that he had never been in love before, and now he was, wildly and passionately so.

"I want to be inside you," he said huskily as he leaned down to kiss her. He shifted Moira into a better position on the bed then lay beside her. After another heated kiss, he said, "No more sweet words, Moira. No more talking."

He rolled onto her and thrust into her so forcefully that they both cried out, then they began to take each other to a piece of heaven where no one else existed but the two of them.

Niall felt Moira's flesh wrapping around him in a warm embrace that tightened with every stroke he made, and he climbed towards his orgasm with what seemed like lightning speed. He tried to hold back because he dreaded the moment when he would have to break their connection and become two separate people again. Currently, when they were one, he felt a love for Moira that was almost painful in its intensity. It drove him on, faster and harder, until he erupted inside her.

With Niall's first plunge inside her, Moira realised that this encounter was going to be far different to anything she had experienced with him before. There was a determined passion about him that was fiercer than he had ever shown her thus far, and it made her own need for him even stronger. Her whole body was tingling and throbbing with delight, from her lips to her breasts to that special place to which Niall was giving so much pleasure.

Moira clung to him tightly for purchase, feeling that she might fly away if she let go of him, then she felt herself rising, climbing to that peak that seemed inaccessible. Yet, the more she strove to reach it, the fiercer the pleasure became until at last she exploded into rapture, she felt Niall's hard body stiffen against her, then heard him crying out her name as his climax hit him.

They held on to each other as they descended back to earth, and lay silent in the afterglow, all their passion sated. Now there was nothing but an aura of love and peace that settled over them like a warm, soft blanket.

"Now you really are Lady McPhee," Niall told her, with a soft smile on his face.

"Yes, and yours forever," Moira whispered lovingly, before kissing him again.

Thank you for reading my story!

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:25 am

Niall had given Moira a horse as a wedding present, a strawberry roan mare called Pinky, and it was love at first sight for both of them. Moira would always appear in the morning with an apple, and Pinky would finish it, then search her pockets for more. She would always find another one. It was a game they played every day, and they loved it, and each other.

However, Niall was busy with the estate to the extent that Moira was beginning to feel a little neglected. When he was with her, he tended to be a little possessive, but rather than finding this a negative quality, as she had with her previous husband, there was a gentleness there that made her feel safe and loved.

PROLOGUE

Kelpie was the smallest pony in the stable; indeed, she was the smallest pony anyone had ever seen! Her name was fitting, because the water spirit after which she was named took the form of a mischievous and clever horse who appeared in the night to spirit people away to their deaths. Kelpie was not a killer, however, but she had a sense of impishness—some would say a sense of humour, if a horse could be said to possess one. She was pale grey, in common with the kelpie, and could swim almost as well as a seal.

Young Grace Richards adored her, having watched her growing from a spindly little foal to the round, robust little creature she was now. The feeling was entirely mutual, since Grace was the sole provider of Kelpie's favourite food; apples.

Grace's mother, Lily, had been nurturing the filly and preparing her for the day when her daughter was old enough for her first riding lesson.

It was the eighth of August, Grace's ninth birthday, when Lily presented her daughter with a short jacket nipped in at the waist, a long voluminous skirt and a pair of stout leather boots. The whole outfit was navy blue and looked a bit like a maid's uniform.

"Mother, I am sorry to sound nasty," she said, frowning, "but this is not a very pretty outfit." Her big, bright blue eyes looked up into her mother's anxiously. She did not want to hurt the person who meant the most to her in all the world.

However, Lily only smiled. "My darling, it is not meant to be pretty, but practical," she told her daughter fondly. "It is a riding habit, like mine, only smaller. Today you

are going to begin to learn to ride, unless of course you don't want to." These last words were spoken with an expression of mock anxiety, for Lily knew that Grace wanted riding lessons more than anything else in the world.

Grace's eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect "O" of astonishment then she gave a squeal of delight and rushed to hug her mother, who laughed happily at her daughter's reaction.

"Now, are you sure you really want to learn?" Lily asked, her voice full of mischief.

"Mama! You know I do!" Grace burst into a fit of giggles, then her mother helped her to don the outfit and they looked in the mirror. Grace scowled deeply, then pinned a smile on her face. Even at the tender age of nine she was learning the meaning of tact!

Kelpie was munching hay from her manger when Grace and Lily walked into her stall but looked up when she heard them entering and whickered softly in greeting. She rubbed her nose against Grace's golden hair, ruffling it so much that it began to become a tangled mess. Grace giggled but held up an apple, which was snatched out of her hand in a flash. As Kelpie crunched, Lily tutted in disapproval.

"You cannot have hair flying all over the place when you are riding," she said irritably. She then proceeded to plait it tightly until it formed a long tail down her daughter's back. Then, for want of a ribbon, she tied the end of it in a knot.

"Now," Lily said as she led Kelpie out of her stall, "I want you, Grace, to do everything I tell you to do as soon as I say the words. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama," Grace replied, sighing. She hated it when her mother treated her like a toddler since she considered herself almost grown up.

“Good,” Lily smiled and they walked out into the paddock behind their house. The stable lad had already put a small side saddle on Kelpie’s back, but Grace growled when she saw it.

“Can I not have a proper saddle?” she asked mulishly.

“This is a proper saddle,” her mother answered. “It is the kind ladies use.”

“Then I don’t want to be a lady!” Grace protested, her bright blue eyes clouded with anger. “Look at it. It’s silly!”

Lily shrugged. “Fine,” she said nonchalantly. “Then you will not be learning to ride. Take off that habit and I will give it to a little girl who deserves it more. I am sure it will make a nice Sunday dress for one of the servants’ daughters.”

For a moment longer, Grace stood, immobile and frustrated. Eventually, as her mother began to walk away, she grumbled, “Fine! I will try to use the saddle.”

Lily smiled to herself before she turned back to face her daughter. “Good,” she said briskly. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

She attached a long rope to the little mare’s bridle, then made a cradle of her hands so that Grace could put her foot in it and mount the pony quite easily. Since Lily had already trained the pony to walk in a circle at the end of a lunge rope, she stood in the middle of the paddock and encouraged her to walk around in a circle. In this way, Grace could become accustomed to the movement of the animal and gradually gain confidence.

After half an hour or so, Grace dismounted, looking very pleased with herself. Mother and daughter smiled at each other. “You did very well, Grace,” Lily said, smiling. “How do you feel?”

“Very happy,” Grace replied, then she asked, “Do you think I could go a bit faster tomorrow, Mama?”

“I think we should take things slowly,” her mother answered. “I know that you often see me riding very fast, but you must remember that I have been riding for years and years. I was a little girl once, just like you are, and I also had to begin by being led at the end of a lunge rope. You must be patient, although I know it is very hard. It was hard for me too.”

Grace sighed. “I want to be as good as you are, Mama, so I will do as you say,” she promised.

“Good girl.” Lily smiled and patted her shoulder. “Someday you will be even better than I am.”

The lessons went on for a few weeks more, and after a while Lily let Kelpie off the lunge rein and allowed Grace to ride at a walk, then a little while later, to trot. This was greatly frustrating for her, since all she wanted to do was urge Kelpie into a gallop and then fly her over hedges and streams as she had seen other, more experienced riders do.

“You are in too much of a hurry, Grace,” her mother said reproachfully. “It took me months to learn properly, and the same thing applies to any skill you wish to master. You must persevere, do your best, and know that mistakes will happen from time to time. In fact, we cannot learn without them, so if you have an accident, or you make a bad judgement, resolve not to do the same thing again but go on trying. Eventually, you will succeed. It takes a long time, as I have told you a dozen times before, but believe me, it will be worth it in the end.”

Grace listened dutifully and nodded, but she resented the time and effort it was taking to master the skill, and she hated the horrible side saddle and riding habit with a

passion. In fact, she was secretly scheming to steal a normal saddle and ride away without her mother's knowledge as soon as she was able. The fact that she would have to have such a saddle specially made for a small Shetland pony had not occurred to her.

However, Grace was not gifted with patience; in fact, it was her biggest fault, and as she watched her mother riding her own mount, a huge mare called Ada, she became green with envy. Lily made it look so easy! In fact, when Lily and Ada were together, she and the big horse looked as if they were one being. This annoyed Grace immensely since she had only just mastered the skill of staying mounted while Kelpie was trotting.

One morning, her mother was late for their lesson, and Grace mounted Kelpie, intending to wait for her. However, after she had been sitting for a few moments and Lily still had not made an appearance, she had an idea. The paddock was large, since they kept about twenty horses for recreation, transport and other work, and there was plenty of room for Grace to try something new.

She hesitated for only a moment then took a deep breath and dug her heels into Kelpie's sides. The little pony, startled, leaped forward, almost leaving Grace behind as the force of inertia drove her backward.

Grace had never been so terrified in her life. She clung onto the saddle pommel as Kelpie careered around the paddock, gritting her teeth and trying to stay upright with her eyes screwed tight shut. She was about to give up the fight and let herself fall onto the grass when Kelpie suddenly lurched to a halt. Grace opened her eyes and found herself looking into her mother's deep grey ones, which were full of a mixture of fear and relief.

Lily helped Grace out of the saddle and pulled her into her arms, then held her tightly while she wept. Grace knew she had done wrong, and she also knew that her mother

would not stand for disobedience. She was never cruel, but she was always firm, and Grace knew that the punishment would fit the crime.

“I thought you were going to fall,” Lily breathed. “You could have done yourself some serious damage, my little witch.”

“Sorry, Mama,” Grace said, sniffing and wiping her eyes. She stood still, her eyes downcast, waiting for her punishment.

Lily tilted her daughter’s chin up so that she was once more looking straight at her. “I told you once that we learn by our mistakes, do you remember?”

Grace nodded.

“Good. Well, Grace, this is your first mistake,” her mother said solemnly. “What have you found out?”

Grace thought for a moment then said, “Not to be impatient and try to do things I have not learned yet.”

“Right,” Lily agreed. “And will you make that mistake again?”

Grace shook her head.

“Good. That was your first, my darling.” Lily’s tone was indulgent as she stroked her daughter’s hair. “You will no doubt make many more, but never stop trying. No matter how many times you fail, persevere, because with perseverance and determination you can do anything.”

“Anything, Mama?” Grace asked incredulously.

Lily nodded and smiled. “Anything, and don’t forget I said so.”

“Are you not going to punish me?” Grace asked fearfully.

Lily looked down at her daughter’s wide blue eyes, then ruffled her hair and bent down to kiss her.

“Do you not think you have punished yourself?” she asked. “Punishment is given to teach a lesson. You have definitely learned yours!”

Grace would never forget that day; the day that started her on the journey to being the best horsewoman anyone had ever seen.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:25 am

Ten years later, Grace had long outgrown Kelpie, who was quite an old lady by that time. She still gave rides to the children who came to visit the staff sometimes, but her first loyalty was to Grace, as it had always been, particularly during the apple season. Grace would never part with her, since she was one of the many memories of her mother that she kept close to her heart.

She tried to think of the happy times she had enjoyed with her mother, and not the torturous last days of her life after her stillborn baby had been delivered, when she had caught childbed fever and died a slow and agonising death.

It had taken years for Grace to even begin to recover from that trauma, and sometimes she feared that she never would. She dreamt about her mother often and sometimes Grace felt that she was watching over her daughter as though she was still alive.

Her death, as that of her stillborn son, did not seem to have affected her father very much. He gave her a lavish funeral, wore black and mourned for the appropriate amount of time, then he moved on with his life as if nothing had happened. He had never thought of his daughter as anything more than an inconvenience, but Grace had become used to that.

Henry Richard was, in fact, the Fifth Viscount of Holmwood, but Lily Richards had never allowed anyone to call her Viscountess or even Lady Richards.

Now that Grace was Lady Richards she felt the same about the pretentious title. The staff called her “Mistress” as a form of address that they would use to any woman of a higher station than themselves, but that was the extent of Grace’s tolerance.

They lived in the hereditary home of the Richards family at Holmwood Manor on an estate that her mother had dismissively described as being “half the size of England”. The tenants had always adored her because of her lack of air and graces and had been devastated when she died. Grace had tried to take her place in some small way, but she knew that her mother was simply irreplaceable.

As she rode through towards the entrance to the manor house, Grace saw a horse approaching at a slow canter. She intercepted the rider and gave him a friendly smile. “I am Grace Richards, Sir,” she said politely. “May I help you?”

The stranger hesitated for a moment. He was a strange-looking fellow, Grace thought as she looked him up and down. He was quite old, perhaps in his early to mid-sixties, with a thick mane of wavy, snow-white hair and a beard to match. As well as that, he was wearing the strangest garment she had ever seen on a man.

It looked like a skirt that reached his knees and was made of a long piece of fabric patterned with checks and stripes of green and blue, one end of which went over his right shoulder. A scruffy leather jacket over a white shirt and boots with the hilt of a long knife sticking out of one of them completed his odd outfit.

The eyes that were staring back at Grace did not have the dull hue of old age, however; they were the piercing bright green of spring leaves.

“Aye, hen,” he answered. “You can tell Lord Holmwood that Fergusson McAulay wants to see him.”

As soon as he opened his mouth, Grace realised who the man was. Although he had spoken mostly clear, intelligible English, the rough Scottish burr gave him away at once.

“We have been expecting you, Laird McAulay,” she told him, valiantly keeping up her smile, “but you are a little early.”

The man frowned deeply, his shaggy brows shadowing his eyes. “Would you like me to come back tomorrow?” He looked so fierce that Grace felt a little intimidated.

“No, no,” she hastened to reassure him. “You are most welcome here, Laird McAulay. Please follow me.”

They rode into the stables, where one of the grooms took the man’s horse, a big piebald stallion, and began to lead him away.

“Mind you treat that horse well,” McAulay warned. “Or there will be trouble. His name is Tam.”

The young man’s eyes widened in surprise but he nodded in acknowledgment as he took the horse to the stables.

“The stable staff are very competent, Laird McAulay,” Grace told him, unable to keep a note of anger out of her voice.

“I’m sure they are, Milady,” he acknowledged. “But that horse is very precious to me, and I always look after what is mine. And my title is ‘M’Laird’.”

“Why is that?” she asked, puzzled. “I thought the Lairdship passed directly from father to son.”

“I would have told you eventually,” the old man said irritably, “but since you are so impatient, Milady, here is why. My nephew’s wife and son died a few years ago, and for a while, he was very distraught and unable to cope. Therefore, when his father was on his deathbed he entrusted the Lairdship to me until such time as Logan remarries. He must find a good, steady woman to stand by him. Now, does that satisfy your curiosity?”

“Yes, M’Laird,” Grace said tersely, gritting her teeth to stop an angry outburst from

escaping her lips. Then, to her relief, she saw one of her favourite manservants, a young, dignified man, John, and called him over.

“Please take Mr McAulay to my father’s study, John,” she requested, then turned back to the old man whom she was beginning to dislike intensely. “Excuse me. I must tidy myself up a little.”

“Of course, Mistress,” the young man answered with a little bow. “Come with me, Sir.”

“M’Laird,” he said gruffly. “You can call me M’Laird.” Then McAulay gave Grace a curt nod and allowed himself to be led away.

Grace stood looking at his back until he was out of sight as if she could mentally throw daggers at him. She had been expecting someone old and a little different from what she was used to, but she had been hoping for a modicum of civility and politeness. She had received neither.

She took the stairs to her bedchamber two at a time in a very unladylike fashion and burst into the room, startling her maid, Catherine, who was folding and putting away some of Grace’s clothes.

“Mistress, you scared me half to death!” she protested, putting her hand to her chest in fright.

“I am sorry, Cathy.” Grace was flustered as she looked at her maid, “but I have to look my best—very quickly indeed!”

Just then there was a sharp rap at the door, and a woman entered without being invited in. Grace’s Aunt Diana was a force to be reckoned with, and she looked the part.

She was a widow in her late forties with wavy iron-grey hair that she kept scraped back in a tight bun. A beautiful woman with strong features, she had the kind of deep brown eyes that made you feel as though she could bore into your mind and read your thoughts. She was also four inches taller than most women and had a kind of forceful presence that was almost masculine in its essence.

Only those very close to her knew that Diana Richards had a heart of gold, and was capable of the kind of love that only a mother can feel for her child, which was remarkable since she had no children of her own.

They had a symbiotic relationship; Grace needed a mother and Diana needed a child. Indeed, since Grace's mother had died when she was ten, Diana Harding had filled a great void in Grace's life. She could never take Lily Richards's place, of course, but she provided her with much more affection and concern than her father did.

Now she sat down and looked at her niece with her usual penetrating stare for a moment before saying, "You know how important this meeting is?"

Grace sighed. "Indeed I do, Auntie," she replied, turning her back on Diana and casting her gaze heavenwards, reflecting that this must be the hundredth time she had heard the same speech.

"You know how long your father has been trying to secure this alliance?" Diana persisted. "Almost as long as you have been alive. I was supposed to marry Fergus McAulay, but that fell through when your Uncle George came along, thank God!" She gave a heartfelt sigh. "Now it is your turn to?"

Grace held up a hand. "I know, Auntie. I know because you told me last time and the time before that and the time before that." She twirled around in front of the mirror to inspect the plain brown dress she was wearing and pronounced herself satisfied.

"Wouldn't you like me to do something different with your hair, Mistress?" Cathy

asked, frowning.

“He has seen me with a plait,” Grace replied, shrugging. “I am not putting on a show for him. He will have to take me or leave me just as I am.” Then she turned and walked out.

Grace was taking slow deep breaths as she descended the stairs, trying to control the rapid thumping of her heart. Although she had known that she would be married in a short time, the reality had never really sunk in before. Now she was faced with it, she found that she was mentally unprepared, and it was terrifying.

She had never seen her prospective husband and knew nothing about his character. He might be a beast, or a bore, or a selfish swine for all she knew.

And what if he was physically repulsive? Grace knew that looks were the very last thing that mattered in a relationship, but she could still not bear the thought of marrying someone old or ugly. But then there was the other possibility; a very handsome man could be unbearably vain and self-centred. It seemed that there were hazards whichever way she looked.

However, as she saw the door to her father’s study looming up before her, she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and thrust out her chest. She might be scared, but she was damned if she was going to show it!

When Grace entered the room, she was surprised to see Fergus McAulay jump to his feet in the classic sign of respect to a woman entering the room. Her father had described him as uncouth, but apparently, he was not wholly so. She smiled and inclined her head at him, and as she sat down, he did likewise, returning her smile. Fergus was quite clearly a gentleman, despite his rough exterior.

“Did you enjoy your refreshment, M’Laird?” Grace asked politely. Grace had supplied him with a few biscuits and fruit after she had heard his stomach rumbling.

“We are having lunch soon, but you looked as though you were about to faint with hunger.”

“Indeed I did, Mistress,” the man replied, then his green eyes twinkled as he said, “Mind you, the ale left a wee bit to be desired, but I dare say I will get used to it. We have some excellent brewsters in Scotland who can teach you a thing or two. Now, Lord Richards—to business. I need to ask Grace a few questions about the union between my nephew and her.”

The corners of Grace’s mouth turned up as she looked at the Scotsman. She was both surprised and pleased at his good manners and the fact that his barbed but humorous comments about the ale had quite clearly upset her father. It had long been known that her father’s preferred brewers were those that made a substandard product, and he used them because it was cheap. Given a choice, Henry Richards always preferred to sacrifice quality for economy.

Fergus’s bright green eyes turned to Grace and she was mesmerised by their piercing quality.

“Now, are you consenting to this marriage without reservation?” he asked. “Because I do not want my nephew to be unhappy. He lost his wife and child in a battle a few years ago, and I do not wish him to suffer anymore. I know that this will be a big responsibility for you, but all I ask is that you are kind to him.”

He looked at Henry Richards, who was glaring at him over the rim of his wine glass, and warned, “The agreement has not yet been signed, so I would like any doubts to be aired now.”

“What kind of doubts?” Henry Richards snapped irritably. “Let me hear yours first.”

“I would like to know that if we are trading in wine,” the other man said, “you will not be sending me any of this vintage.”

“Why not?” Richards demanded. “It is a perfectly good wine.”

“That is a matter of opinion.” Fergus replied, grimacing. “It is very tannic.”

Henry Richards was startled. He had always thought Scotsmen too uncouth to know about such things.

Grace stifled a giggle, but both men heard it anyway. Her father glared at her, but Fergus gave her a mischievous smirk.

“But seriously,” Fergus went on, “I would like to know if you, Milady, are going into this marriage willingly.”

“I would like to know a bit more about Logan,” she answered. “Is he still in mourning for his wife and son?”

“Not officially,” the Scotsman answered. “But even though they died five years ago, he still misses them. There are times when I catch him sitting looking into space with tears running down his cheeks even now. He needs to be treated with a bit of consideration—not that he is a sissy mind you!” Fergus’s voice became a growl and he gave her a warning glance.

“He has a strong will and is well-respected by all his men, but he is in need of a wife who will stand by his side and be loyal above all things; a strong woman. But we must be realistic. You may never fall in love, but my hope is that you can be reasonably happy. If he ever does anything that makes you unhappy, you tell me!” He thumbed his chest, and his bright green eyes darkened with anger. “I have no patience with men who ill-treat women. I promise you will have nothing to worry about on that score. He is a gentleman and a man of honour. I sometimes wish he was my son.”

“I want to know that he will treat me well and that I will feel able to treat him well in return,” Grace said hopefully. “I am going to another country with different people

who have different customs, and I will have no friends. Will he look after me?"

"Better than anybody here, hen!" Fergus answered. He cast a disparaging look at Grace's father, who scowled back, then regarded her, his eyes twinkling. "You will know that when you see him. Scotsmen value their wives and daughters. He will fight for you, and if you ever wondered what a real man looks like, you will not have to wait much longer to find out." His voice rang with pride. "He is very protective of those whom it is his duty to protect, and as his wife, you will be first among those.

You might find him a little rough for your taste at first, but as you get to know him, you will find that the tough shell hides a heart of gold." Then his face became dark and sombre. "He is like a son to me, so do not break his heart." His voice carried a note of warning, but Grace was not afraid. In spite of his crusty exterior, she was beginning to like the Scotsman. She looked across at her father, whose expression was thunderous; evidently, he did not share her feelings

Grace smiled at the description and immediately thought of her mother. "He sounds like a good man," she remarked. I wish you could meet him, Mama, she thought, as a stab of sadness pierced her heart. "Do you have a good stable?" she asked.

Before Fergus had a chance to answer, Grace's father spoke up again, this time addressing his question to Fergus. "You do want your nephew to marry, do you not?" he asked.

"Of course I do!" The other man replied. "Would I be here if I didn't? Are all Englishmen as dense as you?"

Henry Richards's face turned almost crimson. "Then perhaps you should try being a little more civil!" He turned to Grace. "This is a marriage of convenience only. What either of you feels is unimportant. We want a functioning business partnership and heirs, and if my daughter and your nephew can provide them, well and good. Their happiness comes second." He turned to Grace. "Go and begin your preparations to

leave. There will be much to do.”

Grace suppressed the urge to yell at her father in rage. She meant nothing to him; she was merely a commodity to trade, just like the wine and brandy he bought from the French.

She stood up and curtsied to the Laird, who bowed to her. “It was good to meet you, Mistress,” he said, then he gave her a look that said, Do not worry , and she was reassured. She smiled at him briefly, then turned and left.