



# Highlander's Secret Heiress (A Highland Ruse of Love #6)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "Tell me the truth, before I take it from yer lips myself."

When Alyth MacAdams sneaks into the fortress of her clan's sworn enemy, she expects to find a monster—not a broken warrior whose only warmth is reserved for his young daughter.

Laird Lachlan has lost everything to war. His heart is cold, his blade sharp, and his trust nonexistent. He allows no threat near his people, especially not an alluring lady's maid with secrets in her eyes.

Yet, under the weight of suspicion and hatred, forbidden desire ignites. Can Alyth protect her heart, or will she risk the wrath of the enemy she should never have loved?

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# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

Alyth had just arrived back home, at Cairnloch Castle. She had become an expert in the art of moving noiselessly and staying invisible, since these two qualities were necessary for the accomplishment of her mission. At her twentieth year, her well-toned body was quite equal to the task of bending double to creep under low-hanging ledges and squeezing out of seemingly impossibly narrow gaps in the wall.

Wearing a coal-black cloak, she could hide in the shadows and achieve almost total invisibility before climbing like a spider down the outside of the curtain wall that surrounded the castle.

Earlier that night, she had bribed one of the junior stable hands to lead a horse into the open ground beyond the castle. From there Alyth could comfortably trot the two miles to Leithmuir, home of the Carrick Clan, with a few hours to spare before dawn.

Then she would scout around the edge of the massive building, counting the guards, watching their comings and goings and gathering information about them.

Now, though, she had scrambled over the wall to enter the courtyard, only to almost collide with the tall, stern figure of her father.

Laird Colin MacAdams was a fine-featured, handsome man with light-brown hair and deep grey eyes, which he had passed on to his daughter. Alyth's hair was darker, but she had inherited his good looks in a more feminine form, and it was quite obvious that they were father and daughter.

He was standing right in front of her with his arms crossed, staring at her fixedly. The first grey light of dawn was still very faint, but it was enough to show Alyth the deep frown on his face.

Laird MacAdams was a man who was slow to anger, so when she saw her father's expression, she knew that he was absolutely furious.

Alyth could think of nothing to say, so she looked away from his accusing eyes, studying the ground by her feet intently.

"Alyth, where have you been?" her father asked accusingly.

"I-I went for a walk," Alyth replied. "I had a bad dream and I thought it might be good to get out into the fresh air for a while." The excuse sounded lame, even to her own ears, but it was all Alyth could come up with in a hurry.

In truth, she had been sneaking out to go to enemy lands, during the darkest part of September nights and returning just before dawn for weeks now.

"In the wee hours of the morning?" The Laird's voice was incredulous. "Alyth, anything could have happened to you. You could have been kidnapped, or murdered! What is wrong with you?"

Alyth had no answer; she could not tell her father the truth, or he would be even more furious than he already was. After the death of her mother, he had become so protective that Alyth often felt smothered, and although she understood why, it did not make her feel better.

It was indeed a risky venture to trespass in the Carrick Clan, and it required subterfuge and planning, but it was the kind of activity that lent itself perfectly to her agile mind. Alyth was nothing if not determined; somehow she would bring down

those who had taken her greatest treasure from her.

She stepped forward and hugged her father. "I'm sorry, Da," she said, sighing. "Sometimes I feel so trapped in here."

The Laird kissed the top of her head. "I know, darling," he said gently. "But your safety is my greatest concern. I lost your mother, and I loved her more than life itself. I cannot lose you too."

His face was anguished, and Alyth felt a powerful guilt well up in her. The last thing she ever wanted to do was cause him more pain.

The reason for her subterfuge was the bitter hatred between the Carricks and the allied MacAdams and Roberson Clans. In the course of the battle between them, Lady MacAdams, Alyth's mother, had been murdered, and as part of their victory loot, the Carricks had stolen the only thing that Alyth had of her; a piece of jewellery that was so precious to her, she thought that she might go mad if she did not find it.

She remembered the pendant, a twin to the silver one she had always around her neck, as clearly as if she were holding it herself. It was gold, oval in shape, and contained a picture of her mother and Alyth inside. She had to retrieve it to remind her of the beloved woman who was no longer with her.

She burned with loathing for the Carricks. By hook or by crook, she was determined to get the pendant back, and that meant that she needed to find a way into Leithmuir Castle.

Alyth had not yet managed to make her way inside, but she hoped that she would soon be able to infiltrate it in the guise of a maid or some kind of other servant. She had to.

She hugged her father even more tightly and said, “Da, you have trained me to look after myself. Even the Captain of the Guard has told you how well I can handle myself.” She looked up at him and tried to lighten the mood a little. “He said he would accept me into the garrison if you’d let him.”

“I doubt he was serious,” the Laird replied with a faint smile. “But you are fairly capable for a woman, although, of course, you don’t have a man’s strength.” He stood before her, his hands gripping her upper arms. “Please, please don’t do anything foolish.”

Alyth felt wretched. Her gaze dropped to the floor again and she nodded slowly.

“There is something I have to tell you,” the Laird said softly. “I was going to wait till a little later, but now is as good a time as any. Come to my study.”

He linked arms with Alyth, and they made their way to the comfortable room where he worked, running the estate and caring for the welfare of those in the castle. Alyth had always loved this room, with its warm mahogany furniture, thick-piled carpet and the rows of books on their shelves. It smelled of leather, paper, woodsmoke and candles, all of which reminded her of her father, and combined to give her a feeling of comfort and safety.

She sat down on the couch in front of the blazing fire and held her hands out to warm them, realising for the first time that she was freezing.

The Laird ordered some warm mulled ale for both of them and walked over to look out of the window while he was waiting for it to arrive. He seemed edgy and nervous, and when the ale arrived it took him a long moment to turn away from the window.

Alyth had a dreadful premonition that something awful was going to happen as the Laird sat down beside her and took her hand before looking into her eyes earnestly.

“Alyth,” he began gently, “I have found a husband for you. You are to be married to Laird James Robertson.”

Alyth stared at him in shock for a moment, then she jumped to her feet and cried, “No! No, Da. I will not marry him. He is twice my age at least, and I find him repulsive. No!”

She stood glaring down at her father, her fists clenched by her side as her whole being boiled with rage.

“Calm down, Alyth,” her father pleaded as he gently drew her down beside him again. “The contract has already been signed, and your dowry has been paid. Now listen to me. Laird Robertson is the head of a strong clan. He is wealthy and has a large garrison, so he should be able to protect you from any harm.”

“I told you I can look after myself,” Alyth said stubbornly.

The Laird put his face in his hands and sighed. He had known this would be his daughter’s reaction. She was nothing if not headstrong, and had a will of iron. Once she set her mind to something, she was immovable.

“I know you can,” her father conceded, “but not in every situation, Alyth. With all due respect, no matter how well you can fight, you are still a woman, and you have a duty to your clan.” He stood up. “Now, you must prepare yourself because Laird Robertson will be here tomorrow morning to meet you, and I expect you to be smartly dressed and respectful to him. He may not be your idea of a perfect husband, but rest assured that if I thought he would harm you in any way, I would not let him near you.”

Alyth nodded slowly. “I know, Da,” she replied. “I know you only have my best interests at heart, so I will do as you say.”

The Laird hugged her and gave Alyth a kiss on her forehead, then left, pleased that his daughter saw sense for once.

But Alyth did not move. She only stood for a moment looking into the fire, her mind already working. She had anticipated that her father would do this, although not with someone like Laird Robertson.

She already had a plan ready. All she had to do now was put it into action.

Alyth told her maid to lay out one of her more attractive day dresses, then went to bed as usual, since she did not want her routine to be any different from the normal one. There must be no shadow of suspicion at all.

After the maid left, Alyth packed a few of her oldest clothes in a small, well-worn bag that one of the maids had given her in exchange for a cheap necklace that Alyth no longer wanted.

In the soft light of dawn, she went to fetch her horse, varying her routine only slightly by arriving a little later. That way, she hoped, the Laird would have dismissed the guard who would, no doubt, be watching and waiting for her.

At last, she was outside the castle and on her way. Her heart ached, however, as she thought of her father's anxiety. She had left him a note explaining why she was going away without telling him, and told him not to worry, even though she knew it would be natural for him to do so. However, this was farewell.

Then she shook her mind free of him, and thought of what she was going to do next. She had heard that the young Laird Carrick was a greater deal kinder than his father and would take pity on someone in a state of poverty and despair. So, she intended to let herself be hired as a maid.

Alyth had hidden a little money in the seams of her clothing, but she knew it would not last long. Hopefully, it would not take her long to recover the treasure she sought. It was all Alyth had left of her, and she was determined to find it.

Thereafter, she had a vague idea of taking a ship to somewhere far away where Laird Robertson had no way of finding her, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

Her heart ached for her father, but Alyth had been locked in for way too many years. Freedom was calling to her, and she would not waste any chance.

Daylight was breaking when the mighty bulk of Leithmuir Castle appeared in front of her, silhouetted against the lightening sky. It was a formidable structure, and for a moment Alyth hesitated, completely intimidated. She dismounted and set her horse free. She could not turn back now.

She began to walk towards the castle, stopping on the way to smear her face with mud from a puddle, then tear the hem of her dress and dirty it. Now she looked the part of a poor, desolate soul with nowhere to go. She hoped she had done enough, but all she could do now was act the part and hope for the best.



## Page 2

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Alyth stumbled up the hill towards the castle, half-bent over as if she were in pain. Presently, she heard a loud shout from one of the guards at the huge gate. “Hey ye!” he cried. “What dae ye want?”

Alyth looked up at him. She had always been a good actress, and now she summoned up a flood of tears that ran in streaks down her filthy cheeks as she sobbed painfully. She stumbled as far as a few feet from the mighty gate and looked up at the man who had cried out.

“Could you give me something to eat and drink, sir?” she asked pitifully. “I am so hungry. I’ll be on my way after that, I promise.”

She watched as one of the others came to stand beside the first man, and after they had talked for a few moments, a gate, just big enough to admit one person, opened at the bottom of the big one.

“Come in, hen,” the first guard said. He was a burly man in his middle years who looked as though he could bring down a bull with his bare hands, but he had a kindly face with gentle blue eyes.

He put an arm around Alyth’s shoulders as he ushered her inside, then he took her to the guards’ room and sat her down on one of their hard wooden seats.

He ordered one of the other men to bring a blanket, then some food and warm ale, and kept a close eye on her as she ate. Alyth did not have to pretend to be hungry.

She was ravenous, and wolfed down the porridge, eggs, and sausages she had been given in short order without any regard for good manners. Now was not the time to be a lady—she needed to look as pathetic as possible.

“What happened tae ye, hen?” the guard asked. He looked concerned.

“I cannot remember exactly,” Alyth replied. “It all happened so fast. I was riding in a cart that was going to the market in Roscree. I was going to visit a friend who lives there. Then all of a sudden, these men came out of nowhere and ambushed us. There must have been about a dozen of them.”

“Were they on foot?” Suddenly, another guard was by their side. He was an older man with a bushy dark beard, and he too looked troubled as he gazed at her.

The first man said, “This is the Captain of the Guard, hen.”

Alyth nodded in acknowledgement. “Yes,” she replied. “Even though we had a horse there were just too many of them, and we could not get away. The farmer had a lot of meat in his cart, and that is quite valuable stuff, so they fell on it straight away. I don’t know what happened to the farmer, but I hope he survived. I just ran for my life.”

“How did ye get away?” the Captain of the Guard asked, frowning. The whole story sounded rather implausible to him.

“I am a lady’s maid,” Alyth answered. “But the man whose daughter I serve had me trained to use a knife in order to protect her. I always carry my knife with me.” She took a small dagger in a leather scabbard out of her pocket. “One ran after me, but I managed to kick him and get away.”

“My god!” the Captain breathed as he looked at the lethal weapon. He stared at Alyth

in admiration. “That’s courage, lass. Roscree, ye say?”

Alyth nodded. “Yes, but I lost my way. Where am I now?”

He looked at the other guard in shock. “Ye’re at Leithmuir Castle, home o’ Laird Carrick, an’ ye have come about seventeen miles, lass,” he explained. “How long have ye been walkin’?”

She thought for a moment. “Nearly three days,” she replied. “I had no idea where I was going, so I just walked and hoped I would find somewhere to rest.”

“Ye can rest here, hen.” The Captain stood up. “We can get a message tae your mistress an’ tell her ye are fine.”

Alyth pretended to panic. “No! Please, no!” she cried. “I never want to go back there. I only worked in their house because I had nowhere else to go, and I would have left sooner or later anyway. In a way, this is a blessing in disguise.” She stood up. “Thank you for your kindness. I will leave you now.”

“Where will ye go?” the Captain asked. He looked worried.

Alyth hung her head. “I have a little bit of money,” she replied. “I will find a job and somewhere to live somehow.”

A second later, she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see the Captain of the Guard smiling down at her. “Stay here for a wee while, hen,” he suggested. “I will see if I can find ye somewhere tae stay tonight. My name is Gavin Ballantyne. An’ yours?”

“Jeannie Dunbar,” Alyth replied.

She had rehearsed her story over and over again during the course of her journey until she had memorised every last detail, including the false name she had just given herself.

“Wait here,” he told her, patting her shoulder before walking into the castle.

Alyth hugged the blanket closer to herself and finished off the last of the ale, hoping that she could remember her story; one slip, and she would be finished. She shuddered; the thought of being dragged back home and marrying Laird Roberson made her feel nauseous.

The sun was fully risen now, and her maid would be opening the curtains in her bedroom. She would find Alyth’s note and carry it to her father, who would read it and be utterly devastated. No doubt, he would begin to search the countryside around the castle for her, but he would meet with no success.

Alyth almost wept at the thought of the distress she was causing him, but it was too late to turn back now. She doubted if her horse would still be anywhere near where she left it, since an animal of such quality would be a great asset on a farm or fetch a good price at the market.

Alyth looked around her. The sounds of the guards bantering with each other was so familiar that she felt like laughing and joining in, as she had done many times before. She loved the rough company of the men, the way they teased and laughed at each other, occasionally playfully punching and slapping each other. Now and again, an impromptu wrestling match would break out and the air would be filled with cheers of encouragement from the supporters of each side.

Alyth smiled as she listened and watched. She supposed that guards were the same in every castle. The smell of leather, horses, ale, and sweat was familiar too, as was the aroma of the food the men were eating. It all engendered a great feeling of

homesickness inside Alyth, and she wanted to leap up out of her chair and run back home.

For a moment, she panicked, then she heard a gentle woman's voice behind her.

"Good mornin', lovie."

Alyth turned to see a small woman with deep blue eyes and greying fair hair. Alyth guessed that she was in her fifties, but she was still pretty, and her gentle smile enhanced her beauty.

"I am Maisie Ballantyne," she said, smiling. "Gavin tells me ye are lost an' very tired."

Alyth nodded slowly. "I-I am," she replied. It was not a lie; she was exhausted.

"We can soon put that right, hen." Maisie's voice was firm and brisk. "Come wi' me. Ye need a wash an' sleep, I think, an' some clean clothes."

"Thank you, Mistress," Alyth said gratefully. "The robbers took everything I had, even my clothes. I was going to stay with a friend when I was ambushed."

"Aye," Maisie said thoughtfully. "Gavin told me about that. Are ye all right, hen?" There was a worried frown on her face.

"I wasn't hurt," Alyth answered. "Just very, very frightened."

"They didnae... touch ye at all?" Maisie raised her eyebrows in a question so that Alyth understood what she meant.

"I never gave them the chance," she replied, then shuddered. "But I don't want to talk

about it any more.”

“That’s fine, hen.” Maisie smiled. “We need tae get your dirty clothes off an’ wash ye.”

“Do-do you think the Laird would give me a job here?” Alyth asked tentatively. “I have heard he is a very kind man. I will do anything, no matter how lowly. I can work hard, and I don’t mind getting my hands dirty.”

Maisie led her into a small room. It was dim, but cosy, and had a fire, two armchairs, and a bed that was big enough for two.

“This room belongs tae me an’ my husband,” Maisie told her. “I am the housekeeper an’ he is the Captain o’ the Guard—ye have met him already. We have worked here for a long time, an’ the young Laird likes my Gavin, so he will help ye as much as he can. We both will. I can see ye are a good lass, an’ ye deserve it. Ye likely willnae get a ladies’ maid’s position again, but we will find ye somethin’.”

“What if you can’t?” Alyth asked anxiously.

“Dinnae worry, hen,” Maisie replied. “I will see that ye are no’ thrown out in the cold. I have friends in the village, but I would rather see tae it that ye stay here because I think that is what ye want, is it no’?”

Alyth sighed and nodded. “I feel safer here,” she answered. “Thank you for your kindness, Mistress.”

Maisie patted her hand. “Kindness costs nothin’ hen,” she answered. “Now I am goin’ tae get some hot water. Wait there.”

Alyth sat down on one of the chairs and looked into the fire for a while. She felt both

the warmth of the fire and Maisie's affectionate treatment, and for the moment all was well.

To her astonishment, Maisie came back almost at once with hot water and a change of clothes for her. The plain dress was a little too short, but it was better than what she was wearing. She allowed Alyth to wash and change her clothes while she went on another errand.

As she entered the room again, she smiled at Alyth. "Good news," she said happily. "Gavin spoke tae the Laird, an' he says he will give ye a job as a maid. Ye can start tomorrow."

As she was led up what seemed to be a thousand stairs, Alyth felt both excited and fearful in equal measure. She had had adventures before, but they had all been the mischievous kind, like climbing trees and making her maid search for her, thinking she was lost, but this one was positively dangerous.

Yet in a way, it felt good to be free of the social obligations that had kept the reckless part of her nature tied down for so long. Yes, there was fear, but there was also freedom. As well as that, there was the satisfaction of knowing that if she achieved nothing else, she would at least frustrate any heinous plans the Carricks had. She knew they would stop at nothing in their plans to dominate the other lands in the area.

Alyth's chamber was up in the attic, and it was so small that there was barely enough room for a bed. The roof was slanted so that she could not stand up properly, but at that moment it seemed like a palace to her. The narrow bed was not very comfortable, but Alyth slept surprisingly well on her first night, probably because she was absolutely exhausted.

In the morning, she went downstairs to meet Maisie again, carefully looking around her for pieces of furniture and pictures to remember so that she could find her way

back.

It occurred to her that now would be a good time to look around a little, and if Maisie queried her lateness she could claim that she had become lost in all the passages she had to navigate. However, she decided against the plan, reasoning that she would have plenty of time later while she was working. She had no wish to take unnecessary risks.

She made her way down to the lower levels and began to walk along the corridor that led to Maisie's room, which was on the ground floor and abutted the kitchen. Her heart was beating fast as she tried to imagine what duties she would have to perform and whether she would even be capable of them. After all, she had never had to do any manual labour in her life, and she might become a laughingstock among the other servants.

What if I'm dismissed for being hopeless at my job? she thought desperately. What will I do then?

She began to imagine freezing nights spent in barns or derelict farm cottages and shivered, but then she thought of the alternative. Laird James Robertson was a tall man in his fifties with a shock of prematurely white hair, who was so thin that his face resembled a skull. Alyth could not imagine a more repulsive figure, and knew that she would do almost anything to avoid marrying him. The thought of having to share a bed with him and engage in intercourse with him was absolutely abhorrent to her.

Maisie had given her a broom and instructed her to begin sweeping the corridors that led from the courtyard to the adjacent areas of the castle. When she heard her orders, Alyth was elated. This was a perfect excuse for her to begin to explore the castle, and have a perfectly good reason to do so.



Now, mixed with her apprehension, Alyth felt a dark glee; in a macabre way, this might actually be fun! Her hatred for the Carricks was so bitter that even the slightest injury she could commit against them would be a triumph.

She began to move quickly so that she would have the most time to explore; as far as she could see, there were literally miles of corridors, each with dozens of doors leading off them. Maisie had given her keys, but Alyth knew she would not have the time to explore every single one of them.

The chambers on the ground floor consisted of storerooms, parlours, and a few rooms that were used for administrative purposes, since they had desks and cupboards that she found were full of documents. These were the kind of rooms in which she was most interested.

Alyth wondered if she could find a way of taking some of them with her to read after her working day was finished, then she looked at them and saw that they were years old. This must be a repository for all the estates' records. Yet perhaps these were the kind of documents she needed; knowing the Carricks' history with their neighbours might reveal some valuable secrets. She had nothing in which to carry anything, so she decided to leave the door unlocked and come back the following day.

She looked around the room. The carpet was old and faded, as were the curtains, and the furniture had about an inch of dust on it. She got to work, clumsily finished the room hoping it would be passable if Maisie checked her work, and went onto the next.

Leithmuir Castle was a great deal grander than her own, Alyth realised as she moved further into the building. The floors were covered in Oriental carpets, the curtains were mostly made of silk brocade, and the furniture was mostly ebony and mahogany, intricately carved and polished.

Alyth searched in every drawer and cupboard she could find in what appeared to be a spare bedroom, since unlike the others it was fairly stark and bare, and had just knelt down so that she could look under the bed.

However, she found nothing apart from a carpet of dust, and was about to retrace her steps and leave the room when she heard a child's voice calling, "Mammy."

Alyth looked up into the face of a little girl, whom she guessed to be around eight or nine years old. Her hair was a deep red colour, and her eyes, which were wide with disbelief, were a striking blue-green.

"Oh, sweetheart, I am so glad you came," Alyth said, pretending to be relieved. "I have just arrived here, and I'm a wee bit lost. Can you help me find my way out to the courtyard?" She crouched down a little to be on the same level as the child and smiled.

The little girl was silent, but she did not take her eyes off Alyth for a moment. Her expression of incredulity had been replaced by one of curiosity. Alyth instinctively reached out to touch the pendant that was hanging from her neck—a practised move.

The jewel was made of silver, oval in shape, and when opened revealed a picture of a beautiful woman in the middle. It was not very valuable, but had been a present from her mother on her fifth birthday, and it was precious to her.

Now, however, she needed a way to get into the little girl's good graces because she could see by the quality of her clothes that this young lady was definitely of importance, maybe an advisor's daughter. She had heard that Carrick had a kid, so maybe the little girl was the Laird's daughter, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was getting out of there before anyone was alerted to her snooping around.

"Hello," Alyth said gently, "My name is Jeannie, and I am the new maid here. It

seems like I have lost my necklace while sweeping the floors. Have you seen it perhaps? It looks exactly like this one.”

The child said nothing, merely stared at her pendant fixedly.

“What is your name?” Alyth signed, and asked with a tentative smile. It was a long shot to depend on a wee child anyway.

Again there was silence. Alyth swallowed nervously, then continued, “Look, I’m lost. If I give you this as a present, will you show me the way out?” She asked politely.

The girl narrowed her eyes at Alyth, unconvinced. Did she suspect her by any chance? She had caught her snooping around in her bedroom...

“Please help me, lassie. This pendant is all I have left from my mother. It is priceless to me, but I’ll give it to you if you help me get out of here, and keep my job in the Keep.”

The little girl examined her a bit more, then nodded and took the proffered pendant. She clasped Alyth’s hand and led her out into the corridor. They walked beside each other, but despite Alyth’s attempts to engage the girl in conversation by asking her name, she would not say a word.

“I worked in another castle before this one,” she told her. “But it was nowhere near as nice. Have you always lived here?”

Again, the girl was mute, and after a few more futile attempts to draw her out, Alyth gave up.

They turned a few corners and then emerged into the courtyard, but before Alyth could take more than a couple of steps forward, she collided with the large and

formidable bulk of a man who was standing in front of her, completely blocking her way.

He held out his hand to the little girl, and she went to him at once, then put her arms around him, smiling at him fondly. It was clear that they were very dear to each other, and Alyth realised that this was Laird Carrick, the man she had come to find, her clan's enemy.

He was not at all what she had anticipated. For a start, he was younger, not more than thirty years old, she guessed, and he stood well over six feet tall with a well-muscled physique. The blue-green eyes that were staring into hers aggressively were the same colour as the child's, although his shoulder-length chestnut hair was a shade darker.

The man gently eased the child behind his back, then turned to glare at Alyth from under thick brows. "Who are you?" he growled.

Alyth was used to interacting with men of the Laird's calibre—after all, she was a Laird's daughter and experienced in the subtle arts of charming and flirting with them. However, this man was very different. He did not look remotely fascinated with her—quite the opposite, in fact. The blue-green eyes were rendered even darker with anger, and his strongly handsome face looked terrifying.

Alyth had been trained to fight both with her fists and with weapons, but that did not stop fear rising up in her as the big man came even closer till his chest was almost touching hers.

“I asked you who you are.” This time his deep voice was a threatening rumble, and Alyth, usually so calm under pressure, found herself panicking.

This was the man who had murdered her mother, and he would no doubt have no hesitation in doing the same to her if he knew her identity. She fought her terror down with an effort, however, although for a few moments she seemed to have lost the ability to speak, particularly when Laird Carrick stepped forward and pushed her backwards against the wall.

“Now, answer me, or I will have you thrown out of my castle.” His voice was soft, but it throbbed with menace.

At last, Alyth recovered the ability to speak. “I-I am Jeannie, your new housemaid, my Laird,” she answered, dropping her gaze to the ground.

“And what are you doing with my daughter?” he asked suspiciously. “She has been told never to engage with strangers. What mischief are you up to?”

“I have only started working here today,” she replied. “And I became a little lost in the corridors. Luckily, your daughter found me then brought me here. I swear I did not approach her first. She came to me, and I have done her no harm.”

If Alyth had thought her lie about becoming lost would subdue the man, she was wrong. If anything, it seemed to inflame him more; he pushed her shoulders harder against the wall and came so close to her that they were almost nose to nose.

Alyth turned her head to avoid the penetrating gaze of his eyes, but her effort was futile, since he grabbed her chin and turned her to face him again.

He pulled away a little to focus on her better, then said, “If you do not want your first day to be your last day, then do as I say. Stay away from my daughter. Do you understand?”

Alyth nodded frantically, but then something extraordinary happened. The Laird took a step backwards and looked as the little girl tugged at his kilt, and for the first time Alyth saw an expression of tenderness cross his face. This, and the protectiveness he had shown towards his daughter, told her that he loved her enough to kill for her.

“What is it, Davina?” he asked gently as he squatted down beside her, a fond smile on his face. As he stroked the girl’s hair and kissed her forehead, Alyth suddenly saw a different man, or perhaps another side of the same one.

Davina pointed to Alyth, smiling softly. “Friend,” she murmured, then enfolded herself into her father’s embrace.

The Laird looked up at Alyth, astonishment written all over his handsome face. Gone

was the terrifying frown and the intimidating closeness of his body to hers. Now he was just a loving father, and she was merely one of the servants who made his house run smoothly.

In a few days—or more likely a few hours—he would forget about her, and she would become invisible to him, then she could do what she had to do without interference.

“May I go now, my Laird?” Alyth asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

The Laird looked at her closely for what seemed like an age, and Alyth saw a strange expression in his eyes. He looked puzzled. After a few moments, he nodded, then stood up and walked away, carrying Davina in his arms.

Alyth looked after him and saw Davina looking over his shoulder at her, smiling. She smiled back and gave a tiny wave, which Davina returned, then she picked up her broom and began to sweep the floor again. She felt so shaken that it took her a very long time to calm down.

Alyth decided to go to see Maisie to ask if there was any more work for her to do. She had no real desire to do anything else; she merely wanted to be in her older lady’s company for a while, since she found her company so calming. Every time she saw her, Alyth felt like smiling.

As if she had conjured her up, Alyth saw Maisie walking towards her. She went to meet her, and just as she reached the older lady, her stomach gave a mighty rumble.

Maisie laughed and said, “Well, I was just about tae ask ye if ye were hungry, hen, but I suppose I’ve had my answer!”

“I don’t mind admitting I am ravenous,” Alyth replied. “This kind of work is much

harder than brushing a lady's hair! And although I feel a bit silly saying it, I got lost."

Maisie patted her on the back, laughing. "Well, dinnae worry about gettin' lost, hen, because a' the lassies dae it in the first few days, an' ye will soon find your way around. As for the work, ye will soon get used tae it," she assured Alyth. "After a wee while it will be second nature tae ye. An' remember when things get hard, ye have a roof over your head, food in your belly, an' a wee bit money comin' intae your pocket. An' if ever ye have a problem, come tae me. I am a good listener, an' I can usually help my girls an' boys." She laughed softly. "I might no' have any bairns o' my own, but the Laird's young maids an' manservants are my children. Now you are one o' them."

"Thank you," Alyth breathed, giving Maisie a beaming smile. "That is so good to know."

"Now, let's get ye fed," Maisie said. "They feed us well here, unlike some other places I could tell ye about. Ye will no' be hungry for long!"

She led Alyth down to the lowest floor and into the kitchen. It was one of the biggest rooms she had ever seen, even bigger than the one at Cairnloch, with a huge oven on one wall and a long worktable running down the centre.

Barrels and crates lined the walls where there were shelves full of dried herbs and hooks where pots, pans, and kitchen utensils hung ready for use. Alyth smiled as she entered it.

She had always loved being in the kitchen, where the air was warm and fragrant with the mouthwatering aromas of roasting meat and baking bread. She had many happy memories of going there as a child and begging for sweetmeats from the cook, who always indulged her and gave her what she wanted.



This kitchen was no different, and Alyth closed her eyes and inhaled the scents she loved so much. Her mouth was watering, and she thought she might faint if she did not eat soon.

“Sit down at the table, hen,” Maisie instructed.

Alyth did as she had been told, and a moment later she was joined by a few other young women, all of whom greeted her in a very welcoming fashion. As she looked at their friendly faces, she reminded herself that these were ordinary women who likely felt no special loyalty to the Carricks or any other clan. They were simple people who were living their lives as best they could; they were not her enemies.

“Who dae we have here?” The first to greet Alyth was a short, plump woman with dark hair and a friendly smile. Alyth liked her at once.

“Jeannie,” she replied, returning the smile. “And you?”

“Flora,” the young woman replied. As the others came in, she introduced them as Catriona, Morag, Elise, Heather and Alison. “We are a’ housemaids, an’ there are at least another couple o’ dozen o’ us. We are an army, in fact!” She laughed, and the others joined in.

“Mistress Maisie knows we could probably manage wi’ a few less o’ us, but she has such a soft heart she cannae turn anybody away.”

The others laughed again, then Alyth asked, “Do you like working here?” She was surprised when she heard that the answer was an enthusiastic “yes.”

“Aye,” Morag replied. “Mistress Maisie is very kind. Some housekeepers can be witches who treat their maids like dirt, but no’ ours. We are very lucky.”

“And the Laird?” Alyth continued. “I have heard he looks fierce.”

“Aye, he looks that way, Jeannie,” Catriona said, “but dinnae let that fool ye. He has a heart o’ gold. But ever since his wife was killed he has become quite stern-lookin’. An’ he adores wee Davina, his daughter. He has never said an unkind word tae any o’ us, has he?” She looked around the table and there was a series of nods and a murmur of agreement.

Just then, the cook beckoned them to come and collect their food, and Alyth found herself with a hearty plate of lamb stew and two freshly baked bannocks in front of her, as well as a glass of warm ale. The stew was so delicious that she disposed of it in a few moments, and was surprised to find that when she looked up the other young women were laughing at her.

She was deeply embarrassed and a little hurt, but Flora patted her hand and said kindly, “Dinnae worry, hen. We are a’ glad ye enjoyed the food sae much. We have just never seen anybody eat sae fast. Ye must have been hungry.”

“I was,” Alyth confessed. “I might have enjoyed a dead rat if you had put it in front of me!”

They all laughed again, before Morag and Elise fetched some hot spicy fruit pudding from the cook, and they shared it between them.

“Cloutie dumpling is usually for Halloween,” Alyth said, frowning.

“Well, I’ll have yours if ye dinnae want it,” Heather said eagerly, then laughed. “This is a wee treat Mairi, the cook, makes for us sometimes if she’s in a good mood.”

“I see.” Alyth was pleased, since she loved Cloutie dumpling. “I came at just the right time then.”

“Mistress Maisie didnae tell us about ye,” Alison pointed out. “It was quite a surprise tae see ye here. How did ye come by the job?”

“Well, by accident really.” Alyth took a deep breath, then began to spin the tale of the ambush by the bandits and how she had walked for days to get to Leithmuir. “I just about fell down with exhaustion when I got here, but the Captain of the Guard was very kind to me and brought me into the castle, then Mistress Maisie took care of me. They are both so kind, are they not?”

“Aye, they are,” Flora said, smiling. “We are lucky tae have them.” The others murmured in agreement.

“What did ye dae before ye came here, Jeannie?” Alison asked curiously.

“I was a lady’s maid,” Alyth replied. She had rehearsed her story so many times that the use of her false name did not startle her. She frowned and waved her hand in dismissal. “But that’s a story for another day.” She paused to drink her ale, then looked around her again.

“I just met the Laird, actually,” she said carefully. “He seemed very angry. I got a bit lost in the corridors and his daughter came and found me. She seemed a bit puzzled. She looked at me for a long time, then called for her mammy. I have no idea what she means, but when we met the Laird, he was mad.”

The young women all exchanged glances, seeming absolutely astonished.

“She spoke tae ye?” Flora asked, her eyes wide with amazement.

Alyth nodded. “Yes,” she answered. “Why are you so surprised?”

She looked around at the ring of bemused faces, baffled.

“Because that wee lassie hasnae said a word since her mother was killed,” Flora replied. “The guards say they have seen her condition before; it’s called shock. Are ye sure, Jeannie? It couldnae have been another noise ye heard?”

“I am quite certain,” Alyth said firmly. “I heard her very clearly because there was no other noise around us. She definitely said ‘Mammy’.”

Heather stood up and walked around the table to squat down beside Alyth and look up into her face. She stared into her eyes for a long moment before she asked, “Dae any o’ you see what I see? Jeannie looks an awfu’ lot like Lady Carrick. Maybe the poor bairn thought her mother had come back.”

She stood up and looked around at the others, who all began to stare at Alyth.

“Aye,” Flora agreed thoughtfully.

“She also called me a friend,” Alyth went on. “When the Laird saw us together, he became so angry, I thought he was going to hit me. It was only because little Davina spoke up that he stopped himself, I think. He loves her very much, does he not?”

“Aye,” Flora replied. “Especially since his wife died. But he wouldnae hit ye, hen. If ye had been a man he might have, but he would never harm a lassie. I am surprised he even laid a hand on ye at a’. It isnae like him.”

“Well, if he thought Jeannie was goin’ tae hurt Davina...” Morag said, leaving the rest of the sentence unspoken.

There was a silence between them all for a moment before Flora clapped her hands.

“Why are we a’ gettin’ sae miserable? Come on, talk about somethin’ more cheerful, for heaven’s sake.”

She launched into a funny story about her sister, and in a few moments all the young ladies were chatting and laughing amongst themselves. Alyth pretended to join in, but it was all an act.

When she went back to her duties, she could think of nothing else but what Heather had said.

“She looks an awful lot like Lady Carrick.”

Alyth fervently hoped she would not bump into Davina and her father again.

She occasionally saw the Laird from a distance as she carried on with her work that day, but looked away quickly, not wanting to catch his eye or attract his attention in any other way. Most of the time he was with Davina, who stayed close by his side and looked up at him adoringly. He smiled at her frequently and occasionally picked her up to kiss her cheek and laugh with her.

The love between them was almost palpable, and made Alyth long to be back with her own father, back to the reality she knew, not here in this confusing state. She knew he would never give up looking for her, perhaps she would just go back after getting the pendant and the joy of seeing her again would be enough to call off her wedding.

That evening, Alyth avoided the other maids and went to the kitchen for her evening meal after they had all left. Mairi was a fat woman in her middle years, a Lowlander, and had quite a different way of speaking from the other servants. Sometimes Alyth missed a word or two, but she persevered.

“I met the Laird just after I came here,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “He seems a bit scary.”

“Aye, but only since his wife died,” Mairi replied. “An’ we a’ know he is soft as butter inside. He dotes on that wean o’ his, puir wee thing. Never seen a man sae lovin’ in my life. Him an’ the Captain o’ the Guard are good friends an’ a. Ye will often see them trainin’ together. The Laird is a fierce fighter, an’ a handsome devil. A charmin’ in his late twenties.” She winked mischievously.

Alyth laughed. “I have already met the Captain.” She smiled.

“Oh, he is a nice man, even though he’s a soldier,” Mairi replied, smiling. “He absolutely adores Mistress Maisie, an’ she loves him. Both o’ them are fond o’ Davina as well, because they cannae have any weans o’ their own.”

“Such a pity,” Alyth said sadly. “They would have been very good parents.”

Then Alyth changed the subject in case she aroused suspicion that she was asking too many questions. “Tell me what Glasgow is like,” she said, smiling. “I have always wanted to go there.”

They chatted amiably for a short while before Alyth yawned, pleaded that she was very tired, which she was, and went to bed in her tiny room.

Alyth did not sleep well that night, since she was constantly plagued with nightmares of being trapped against the wall by Laird Carrick. This time, however, there was no Davina to save her, and she woke up shivering with fear several times. She eventually managed an hour or two just before dawn, but she still felt drained and exhausted when she rose from bed.

As she made her way downstairs for breakfast, she met some of the other women, who remarked on how pale she looked.

“I didn’t sleep very well,” Alyth confessed, yawning. “I’m sure I will be better later, though.”

“Bad dreams?” Flora asked. “I often have them, especially when Mairi makes us eat tripe. I hate tripe!”

The others laughed, and Alyth envied their friendship and all their carefree banter. She did not yet feel like one of them, but hoped she soon would. None of them had asked about her upper-class accent yet, but she reasoned that was only a matter of time.

“No,” Alyth lied. “No nightmares, but I never sleep well in a strange bed, though I expect I will get used to it, and I bumped my head on the roof.”

The last part was the truth; even though Alyth was of average height, the sloping roof was so low just above her bed that she had difficulty in avoiding it.

Morag patted her on the back. “We a’ hated sleepin’ in that room,” she said, “but Mistress Maisie will move ye as soon as another one is empty. Be careful when it’s rainin’. There’s a leak in the roof.”

Alyth sighed. She would have to grit her teeth and put up with these little hardships. After all, she was working for a noble cause, and she was determined not to be deterred from her mission by anything except death.

Death.

That suddenly seemed like a much more likely prospect than it had before Laird Carrick had scared her so much. Alyth had always prided herself on her self-defence skills, but up against a six-foot-two inch man she was not quite helpless, but at a severe disadvantage.

However, Alyth reminded herself again of the alternative, being Laird Robertson’s wife, and her mission to retrieve her lost treasure. She was glad to be distracted again by some humorous small talk.

She thought of trying to find out a bit more about the Laird and his daughter, but was afraid to be seen as too inquisitive; that would arouse suspicion. Alyth knew that the fastest way to spread any kind of rumour was through servants’ gossip!

As soon as she rose from the breakfast table, Alyth went to find Maisie so that she could receive her instructions for the day. She walked into the small room in which Maisie kept the keys and other paraphernalia she needed to run the household, and immediately stopped in her tracks.

Maisie and Gavin were locked in a tight embrace, kissing hungrily like two young lovers instead of a couple who had been married for thirty years. Alyth was astounded that a couple who had been together for so long were still attracted to each



other in a carnal way.

Their togetherness had not become some mundane thing, a habit akin to eating or drinking, but was still passionate. Her heart warmed as she gazed at them, then she realised that she would embarrass all of them if she stood there much longer, so she beat a hasty retreat.

Alyth was hesitant to approach the room again, so she passed the time looking at the family portraits along the wall. As yet, she had not had her own portrait done back in the MacAdams Keep, and doubted if she ever would, since she was such an active person she doubted if she could have sat still long enough!

The pictures were all dated, so she could trace the family's lineage through the generations, and she noticed the strong thread of a resemblance that had persisted to the present day. Most of the men had strong features, with high, sloping cheekbones and broad foreheads, traits which Alyth could see on Lachlan Carrick's face. The women had mostly married into the family and there were very few of them who were blood relatives, so their features varied from face to face.

Alyth was fascinated, when she came to the portrait of Davina's mother, to realise that the resemblance between the two of them was quite striking. They both had the same dark, slightly wavy hair and deep grey eyes. Sandrina Carrick's face was slightly squarer than Alyth's, however, and lacked the dimple in her chin that Alyth had. Yet now she could understand Davina's observation.

Alyth was lost in her thoughts when she felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see Maisie standing behind her, smiling. "I can see why wee Davina got mixed up," she remarked. "Ye are very like Milady."

"I can see that now," Alyth agreed. "My goodness—we could be sisters!"

“But ye’re not,” Maisie reminded her. “Back tae work, hen. I need ye in the garden today.”

“I’ve never done any gardening before,” Alyth said dubiously.

“It’s no’ very hard,” Maisie replied. “The hard work is mostly done by the men, which is why I am very glad tae be a woman sometimes!”

Alyth laughed then looked down at her clothes. She was wearing an apron, but had not yet been given a uniform. The one she had been wearing on her arrival was too tattered and dirty to wear, so she had been given another, but that did not fit her properly. Even if it had, it was in such bad condition that kneeling in the dirt and grass would ruin it anyway.

Seeing her look, Maisie said, “There is a work dress bein’ made for ye, but in the meantime ye will have tae wear what ye have on.” Her tone was regretful.

Just then, one of the stable lads passed them wearing a pair of breeches. Alyth had occasionally worn these when she was learning her martial skills, but even though such an outfit was quite shocking, no one had commented. After all, she was mistress of Cairnloch Castle.

However, that was not the case any more. Dare she ask for a pair, Alyth wondered?

“I could wear a pair of breeches, if you don’t mind,” she said thoughtfully. “This dress is far too short for me.” They both looked down at the hem of the garment, which only reached the middle of Alyth’s calf. If she knelt down, it would only come down to her knees.

Maisie frowned at her for a moment, then nodded slowly. “The lassies will a’ laugh at ye, mind,” she warned.

Alyth shrugged. "I have been laughed at before," she said carelessly. "It will not kill me."

Maisie caught one of the manservants and gave him instructions. He looked shocked, but he obeyed his orders and came back a moment later with a pair of baggy breeches and a long shirt.

Alyth went into the tack room beside the stables to change, and came out a few moments later looking like a different person. The baggy tunic had been tucked into equally baggy breeches that were tied at the waist with a length of frayed rope. The legs were too long, so Alyth had tucked them into her boots. Maisie thought she looked like a slender teenage boy, but evidently the gardeners did not think so; their gazes followed her all the way into the kitchen garden.

By the time the hour of her midday meal arrived, Alyth's back was aching, and she never wanted to see another dandelion as long as she lived. She went into the kitchen, and as Maisie had predicted, all the other maidservants laughed at her, but it was in a delightful, good-humoured way.

Alyth joined in, enjoying making fun of herself, this was not something she had ever been able to do before. She loved the warmth of the group of young women in which she found herself, and the fact that they accepted her felt like a tremendous honour.

When she knelt down again to battle the weeds in the herb garden, Alyth was feeling more cheerful than she had for days. Her chat with the others had not only been enjoyable, but profitable, since she had found out the names of the most influential members of the garrison, the ones who had the Laird's ear. She decided that she would try to pursue a friendship with at least one of them and see what came of it.

She had just pulled out another handful of weeds and was about to throw it into the basket behind her when a little hand plucked it out of her grasp, and Alyth looked

around to see Davina looking at her shyly.

“Davina,” Alyth said with a smile. She looked at the pale blue dress the little girl was wearing and said admiringly, “My goodness. How pretty you look today!”

Davina smiled, then reached out to take Alyth’s hand and led her to a wooden bench under the shadow of the fruit trees that grew around the kitchen garden.

There, she put a book on Alyth’s lap and tapped it with her forefinger.

“Do you want me to read it?” Alyth asked.

Davina nodded with a shy smile. Alyth hesitated for a moment. She had thought it might be a good time to talk to Davina about her mother’s death and tell her that her mother had also passed on, but decided it was too soon. Davina was fragile, and Alyth was in no position to play with fire, so she began to read aloud and point at the pictures as she went, asking the little girl about them, trying to urge her to speak.

They had only read a few pages of the book, however, when Alyth, out of the corner of her eye, saw the unwelcome figure of Lachlan Carrick coming towards them, frowning.

Lachlan had been about to pick some apples and nuts for Davina, since she loved apple pie and sweet chestnuts roasted over the fire. Then he saw the new maid and his daughter sitting close together, and he noticed how similar she looked to the wife he had loved and lost.

Jeannie was a little taller and more slender, her eyes were a little darker and more almond-shaped, and she had a dimple in her chin whereas Sandrina had not. However, at a glance, from a distance, they could have been mistaken for each other.

At the last moment, Alyth looked up and saw him, and paused in the act of reading Davina's favourite story to her. She should have been helping to harvest the vegetables in the kitchen garden as well as weeding it; that was what he was paying her for, after all.

Yet, Davina looked more content in the new maid's company than she had for a long time. He had employed a woman to look after her, but she had gone to see her sick mother for a few weeks, and Davina was unsupervised. She was seemingly indifferent to this, since she had never expressed a great deal of affection for the nanny.

However, now, whether it was because of the resemblance to her real mother or some other quality the woman possessed, Davina was drawn to the new maidservant.

Alyth stood up and curtsied briefly, and suddenly, he could see that she was not in a maid's uniform. Lachlan's eyes widened in surprise. He did not know whether to feel angry about a woman wearing breeches or not, but she was not dressed indecently.

In fact, he found her clothing quite alluring, but he forced the thought, and the guilt it brought with it, to the back of his mind as he walked towards them.

Davina looked around and saw him, then smiled and reached up to embrace him. Lachlan loved to feel his daughter's arms around him, and laughed softly as he kissed the top of her head. Since his wife's death, she had been his whole world, and as he watched her with the new maid, he felt jealous; he did not want to share her with anyone.

"Davina," he said, his voice gentle, "you should not take the servants away from their work. They have things to do, and you are keeping them away."

Davina's face fell, and Lachlan felt wretched for having chastised his daughter; she

was so fragile. He looked up into the eyes of the woman who was causing him so much trouble.

“This is not what I pay you for,” he said reproachfully. “You are a housemaid, not a nursemaid. Get back to work. Have I not told you already to leave my daughter alone?”

If he had expected meek compliance, he was disappointed. Alyth squared her shoulders and tilted her chin up, then looked him squarely in the eyes.

“Davina is my lady too, and I must obey her,” she said defiantly. “She summoned me to read to her, and I obeyed. I have not harmed her, nor would I ever do so. I think she enjoys being read to, my Laird.” She looked down at the little girl. “Do you not, Davina?”

Davina nodded vigorously, beaming at Alyth. Then she did something neither the Laird nor Alyth had expected. She let go of her father and went to Alyth, drew her down onto the seat again, and put her arms around her before opening the book again. She looked up at the Laird reproachfully, then pointed to the book again.

“What would you like me to do, my Laird?” Alyth asked him as Davina put her arm around her waist. “I can go back to my gardening if you wish.”

The Laird took a step forward, bringing himself closer to her. Alyth wanted to step backwards, but she stood her ground, not wanting him to see how afraid she was of his intimidating bulk.

Then Davina pulled at his kilt and gave him a pleading look, and Alyth saw the defiance going out of his expression at once. It was quite evident he would do anything for his daughter, and Alyth realised that having Davina on her side was a wonderful tool to have on her mission.

“Well,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “It is a rare thing to have a maid who can read, and who speaks like a lady.”

“I was a lady’s maid, My Laird,” she told him. “I needed to be able to read sometimes. I picked up her way of speaking too. Is that wrong?”

His eyes had darkened with anger, and the glare he gave her was venomous, but Alyth refused to be cowed. She stared back at him, feeling her own rage rise to meet his. Why should she be treated this way, even if he was suspicious of her?

Lachlan looked down at her with some respect. She had courage, he had to give her that, but she was far too mysterious for his liking. She was hiding something; he was sure of it, but what could it be? Yet, Davina liked her, and there were not many people who were accorded that honour. Perhaps he could bend a little just this once if it made her happy.

“If you were a lady’s maid, you must know how to behave in a ladylike manner,” he conceded. “You may read to her as long as she wishes, but Davina must choose when to stop. She is your lady, as you said, and you must obey her. Do you understand?”

Alyth boiled with fury inside.

Of course, I do, you monster! I’m not a simpleton, she thought, but she merely nodded and said, “Yes, My Laird.”

Davina tugged her tunic and drew Alyth’s attention back to the book again. “Where were we?” Alyth asked, smiling as Davina turned to the right page.

The last thing Lachlan saw was Davina leaning her head on Alyth’s shoulder as she began to read the story aloud.

Alyth had had no idea when she was hired at Leithmuir Castle that her work would be so diverse. Now she found herself serving the Laird and Davina at dinner, a task she was far better suited for than gardening. At least she knew the etiquette of a dining room, whereas she was completely clueless about growing vegetables and herbs.

The problem of her dress had been solved, since Maisie had told her that the Laird had come to see her to complain about Alyth's attire.

When Alyth went to collect her new uniform, Maisie had smiled at her in a somewhat mystified fashion. "Well, I dinnae know what ye did tae the Laird," she said, "but he was a' in a flutter when he came here. He said he was shocked tae see one o' his maid servants dressed in such an indecent way—his words, no' mine, hen. He ordered that your dress should be finished as quickly as possible, an' got another seamstress in tae help the first one."

Alyth frowned. "Was he angry?" she asked. Her heart was beating nineteen to the dozen, for she did not want to be thrown out after she had only been in Laird Carrick's employ for only a few days.

Maisie shook her head. "A wee bit, but he knew it wisnae your fault," she answered. "Anyway, here it is." She presented Alyth with a plain brown dress. "I wish ye health tae wear it, hen." Then she smiled warmly and put her hands on Alyth's shoulders. "Ye will dae well here, hen. The lassies a' like ye, an' I trust them."

Alyth was genuinely pleased. The life of a servant was a hard one, but she had not



reckoned with the camaraderie she would find amongst the others, and realised that it was something she had never experienced before. Ladies of her own rank of the social ladder tended not to form intimate friendships.

She could never imagine sitting around a table talking about the blacksmith's daughter who became pregnant out of wedlock, or how handsome the minister's son was. She looked forward to mealtimes, to the laughter, gossip and teasing; now she knew why servants' gossip travelled so fast!

As well as that, she had never known how much fun it was to laugh at yourself, and have others laugh with you. If she had not been in the home of her deadliest enemy, she could actually say she was enjoying herself, but these moments of self-deprecating fun could not be allowed to divert her attention from her mission.

Her heart was pounding when she walked into the dining room and placed the food in its covered dishes on the table in front of them. Laird Carrick was sitting at the head of the table, and Davina was on his right. She had her little hand resting on his big one and was looking up at him with a soft smile on her face. Alyth had heard the deep rumble of the Laird's voice just before she walked into the room, and although she could not make out his words, his tone was tender and affectionate. He was smiling down at Davina when Alyth walked in, but the smile disappeared as soon as he saw her.

"Is there anything else you need, M'Laird?" she asked politely.

"No, thank you," he answered.

Alyth turned to leave, and he reached out to the meat pie to dish up for Davina, but she shook her head and tugged Alyth's sleeve.

Surprised, Alyth turned to her. "Yes, Milady?" she said, smiling.

Davina, of course, said nothing, but she took the serving spoon from Lachlan's hand and pointed to the pie. For a moment, Alyth hesitated, then she glanced at the Laird, who nodded.

She carefully cut a small slice of the pie for Davina, then lifted it with the spoon and put it on her plate. After that, she had to do the same with the green vegetables and cut a slice of bread for her. Alyth's reward was a beaming smile from the little girl, and she returned it, her heart warming.

When she tried to leave the room for a second time, though, Alyth felt her sleeve being tugged yet again. She turned to see Davina holding up the book she had been reading the previous day.

She smiled. "We did not finish it, did we?" she asked. "Would you like me to read the rest of it to you before you go to bed?"

Davina nodded eagerly, and Alyth glanced up at the Laird for approval, but he was glaring at her suspiciously. Then Davina put her hands on her father's again and looked up into his face. She said one word, "Please."

Lachlan continued to frown at her for a moment, then he looked down at Davina, smiled and kissed her forehead. Alyth felt as though she was invading a private conversation, so she turned and walked out. Davina looked after her, smiling, and Lachlan thought it was the happiest he had seen her since her mother died.

An hour later, one of the other maids showed Alyth to Davina's bedroom, and she stood outside the door for a while, trying to gather the courage to go inside. At last, she turned the handle and entered.

Davina was lying in bed already, clutching a rag doll, and the Laird was sitting beside the bed on a sturdy chair, but as soon as the maid entered he kissed Davina, then

stood up and walked past her to leave the room.

She was very relieved; she found that when she was in the same room with him, it became hard to breathe. She hated him, yet somewhere deep down in her being she felt sorry for him, and she had no idea why. However, his presence made any room he was sitting in feel smaller, and Alyth felt a sensation of being suffocated.

Alyth sat down in the chair that the Laird had just vacated, then pulled Davina's blankets up over her shoulders.

"To keep you cosy," she said, smiling. "I can never sleep when I am cold." She opened the book. "Now, where did we stop? Oh yes, the prince was just about to climb the castle wall so that he could rescue the princess from the dragon..."

She began to read, and mimed some of the expressions of the characters as she read the story. Presently, she felt Davina's little hand stealing out from under the blanket to grasp hers. The little girl could say very few words, so she expressed herself with her hands and her smiles, and an occasional soft peal of laughter.

Alyth's heart went out to her, while wishing that she herself had a child to love. This was a thought that had never occurred to her before, since she had no siblings of her own, and it astonished her.

Alyth came to the end of the book and saw that Davina had merrily gone to sleep. She gazed at the little girl for a while, loving her innocent beauty; her long golden eyelashes and eyebrows, tiny nose, cupid's bow lips, all of which were completely relaxed in sleep. She was adorable.

She hoped that Davina never had the kind of nightmares that she had about her mother's death, she would not wish those on a child. Her father, though? That was a different matter; she had no problem wishing nightmares on him at all!

Alyth stood up, tucked the blankets more securely around Davina, then kissed her forehead. “Goodnight, little one,” she whispered. She put the book back in the little bookcase and took a last look at Davina before opening the bedroom door.

Then she jumped, startled, as the Laird, who had been leaning against the doorpost, seemed to appear out of nowhere in front of her.

He gave her a grim smile and said, “I must talk with you.”

Laird MacAdams had sent out search parties far and wide when he realised that Alyth was missing, but so far, there had been neither hair nor hide of her seen. He swore that he would not give up, but the strain of not knowing what had happened to his precious daughter was too emotionally taxing. He was finding it hard to sleep, and had to resist the temptation to drown his sorrows in whisky; he had seen too many men take that route and be destroyed by it.

He had read and reread Alyth’s note till he could almost recite it by heart, and as he sat at his desk trying to concentrate on his estate management work he found himself reading it again.

“Da,” it read. He laughed at her pet name for him, which she had been calling him since she could only utter a syllable or two.

I need to leave you for a while. Please do not fret, I promise not to put myself in any danger. If for any reason danger comes to me, you know how well I can defend myself, thanks to you. I need to find the answer to some questions, and I cannot do that while sitting inside the castle doing nothing. I will soon be back, and hopefully with your blessing, no longer Laird Robertson’s intended.

Your ever-loving daughter,

Alyth

He stood up to look out of the window. It was late autumn, and the last few trees were almost bare, the harvest had almost finished and everywhere fruit, nuts, vegetables, and meat were being salted, dried, pickled and preserved for the harsh days of winter. Soon it would be the festive season, which he and Alyth would normally celebrate together, but the Laird would not celebrate this time. How could he when the light in his life had gone out?

This was normally his favourite time of year, when he could go out onto the tenants' farms and hear their stories, distribute gifts, and generally reassure them that he would always look after them. However, this year it was different.

Usually Alyth came with him because she had the common touch; she could talk to and bond with anyone, no matter how far up or down the social ladder they were, and the tenants loved her. Now that she would no longer be with him, he felt dispirited and depressed, and he had no idea how he would explain her disappearance.

Presently, there was a firm knock at the door and a manservant ushered Laird Robertson into the room. The two men shook hands, and Laird MacAdams tried to force his gloomy reflections out of his mind. They must have shown in his face, however, for Robertson frowned at him and said, "Brooding will do you no good at all, my friend. You need to take action. Go out there and find her, for god's sake!"

Laird MacAdams rounded on the other man, his face a mask of fury. "Do you not think I have tried, Jimmy? My men have been out looking everywhere. No one has seen her,"

"Then you have not been looking hard enough, Colin," Robertson answered grimly. "Or using the right methods." He moved in front of the other man and gripped his upper arms, then shook him slightly. "I have had my men looking too, and we have

traced her to Carrick's lands, but after a while we lost her trail.

We need more men. We need them swarming like ants all over the Carrick lands, and even our own estates. We do not know what's in her mind. She might have gone in a direction we have not thought of exploring."

Laird MacAdams sat down in a chair by the fire and put his head in his hands, wishing that Robertson would go away and leave him alone.

However, Laird Robertson was not ready to let go so easily.

"Remember when the Carricks tried to conquer this castle? They almost succeeded; they murdered dozens of your guards and even your wife, for god's sake! They stole some heirlooms from your family that you will likely never get back. They are absolute savages, and they have become so powerful now that they are almost invincible.

Colin, do you not care? Do you not think it's past time to raise an army against them before they take over all the land from here to the coast? Do you want to see everything you have worked for all these years destroyed by a bunch of barbarians? What do you think Adaira would say?"

He paused for a moment, expecting Laird MacAdams to answer, but he said nothing, merely gazing morosely into the fire.

"If you want my men to join you," Robertson said. "We will be happy to do so and fight by your side because what is in your best interest is in ours too."

Colin MacAdams sighed. "I have no wish to go to war, Jimmy. I have seen enough fighting in my life. All I want is for the Carricks to keep their distance, and to get my daughter back."

Robertson helped himself to a glass of whisky from the carafe on the Laird's desk. It was a rather rude thing to do, since he had not even asked for permission, but Laird MacAdams was past caring.

“Do you want to lose all your possessions to the Carricks?” Robertson asked.

He sat down opposite MacAdams to look at him, his shrewd eyes passing over the Laird's face. The MacAdams Clan was one of the wealthiest in the area, except for the Carricks, and Robertson had to make Colin MacAdams see that he was the best chance he had of recovering his daughter.

He had as much to lose as the other Laird did—in fact, he had more. Alyth was a passport to success for him. With her by his side, the possibilities were endless.

By hook or by crook, he was going to bring Alyth MacAdams back and marry her. He knew that she had no wish to be his wife, but he did not care. She would obey her father, and nothing would matter when there was a ring on her finger.

“Colin,” he said. “I think you should post a reward. Perhaps that will bring in some news of her.”

“Do you think I have not already done that?” MacAdams asked furiously. “There have been no sightings of her—none at all.”

Robertson stood up and sighed in frustration. He looked at Colin MacAdams, who was staring miserably into the fire, and said, “You know that the Carricks will be coming for you soon. Peace has lasted for years now, but I doubt it will last for much longer. That is one of the reasons why we have to retrieve Alyth. If the Carricks get hold of her they could use her as a bargaining chip, and you could lose everything, Colin, everything. Your lands, this castle—everything. We must crush them before they can react.”

Laird MacAdams had been in the depths of depression, and the will to persevere in the search for Alyth had left him for a while, but now it came back with a vengeance.

“We start first thing tomorrow,” he said, pouring himself a glass of whisky. “I will find Alyth or die trying!”



Once more, Alyth found herself standing looking into Lachlan Carrick's fierce blue-green eyes as he stood staring down at her as if he wanted to bore a hole in her forehead. She swallowed nervously, but raised her head and held his gaze. She would not let him see how much he frightened her.

Alyth had to tilt her head back to see him properly, since he was so much taller than she was, and this made her angry because she was so small and felt inadequate. Was this how a man was supposed to make a woman respond to him?

No, she decided. He was using his height and strength against her to intimidate her; those were the tactics of a bully, and she had no time for people like that—of either sex. Men used their fists, but more often than not women used words, and they could be as cruel as whiplashes.

However, she was not dealing with a woman now, but with the biggest and most fearsome man she had ever seen—and she hated him. But did she? When she had seen this big, hulking man treating his daughter with such love and tenderness, she realised that no one was altogether bad, not even him.

Alyth waited for him to say something, but he seemed to be content to stand and let the atmosphere around them thicken with tension. He was standing only a few feet away from her, and she could smell the peculiar, masculine scent of his body, a mix of leather, earth, and an underlying musk that was all his own.

Despite her dislike of him, the smell aroused sensations in Alyth that she had never

felt before. She was not ignorant; she had heard what happened inside a bedroom before, but had never felt the tingles and pulses she was experiencing now.

Abruptly, he shifted his stance, crossing his arms and planting his feet wider on the floor so that he looked even bigger and more intimidating than he had before.

“What did you say to my daughter?” he asked suddenly, his brows descending in a deep frown.

At this distance, Alyth could hear the deep rumble in his chest as he spoke, and she had to keep reminding herself that this intensely masculine man was her enemy, no matter how handsome he was.

“I was reading her a story,” Alyth answered, puzzled. “You were listening outside. Surely, you heard, M’Laird?”

“Did she speak to you?” he continued, unbothered.

Alyth was surprised to hear the eagerness in his tone. Her answer was obviously very important to him, and for a moment, she thought of saying no, but she could not be so cruel, despite her loathing of him. Later she would think herself weak, but at that moment she answered truthfully.

“She said a few words,” Alyth replied. “She pointed to one of the pictures of a rabbit and said, ‘bunny.’ Then she laughed.” She thought for a moment. “She told me the name of her doll. She calls it Bettie. Those were the only words she said.”

Lachlan was stunned as he reflected that he had not heard Davina speak as many words as that since her mother died three years before. His mind was about to drift back to the day of his wife’s death, but he forced the memory down, unaware that it was showing in the sorrowful expression on his face.

Alyth saw once again the other, vulnerable side of Lachlan Carrick, the one he took great pains to hide from everyone else. In that fleeting moment, all the pain of the last few years became visible, but he quickly hid it as he frowned.

“Davina has not talked to anyone since her mother died, yet she talks to you.” He paused for a moment, and Alyth was silent too, wondering what was going through his mind. “Why? Why are you the only one who can make her speak? What do you do with her?”

“I treat her as I would treat any other little girl,” Alyth replied. “But perhaps she can sense that I relate to her, we have a lot in common. I lost my mother too, and Davina seems to be a sensitive child. She may not be able to express things in words, but she feels and sees, and she can tell you what she needs you to know with her face and her hands. She is very intuitive, M’Laird.”

Alyth paused, then cast her gaze down to the ground before looking into his eyes again, unsure of how her next words would be received. “The other maids tell me I look a lot like your late wife,” she told him. “Perhaps she can see that, and feels more comfortable with me because of it.”

Whatever Alyth had expected, it was not the darkening of his eyes or the thunderous frown he gave her. “Are you comparing yourself to my wife, the woman I loved with all my heart?” He looked as though he might explode with rage.

“No, I merely said I might look like her,” Alyth answered.

Lachlan Carrick leaned forward and put a hand on each of her shoulders, and there was an audible thud as Alyth’s back hit the wall again. Then he put a hand on either side of her so that Alyth was effectively caged in by his big body.

His face was only a few inches away from hers now, and Alyth was terrified; if he

knew who she was, he was quite capable of killing her where she stood with his bare hands. Currently, Alyth had no doubt that he would do so without a second thought.

“Listen to me,” he growled. “My wife was one of the best women who ever lived. She was a wonderful mother and wife, and you cannot hold a candle to her. If I hear you comparing yourself to her again I will cut your tongue out then throw you out of the castle to let the wild boars have their way with you. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Alyth replied steadily, refusing to let her voice tremble as she looked into his blue-green eyes. “I understand perfectly, but I cannot compare myself to Davina’s mother, M’Laird, because I never knew her. If we resemble each other, it is by mere chance. If you think I might harm Davina, let me put your mind at rest. Nothing of the sort has ever crossed my mind. I love children, and I hope to have some of my own one day.”

Something in her tone caught Lachlan’s attention. “So you would never harm children.” He paused. “But would you harm anyone else? Me, for example?”

Alyth almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of the notion. Yes, she was a fit woman, and well-trained in the skills of fighting, both with and without a weapon, but so was Lachlan Carrick, and he was so much bigger and more muscular than she was.

Alyth bravely held on to his gaze with a great act of willpower. “I am a woman, M’Laird,” she pointed out. “I am much smaller than you are, and I have no skill with weapons. I could insult you, but you give me a means to earn a living, so that would not be a good idea. How could I possibly hurt you?”

Lachlan backed off a little, taking his hands away from the wall. She was right, of course. The only way she could possibly hurt him was through Davina, and somehow, deep inside himself, he knew that she would never do that. And yet, there

was a look in her eyes that suggested something else...

“If you were in love with me, I could break your heart,” Alyth said. “But Lairds do not fall in love with maids.”

Lachlan felt anger boil up inside him again; this woman was insufferable. “Do maids fall in love with Lairds, then?” he asked.

Alyth shook her head firmly. “I have no idea about anyone else,” she told him, “but this one,” she thumbed her chest, “definitely will not.”

Lachlan looked into the deep grey eyes staring back at him. He knew he ought to throw her out because of her impudence, but he had to consider Davina. How would she react to having someone else she was fond of ripped away from her? The fact that this woman could make his daughter speak was something he would have found impossible to believe even a few days ago. For that reason, only, Jeannie Dunbar had to stay, but he would keep a close eye on her.

And there was something else. As he stood looking down at her, he felt himself wanting to reach out to her and touch her. He felt a spasm of guilt, but dismissed it. It was only his weak man’s body reacting to a beautiful woman. He stared at her for what seemed like an age, but no matter how fiercely he glared at her, she would not look away from him, but held his gaze with a steady one of her own.

At last, with an exasperated sigh, he turned away. Alyth’s gaze followed him, and when he was out of sight she sank onto the floor, exhausted by the mental battle she had just fought with him.

Yet, she had to find her mother’s pendant—she could not return home without it, and for that reason, she would have to endure Lachlan Carrick’s loathsome company for as long as it took.

Alyth stood up, sighed and stretched her back. She would not worry or brood, she decided. She would try to keep out of the Laird's sight and go about her mission as unobtrusively as she could.

However, the pressure of pretending to be someone she was not, and knowing that she was being constantly kept under surveillance by the Laird and his men, was becoming unbearable. Even being with Davina was something of a strain, since she had to keep smiling continually.

In fact, she thought, the only time she could ever relax was in bed, even though it was narrow and uncomfortable; at least she could pound her pillows with her fists and pretend they were Lachlan Carrick!

Alyth tried to think of another way of letting off some steam. When she was at home, her best outlet for her over-abundance of energy was training with the guards, but of course, that was impossible in Leithmuir.

She sighed. How much longer could she live like this?

Lachlan was smiling as he gazed at Davina, who was sitting in the garden playing with her doll. He felt more hopeful than he had in a long time as he watched her; she was his whole world, and without her, he knew his life would not be worth living.

Davina looked up as her nanny, who had just come back from her visit to her family, went to sit beside her. She gave her a vague smile, but when the woman tried to engage her in conversation, Davina picked up her doll and strolled away further into the gardens. She walked around looking at the stalks of the plants that had just been cut back for winter, and Lachlan watched as one of the gardeners gave her a chestnut. She smiled at him and walked on.

They saw Jeannie at the same moment, and Davina ran towards her, beaming all over

her face. When the little girl reached her, she threw her arms around the woman and held up the chestnut to show her. Lachlan watched as Jeannie took it and admired it, then made to give it back, but Davina pointed to the nut, then to Jeannie's mouth.

"For me?" Alyth asked. Davina nodded, still smiling. "Thank you!" Alyth had been intending to drop a kiss on Davina's forehead, but refrained when she saw the Laird looking at them. "I have work to do," she said, with a little wave.

However, Davina was not yet ready to let her go. She grabbed the skirt of Alyth's dress and pulled as hard as she could, frowning fiercely.

Alyth had no idea what to do. She could not abandon her work, but neither could she reprimand Davina in front of the Laird and everyone else; they were attracting enough attention as it was.

She was saved by Davina's nurse, Martha, who was obviously used to dealing with stubborn children and had a lot of experience with Davina in particular. She picked the girl up and carried her for a few steps, then put her down and led her away. Davina looked furious, and she stared over her shoulder at her friend for a while before turning a corner, leaving her line of sight.

Alyth breathed a sigh of relief. She had been sweeping up some earth and foliage from the paths between the vegetable patches and trying not to look at the Laird, whom she knew was only a few yards away. There was no way she could escape from his view now, though, she thought ruefully. She watched him approaching her, then he stopped in front of her. Alyth began to tremble inside. So much for trying to stay inconspicuous!

Everyone around them was watching, even though they were trying to make it appear as if they were not. Once more, Alyth found herself trapped in the gaze of his cold eyes, and once more she was helpless. She stood up.

“M’Laird?” she said, giving him a brief curtsy.

“Come with me,” he ordered.

Alyth did as she was told and followed him. It was some distance to the castle itself, since the gardens were extensive, and it took them some time to reach the courtyard.

Lachlan did not go any further, but turned to her, and Alyth thought that standing talking to him this way was becoming a little tedious. It was the third time he had summoned her this way; she only hoped that he would not threaten her the way he had before.

“Did she speak to you?” he asked.

Alyth shook her head. “Not this time,” she replied. “But there were a lot of people watching us, M’Laird. She has only done so before when we were alone, or you were with us.”

Lachlan nodded thoughtfully as he looked down at her, thinking how fascinating her deep grey eyes were. No matter how he tried to stop himself, he could not help thinking of Davina’s mother when he looked at her.

“I want her to learn to talk again,” he said gently, and as he dropped his gaze down to his hands,

Alyth saw him letting his guard down for the first time since she had known him. He was holding a red silk ribbon, running it through his fingers tenderly, before he realised that he was giving away some soft emotion that he usually kept hidden.

Alyth thought that the ribbon must have belonged to his wife, but of course, she could not ask him.



“I would like you to spend more time with her,” he went on. “Read her a story at night when she goes to sleep. I think she will like that.”

“But she has someone to do that already,” Alyth pointed out.

“Martha will still carry out her usual duties,” Lachlan replied, “but her reading skills are not the best, and as far as I know, Davina has never said a word to her. I would like you to take over the duty of reading to her.”

For the first time, Alyth felt that it was safe to smile at him. “It will not be a duty, M’Laird,” she said happily. “It will be a pleasure.”

Lachlan and Gavin were walking around the castle after the morning drill when they came to the laundry area just outside the kitchen and saw Jeannie and some of the other maids washing a load of the castle laundry.

There was nothing unusual about this, except that they had gained another helper in the shape of Davina, whose arms were immersed almost up to her shoulders in soapy water. She was imitating Jeannie, who had her arms in the same vat of laundry, and was obviously having a great deal of fun. Lachlan had lived with his daughter all her life and had never seen her interacting with the servants before.

Davina was trying to say the odd word, but mostly she was giggling, and this was a sound Lachlan had not heard for a very long time. Her nurse was keeping watch on his daughter from a distance, but she was not interfering, since it was obvious that Davina was enjoying herself very much.

“I havenae seen Davina sae happy for a long time,” Gavin observed, smiling. “She seems tae be fair smitten wi’ that new lassie.”

Lachlan frowned as he looked at Jeannie again. He was beginning to feel something strange for this woman who had come into his life so suddenly. She was so different—nothing like the usual maids, who obeyed him at once and never questioned his orders.

This woman was stubborn and stood up for herself, and there was something about her that was very familiar. She reminded him of someone else, someone who had

grey eyes, dark hair, and a sparkle in her eyes. She was ready to fight for what she wanted, and she had a way with Davina that was unlike any other woman but her mother. A stab of guilt pierced him; she was nothing like Sandrina—was she?

And yet, why had he begun to dream of her at night? Why did he sometimes imagine that she was lying in bed beside him?

Why did he feel so aroused when she passed him sometimes? Lachlan told himself it was just the reaction of his body to an attractive female, since he no longer went to the ceilidhs and social gatherings he had been accustomed to when his wife was alive. His body was likely starving for some womanly attention—in fact, he knew it was—but even now, three years after her death, he would have felt unfaithful if he succumbed to that temptation.

Yet deep inside he knew that it was more than that, but he brushed his thoughts away; he had no wish for Gavin to know them. He was a good friend, but Lachlan had no wish to make him aware of his guilty conscience.

“She is an interesting woman,” he conceded. “But a strange one. Does Maisie know anything about her?”

Gavin thought for a moment, stroking his thick beard. “Well, she likes the lass,” he answered at last. “So dae a’ the other maids. She says they a’ thought she would be a bit snooty at first, but now she is one o’ them. Maisie an’ the girls are a’ surprised at how well she gets on wi’ Davina. They say it is a miracle.” He took a long quaff of his water and smiled. “But miracle or no’, it is lovely tae see them playin’ together. D’ye no’ think so?”

“Indeed,” Lachlan agreed, “but this woman is not like any other servant I have ever seen, Gavin. She is obviously well-educated—she can read, and I’ve put her in charge of reading Davina her story at bedtime. Can you explain that?”

“Maisie tells me she was a ladies’ maid,” Gavin replied. “She said she had tae learn tae read as part o’ her duties, an’ the way she talks—well, she said she worked for the same woman for a long time an’ picked up her manner o’ speech.”

“And do you know the name of the lady who employed her?” Lachlan asked suspiciously. It would be good to confirm Jeannie Dunbar’s story to put his mind at rest.

“Maisie never told me,” Gavin answered. “I am no’ sure if she even knows hersel’.”

Lachlan sipped his ale, thinking. The whole story seemed fanciful to him; he doubted that a young woman could rid herself of the very strong Aberdeenshire accent in which the local people spoke. She was not old enough to have been in someone’s employ for years.

No, he decided. Something else was going on, and he was determined to find out what it was.

“I heard that when she arrived, she came from the south,” Lachlan said thoughtfully. “Is that not MacAdams land?”

“Aye, Lachlan,” Gavin confirmed. “But just because she came fae that direction doesnae make her one o’ them. The girl was in a hell of a state, an’ could have wandered a’ over the place for days.”

Gavin was one of less than a handful of people in the castle who was allowed to call the Laird by his given name, since they had known each other since Lachlan was a boy.

“I know, Gavin,” he said, frowning. “But I am still not convinced. Her accent, her reading, her bearing—she is not one of the common people.” He looked at Gavin

with a firm, direct, gaze. “Could she be a MacAdams spy?”

Gavin was about to laugh and deny this suggestion as fanciful, then his eyes widened as if in shock. “My god!” he exclaimed. “I just remembered somethin’. Some o’ my lads have seen a lass sneakin’ out in the early mornin’ tae train wi’ a sword. She has even used a bow.” He looked up at Lachlan. “A spy, ye say?” he said again. “Ye know, I think she might be. I might be dead wrong, but Lachlan, I think ye must say somethin’ tae her. Ye have tae know the truth.”

Lachlan nodded. He stood up and looked over at Davina and Jeannie Dunbar, still playing together. It seemed to him that Davina was becoming even more attached to Jeannie, and it worried him immensely. What if all of her apparent affection towards his daughter was an act, designed to worm her way into the household, and into his heart? Spies were dangerous, and female spies, he imagined, were more dangerous than men; they could use their feminine wiles to great effect.

“Do not worry, Gavin,” he said grimly. “I will be saying many words to that young lady, and they will not be the kind of words she wants to hear!”

With that, he strode away to the stables to find his favourite horse. At times like this he could not bear to be inside; he needed to be in the fresh air and the endless, open countryside around the castle to clear his mind, for he could not bear to fret and worry any longer.

Alyth duly made her way to Davina’s bedroom that evening to read her a story, and watched the little girl’s face light up with pleasure as she entered the room. She was dressed for bed, cuddling her doll as usual, but she did not seem sleepy in the least.

As she looked at her, Alyth was reminded of her own bedtimes, especially the summertime ones when there was almost no darkness, and she was obliged to go to bed in full daylight, which was incredibly frustrating. She had always fought like a

little tigress to be allowed to stay awake, but eventually tiredness always won.

There was a little bookshelf beside Davina's bed on which there were a couple of dozen picture books, one of which Davina picked out and gave to Alyth to read aloud. Her eyes were shining as she did so, and Alyth smiled at her fondly as she opened it and began to read. As she moved through the book, imitating the sounds of animals' and children's voices, she heard Davina beginning to laugh, and looked up at the girl's happy face.

Davina pointed to a picture of a cow, and said, "Moo," then giggled.

Alyth felt a surge of warmth and amazement inside as she gazed at her. Then she realised that she had a task to fulfil, and she went on with the story.

"Do you know that when I was a wee girl, my Mammy used to read stories to me?" Alyth said. Davina shook her head.

"My favourite ones were the stories about handsome princes and beautiful princesses," she went on. "And fairies because they were always so good and kind. Would you like a story like that tomorrow night?"

Davina smiled and nodded eagerly. This time it took a little longer for her to fall asleep, and when she eventually did, her eyes drifting closed, Alyth sat beside her for a long time, gazing tenderly at the little girl's face.

Suddenly, she realised that the Laird's daughter had come to mean a lot to her, and she guessed that Davina felt the same way about her. How had this happened?

"You know, Davina, I can understand your pain better than anyone. I lost my mother a few years ago, too, and my world went to shreds. There is only one thing that can ease my pain, but I am not sure if I can find it any more. If only you could help me,"

Alyth whispered to the sleeping Davina. “I know your father has the necklace. Where should I look for it, huh?”

Alyth sighed and stood up, then kissed Davina’s forehead before she tiptoed out of the room. What was Davina going to do when she left? Because Alyth knew that eventually she would have to leave Leithmuir and go back to her own home, and this would make both of them unhappy. It might even drive Davina back into her shell again.

She looked out of one of the windows in the corridor as she made her way to bed and saw the moon riding across the sky. It was almost, but not quite full, and she was reminded of a similar night when she was about twelve years old.

She was sitting with her head on her mother’s shoulder in front of the fire, feeling comfortably dozy and warm. They were looking out of the window at the same three-quarter moon, and her mother was reading aloud, but this time it was a love story.

Alyth had grown out of children’s picture books, so Lady MacAdams had gradually introduced her to more adult works of fiction while gently breaking Alyth into the knowledge about what her duties for the clan would one day be; marry for an alliance and produce an heir. That evening she had come to the end of her explanation, and Alyth had gazed at her in astonishment.

“You mean, you and Da...” she asked in disbelief.

“Yes, and we love each other very much, Alyth,” she said gently, as she kissed her daughter’s forehead. “Sometimes people who are married don’t love each other, then it can be only the act two people do to have a baby, but your father and I loved each other almost from the first time our eyes met. I hope that happens to you when you marry.”

Then she smiled, a glowing, happy expression that Alyth never forgot. She recalled it now, however, as she looked at the moon and sighed. Would she ever feel like that about anyone? Somehow, she doubted it.

It had been a long, exhausting day, and when Alyth reached her room she lay down in her bed, thinking. Despite her attempts to avoid him, Laird Carrick seemed to have been everywhere she looked that day. He always stared at her with a face that was devoid of expression, as if it was a mask he had put on just for her, since he seemed animated and friendly to everyone else.

Perhaps it was her imagination, she thought, but the more she considered the matter, the less likely that possibility seemed to be. No, there was definitely an expression that he reserved especially for her, and it was so impenetrable that it might as well have been a suit of armour that she could never pierce.

Alyth shifted in her little bed, trying to wriggle into a comfortable position, but it was too narrow, and the thin straw pallet underneath her was anything but soft. For someone who was used to sleeping on well-stuffed feather mattresses, it was torture. However, she consoled herself with the fact that at least she had a roof over her head and enough to eat. Yet, she knew she would become accustomed to the bed in time, but in the meantime she would have to suffer.

Eventually, Alyth fell asleep, but realised after a few moments that she was not alone in the bed. An arm was draped over her waist and there was a warm body pressed against her back. But strangely, although there was someone else in the narrow bed with her, it had suddenly become more spacious. Alyth had no trouble turning around to face whoever was lying behind her, and almost cried out when she saw Lachlan Carrick.

His eyes were closed, he was breathing deeply and evenly, and there was even a hint of a smile on his face. Presently, as she watched, his eyes opened and looked straight



into hers.

“Alyth,” he murmured, and she realised with a shock that he had not called her Jeannie, the false name she had been using since she arrived in Leithmuir.

Her heart began to beat a wild tattoo, and she stared at him, unable to think of what to do next. Should she humour him? Pretend to be outraged and tell him to leave? She knew that many men of his class used their maid servants to satisfy their carnal needs, whether or not they were willing, but she had not thought him one of those men.

Now she stared at him as his smile widened, and he brought a hand up to cup her cheek, then he pulled her towards him, and to her shock, planted a soft kiss on her lips.

Alyth was even more astounded as he touched her lips with his tongue tip, begging to be allowed entrance to her mouth. She was startled by her own response as she allowed him inside to let her tongue tangle with hers. Her body began to tingle, and she strained against him as she felt his big hands begin to roam over her from her shoulders, over her breasts, down over her flat stomach. He cupped her buttocks in his hands and pulled her closer, all the while rubbing against her in a way that made her body sing with delight.

When his lips left hers, Lachlan looked into her eyes again before kissing her softly once more, but when Alyth opened her eyes again he was gone. She reached out her hands to see if she could find him, but he was not there, and her spirits sank.

The bed had shrunk to the same narrow width it had been before, and she felt like weeping as she turned over to sleep, having abandoned her.

Hours passed, during which she was tortured by thoughts of Lachlan Carrick. She hated him, did she not? Yet, why was her whole being singing with delight at the

thought of him?

Alyth dozed intermittently, not fully awake but not sleeping either, and at some time before dawn she gave up and rose from bed. She had kept the trousers she had been given before, and now she put them on, then lit a candle and tiptoed outside.

It was a cloudy night, but a full moon lit the sky behind them, and Alyth could clearly see the grounds where the guards trained with their swords and bows. There were targets set up in a row along one of the walls, but arrows striking them would be too noisy, she decided, so she opted for a sword with which to fight an imaginary enemy.

Accordingly, she went to the weapons store and picked out a medium-sized broadsword, then visualised a fierce and well-trained enemy in front of her.

She attacked him fiercely, growling in fury as she thrust and sliced, backing her imaginary enemy into a corner and finishing him off with a savage swipe. It was only then that she realised she had been fighting Lachlan Carrick, and her head spun in confusion. A few hours ago, she had been dreaming of him making love to her, for heaven's sake!

What is wrong with you, Alyth? she thought as she moved back to the centre of the training field to begin again.

Dawn was just beginning to streak the sky, and it was slowly becoming lighter; soon the castle would be waking for the day, and Alyth did not wish to take the risk of being found out. She decided to go through one more bout, then go back to her chamber and dress for the day, since it promised to be a long, tiring one, full of even more laundry.

Alyth took her stance, ready to begin the imaginary bout, but she never got the chance. She jumped in fright as a heavy hand landed on her shoulder, and whipped

around to see who was there, raising her sword as she did so. However, when she saw who it was, she stiffened her body in a defensive position.

“Good morning,” said Lachlan Carrick. His words were ostensibly a greeting, but they sounded more like a threat.

Alyth could see, even in the dim grey light of dawn, that Lachlan was holding a mighty broadsword in his hand. He was sweating, and his tunic was sticking to him, outlining every one of his impressive muscles. Either he had been training alone or he had something nefarious in mind; from the look on his face it was the latter. Or perhaps, like her, he had been fighting some imaginary enemy, and that enemy was probably her. The depth of hatred they had for each other was equal on both sides.

For a few moments he stood looking at her grimly, his brows drawn down in a fierce frown, shadowing his eyes and filling his face with menace. Alyth had often tried to imagine him smiling at her and found it impossible. It certainly was now.

Instinctively, Alyth backed away a few steps, but Lachlan stood still, his eyes never leaving hers. His body was tense, still, and silent, and somehow his soundless posture made him more intimidating, like a big cat about to spring on its prey. Indeed, Alyth felt acutely vulnerable and helpless. She was not a tiny woman by any means, but at this moment, Lachlan Carrick looked absolutely huge.

She could imagine another scenario when they would fight each other with a different kind of passion, this time kissing, sweating, limbs tangled in a frantic, lustful embrace. Alyth was baffled by the fact that she was both attracted to him and repelled by him in equal measures. What was it about Lachlan Carrick that confused her so much? He was just a man, after all; a very attractive man, to be sure, but there was more to life than a handsome face.

She took another step backwards, but this time Lachlan followed her. He had always

suspected by the way she moved and the speed of her reflexes when she worked at some difficult task that she was no ordinary maid. Now that he had seen her using a sword, he was convinced that she had been trained to defend herself—no, not only defend, but attack too.

He was sure that if he took her on now, she would put up a good fight, even though it was unlikely she would beat him. A man always had the huge advantage of natural strength, over a woman, after all.

Lachlan felt himself harden as he contemplated the possibility of doing battle with Jeannie Dunbar. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, especially in the breeches she was wearing, leaving her sensual curves in imagination. He pictured himself lying with her, skimming his hands over her soft skin, cupping them over her generously sized breasts and kissing her full lips.

He began to walk around her, his body thrumming with desire, while she watched him. Daylight was broadening now, and Alyth knew it would only be a matter of time before they were seen by someone, who would no doubt be extremely curious to know why their Laird was engaged in combat with a serving maid.

Although she was shaking with fear inside, Alyth stubbornly refused to let her feelings show on her face; she had become an expert in hardening her features into a stony mask. She kept her gaze fixed on the door of the weapons store, her eyes never moving a fraction.

“You are a very strange woman, Jeannie Dunbar,” Lachlan remarked, his voice a low, threatening rumble. “I have never met a serving maid who reads, handles herself with such grace, and speaks with an accent that is very, very different from the one the other servants use. I have heard it said that you are very adept at looking around the castle, even going into places you have no business being in at all. Several of my guards have seen you, but somehow you always convince them that you have a good

reason for being there. You seem to think Leithmuir belongs to you.

One might think that being able to disappear from one place and reappear in another is witchcraft—or perhaps they might suspect that you are a spy.”

Alyth jumped in fright as the word hit her like a blow. For once, she had been unable to hide her reaction, and Lachlan Carrick had seen it all too clearly. He bent down so that his nose was almost touching hers, and suddenly, he was not aroused any more—at least, not in the way he had been. Now he was simply furious.

For a long moment, Lachlan stared at her, then suddenly he stepped back, and raised his sword, holding it upright in front of him. Alyth recognised the gesture as the formal challenge to a duel, and held her own sword up in answer to the invitation.

“I accept,” she said firmly. “And I promise you a fair fight, M’Laird. I am only a woman, and I am not as strong as you are, but I do not ask for any allowances to be made because of that. Treat me as you would treat a man. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he replied. “We will fight for first blood.”

“First blood” meant that whoever was the first to draw blood from their enemy would win the bout, even if the wound was only a tiny scratch. All the weapons they used to practise with were blunt, so likely a scratch or a cut would be all they could inflict on each other anyway. The duel would likely be a short one.

Alyth made the first move, thrusting her sword at Lachlan as hard as she could. However, he parried the thrust and launched into one of his own, but there were two attributes in which he could not match Alyth, and they were speed and agility.

When it came to sheer strength, she was, of course, outmatched, but now, as Lachlan’s sword tip came straight at her, Alyth sidestepped so that he missed her

completely. He stumbled forward for a few steps and narrowly missed falling to the ground, and as he turned to face her again, Lachlan saw her sword swiping towards him again. He parried the stroke, sweeping her weapon away in a wide circle, but he had left the front of his body open to attack.

Too late, he saw his mistake and took a few steps backwards to reposition himself, holding his sword horizontally across his body to block her next stroke. He was astonished to find himself firmly on the defensive and wondered how this could possibly have happened—especially against a woman!

Alyth's next stroke proved that she was definitely no amateur, as she raised her sword and was about to bring it down on his head before he lifted his own weapon to block it. The two swords clashed and for a second it seemed as though there would be a stalemate, with neither willing to move, before Alyth backed away. They circled around each other before Alyth sidestepped and attacked Lachlan from another direction.

This blow wrong-footed Lachlan, but only for a second, and he recovered quickly, but when he turned to face Alyth again she could see that his eyes were smouldering with a terrible rage.

Her stomach filled with terror, but there was nothing else she could do but keep on fighting because she could hardly give up now. She had a dreadful feeling, even though they had promised to fight only till first blood, that he would kill her.

Lachlan was astonished at the girl's obvious expertise; it was clear she had been well-trained by an expert because she was not merely waving her sword around, but handling it with energy and purpose. If he had not known better, he could have imagined he was doing battle with one of his guards.

He could not help admiring her confidence, her agility, the speed of her movements

and her stamina. He had no idea how long they had been fighting, but he was beginning to tire. Damn the woman! She was fighting like a man, although she most definitely was not one of his own sex; he almost laughed aloud at the thought.

Even if he had not had his suspicions before, the level of her skill told him that she was no ordinary maid: she must be a spy, but if she were, she was not a very good one. Her talents marked her out as someone quite extraordinary, and he had to know more—he would not sleep until he did.

Alyth was also beginning to flag; she practised regularly, but this encounter was different—of course it was. Her enemy was not imaginary, but a large, powerful, flesh-and-blood man with a very hostile attitude and a prodigious amount of strength.

It was Lachlan's strength that finally won. They carried on with the duel for what seemed like hours before he swiped his sword across the front of her chest, narrowly missing her, but Alyth was too exhausted to battle any longer.

She tripped over a loose flagstone, lost her balance, and fell heavily onto the ground, landing on her left shoulder. Instinctively, she cried out in pain, then cursed herself; she wanted to show no weakness in front of this man. She was lying on her back, completely at his mercy.

Alyth had to restrain herself from spitting at him. She stayed quiet as he crouched down and leaned over her, his hands on either side of her body, caging her in yet again. She wanted to close her eyes so that she would not have to look at the anger in his eyes, but she would not give Lachlan Carrick the satisfaction. He might suspect that she was afraid of him.

A moment later, he put one of his large hands around Alyth's neck. His grip was not tight, but its position was enough to terrify her. He only had to squeeze to choke the life out of her. This time Alyth could not hold back the fear on her face.



“Are you afraid of me, Jeannie?” he asked, his eyes full of dark glee. “Because you should be. You should be very scared indeed because I am a very powerful man in these parts. Right now, you are completely at my mercy. I could squeeze the life out of you and no one would know. Even if they did, I could still walk away scot-free because I am a Laird, and my men would never betray me. Think about that for a moment.” He sat back on his haunches and looked down at her with a smug smile on his face.

“If you long to kill me so much, then why do you hesitate, M’Laird ?” Alyth asked defiantly, sneering at his title. “Is it you who are afraid, or is it because of Davina? If you think so badly of me, why do you let me get so close to her? She is a very vulnerable child.”

Lachlan saw red. “Leave my daughter out of this,” he growled. “She has nothing to do with it.”

Then he was silent, breathing heavily but looking down at Jeannie Dunbar with murder in his eyes. In truth, he had to let his expression speak for him because he could think of nothing else to say; this woman was not only skilled in self-defence, she was extremely intelligent too, and presently, she was running rings around him.

For every one of his questions she had a smart answer which was often another question that he found it difficult to reply to. Every remark he made was treated with contempt and cynicism.

“Why are you here?” he asked angrily. “You are not a maid of any kind. Your speech is cultured and you can read. These are not skills an ordinary housemaid would learn in the course of her duties. Who are you?”

Alyth swallowed nervously. “I used to be a ladies’ maid,” she told him. “I needed to learn to read for my mistress.”

“I see.” Lachlan’s tone was suspicious. “What was the name of the lady you worked for?”

This came totally out of the blue, and for a few seconds Alyth had no answer. She had thought she was prepared for everything, but lying here on the hard flagstones with a huge threatening man leaning over her seemed to have wiped her mind clear of an answer. She was tongue-tied.

“If you cannot even tell me your mistress’ name,” Lachlan said grimly, “then I am forced to believe you are lying to me. You were not a ladies’ maid.” Lachlan shook his head firmly. “Now, the truth, please.”

However, before she could answer, Lachlan saw that the sun was a little higher now and knew that any moment now, the guards of the first watch of the day would be taking their positions. Quickly, he hauled her to her feet, grabbed her by the elbow and strode back inside the castle, practically dragging her with him.

When they reached his study, he pushed Jeannie inside and locked the door firmly behind them. He poured himself a glass of ale, then, after hesitating for a moment, poured one for her too.

Alyth sipped it gratefully, closing her eyes and savouring the yeasty taste of the cool liquid. When she opened them again, she found herself staring into his bright blue-green eyes.

“The truth,” he repeated grimly.

Alyth looked at the size of his big hands laced together on the table-top; they looked like a heavy club. She nodded slowly, deciding that she could give him half the truth, but only enough to temporarily satisfy him. She doubted that she could allay his suspicions entirely, but perhaps she could make him leave her alone for a while.

“I told the other maids that my mistress often abused me,” Alyth said sadly. “But you are right—I was never a ladies’ maid. I am running away from violence, but not from my employer.” She took another sip of her ale to give herself a moment to think. “I am a merchant’s daughter, and my father has great plans for me. He thinks that by marrying me to another wealthy man, he will garner more business among the upper classes.

He imports silk and trades in wool, and there are many wealthy ladies in the district. They always need ball gowns and other special clothing for grand occasions. However, he saw an opportunity to marry me off to another wealthy businessman who has a dreadful reputation for being an absolute brute, and I was not prepared to stay and be abused, so I ran away. I am not prepared to be sold for my father’s gain.” She shuddered. “I was not used to looking after myself, especially outside in the cold, and I had no idea where I was going. I was in a terrible state when I came here, as you know.” She dropped her gaze from his to conceal the anger she felt.

“But you are obviously well-trained in self-defence,” he countered. “Why?”

“My mother was murdered,” she replied. “So I forced my father to have me trained.” She was about to make a joke about being employed as one of his guards but decided that it would only anger him further. Then another possibility occurred to her. What if she could use her skills against anyone who tried to harm Davina?

Alyth opened her mouth to make the suggestion, but suddenly realised that Lachlan Carrick was bending over her again, his blue eyes dark with rage. “If you harm one hair of anyone under my roof,” he growled, “or steal so much as a stone, I will have you hanged here in front of everyone in the castle.” His deep voice was throbbing with fury. “Do you understand?”

Alyth had no idea where her next words came from. They escaped from her mouth before she had a chance to take them back.

“I do... but what if I stole your heart?” she asked, with a mischievous smirk.

Lachlan was completely dumbfounded. Whatever it was he had expected Jeannie Dunbar to say, it had not been this. He was astonished, and furious at the same time, but then he seemed to spend most of his time being angry with her; it was as if she had been put on earth especially to infuriate him. If so, she was doing a damn good job of it!

Then something astounding happened. Jeannie got to her feet, her eyes never leaving his, and pushed him back against the desk, then pressed her lips to his.

For a split second, Lachlan froze in utter shock, then, before he knew what he was doing, he was responding to her as if he had no will of his own; he felt his manhood stiffen as he became aroused and lifted his hips to press against hers. His arms went around her as though he had no ability or will to stop them. In fact, he had neither; it was as though she were a witch, and he was completely under her spell.

It had been such a long time since he had had a woman in his arms, and even though he wanted to hate this wild creature who had so recently come into his life and completely turned it upside down, he could not.

Her body was warm and pliant, her skin supple, her hair as soft as silk. Her scent was almost making him dizzy with desire. It had been so very long since he had been able to breathe in the warm, indescribably sensual aroma that was just woman, the essence of femininity itself.

Lachlan groaned. Knowing this woman was not his and could never be his was

infinitely frustrating, but there were many others out there, he reminded himself. Why did that not console him, though?

Alyth felt Lachlan's arms going around her, and a thrill of triumph shot through her. Men might be bigger and stronger than women, but when it came to the power of desire, they were as weak as water; she had seen this for herself many times.

That was not to say that she was immune to the force of attraction herself. As she felt Lachlan's manhood pressing against her, she felt her own arousal welling up. It was glorious, but Alyth realised that she had to quell it: she could not allow it to weaken and overwhelm her.

Very reluctantly, she broke the kiss and moved back a step to look into Lachlan's eyes again. They were still closed, as if he was under the influence of some soporific drug, and he opened them only very slowly.

That was when Alyth sprung her surprise. In the split second before Lachlan saw her again, she whipped a small knife out of her pocket. She had not been able to lay a hand on it before, but now she was in the perfect position to do so. The knife was very small, but extremely sharp, so much so that she had to keep it in a leather sheath when she was not using it.

However, she used it now to great effect. She pushed him back even harder against the desk and pressed the knife against his throat next to his Adam's apple. The blade lay flat against his skin, but Alyth only had to turn it a fraction, and the little weapon would slice through it without any effort at all.

She smiled at him darkly, and for the first time she saw a hint of fear in his blue-green eyes. Now I have him where I want him, she thought triumphantly.

"I don't know if you can see the weapon I'm holding in my hand," Alyth said,

injecting a friendly note into her voice to anger him further. “It’s only a small knife, but I only have to move it a fraction of an inch, and it will kill you, M’Laird. You should never underestimate the measures a desperate woman will take to protect herself. The consequences can be fatal.”

Suddenly, Alyth turned the blade so that it nicked Lachlan’s neck and made a small scratch on his skin, which began to bleed and stained his tunic red. “First blood,” she said, smiling. “I win.”

Alyth crossed the room swiftly, unlocked the door and left, then began to run to her room as fast as her legs would carry her, expecting to hear the noise of the Laird’s heavy footsteps behind her at any moment. To her amazement, they never came. Once she reached her chamber, she locked the door behind her and put a chair under the handle for good measure.

Alyth sat down on her bed and stared into space for a long while. She looked back on her actions of the last hour or so with complete disbelief. What on earth had she done? She had kissed the hostile Laird of Leithmuir, then, to make a bad situation even worse, she had pressed a knife into his neck and threatened him. She had even dared to injure him, even though the wound was only tiny.

Alyth had no doubt that at some point in the next hour or so, half-a-dozen guards would come and break the door down; a chair and a flimsy lock would hardly deter a small party of very well armed men. What had she been thinking, for god’s sake?

“You will not survive tomorrow, Alyth,” she said aloud with a heavy sigh. “Or perhaps even the next hour.”

She thought of trying to escape, but decided it was futile. The sun had risen fully and there was no chance of sneaking out in broad daylight; she would have to accept whatever fate Lachlan Carrick decided to dish out to her.

Lachlan went to Davina's bedroom to watch her sleeping before she woke up for the day. In sleep, she was even more adorable than she was during the day—if that was possible. He loved her with an intensity that he could never have foreseen before he was a father; she was his world, his reason for existence, and that was the main reason he was so fiercely protective of her. She was so vulnerable.

He could see now that any resemblance between Jeannie Dunbar and his wife Sandrina was purely superficial, since Sandrina had respected him too much to ever have treated him so callously.

As well as that, the fact that a woman, a person so much smaller and weaker than himself, had managed to beat him, not exactly with ease, but with strength of will and determination, sorely hurt his pride.

But why was Davina so fond of her? His daughter had never responded like this to anyone since her mother died, then Jeannie Dunbar had come into his household. Now she had completely emerged from behind the wall she had built around herself since her mother died. No one else had managed to get her to do this, and the fact that Davina was beginning to speak absolutely astounded him, since she had never before said a word to anyone, not even him. The strangest thing of all was that it had happened with no apparent effort on Jeannie's part; she was as surprised as everyone else.

Damn , he thought furiously. Why are you letting her torment you like this, Lachlan?

Yet, he knew why; he also trusted his instincts, and they told him that there was something between him and this strange woman that had to be settled before he could be at peace.

Yes, he could throw her in the dungeons. Indeed, he could, as he had threatened, have her hanged, but she touched something inside him that he had not been aware of for a



long time.

What was it? She certainly aroused him physically, but any beautiful woman could do that to a man. No, it was something more, something intangible that he had to struggle with. Did he care for her? Lachlan almost laughed out loud at the thought, then he saw Davina stirring restlessly in her sleep and stopped himself just in time.

He stood up and bent down to kiss her forehead, looking down at her long red-gold hair spread across the pillow, her innocent little face so peaceful and content, and his heart swelled with love. How could he and Sandrina have created someone so lovely? It never ceased to amaze him.

Soon she would be a woman, but he was not looking forward to that, since he would not be able to protect her as he always had before. She would be laughed at if her father was always hanging around. Despite the fact that she had been traumatised by the death of her mother, there were signs that Davina was becoming a little more independent.

And what if a man wanted to marry her? He could picture some predatory individual taking advantage of her and pretending to be the love of her life. He would treat her with gentleness and kindness until there was a ring on her finger and her dowry was in his pocket, then his true colours would emerge. He would hate to be the man who wrenched Davina's husband away from her: she might loathe him forever.

However, there was consolation in knowing that there were not many men who would take on a girl who would not speak; perhaps remaining unmarried would be the best path for Davina to follow.

Yet now Lachlan could see another way. What if he let Jeannie work and play with her? She might gradually coax Davina to speak, not just the odd word now and then, but real meaningful conversations with friends and others. She might bring out

Davina's hidden talents, like the ability to draw that no one knew about; Davina would be quite a gifted artist one day.

Lachlan shook his head to clear it of all his unwanted thoughts, then tucked Davina's blankets under her chin, kissed her again, and left, after pausing at the door to give her one last loving glance.

He closed the door quietly behind him and went out and climbed up to the topmost turret of Leithmuir Castle, which was so high that he had a view all around the countryside for miles around. The sun had just peeked over the horizon and its light was flooding the fields around, showing flocks of sheep like tiny dots against the slopes of the hills.

At this time of the year they were wearing their thick winter coats, and he almost envied them as he stood, exposed to the elements, freezing on top of his fortress. The grass around them was dusted with frost and the colour had disappeared from the trees, leaving the landscape looking like a drawing done in charcoal. How he longed for spring! He loved to see the earth awakening from her long winter sleep, loved how the wildflowers came out in an orderly sequence: first snowdrops, then daffodils, tulips and bluebells. Spring was his favourite time of year, but it was still months away.

Lachlan's chestnut hair was blowing around him, and he tossed it out of his face impatiently. Usually, he could have stood up here for hours, no matter what the state of the weather was, lost in his thoughts, but this morning they were too disturbing to dwell on.

As he looked down, he saw a party of his guards going out on patrol, and he felt a sense of pride. These men answered to him, and him alone; they dared not disobey him since he put food in their mouths and kept a roof over their heads, and in return, they protected him and all that was his.

Yet owning this castle and all this land was a fearsome responsibility, and sometimes he bent under the weight of it. Those were the times when he locked himself in his chamber and slept for an entire day, or went out riding on his favourite horse from sunrise to sunset. Then his mind was clear for a while before the worries began to pile up again.

Life had been much easier when he had Sandrina to care for him and share his burdens. He remembered times when they had sat together in the evening after Davina had gone to bed, protesting in her shrill little voice that she was not a bit tired. When she had finally succumbed to sleep, Lachlan had closed his eyes and laid his head on his wife's lap, slowly letting go of all the tension that had built up inside him.

However, as he looked back on his days with Sandrina, he realised he was not feeling the pain he once had, and for a moment, a stab of guilt pierced him. Yet, it had been three years since her death. Should he not be finished with grieving by now? Of course, no one could tell a man how long his mourning should last, so perhaps it was time to look forward to the future and not backwards to the past. Sandrina would have wanted it that way, he thought.

Then he thought again of Jeannie, her dark grey eyes, her defiant spirit, her firm, toned body, and groaned. Perhaps she had been sent from heaven to help him heal, but he could not imagine anyone less angelic!

Lachlan went downstairs to have breakfast, realising suddenly that he was ravenous. He passed some of the maids on the way, all of whom curtsied to him, but Jeannie was not amongst them. Despite himself, he felt a little disappointed.

He went into the small parlour where he and Davina dined and found her sitting waiting for him with her nanny sitting behind her. Her face broke into a huge smile when she saw him, and she rushed into his arms.

Lachlan laughed and hugged her. “Did you sleep well, my lovely?” he asked. He said the same thing every morning, and usually, he received nothing more than a nod in reply. However, this morning was different.

Davina put her hands around his face, looked up into his eyes, and said, “Yes, Da.”

For a moment, Lachlan was the one who was speechless as he stared at his daughter’s face. She looked hopeful, but there was a hint of doubt in her eyes. Would her father be pleased with her?

Lachlan felt tears of joy spring to his eyes, and he hugged Davina as hard as he could. “I am so glad you slept well,” he said huskily. “And I am so glad you told me so.” He reached out his hand to squeeze hers, and was rewarded with another beaming smile.

He thought there was a possibility that she might speak again, but Davina remained silent for the rest of the meal. She looked happier than she had for a long time, however. Perhaps she too was beginning to let go of the grief she had been holding on to all this time. Lachlan hoped so.

He imagined taking her out for rides, throwing stones in Loch Leithmuir and flying kites from the castle ramparts, but instead of being silent, Davina would be screaming and laughing with happiness.

Suddenly, Lachlan knew that those days could be coming soon.

Lachlan had unexpectedly invited some friends he had not seen for a while to a dinner party at the castle; this was something that he had not done since before his wife died, and everyone was astonished.

The maid servants were all eating breakfast in the kitchen and talking over the event in somewhat shocked, but pleased tones. They were all happy for the Laird, even if the coming occasion was a bolt from the blue and meant a great deal of extra work for them.

“I am that glad tae see he is goin’ tae be among his friends again,” Flora said, smiling. “It has been three years since Milady passed on. Maybe he is finally gettin’ over her, maybe he will soon be courtin’ again!”

There was a murmur of agreement. “He deserves the love o’ a good woman because he is a good man,” Alison added. “An’ he didnae deserve what happened tae him. Bloody MacAdams! Savages!”

“The Robertsons are just as bad,” Catriona put in angrily. “If no’ worse. I hate them.”

They all knew that Catriona had a good reason to hate the Robertsons, since her father had been murdered by one of them, and the culprit had never been caught.

Flora patted her back and said soothingly, “Dinnae worry, hen, there will be nae sign o’ any Robertsons in Leithmuir. If one o’ them tried tae set foot in here, he wouldnae last very long!”

This time the chorus of acquiescence was very loud indeed, and Alyth was shocked to hear the naked animosity in the women's voices. It seemed that it was not only Lachlan Carrick who had been badly affected by the clan wars.

She had grown very fond of the women she worked with, but now, hearing their anger when her family's name was mentioned, she felt terribly afraid. What if anyone found out who she was? She had taken great pains to hide her identity, but it only took one person to recognise her, and her fate would be sealed.

She decided to change the subject to something a little lighter. "Did anybody see the new guard the Laird has just hired?" she asked, looking around the women with a mischievous smirk on her face.

"No!" It was Heather who spoke. "What is he like?"

"Well." Alyth stood up and held her hand up about eight inches higher than her head. "About this tall, with golden blond hair and the brightest green eyes you ever saw. And handsome. He is an absolute god!"

"Do ye know his name?" Catriona asked eagerly.

Alyth looked sad. She shook her head and said, "No, I do not, but I'm sure Heather can find out."

Heather was the one who always solved mysteries and rooted out secrets faster than a bloodhound on the scent of a criminal.

"I will have the name before bedtime!" she said determinedly.

They all laughed and began to eat their breakfast again, but just then, Maisie came in with a large sheet of paper in her hand.

“Mornin’, lassies,” she said pleasantly. “Ye have heard that the Laird has some guests comin’. Well, quite a lot o’ guests, actually, so there is an awful lot o’ cleanin’ that has tae be done! A’ the bedrooms above the Great Hall an’ the ones leadin’ tae the chapel need tae be done—an’ I mean really scrubbed!”

Everyone groaned, but Alyth was glad that she would be cleaning and making up guest-bedrooms for the next few days. These were farther away from the busiest parts of the castle and less likely to be seen by the Laird.

She was also happy to know that she would be able to search for the pendant undisturbed, since she knew that the maids had a room allotted to each of them, and did not share one between them. At the end of the day, Maisie would come to inspect their work, and if it was not to her satisfaction, they would have to do it again.

Alyth resolved to do her work as quickly as possible and sneak away to where she thought Lachlan might have hidden a piece of jewellery.

Could it still be in his wife’s bedchamber? Alyth knew which room it was, since she had been about to search it when she first came to the castle, but she had been moved on to other duties and the opportunity had been lost. However, she was deeply disappointed to find out that the room had been tightly locked up, and a guard was posted outside it. Lachlan Carrick was apparently protective of his wife even after she was dead.

While she was doing that, Alyth searched every room that she cleaned without much hope of finding the jewel. No doubt, Lachlan Carrick kept it in a place where no one else would think to find it—not in a chest or a secure vault, but hidden somewhere that was the last place anyone would search.

She was beginning to understand the way his mind worked now; it had not been too difficult. Like most men, he was completely vulnerable to seduction, and Alyth was

planning to use that to her advantage. After she had achieved her objective, however, she planned to flee back to her father, whom she was sure would have given her up for dead by now. She had wanted to get a message to him, but could think of no way of doing so without attracting unwanted attention.

Alyth had been working so hard she had not had time to see Davina, which saddened her because she had become fond of the little girl and missed her very much. By the time Alyth was finished in the evening, Davina was asleep and there was no chance to read her story to her.

Three days passed like this, but on the fourth, one of the guards came striding towards her as she was washing the floor of one of the passageways. Alyth was about to give him a piece of her mind when he held a hand up and said, “The Laird wants tae see ye, Jeannie.”

“Me?” she feigned surprise. “I wonder what I have done wrong?”

The guard stared at her. “I’m sure it’s nothin’ tae worry about, hen.”

Alyth nodded in agreement, although she felt deeply apprehensive. She made her way down to the courtyard, where she found Lachlan and Davina seated together on Lachlan’s grey stallion. There was another horse nearby, a much smaller chestnut mare.

“Jeannie!” Davina called.

Alyth felt a leap of joy in her chest as she strode over to the little girl. “Such a great voice ye have there, Davina,” she cried.

Lachlan regarded them both with an unfathomable expression as he heard Davina’s speech. He knelt on the ground to look into her eyes, and Alyth had a fleeting glimpse



of a tiny smile on his face, but it disappeared almost at once. It seemed to Alyth that he wanted to be happy, but was afraid that it would be snatched away from him again. That was supposition, of course, because his inscrutable face gave nothing away.

As she studied him, he glanced up and met her gaze. Alyth panicked and looked away hastily, feeling utterly terrified. How was she going to cope with a situation like this after what had occurred between them? She was sure that he regretted their kiss, but was too embarrassed to say so. Accordingly, she decided to act as though nothing had happened; it was not as though it were going to happen again, after all!

She took a deep breath and asked: “Are you going somewhere, M’Laird?”

“Davina wants to go and see if there are any snowdrops and heather about. She loves heather, especially white heather, so we will go in search of some since it will make you happy, eh, miss? She would like you to come with us.” He looked back at his daughter, and she giggled.

“I will be happy to,” Alyth replied, smiling. She felt jealous of the great love they shared, which was obvious every time they looked at each other. She mounted the mare with the aid of one of the guards, who made a stirrup with his hands for her. She wondered how Lachlan had guessed she could ride, though.

“I know you cannot probably ride well,” Lachlan answered her thought. “But we won’t be going more than a few hundred yards away, and the horses will only be walking.”

“Thank you, M’Laird,” Alyth said, with a bob of her head.

In fact, she could ride better than many men she knew, but now was not the time to tell that to Lachlan Carrick.

They rode for a short-distance away from the castle, and the land began to slope downhill. The sun was bright that day, and the tough winter heather showed a brilliant pinkish-purple in its glare. A stand of trees stood a little farther away, and Alyth knew there would be snowdrops there. Apparently, so did Davina, since she ran to Alyth as soon as they both dismounted and grabbed her hand before running into the spinney to bend over a little patch of the tiny white flowers.

Alyth was glad when she saw that Lachlan was tending to the horses and not following them. Since the morning of their kiss, she had not been able to stop thinking about it, the firm pressure of his lips, his tongue stroking hers. She had never been kissed before, and was almost ashamed to admit that she wanted more; not just more kisses, but more of Lachlan himself.

However, she was confused. The sides of him that she had seen were so different; on one hand there was the tender, loving father, and on the other was the fierce warrior who had almost scared her to death.

And there was yet another side too, the broken part that he kept hidden inside, and which she had only seen a few times. This part of him was so vulnerable that when it was touched, his temper flared into a fiery rage in self-defence.

However, today he was the loving father, and Davina was taking full advantage of this, using her wiles to get her way. Alyth laughed inwardly; even at the tender age of seven, Davina was learning the art of twisting a man around her little finger, even if the man in question was only her father.

They bent down under a tree to see a patch of tiny white flowers, their heads bent as if in sadness. Davina bent down to pick one, but she had barely touched the flower when Alyth heard a sound that almost froze her heart. She whipped around to see two heavily armed men in the livery of the Robertson Clan crashing through the undergrowth behind them.

Alyth heard Davina scream, and immediately pushed the little girl behind her, then faced the two men armed with nothing but her little knife. It looked quite pathetic compared to the Robertsons' mighty broadswords, but Alyth knew she could do a lot of damage with it if she managed to get within arm's length. She was definitely the weaker of the two sets of combatants, but she would never give up.

"Alyth MacAdams!" one of the guards, a tall dark bearded man, jeered as he moved in closer to her, holding his sword pointed directly at her. "Your father has put out a big reward for ye, hen." Talking to the other guard, he said, "There are men lookin' for ye all over the place, but we have found ye!"

Alyth had surreptitiously taken the knife out of her pocket, but was holding it behind her back out of sight of the two men. "I think ye might have buttoned yer heid up the wrong way this mornin', pal," she said scornfully. "My name's Jeannie an' I'm a maid!"

The man looked at her doubtfully, then at the other guard, who was much shorter and heavier. In the fraction of a second when their eyes were not on her, Alyth leapt forward and knocked the first man's sword out of his hand with her elbow, then sliced him across his cheek with her knife.

He screamed and fell backwards, clutching his cheek, which was now pouring with blood. Alyth picked up his sword, which he had dropped on the ground. However, events were unfolding almost too fast for Alyth to keep up with, and a moment later she saw the shorter of the two guards grabbing Davina, who looked frozen with terror.

"Let go of her," Alyth growled, "or you will be very sorry."

The man laughed at her and pulled Davina even closer to him, his arm just under her chin. If he had applied just a little pressure, he could have choked her, but Alyth had

no intention of letting him do that. She held up the sword and advanced towards him with murder in her eyes.

However, it seemed that Davina had other ideas too. Although the guard was heavily armoured, his hands were bare, and Davina bit him as hard as she could. It was obviously painful, not as bad as his friend's wound, but enough to make him let go of her. He cried out as Davina broke free of him, then he reached out to grab her, but Davina was too fast for him, and ran back to Alyth.

At that moment Lachlan, hearing the noise of fighting, dashed up behind the guard Davina had bitten, his sword unsheathed. The man half turned, but Lachlan's blade pierced him from behind, and he dropped dead without making a sound. The first guard was running for his horse, but Lachlan tackled him from behind, knocking him to the ground. He took hold of the man's helmet, wrenched it from him, and hit him on the back of his head with it three times as hard as he could before the guard was completely immobilised. Looking down at him, Lachlan saw that he had killed him.

He stood over the inert body of his enemy for a moment, his face twisted with hate, before he ran back to Alyth and Davina, terrified that they had come to any serious harm. He expected them both to be bloodied and wounded, perhaps even dead, and his heart was pounding, and he prepared himself for the worst, as he ran into the trees to find out their fate.

Alyth was kneeling, holding Davina in a tight embrace. Her face was white as a sheet as she looked up at him, and she jumped, startled at his sudden appearance. Clearly she had been expecting the Robertsons to return, judging by her terrified expression.

Lachlan almost collapsed with relief, and took Davina in his arms at once. She clung to him tightly and laid her head on his shoulder, her whole body shaking.

"This clever girl bit the arm of the man who was holding her," Alyth said. "Then she

ran back to me. She may have saved both of us.”

She attempted a smile, but the muscles of her face would not obey her. In truth, she was scared to death. What if Lachlan had heard the men calling her by her real name? She had no doubt what her fate would be if he knew her real identity!

Lachlan was still holding on to tightly to his daughter, but now he kissed her and said lovingly, “I am so proud of you, Davina.” When he let her go, Davina looked at the men on the ground. She pointed to them, one after the other. “Bad,” she said with a deep frown.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Very bad. But you scared them away. Now, shall we go back home?”

Alyth was almost limp with relief. She looked at the two bodies on the grass as they walked over to their horses. “What are we going to do with them?” she asked.

“Leave them,” he answered. “If they were still alive, I might get some useful information out of them, but dead... Well, they might be of some use to the wild boars. They are always hungry, and we can take their horses as a reward for this trouble. I like to get horses as a bounty.” He smiled grimly.

Before he helped her onto her horse, he said, “Thank you, Jeannie. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t been here.”

She shrugged. “But I was, and anyone would have done the same,” she answered, still looking down at the bodies.

“I doubt that very much,” he replied. “There are not many who are brave enough; most people would have run away. I can see you are very shaken, even though I can tell you are trying to cover it up. I will have the healer come to see you to give you

something to calm you down, and you must take tomorrow off to rest.”

Then he grasped Alyth around the waist and lifted her into the saddle. She was rather shocked; she had never mounted a horse this way before, but she was not displeased. She loved Lachlan touching her.

Just before he walked back to Davina, their eyes met and held for a moment, and Alyth was surprised to see the warmth in his expression. She had a feeling their relationship was about to change—but did she want it to? It was a question she was too afraid to answer.

It was not until a few days later, when Lachlan's party had come and gone, that Alyth saw him again. She had gone back to reading Davina her bedtime story once more, and to her surprise Davina seemed much more confident than she had before, and was even slowly but surely recovering the power of speech.

Alyth had been afraid that the whole trauma of the attack by the Robertsons might have sent her back into her shell, but the opposite seemed to have happened. After considering the matter for a while, Alyth reasoned that it had been because Davina had been able to defend herself, and therefore she had lost her sense of helplessness and fear.

Alyth wished she could communicate this to Lachlan, but she felt it better to keep her distance for the time being, since the whole horrifying event had been extremely hard on him too. Consequently, she felt that if she approached him, it might bring back memories he wanted to forget.

Lachlan, for his part, had deeply regretted inviting people he had once called friends to his home. He had thought that it was time for him to mix with society again, to hear about the goings-on in the life of people he had once known and cared about. Instead, he found the whole experience stultifyingly boring, and realised that he was no longer the man he had once been.

His values had changed; he had never been hugely outgoing, but while he was with Sandrina she had brought out the best in him. He had become more sociable and able to hold his own in any conversation. Occasionally, especially after a few glasses of

wine, his sense of humour had come to the fore, and he had actually been able to make his friends laugh.

But now those days had gone, and he realised that the people he had once valued now meant nothing to him; they seemed shallow, and their conversation centred mainly around social events and scandals.

However, Lachlan realised that he had no interest in those things any more—in fact, he never had, but Sandrina had encouraged him to stay on the right side of the social circle for the sake of Davina. As long as she had been beside him, he had complied, but now he found it impossible, he simply could not make himself fit in.

For the last three years, Lachlan had been a recluse, and he would have stayed that way if he had not had Davina's future prospects to consider. For a long time, he had thought that she had not much of a future to look forward to.

Now, however, things had begun to change with the arrival of the new maid. He had spent hours thinking and wondering about what made Jeannie special, but he simply could not put his finger on it. One thing was certain, however. She was absolutely gorgeous, and made his body thrill with desire.

He was utterly confused, and realised that the best and only way out of his situation was to talk to her; anyway, he had not thanked Jeannie Dunbar properly for saving Davina's life.

Accordingly, he waited outside Davina's door that evening to intercept the maid before she made her way to bed. Listening closely, he heard Jeannie's voice reading the story, but now and again Davina put in a word; she was speaking more and more frequently now, and Lachlan was infinitely relieved and grateful. It had been years since anything had moved him so much.



As soon as Jeannie's voice stopped, he opened the door and stepped through into Davina's chamber. The maid looked up, and her eyes widened in surprise, then she glanced back at Davina, indicating that she was asleep.

Lachlan smiled and opened the door wider, signalling that she should come out with him.

Alyth was mystified, but she complied, and walked beside him silently, wondering where they were going. She was terrified. Had she done something wrong? Was she going to be dismissed?

Her suspicion was confirmed when they arrived at his study and opened the door, then stood aside to let her in. "Sit down, Jeannie," he said, indicating one of the chairs in front of his desk.

Before he spoke, Alyth pre-empted him and said, "If you would like me to leave, M'Laird, I understand. I—" She got no further before he interrupted her.

"No. The last thing I want is for you to go. Davina adores you and would never forgive me for sending you away. Jeannie, I wanted to thank you... again. Thank you for saving my daughter's life. It is a debt I can never repay, and as long as Davina needs you, you have a position here. I have asked Maisie about you, and she tells me you are well-liked among the other maids. I told her what you did for Davina, but I made her stay quiet about it until I had spoken to you again, although it has taken me a few days to work up the courage. I feel responsible for the whole incident, I should not have left you on your own, and I should have brought some guards with us.

Yet if I had left Davina with anyone else, I think she would be dead by now. You are an exceptional person, Jeannie, and I have often wondered if I should recruit you into my guards." He laughed to show he was not serious, then stood up and went to pour them a glass of wine.

“I really know very little about wine,” he confessed. “I know what I like, so I hope you do too.” He handed her a glass. “Slàinte Mhath, and thank you again, Jeannie.”

“Slàinte Mhath, M’Laird,” Alyth replied, then took a sip of her wine. It was not the best she had ever tasted, but by no means the worst. “It’s delicious, but I am not an expert either.”

Lachlan smiled, and realised that it was something he was becoming accustomed to doing. At first, smiling had involved stretching his facial muscles in a very unfamiliar way, but then he had done it so little in the last few years, but now he was finding it much easier. Was it because of the woman sitting opposite him, or because of Davina’s improvement? Both, he concluded; this woman was the cause of the wonderful change in his daughter’s life.

“I have no way to tell you how grateful I am,” Lachlan went on, and the expression in his turquoise eyes was warm. “Again. Do you believe in intuition, Jeannie?”

“Do you mean meeting someone for the first time and liking them at once?” she asked. He nodded. “Yes, I do. It’s happened to me a few times.”

“I think that was what happened to Davina,” he remarked. “She saw you, and she liked you at once. It might have had something to do with the way you look, but I think it was more than that. She has always been able to read people, and she liked whatever she saw in you—something reminded her of her mother, Sandie.”

To her surprise, Alyth saw Lachlan’s eyes begin to glitter with tears as he said his late wife’s name.

“Her death was my fault,” he said huskily. “When the MacAdams attacked us, I was so blinded by rage that I went to fight them straight away and left Sandie and Davina behind. I am bitterly ashamed that I hardly thought of their safety—we had always

had a plan to safeguard them, of course.

Yet in my haste to go to battle I left the responsibility to someone else, someone I thought I could trust, but who failed me. But that does not excuse me. I am the Laird, the leader, and I failed in my duty to keep my family safe, even though my castle was undamaged. I fought harder for it than I did for them. Yet, I would rather have seen the castle in ruins and have my wife back than have lost her because she and Davina were my whole world. Sandie and Davina were devoted to each other, and I loved my Sandie more than anyone else I had ever known, apart from my daughter, of course. I would give everything I possess to have her back, and for Davina to have been undamaged.”

Tears had begun to stream down his face, and his eyes were looking into the past as he relived what had been the saddest day of his life.

“When I came upon them, Sandie was lying on her back, and an arrow was sticking out of her chest. She had died defending our daughter. She had taken an arrow for her—stood in front of Davina, blocked its path and died,” he continued. “There was blood everywhere, but the worst thing of all was that Davina was standing looking down at her. She was completely still and silent, not moving, not saying a word.

I had a terrible feeling of foreboding and when I went up to her to ask her if she was all right, her face was expressionless, and still, she did not speak. She was pale as a ghost, and I thought she was going to fall down dead right there on the spot.”

When Lachlan looked up at her again, his tears were falling so heavily that they were dripping onto the desk, but he made no move to wipe them away.

“But she lived,” he went on, “although she has never said a word—until now.”

He looked up at Alyth, and suddenly, she felt so sorry for him that she moved around

the desk and put her arms around him, gently stroking his chestnut brown hair and murmuring to him soothingly.

“Not everything was your fault,” she murmured. “It takes two sides to start a war, so there was responsibility on both sides. You were under pressure, and I understand completely what that is like. Stop blaming yourself.”

But Lachlan seemed not to have heard her as he went on: “And I made another child an orphan too, that day. The MacAdams girl.” Alyth stiffened around him. “That too weighs heavily on my conscience.” He wiped his tears away, but they came streaming back, and eventually, he burst into a storm of weeping.

The MacAdams girl, she thought. He is concerned about me, and she suddenly realised that the man she was holding in her arms, whom she had thought cold-hearted and brutal, instead had a loving, gentle spirit. He kept it hidden inside himself because he had been so hurt that he could not bear any more damage. He was too afraid that if he bared his soul to the world, it might become a target for those who wished to ruin him forever.

Alyth felt his agony seep out of him into her own heart, awakening her own hidden pain, and she began to weep with him until they had both run out of tears. Then, for a long time they were still, arms around each other, until Lachlan looked up at Alyth.

They gazed at each other for a long moment before he drew her down and sat her on his lap, then kissed her with such tenderness that her whole body sang with a sweet sensation of desire. She wanted him desperately, but there was no way of telling him that without making herself look loose and wanton. Society held women to a much higher standard than men.

He broke the kiss, leaned back a little on the chair, and gently drew a wisp of hair away from her face. He looked almost puzzled, Alyth thought.

“You fascinate me,” he murmured. “I have never met a woman quite as bewitching as you. From the very first moment I saw you, I felt that there was something about you—something I would never be able to understand, Jeannie. And I want you.”

“You are the Laird,” Alyth said huskily. “I am quite sure you could have any woman you want.”

He laughed softly. “Not quite any woman,” he said, cupping her cheek with one hand as he gave her a small, soft kiss on her lips. “And I don’t want just any woman. I want the one who made my daughter speak again, who awoke my body after years of frigidity. I want you, Jeannie, because of the person you are.” He looked at her quizzically. “Do you not want me?”

This was Alyth’s last chance to refuse, to tell Lachlan that she was not going to risk her reputation or whatever other excuse came to mind, but she simply could not do it. “Yes,” she answered. “Yes, M’Laird, I do.”

“Call me Lachlan,” he replied, as he gazed at her lips before kissing her again. This time it was not tender, but hungry and desperate, as if he wanted to possess all of her in a single moment.

Alyth moaned and gave herself up to it with every ounce of passion and desire she had been storing up inside herself. It seemed that she had been waiting for this moment her whole life. However, in her wildest dreams, she would never have imagined that the man who stirred her senses in this devastating way would have been a Carrick—especially not the Laird.

For a fleeting second, she felt guilty, but that feeling was swiftly washed away by a tide of desire so strong that Alyth could hardly stand it. She had never been with a man, and although she had no experience, she could not fathom it would feel like the sweet madness she was experiencing now.

Lachlan, for his part, needed her so much that he was willing to forego any more kisses and tender caresses so that he could be inside her, driving her to the place where they could, for a fleeting moment, be in heaven together. However, he wanted this, their first and perhaps their only time together, to be wonderful for her.

A moment of sanity returned when Lachlan realised that they were seated on the hard chair behind his desk. He stood, lifting her into his arms as they moved to the soft couch that stood in front of the fireplace. He placed her tenderly on the soft furs so that she was sitting facing him, then cupped her face in his hands and kissed her tenderly. His hands were rough, which both surprised and pleased Alyth; he obviously did some tough manual labour, and she admired him all the more for that.

Lachlan moved his hands to her breasts, caressing and gently squeezing them, teasing her nipples into hard points over the fabric of her dress, while he feathered tiny kisses down her throat. Alyth had never been touched in these most sensitive places before, and she almost cried out at the intensity of the pleasure.

Lachlan made a growl of frustration as his mouth came to the neckline of her dress; she was wearing too many clothes, and for a second, he thought of ripping them off her before reason returned. She probably only owned two dresses. But he urgently wanted to see and explore those beautiful breasts.

Alyth felt a sweet pulse beginning to beat between her legs, and every inch of her skin was tingling with delight. However, the next moment she was unable to think about anything more as she felt Lachlan raising her skirt then gently parting her legs. He bent down to kiss his way tenderly from her knee to the inside of her right thigh, almost touching her sex, before he set to work on the left.

Alyth raised her hips instinctively, moaning softly at the wicked, delicious sensations he was arousing. Her fingers were tangled in his thick, strong hair, revelling in the silky feel of it.

A moment later, Lachlan pushed his first two fingers gently inside Alyth's channel and stifled her startled cry with a hungry kiss. He moved in and out, in and out, then he found the nub of flesh that was her sweetest spot before using his other thumb and forefinger to tease and play with it. A jet of intense pleasure, so strong that she could hardly bear it, seared through her.

Lachlan looked up and smiled at her wickedly. "Good?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" Alyth gasped. She could hardly speak, for something wonderful was gathering inside her. She had no idea what it was, for she had never experienced anything remotely like it before. It was heaven, Alyth thought. Perhaps this was what so many poets and songwriters wrote and sang about.

She was a little puzzled when she saw Lachlan push her skirt further up and bend his head down between her legs. She was utterly shocked as she felt his tongue sweeping between her womanly folds, from front to back, over and over again.

"What are you doing?" she gasped.

Lachlan looked up. "Do you not like it, Jeannie? I can stop if?—"

"No!" Alyth cried, then almost screamed as she felt the astonishing new sensation Lachlan was unleashing upon her.

Alyth felt his tongue tip teasing her bud, then he sucked it and scraped it with his teeth, making her cry out in an agony of pleasure. She had never felt or even imagined anything like it before.

Lachlan looked up to see Alyth's incredulous expression, and smiled inwardly. He was so ready to plunge inside her as nature dictated, to finish what he had started with that kiss, which now seemed a lifetime ago. Yet, he waited, returning to her breasts

which he suckled through the fabric of her dress, before he kissed her again.

His arousal was throbbing so hard it was almost painful. “Are you ready for me, Jeannie?” he asked hoarsely. He could hardly speak by now.

“Oh, yes,” she whispered. “So ready.”

Lachlan pushed her legs apart and settled in between them, then slowly pushed himself inside her. Alyth felt herself opening, welcoming him in, loving the sensation of them joining together as one.

He began to thrust, slowly at first, trying to hold back the moment of no return when he would be unable to do so any longer, but the feeling of her warm flesh closing around him was almost unbearably delicious.

Alyth pulled his kilt up at the back and wrapped her legs around his hips, feeling the hard muscles of his buttocks as he moved in and out of her. Then something new and wonderful started to happen. She felt a faint but delightful tingle inside her, which became stronger and stronger as Lachlan’s thrusts became harder and faster. She felt as though she was climbing a mountain, but the summit seemed frustratingly out of reach, yet she strove with all her might until, suddenly, she reached its peak.

A glorious wave of ecstasy swept over her, causing her to scream in rapture. It was like nothing Alyth could ever have imagined; how was it possible to feel that she had just reached heaven?

Lachlan’s climax was fiercer than any he had yet experienced, and he only just managed to pull away from Alyth before he spilled his seed. He leaned his head on her shoulder as he recovered his breath, and wished he could stay there forever.

After a moment, he drew back and sat down beside her. “That was wonderful,” he



murmured. “I have not felt so—oh, I have no words to describe it. Thank you for making me feel alive again.”

“Thank you, Lachlan,” she replied, smiling warmly at him.

“I only wish we had been naked.” His voice was regretful as he kissed her again. “Perhaps next time?” There was a question in his eyes.

Alyth felt her heart skip a beat as she looked into his teal blue eyes. She had not imagined that there would be a next time.

“Perhaps,” she said softly.

Alyth's body was still tingling and throbbing with delight as she made her way upstairs to her tiny chamber again. She knew she would dream about Lachlan that night and feel his rough hands caressing her skin again, feel his tongue and his manhood teasing her into rapture.

He had mentioned something about another time. What had he meant? Was he suggesting that she should become his mistress? She certainly could not imagine him asking a servant to be his wife, no matter how well she spoke or how fine her manners were.

Alyth lay down in bed and imagined that Lachlan was with her, not making love to her, merely holding her while they slept together. The last time she had slept in the same bed with anyone was with her mother when she was about ten years old. However, that was not quite the same thing as being wrapped in the strong and protective embrace of a beautiful man!

"Goodnight, M'Laird," Alyth whispered, then closed her eyes and fell asleep almost instantly.

Her dreams were full of him, however, and she had the best night's sleep ever, even though he made love to her over and over again. She woke up feeling invigorated and refreshed, and for a few seconds wondered why before remembering her glorious experience of the previous night.

Nevertheless, Alyth knew that she still had a mission to fulfil, and she would not let

her desires deter her from doing it. She had known that Lachlan Carrick wanted her and was determined to use it to her advantage, but she could see a situation where the weakness of her own needs overcame any plan she devised. She must be very, very careful, she decided; a physical attraction was not love. She could not love the man who had been responsible for the death of the dearest person in her life.

I must harden my heart, she thought determinedly. Whatever tender thoughts I had about him were during the heat of passion, and I must never forget that Lachlan Carrick is my enemy.

Having made this promise to herself, Alyth picked up her dress to put it on, but as she lowered it over her head, she smelled the earthy scent of Lachlan's body. Would anyone else notice it, she wondered?

You are being ridiculous, Alyth, she thought.

It was very unlikely that any of the others would be aware of it. After all, how could they know the scent of their Laird's body? But for her own peace of mind, she donned her spare uniform.

Better safe than sorry, she thought.

When she entered the kitchen, Alyth found a lively conversation going on around the table, and she joined in as soon as she had heaped her plate with food.

"Have I missed anything?" she asked eagerly.

"We were just sayin' how happy the Laird looks," Alison replied eagerly.

"Aye, he looks like the cat who stole the cream!" Flora went on. "I think he has a new lady in his life!"

“Or his bed!” Heather said, giggling.

“Or both!” Catriona suggested, making them all burst into a gale of laughter.

Alyth joined in, although she was shaking with nervousness inside. Did they know? Had anyone seen her sneaking out of Lachlan’s chamber? She was fearful, even though she doubted that Lachlan would advertise the fact that he had slept with a servant.

Yet, there were other ways of communicating that did not involve words, and Davina had proved that. For years, she had made herself understood through hand gestures and facial expressions; it was quite possible Lachlan could do the same without even meaning to. What would her life be like if he showed her any kind of favouritism?

She had no idea what the other maids would do. Shun her? Make her the butt of their jokes and their scorn? Alyth did not know, but now she felt that her mission had become more urgent than ever. She had to find out what the cause of the hostilities were from the Carrick’s point of view; after all, there were always two sides to a quarrel even though she naturally took her own family’s side.

One morning that week, the cook, Mairi, was absent because of an urgent family emergency, and Maisie had decided that it was as good a time as any to teach Alyth some basic cooking skills. Accordingly, she summoned her into the kitchen, gave her an apron, and said, “I dinnae suppose ye have ever learned tae bake bread, hen?” Her tone was mischievous.

Alyth laughed. “It’s really not one of those skills ladies’ maids are taught,” she replied. “But I would love to learn. I would find it very useful, I think. Who knows, I might marry a farmer some day?” She looked at Maisie with an expression that said this was a very distant possibility.

Maisie laughed. “I cannae see ye as a farmer’s wife, hen,” she said. “Somehow I dinnae think ye would know one end o’ a sheep fae the other.”

“You’re right, Maisie!” Alyth agreed. “But I would love to impress whoever I marry with my baking skills. Tell me, what kind of cake does the Laird like best—not that I’m going to marry him, of course.” She shook her head and flapped her hand with a dismissive gesture.

Maisie laughed. “Well, that’s easy enough!” she replied. “He absolutely loves clootie dumpling. He could live on the stuff. On the other hand, if ye really want tae turn his stomach, ye can try black puddin’. He hates it wi’ an absolute passion!”

Alyth laughed. “I completely agree with him.” She shuddered in disgust. “I can’t stand it either!”

Alyth paid attention as Maisie showed her how to roll out the dough and knead it; she loved the feel of it, soft and yielding under the pressure of her hands as it oozed between her fingers.

“I have heard that there was a lot of trouble here a while ago between the Carricks and the MacAdams,” Alyth said thoughtfully as Maisie took the dough away from her and set it aside to rest for a while. “What happened?”

“It is a very long story, hen,” Maisie replied, sighing. “An’ a very sad one. The MacAdams an’ the Carricks have had a feud that goes back for a long time, but sometimes it calms down an’ sometimes it flares up again. Everybody on both sides suffers when a fight breaks out, an’ naebody ever wins.” She looked sad, then she began to tell Alyth the story.

“Laird Bearnard Carrick, the present Laird’s father, was a very good businessman. He brought in a lot o’ French an’ Spanish wine an’ sold it here in Scotland, an’ he sold

the whisky we make here tae the French. He sold salmon an' animal hides an' coal—tons o' it. He made the clan very rich, but when he died an' young Lachlan took over—well! The trade just got better an' better, an' the family got richer an' richer. Well, as ye can imagine, hen, everybody wanted tae be his friend—or nearly everybody.

There were people comin' fae as far away as Edinburgh that wanted tae trade wi' him, clans comin' wantin' alliances, it was the best time we ever had here.” Maisie sighed, and began to wash the flour from her hands; her eyes became dreamy as she looked back into the past.

“Only two clans werenae very friendly,” she went on.

“Let me guess,” Alyth said grimly. “The MacAdams and the Robertsons? I gathered as much from listening to the girls at breakfast.”

Maisie gave a short, cynical laugh. “Aye,” she replied, with a ferocious frown. Alyth had never seen her look so angry. “They were only interested in tradin' weapons, an' our young Laird isnae interested in makin' war. He is a peacemaker an' that is tae his credit.” She paused for a moment, thinking, before she went on.

“He told them he wasnae lookin' tae buy weapons an' sent them away.” Maisie looked extremely troubled.

Alyth waited a moment before she asked, “What happened then?”

Maisie made a sound that was almost a growl. “We heard that some MacAdams men had come an' invaded our borders an' killed some o' the villagers in Leithmuir.” Her face took on a thunderous look. “When the Laird went tae avenge their death he took quite a few o' the garrison wi' him, an' while he was away some o' the MacAdams lot got intae the castle. They killed Lady Sandrina in front o' the wee lassie—shot her

in cold blood in front o' wee Davina while she was defendin' her daughter. If I had been there, I would have killed that murderer myself!"

Again she paused, leaning on the flour-covered table and taking deep breaths in order to calm down.

"I am sorry to have upset you, Mistress Maisie," Alyth said softly. "I had no idea about all this. It was just that the other day at breakfast, Alison and Catriona were talking about it, and they seemed so angry."

Maisie patted her shoulder and gave Alyth a sad smile. "When they heard that Lady MacAdams had been killed as well, the two Lairds decided tae stop fightin' wi' each other because they had both lost somebody they loved."

"So there is peace now?" Alyth asked. "The war between the two families is over?"

Maisie shook her head. "I wish it was, but we a' think it is just a truce," she answered. "Most o' us think it is only a matter o' time before a' the fightin' starts again."

Alyth's heart plummeted, then she rallied, having thought of a way to turn the situation to her advantage. "Maybe things will not be so bad," she remarked. "I know that sometimes when I think nothing can be any worse, something happens to prove me wrong. Look at the night I came here; I thought I was going to die in the cold and wet weather of that horrible evening, yet here I am, happy and well. I was taken in by good people who treated me—and are still treating me—with great kindness. And you, Mistress Maisie, if you had not taken me in I would be dead, and nobody would even know about it. So you see, there is always hope, or at least that is what I believe."

A slow, warm smile spread over Maisie's face. "Ye give me too much credit, hen,"

she told Alyth. “But ye are right. We must always hope for the best, or we would a’ be miserable, would we no’?”

Alyth nodded, pretending to be happy. Yet, she knew that when she finally managed to leave, her name would be mud. All her fellow maids would be disgusted with her, as well as outraged. They would think she had used them, which, in fact, she had.

Then, of course, there was Davina—and now Lachlan. Davina would be devastated. She had lost her mother, and while Alyth could never compare herself in any way to the woman who had given birth to the little girl, she knew that Davina was fond of her.

Alyth knew what loss was like; she had experienced it herself, and felt it now as she recalled the day when her father had come to tell her how her mother had been tossed over the curtain wall of Cairnloch Castle. It had cut as keenly as a knife, and she had never really recovered from that loss.

She knew that she would keenly miss Davina, with her flowing red hair and eyes that were just like her father’s, her innocent smile and mischievous mannerisms.

And then there was Lachlan, whose body she had just enjoyed with more pleasure than she could ever remember having with any other experience in her life. She doubted that he would be sorry to see her go. No, he would be absolutely incandescent with rage, knowing that he had been used, and that his enemy had bested him with the utmost courage and cunning.

As well as that, Alyth’s feelings about him were a tangle of confusion. Did she love him? She had no idea, but as well as the physical sensations he had aroused in her, there was the complicated matter of her heart.

Now that she knew Lachlan Carrick better, she could see that he was not the monster



she had first thought, damn him! Why did he have to be so hard, yet so tender, so full of love for Davina, yet hate for her family?

Thinking about all this, Alyth felt utterly ashamed and guilty, but she could hardly sit everyone down and explain what had happened to drive her to this desperate course of action. No, she had to forge ahead and complete what she had set out to do, no matter how much hurt it caused to herself or others. She had to harden her heart and firmly put any affection she harboured for anyone at Leithmuir behind her. She was a soldier on a mission, and nothing must get in her way.

Alyth had not realised that Maisie was speaking to her until she heard her laughing. “Daydeamin’ hen?” she asked.

“One of my worst faults,” Alyth replied, casting her eyes heavenwards.

“I have that problem mysel’,” Maisie replied, and they laughed together.

Alyth forced her mind away from her morbid thoughts and resumed her work. It occurred to her suddenly that her stint as a maid was teaching her many more skills than she would ever have learned as a Laird’s wife. If she ever had to, she could become a baker or a farmer’s wife. She chuckled inwardly at the thought.

After the bread had risen, Maisie set Alyth to other duties, ones which had become almost automatic to her now. As she swept the floor of one of the passages, she thought about the attack they had suffered from the Robertsons. Alyth had kept the news to herself, but it leaked out anyway, since the guards who had brought back the inert bodies had spread the news.

Alyth found out then how much the other maids meant to her when they crowded around her and hugged her with affection and relief.

“Thank god ye are still well an’ still wi’ us, Jeannie,” Mairi, the cook, had said to her as she kissed Alyth’s cheek. “We would have missed ye so much.”

Alyth had burst into tears then, tears of relief at the lucky escape she had, and the warmth of these special friends. She felt like the most fortunate woman in the world, but the attack had set her to thinking.

What part had the Robertsons played in the raid on Leithmuir that had started the feud between the Carricks and the MacAdams? There was definitely more to this than met the eye, and she was determined to find out what it was.

Lachlan had not slept well that night, but he often found that exercising hard helped him to wake up and tackle the day ahead. Accordingly, he challenged Gavin Ballantyne, his Captain of the Guard, to a sword fight in the courtyard. They were surrounded by off-duty guards and servants who were cheering them on, some for Gavin, some for Lachlan. The maidservants loved to see their handsome, muscular Laird display his considerable skills in front of them. It was a treat for the eyes, as Maisie put it.

This was a sight that would never have been seen in any other castle, but since his wife had been killed, Lachlan had always actively encouraged his staff to take an interest in self-defence. Even some of the maidservants were learning to use small weapons. They would never take part in any battles, of course, but at least they would have a chance of fending off an attacker for a while till help arrived.

The bout went on with first one combatant taking the upper hand and then the other, forward and back until Gavin suddenly lunged forward and had the point of his sword pointing straight at Lachlan's throat. Lachlan laid down his weapon in surrender then shook hands with Gavin, smiling, while the staff went back to their duties.

"You win," he said resignedly as he patted his friend on the back. "I am not at my best today, but watch out, next time you will not be so lucky!"

Gavin laughed, then his expression changed to one of concern. "Ye look tired today," he remarked. "Did ye no' sleep well?"

Lachlan yawned. "I had an awful night," he replied, "but I have too much to do to lie in bed all day, Gavin. The tenants' rents are due tomorrow."

"But maybe a wee rest would dae ye good," Gavin pointed out. "Ye need tae take the weight off your shoulders for a while; runnin' an estate by yourself isnae easy, is it? It is a while since ye had a day off."

This was true, and Lachlan was aware that if he did not give himself time to relax for a while, there was a serious chance that he would burn out altogether.

"Have ye thought any more about hirin' a steward?" Gavin asked, looking gravely at Lachlan. "Ye will be nae good tae man nor beast if ye work yourself intae the ground."

"You're right, Gavin." Lachlan nodded slowly. "I have said a hundred times that I'll do it, but I never seem to get around to it." He sighed. He had been working too hard, but he knew that this was not the source of his problem. That problem was Jeannie, the bewitching woman whom he could not get out of his mind.

What would Sandrina think of her, he wondered? His wife had been a strong, determined woman who had made her mark on him forever, but he knew she would be happy for him if he moved forward with his life.

One evening after dinner they had discussed it, since that was the time of day when they were most relaxed and had left work behind them, and Davina was in bed. Now was "their time" as Sandrina had put it. Lachlan had looked forward to these few hours all day.

"What will you do when I am gone?" he had asked her one evening as he lay on the sofa with his head in her lap. It was his favourite place to be apart from in bed with her.

Sandrina stroked his hair and her dark eyes twinkled as she replied, “I will find the first rich Laird I can and drag him to the altar!” she said dramatically. Then they laughed, but after a moment her expression softened and became serious.

“I have no idea,” she said. “I know Davina and I won’t starve, and we will have a roof over our head, but I cannot imagine a day when there will be no Lachlan by my side. Nobody to love and support me, laugh at me, tease me and quarrel with me. Never leave me, Lachie, please. I love you so much.” Her expression was desperately sad.

“I could never leave you, Sandie,” he said tenderly. “You and Davina are my heart and soul.”

“And you are mine,” she replied, kissing him softly. “But Lachie, if anything were to happen to me, and you were left alone, I want you to know that you have my blessing to find someone else to love. You have so much love to give—don’t waste it.”

“Don’t think about it, my sweetheart,” he had replied. “Nothing will ever happen to part us.”

However, Sandrina had never had the chance to live without him, since her life had been cruelly cut short a little while later, but he had somehow managed to suffer life without her. From the moment of her death, Lachlan had imagined a long, empty future stretching ahead of him until his own death, but that had all changed now with the arrival of the new maid.

He wanted Jeannie Dunbar so much that sometimes he found himself standing still, daydreaming about her while the world went on around him. Gavin had begun to notice this, and Lachlan had no doubt that others had too. Perhaps if he employed a steward and took a few days off he could excuse himself for a while and do some reading, something he never seemed to have time to do.

Maybe he could even begin to teach himself some basic French, since he had always found that it was a useful language to know when buying and selling wine and other products. He would stay away from Jeannie Dunbar—avoid her like the plague.

Out of sight, out of mind, he thought. The less he saw of her, the less he would think of her—or so he hoped.

Lachlan tried to imagine Jeannie being a permanent part of his life. He could not marry her, of course; that would condemn him in the eyes of society. Although he had never really cared what people thought of him, he had to remain on good terms with his neighbours because their livelihoods were intertwined. He also had to think of Davina's future.

A mistress, then? Lachlan almost laughed out loud at the thought of it. He had slept with the woman once, and he was thinking of making her a fixture in his life. What was wrong with him? Of course, a man's standing improved if he had a mistress; it was unfair, he knew, but it was a fact. A man was somehow more masculine if he had conquered more than one woman, whereas a woman who did the same was considered unethical.

Lachlan could imagine Jeannie sneaking out of her room to see him every night to keep their relationship a secret. They could make love in his study, as they had before, in his chamber, in fact, anywhere they liked.

He began to visualise it, imagining himself lifting her off her feet and onto his bed, feeling her hot breath on his skin, his lips against hers. He imagined himself rolling her onto her back, her legs wrapped around his waist. She would thrust up her hips and drive him to another fierce climax, and afterwards he would hold on to her, not wanting his bed to be empty and cold again. Even the thought made him sad.

He had always thought that no one could replace Sandie; she was the love of his life,

but was it possible that a man could love two women, not at the same time, but could one replace the other? Then he shook his head irritably—she was a maidservant, for god’s sake! He was not thinking with his brain or his heart, but with a much more greedy and primitive part of himself.

Lachlan sighed. He was still tired, but there was too much work for him to do to allow him to sit and rest, so he trudged along to his study. He had heard of a drink called coffee which was said to invigorate and stimulate the drinker, as well as tasting delicious, so he decided to find a trader from Edinburg and buy some. However, he could not do that today.

Lachlan was surprised to find his office door open, since he knew he had locked it when he left the previous night. However, he often kept the keys in the pocket of one of his jackets in his chamber, and only one other person apart from Maisie knew they were there.

As he had expected, he heard some rattles and thumps coming from the drawers of his desk. He knew that his supposition had been right when he moved around it and saw Davina with her arms up to her shoulders in the bottom drawer, which was the deepest. It was always kept locked, but Davina was crafty and knew where all the keys fitted. She might not be able to speak well, but there was nothing wrong with her brain.

Now, Lachlan could see that she had taken some miscellaneous items out and laid them on the floor; his watch, a tin in which he kept pens, a letter opener and some sheets of parchment.

She looked up at him, trying to appear innocent, but that was impossible; guilt was written all over her little face and shone through, no matter how much she tried to hide it. Lachlan was always struck by how much she resembled him, but sometimes wished he looked a little more like her mother. He always felt a little disloyal for

thinking this way because Davina was her own little person, perfect just as she was.

Lachlan could see that she was holding something between both her hands, and he frowned as he reached out to pick her up. “I will give you anything you want, my angel,” he said tenderly. “There is no need to take things that don’t belong to you.”

He sat down and set Davina on his lap, then gently unclasped her hands. She was holding a small, polished wooden box, and he took it away from her and studied it for a moment.

To his surprise, Davina pointed to it and said, “Necklace.”

Another word! They were coming thick and fast now; soon, he hoped, she would be speaking fluently. Jeannie’s influence again...

Lachlan opened the box and lifted out a gold chain on which hung an oval-shaped opal pendant. There was a picture of a beautiful dark-haired woman inside it holding a baby who was probably only a few months old. It was a lovely piece of jewellery, and Lachlan felt guilty as he held it because he knew who owned it.

He sat studying it for a long time before he felt a tug on his sleeve. Davina was

smiling at him as she pointed to the pendant. Clearly she thought it was very beautiful.

“When you are grown up I will have one made for you,” he said. “Perhaps with a picture of you and me in it?” Davina nodded happily. “This belongs to someone else, someone who lost her life in the same war as your mother. You know how that feels, do you not?”

War is never good and there are never any winners—everybody suffers. Now, this



necklace must go back to the lady who lost her mother, just as you lost yours. I am sure she wants to have something of hers to remember her by. Sometimes, you see, you have to try to sympathise with your enemy too.”

Davina looked at him solemnly for a moment, nodded, then touched the pendant again. Lachlan carefully took the necklace and returned it to its box, then put it back in the drawer. When he looked at his daughter again, he saw her studying him intently as if trying to read his face. When he smiled at her, she did not return it, merely looked at him more closely.

What was going through her mind, he thought? It was at times like this that he wanted to throw up his hands in frustration and yell his helplessness to the heavens because sometimes dealing with Davina was almost more than he could bear. Then he reprimanded himself; it was not her fault.

He led Davina outside, and they walked along to where her nurse was standing waiting for her. “Jeannie,” she said, frowning.

“I am afraid Jeannie is busy, sweetheart,” he said regretfully. “But you will see her later, and I’m sure she has a wonderful story to read to you.”

Davina nodded, then reached up to pull his head down and kiss his cheek. He did not have to be told now that the expression on her face said, “I love you.”

“I love you too, Davina,” he murmured. He watched her walk away with her nanny, then thought about the pendant again.

Lachlan walked up to the first row of turrets and looked over to the surrounding rugged, mountainous countryside. It was a beautiful day, with not a cloud in the sky, yet it was icy cold with a stiff, cutting breeze that made the Scottish Saltire flag and the Carrick standard billow straight out like soldiers standing to attention.

Lachlan smiled; seeing his flags always made him feel proud. He had often heard of people who travelled to other far-flung places and saw wondrous things, but he had never wanted to leave his little country. It was far too precious to him because here was the grave of the woman he loved.

He thought about the pendant again. At some time in the future, he was going to have to return it to his rightful owner—as soon as he plucked up the courage to do so. Lachlan felt like such a coward, but the thought of confronting the daughter of a woman whose mother had died because of him was terrifying. Yet, it had to be done, and he would do it. Someday.

Alyth too was thinking about the pendant. She had to have it back, since it was all she had left of the mother she had loved so much. Yet, she had looked everywhere she could think of with no result, but the castle was a huge place, and she could not possibly search it all. There were dozens of empty rooms, storerooms that were full of all kinds of goods, as well as the stables, a laundry, dairy, buttery, and brewery.

She lay in her bed looking at the ceiling, thinking about whether or not to give up. It seemed like such a hopeless quest now, and she was beginning to wonder why she had even started it.

Perhaps it's time to give up, Alyth, she thought despairingly. After all, finding it will not bring Mammy back.

She thought about using her feminine guile again to get closer to the Laird, but that had caused more problems than it had solved. She still had her memories, after all, and no one could take those away from her.

No , she thought. Trying to seduce Lachlan Carrick again was not the answer, especially since she was so very confused about how she felt about him.

However, she did not have the energy to worry about him any more. Eventually, Alyth drifted off to sleep and dreamed about lying in her mother's embrace, listening to one of her stories. She smiled in her sleep, calm and content for once.

Breakfast was always a merry meal in the kitchen of Leithmuir Castle, but today it was especially so, since Alison declared that she had become engaged to the son of the blacksmith in the village. Everyone congratulated her, and Alyth was happy for her, but deep inside she was jealous of the shining joy she saw in her friend's face. If only she had been the one celebrating!

These women had come to mean so much to her; they were attentive, kind, and had a wonderful sense of humour that made them able to laugh at each other and themselves without rancour. They had welcomed her into their fellowship without question; she worked with them, and therefore she was one of them.

In a way, this also made Alyth sad because she knew that at some point she would have to leave them, and she had no wish to. After Lachlan's confession, and Maisie's explanation of what had gone on between the Carricks and the MacAdams she could quite happily stay there forever.

She had come to the conclusion that Lachlan was not her enemy; he was a very damaged man who wanted nothing but a quiet life, to look after his daughter and to be at peace. The fact that a kind of peace had been negotiated between the two families showed that neither wanted to carry on a war that no one could win.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Mairi, the cook. "Who wants tae take the Laird's breakfast tae his study?" she asked, indicating a tray loaded with food and a pitcher of ale.

She looked around, but nearly everyone was busy with some other task; when the cook caught her eye and called out to her, she groaned inwardly. She was not prepared to be confronted by Lachlan so early in the morning, but submitted, as she had no other choice.

Alyth trudged along the corridor to the room, then stood outside for a moment in order to take a deep breath to prepare herself before knocking. When she heard Lachlan's deep voice summoning her inside, she opened the door and entered.

Lachlan looked up to thank her, then his eyes widened in surprise. Alyth put the tray on a small side table, then asked, "Is there anything else you need, M'Laird?"

Only you, he thought. He only just stopped himself from saying it aloud as he gazed at her. Even in a maid's drab uniform, she was beautiful, and he wanted nothing more at that moment than to take her in his arms and make passionate love to her as he had before.

Without thinking, Lachlan looked over at the couch in front of the fire where they had come together for the first time. The first time? Would it be the only time, he wondered? God, he hoped not.

He looked up at Alyth, to find her gazing back at him, and for a frozen moment, they stood staring at each other. The atmosphere in the room was thick with palpable tension as teal blue eyes gazed into dark grey ones, before Lachlan regained his senses and tore his gaze away from hers.

"No, Jeannie," he replied. "There is nothing more that I need, thank you."

Alyth made a brief curtsy and almost sprinted out of the room, leaving Lachlan sitting staring at the door, wondering just how he was going to deal with his feelings, for he could not go on like this.

And as she strode back down to the kitchen, Alyth was wondering exactly the same thing because now she knew for certain that she cared for Lachlan Carrick. It was not just the fact that he made her body thrill with desire, or that she loved the way he was firm with his men yet infinitely gentle with his daughter.

No, she cared for him because he touched her at some level deep inside that no other man ever had or, she suspected, never would again. The feeling was indescribably wonderful and terrifying all at once, for she was helpless to act on it.

But was she? The more she thought about it, the less possible it seemed that the Carricks were to blame for their feud. They had been the ones who suggested the truce, after all, and neither side had gained anything from the fighting; in fact, they had both suffered the heaviest loss of all and were still suffering the consequences.

Alyth shuddered as she thought about the attack by the Robertsons that she and Davina had endured, and the predatory gaze of Laird Robertson himself. No one revolted her as much as he did.

Perhaps she was not so helpless after all, Alyth thought. She and Lachlan could talk together, perhaps work out some plan whereby the two families could make the current truce that existed between them into a permanent cessation of hostilities. After all, she and Lachlan had already made a good start!

Alyth laughed at the thought; could two people who had engaged in such passionate lovemaking possibly be enemies?

Yet, there was one other problem. Would Lachlan forgive the lies she had told him? Would he resent her deeply for forsaking Davina when she left? These were questions which she had asked herself time and time again, but for which she had no answer.

She had almost reached the kitchen when she saw Davina running towards her, smiling happily. “Jeannie!” she called.

Her speech, while still only confined to one or two words at a time, was progressing amazingly well, and Alyth felt proud to have been the one to coax her out of her shell of silence.

“Davina!” she replied. “Are you not supposed to be busy with your counting lessons?”

Davina shook her head and took Alyth’s hand.

“I am working!” she protested, but the little girl took no notice.

She led Alyth to their favourite spot, a bench underneath a sweet chestnut tree, now bare and skeletal in the middle of winter. It was bitterly cold and Alyth shivered, but Davina did not seem to have noticed it at all.

Davina looked at Alyth for a long moment before reaching into the pocket of her dress, keeping her eyes on Alyth’s face as she did so. She took Alyth’s hand and put something small and shining into it, and when she looked at it, Alyth gasped in astonishment.

There, lying in her palm, was the pendant she had been searching for all this time! A wave of gratitude and relief swept over her; gratitude for the return of this, her most precious treasure, and relief that she no longer needed to spend all her time in this dangerous place searching for it.

Alyth opened the pendant and saw her beautiful mother, who was holding a chubby, happy-looking baby of perhaps six months old, whom she knew to be herself. They were looking at each other adoringly, and the love between them was palpable, even

though the image was no more than a tiny reproduction.

Alyth's eyes filled with tears; this was the person she had lost in the most brutal way, and now, even though she only had an image of her, she felt some tiny measure of healing.

Davina tugged at her sleeve to attract Alyth's attention, pointed to the baby's face, then at Alyth. Her teal blue eyes, so like her father's, were wide with curiosity as she asked in a trembling voice, "You?"

Alyth nodded; her throat was too choked with emotion for her to speak, and the tears which had been pooling in her eyes began to pour down her cheeks. Davina must have heard her whispering above her bed, desperately asking for the girl's help to find the only thing she had left of her dead mother.

"You, MacAdams," Davina stated, and Alyth suddenly saw a measure of sadness creep into her gaze.

Alyth felt wretched. "Yes, I am," she confessed. "But my only reason for coming here was to find this, Davina." She held up the pendant. "Because I lost my mother, just as you lost yours, and now I have found this tiny piece of her which was also taken from me. It will never bring her back, of course, but at least I can look at her now whenever I want to.

I feel so fortunate to have met you and helped you speak again. Thank you for letting me do that, and thank you for giving me back my pendant. You have no idea how much it means to me. I hope that we are friends now. Do you think so, too?"

Davina studied Alyth for a moment, then her face broke into a wide smile. "Yes," she replied, and Alyth realised that this was the first time she had actually had a proper conversation with the little girl, albeit an extremely hesitant and stilted one. Some



part of her felt extremely triumphant, since this was something no one else had been able to do.

Would Davina go back to being her old, silent self when Alyth was gone, she wondered? Would she ever forgive this nasty woman who had deserted her just when she was finally finding her way back to normality?

Her mother had left her, albeit through no fault of her own, and now Alyth would be leaving her too, but this time quite deliberately with no thought for her welfare. Would Davina ever be able to trust anyone again?

Yet Alyth had a responsibility to her own family. Her father would no doubt have come to the conclusion that she was dead by now because he knew his daughter well; she would not have deserted him so callously. Therein lay the only bright spot in her current predicament; the thought of seeing her father's face when he saw her alive and well.

And Lachlan? She need not wonder about his reaction; he would be incandescent with rage, mostly for Davina's sake. Yet would he miss the woman he called Jeannie? Would he miss the body he had once enjoyed and perhaps hoped to enjoy again? For her part, Alyth knew that she would miss his, even though they had only had one encounter.

She dragged her mind away from that subject to focus on Davina again. "Please don't tell your father who I am," she begged. "Or he will be very angry with me. Davina, I am going to have to leave you soon, but I am so, so glad to have met you, lovely girl."

At this, Davina's face dropped, and her eyes became full of sadness. "Stay, Jeannie," she pleaded woefully.

She put up a hand to caress Alyth's cheek, and Alyth turned her face and kissed Davina's palm.

"Oh, my dear girl," she murmured. "You have no idea how much I wish I could, but you see, I have a father too, and he has no idea where I am. He is very sad, and misses me, so I have to go back to him. Also, your father will be furious that I lied to him, and I would rather not upset him. Please, please keep this a secret between the two of us. I will be back to see you as soon as I can."

This was not a promise Alyth was sure she would be able to keep, but she had to make it in order to fulfil her aim of leaving the castle.

"Will you keep my secret?" she asked again. "You could keep the necklace I gave you to remember me by."

Davina nodded, then put her arms around Alyth, but when she moved away eventually Alyth could see that she was weeping, and felt wretched. They clung together for a few moments longer, then Alyth rose to her feet and kissed the top of Davina's head before hurrying back to the kitchen.

Somehow, Alyth managed to get through the rest of the day. She forced herself to laugh with the others during their midday meal and even told a few jokes, mostly aimed at herself. She felt infinitely sad that this would be her last day with these people whom she had come to know and like.

Their concern for her after the incident with the Robertsons had been like a healing balm, but what had always surprised her the most was their lack of jealousy over Davina's preference for her. Her nurse had been pushed firmly into second place, but she seemed quite content with that.

The evening meal with her friends seemed particularly poignant that evening when

Alyth realised that there would never be any more of these happy evenings filled with teasing, laughter and scandalous gossip. She tried to find comfort in the thought that she would have many happy memories to look back on, but she was saddened to think that the feeling would not be mutual.

Presently, Flora, who was sitting next to her, waved a hand in front of her eyes to regain her attention, and Alyth laughed as she realised she had been daydreaming.

“Sorry, Flora, I was miles away,” she said, shaking her head. She summoned up a yawn, then rubbed her eyes.

“So tell me—” Flora gave her a frown of mock severity. “What were ye dreamin’ about? Nothin’ ye couldnae tell your friends?”

She raised her eyebrows and put on a suspicious glare. Alyth punched her playfully on the shoulder.

“I was wondering what we were going to have for dinner tomorrow,” she replied innocently.

“Aye—an’ I’m the King’s mother!” Heather burst out laughing, and soon started a gale of mirth.

When the laughter was over, and they all went back to eating, Alyth reflected on how much she was going to miss this. Alyth wanted to hug every one of them and say goodbye, but she could not. She knew that if she told any of the women what she was about to do, their loyalty to Lachlan was such that they would immediately inform him.

They all trooped upstairs to bed at the end of their meal, and it was not too long before silence descended on the servants’ quarters. Alyth waited a while to make any

move to pack her belongings. She wanted to be absolutely sure that there was no possibility of any of her friends waking up, since there was absolutely no way of talking her way out of her situation.

Alyth donned her breeches and the warmest clothing she had, then packed the rest of her meagre belongings into a jute sack that had contained wheat. Lastly, she put the pendant around her neck, fastened it, then tucked it under the neck of her tunic where it would stay safely hidden.

Alyth took a look around her cramped quarters; she was sad to leave the little room. It was as unlike her bedroom at her home in Cairnloch Castle as it was possible to be, but she would always associate it with good times. She sighed, picked up a candle to light her way downstairs, then made her way outside through the kitchen. There, she helped herself to some leftovers from supper and a few other pieces of food, as well as a flagon of ale.

The big room was still warm from the heat of the ovens, and Alyth inhaled the mixed aroma of roasting meat, baking bread, honey, and all the other assorted foodstuffs that had been prepared there over the years. She knew that the memory of that delicious smell would never leave her.

She tiptoed out, closing the door as quietly behind her as she possibly could, then crept across the courtyard to the stables. She had made a deal with one of the stable hands, bribing him to tell the Laird that she had drugged him and stolen a horse.

Alyth had chosen one of the horses that Lachlan had taken from the Robertsons with which to make her escape, after all, she could hardly be punished for stealing something that was already stolen! The horse was a stately black mare with a white blaze on her face, and the stable hand had assured Alyth that her temperament was quite calm and biddable.

Having retrieved the saddle and bridle from the tack room, Alyth saddled the mare and tightened the girth before raising one leg to mount the horse. However, her foot had just touched the stirrup when she felt the pressure of a heavy hand landing on her shoulder.

Startled, she looked around, and saw the last person she wanted to see.

After finding Davina searching his desk drawers, something began to gnaw at Lachlan. Had his daughter known about this pendant, or had her curiosity merely been another part of her reawakening? He had pondered over the matter for some time before putting it to the back of his mind.

However, it was brought back to the foreground the next evening when he found himself unable to sleep again and decided to do some estate work to tire himself out. He knew he should simply try to relax and let sleep overtake him, no matter how long it took, but his brain was so alert and busy it simply would not rest.

He sighed irritably as he rose from bed and padded down to his study, where he poured a large measure of whisky before attempting to settle down to some work. However, as he reached into the bottom drawer of his desk again to find some quill pens, he noticed that the wooden box that had contained the pendant was missing.

Puzzled, he searched the whole drawer, taking out every item one by one and placing it on the desk to make sure he missed nothing. At last, it was empty, and there was still no sign of the box.

Lachlan frowned deeply, feeling a surge of anger; there was no doubt where it had gone, since Davina was the only one who knew where it was. Sometimes he suspected that she used her disability to manipulate him. She might still be unable to speak fluently, but she could still think. However, he realised that the best person to ask about any subterfuge on his daughter's part was Jeannie.

As soon as he thought of her, his body surged. Ever since their lovemaking, she had never really been out of his mind, and he longed for her in a way that he could not fathom. It was not mere lust, but something else—something he could hardly bear to admit to himself, even now.

Considering the effect she had had on Davina, even his mute daughter sensed that there was something extraordinary about her.

And at that moment he desired her even more than he had ever desired any woman before, not even his wife. Their loving had been tender and reverent, but Jeannie was different; there was a primitive nature to their pairing. She was not sweet, as Sandie had been, but hungry and passionate, and at that moment, so was he.

His arousal was so strong it was almost painful, and he knew he had to see her and talk over how he felt about her, but they would make love first.

It occurred to him, as he made his way up to her chamber, that she might not want him as much as he wanted her. Lachlan had never forced himself on a woman and never would, but he hoped that she felt the same as he did.

In spite of the fact that he was the Laird and had the keys to every room in the castle, Lachlan always preferred to courteously knock at the door before he entered a room. He did so now, but tentatively, to avoid waking the other servants.

When there was no answer the first time, he tried again, then again, but after his fourth attempt he decided that Jeannie must be asleep, so he entered the room silently and looked around.

By the light of his single candle and the moonlight shining through the tiny window in the roof, he saw that the room was empty, and the bed had not been slept in. At first, he was puzzled, then astonished, and as he looked around, angry. Where had she

gone?

The servants usually kept their clothes and personal belongings beside their beds, and that was the first place Lachlan looked for the answer to where Jeannie had gone.

The cupboard was empty except for Jeannie's servant's uniform. Lachlan picked it up and pressed his face into it, inhaling her scent, the smell that was her essence. It was a fragrance of the kitchen, the garden, and a peculiar musk that was all her own. He had inhaled it before while their bodies had been joined in passion, and he would have known it anywhere.

So where had she gone? The answer came to him almost at once as he noticed that her men's breeches were not there. Lachlan smiled as he realised that his fiery servant must have gone out to practise her swordsmanship again.

I might have known, he thought, smiling. He clattered downstairs with no thought to the noise he was making, so eager was he to reach Jeannie.

After he had selected a blunt weapon from the store to practise with, Lachlan headed out onto the training field to find Jeannie; he spotted her at once, but not where he had expected to. She was not carrying a wooden sword, as he was, but a lethally sharp broadsword in a scabbard strapped to her hip.

A bolt of anger shot through Lachlan as he saw her tightening the girth on a black mare, and he realised that she was running away from the castle and from him. He reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder, and she whipped her head around to face him.

By the light of the small candle he was carrying, he looked into her dark grey eyes which were now wide with fear. Alyth released her foot from the stirrup and looked at the ground, avoiding his eyes. She was terrified, but tired, and all she wanted to do



now was go home.

“Where are you going with one of my horses?” he asked angrily.

“This is not one of your horses,” she replied. “It belongs to Laird Robertson.”

“And you are taking it back to him?” Lachlan asked angrily. He was standing only a foot away from Alyth, and she had absolutely no chance of escape: she was trapped.

“No,” she answered, “I just want to go home.”

“Why? Home to where?” Lachlan was mystified, and his anger suddenly evaporated. “Tell me, Jeannie.”

However, she refused to look up, and he lost patience. He tilted her chin up, forcing her to look at him, yet still, she said nothing.

“If there is a problem,” he tried to talk calmly, “please tell me about it. Whatever it is, we can sort it out together.”

“No, Lachlan,” she replied, shaking her head. “Let me go. I want to go home. I need to.”

Lachlan looked into her eyes for a long moment and watched them fill with tears. He felt infinitely sorry for her.

“Please stay,” he begged. “Davina needs you, and I need you too. I know you’re holding something back from me, but whatever it is, please tell me. I promise I won’t hold it against you.”

Lachlan watched helplessly as she shook her head. “No, Lachlan,” she replied. “I am

a servant, and you are a Laird. I want to go home to my family. They need me, and I need them. I have been away long enough.”

“Who is your family?” Lachlan asked. “You were running away because your father was forcing you to marry. Has that changed?”

Again, Alyth shook her head. “No, but I will find a way to escape it. We were never meant to be together, Lachlan.”

“Jeannie.” His voice was almost a growl. “I make the rules here, not you. Of course, I won’t force you to stay, but I can help you change your fate.”

“And how could you do that?” Alyth asked. “Taking me as your mistress? Definitely not your wife—think of the scandal.”

That made Lachlan think for a moment. What status would Jeannie Dunbar have in his home? Yet as he looked down at her, he knew he could not let go of her. Perhaps he could buy her a cottage and she could set up home there? He could see her as often as he liked; perhaps they could even marry in secret.

Lachlan stopped his train of thought immediately, aware that it was becoming rambling and ridiculous, and brought himself back to the present. He wrapped his arms around Alyth and held her close for a moment.

“I love having you around me,” he said fondly. “You are good for me, Jeannie. You make me feel happy in a way I have not since Sandie died. When I met all my former friends and realised how empty-headed they were, I thought of sitting down and having a conversation with you. I want us to be friends. The fact that Davina likes you is tremendous, of course, but...” he tailed off, but the look in his eyes said everything he could not put into words.

Suddenly, his lips swooped down on Alyth's, and she was lost in a world of sensation out of which there was no escape. For a fleeting second, he thought she would push him away, but instead she did the opposite and pulled him so close to her that their bodies were pressed together with no space between them. She rubbed herself on the bulge of his erection and left a moan of triumph that she had brought him to this impressive state of arousal.

Lachlan broke the kiss and lifted Alyth into his arms, then took her to the tack room, where all the riding equipment was kept. He laid her down on the straw-covered floor then kissed her again, frantically and hungrily, until she was almost dazed with delight.

"Every time I looked at you, I wanted to do this," Lachlan said hoarsely. "Thinking about you was driving me mad, Jeannie." He kissed his way down the side of her neck, then once more came to the barrier of her clothing.

Alyth could read his mind as she saw him looking at her tunic. He wanted to tear it from her body, but a moment of sanity returned as she realised that the pendant was there. She could not possibly let him see it.

"Don't," she whispered, "I have nothing else to wear."

He looked disappointed, then he asked hopefully, "There will be a next time, will there not?"

Alyth hesitated; uncertain as to what she should say next. She desperately wanted to say yes, but did not want to sound too eager. "If you wish," she replied.

"Oh, I do," he answered fervently. "Jeannie, you have no idea how much I want there to be another time like this."

Then he paid her the same attention as he had before, lowering his mouth to suckle and nibble first the left, then the right breast as he toyed with the other one between his thumb and forefinger.

Alyth plunged her hands into his thick chestnut hair as she arched her body up to him. Lachlan moved his lips back to her mouth to kiss her again, then asked, “What would you like me to do now?”

“Whatever you like,” Alyth replied huskily. She was too far gone by now to refuse him anything.

Lachlan kissed his way down to the waistband of her breeches, which he unfastened before pushing them down over her knees and pulling them off altogether.

His eyes widened as he gazed down at her. “I knew you would be beautiful,” he murmured incredulously. “But nothing like this, Jeannie. You are a goddess.”

“Hardly,” she replied, with a mischievous grin. “But now it’s your turn, Lachlan. I want to see you too.”

It was true. Although they had already made love, Alyth had not had a chance to study him properly either—now she was beyond impatient.

Lachlan needed no second bidding. He knelt in front of her and ripped his clothes off as though they were burning him. When he was naked, Alyth stayed his frantic movements so that she could feast on the magnificent specimen of masculinity in front of her. She let out a soft sigh of appreciation.

Lachlan was everything she had expected and hoped for. He boasted broad shoulders and powerful arms, with a sculpted chest and stomach with a dusting of dark red hair. However, the piece of him that was between his bulging, muscular thighs was what

fascinated her most. Alyth was not a connoisseur of such things, but she was sure that most men were not as well-endowed as this.

She watched as he bent down to kiss her sweetest spot, then she said, “Wait.”

Lachlan looked up, puzzled, but he gave a sigh of satisfaction as she took him in her mouth and began to suck him, while running the tip of her tongue down his length.

He moaned in delight, and when Alyth let him go, he gave a little grunt of protest, but she began to massage him with her hand, looking up into his face to see his reaction. Lachlan arched his head back, and she could see every muscle in his neck straining as he clenched his jaw to stop himself crying out with pleasure.

“Jeannie,” he said desperately. “Please stop. I cannot go on much longer—I need to be inside you!”

Alyth lay back on the straw, then opened her arms to him. She smiled wickedly. “Come then,” she invited. “I would hate to make you suffer.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he whispered.

This time, there were no preliminaries, no caresses, no kisses. Lachlan surged into her and Alyth cried out as she felt him fill her, reaching inside her as far as she could accommodate him. But it was not enough.

She felt, at that moment, as if she would never have enough of him, and as she raised her legs to wrap them around his waist, she wished there were more of her. She wanted him to reach every part of her, to become one with him because she loved him with every fibre of her being.

As he thrust harder and harder, faster and faster, Alyth dug her fingers into the flesh

of his back and shoulders and met every stroke with an upward movement of her hips that matched his in a frantic, frenzied rhythm.

Every movement brought her closer to the glorious peak of ecstasy she had experienced before, till at last she reached it and screamed, “Lachlan!”

As the rapturous waves washed over her, she heard Lachlan give out a hoarse cry as he reached his own fulfilment, his body shuddering against hers.

He kissed her with a hunger she had never felt from him before, as if he wanted to devour her, before he drew away and laid his head on her shoulder. He looked almost stunned, she thought.

“I think if we do that again,” Lachlan said, with a dreamy smile, “I might die of bliss.”

Alyth laughed softly. “I doubt that’s likely,” she replied as she ran her hand over his shining hair.

It was one of the features she admired most about him—she loved to run her fingers over and through it while they were making love. It was yet another thing about him, she knew she was going to dearly miss.

“A penny for your thoughts,” he said, smiling. He raised himself on one elbow to look down at her, and Alyth laughed wickedly.

“I wish we could do that again,” she answered.

Lachlan was genuinely shocked. “My god! You are insatiable,” he cried. “You know that we poor men are not quite as strong as women. We take a while to recover.”

“I know!” Alyth giggled, then became serious.

She needed to get away, but before she could make another move, Lachlan put his arms around her and embraced her again. His hand moved around the back of her neck so that he could pull her towards him to kiss her again, but, suddenly, it stilled.

She felt him, then, running the fastening of the pendant through his fingers. Alyth tensed, and her heart skipped a beat as she realised what was going to happen next.

“I have never seen you wearing jewellery before,” Lachlan remarked, frowning.

Alyth watched his startled expression when he pulled the chain from under the neckline of her tunic. He stared at the pendant for a moment before he opened it, then he looked up at her again, his eyes dark with anger.

“Where did you get this?” he demanded.

Lachlan's blue-green eyes were dark with fury, and he felt as if he might explode with it as he stared at the jewel in his hands, then into the dark grey eyes of the woman he had come to care about so much.

She had deceived him, and he, like the utter fool that he was, had allowed himself to be seduced by a pretty face and a beautiful body. Suddenly, he saw how cruelly she had used him, and how easily he had fallen into her trap.

Not only was he full of rage, but he was infinitely disappointed and deeply hurt. What had he done to deserve this? He had taken Jeannie Dunbar into his home, fed her, clothed her, sheltered her and given her a way to support herself, and this was how she repaid him!

"Was this your whole purpose in coming here?" he asked, his voice throbbing with rage as he held up the pendant. "Was this what you wanted all along?"

Lachlan watched as she stared at the ground for a moment as if trying to collect herself, then she pulled herself together and reached out for the pendant, but he swung it away out of her reach.

"Yes, but please let me explain," Alyth begged. "This is not the way it seems. I can see what you think, but I swear to you, I meant no harm to you, Davina or anyone else."

"You can see what I think?" He sneered. "So you are a mind reader now? Do not



presume to know me! You realise that at this moment I could call my guards to come and drag you to the dungeons? They could kill you, or I could kill you myself.”

He raised his large right hand and flexed the fingers, looking at her neck, watching her eyes darken with fear.

“Your name is not Jeannie Dunbar, is it?” Lachlan asked, frowning deeply. “You are not a ladies’ maid, or any other kind of maid, for that matter. Tell me your real name.”

“I am Alyth MacAdams,” Alyth replied resignedly with a deep sigh. “And yes, I have been lying to you all along, but I meant no one any harm. I would have left as soon as I found the pendant, and that’s what I was doing. You have to believe me, Lachlan. I meant no harm to anyone.”

Lachlan had thought himself immune to the wiles of the female sex, but now he felt himself beginning to soften. She looked so vulnerable, still half-lying underneath him on the straw, that he almost yielded to her, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her again. Even now, his weak man’s body, driven by his most primal instincts, was responding to her again.

Almost, but not quite. He reminded himself that this woman was not what she seemed at all. She was not helpless, could handle herself in battle as well as any man, and she had completely defeated him in bed, reducing him to nothing more than her slave. He had been utterly besotted by her—but no more.

“My god,” he said, shaking his head. “How you must have been laughing at me!”

“No!” Alyth cried. “I never laughed at you, Lachlan, and I never will.”

His lip curled in disdain as he looked down at her. “I have to give you credit, Alyth ,”

he said. “You had me almost twisted around your little finger. You lied to me, seduced me, played me like a puppet on a string. I would have done anything for you.” He shook his head. “But now that I see through your little scheme, all of that is over. There will be no more seduction, no more games. I see you now for what you are—a fraud, and a creature who will use any means to achieve her ends.” His face took on a look of disgust. “You repulse me!”

However, just as Lachlan thought he had thoroughly intimidated her, Alyth retaliated. “I have nothing to do with your clan’s power games,” she snapped. “All I wanted was to recover my mother’s pendant because it is all I have left of her!” She sat up to look him in the eye so suddenly that Lachlan almost fell over.

“I am a victim too, just like you, your wife, Davina, my mother, my father.” She paused for breath. “Do you not see? We are all victims because war has no favourites. It doesn’t matter who is killed!”

They sat staring at each other for a long moment until it became a contest of wills. Alyth looked away first, and Lachlan felt a surge of triumph; now he had her right where he wanted her. He took her by the chin and forced her to look at him again.

“What took you so long?” he demanded.

“I only found it yesterday,” Alyth replied, puzzled.

“Oh, dear.” Lachlan laughed again. “You are so funny. You are very entertaining—it’s a real talent. Yesterday, you say?” Lachlan felt anger begin to boil up inside him again. “Now, why do I find that so hard to believe?”

He stared at Alyth and felt the urge to shake her hard, but he had never harmed a woman in his life and he knew he would not do so now. “So why did it take you so long to find it? Were you waiting for Davina to do it for you? Did you train her to

“speak to you?”

This was such a ludicrous question that Alyth almost laughed out loud. “I don’t know why she talks to me,” she replied. “But I am glad for her—and for you because it is good to see her opening up. I wish I could be here when she really does learn to talk properly. She will blossom, Lachlan. She will take up singing—I know she will. She will recite poetry and write stories of her own. She is like a bud waiting to flower. I-I feel it. And she will be a beauty. She will be as lovely as you are handsome, and you will be so proud of her.”

“I’m already proud of her,” Lachlan said angrily. “Tell me, Alyth, why did you not give up? Why were you so determined? Did you want to torture me? Did you want revenge for your mother’s death?” He paused, then asked in a voice that was throbbing with rage, “Did your father send you to spy on us?”

“No!” Alyth refused passionately. “He had no idea. I told you I needed to have that little piece of my mother back.” Alyth’s eyes filled with tears of frustration as she tried to make him understand how she felt. “Would you not try to recover something of your wife’s if it were lost?”

Lachlan was not moved. He laughed heartily as he saw Alyth weeping, despising her even more.

“Ah, tears,” he mused. “The ultimate woman’s weapon. You can save them for someone whose heart is not as hard as mine, Alyth MacAdams, because they have no effect on me!”

This was a lie. Alyth’s tears were certainly having an effect, although not the one she wanted. They were making Lachlan angrier than ever.

“Leave my wife out of this—you know nothing about her. She was the noblest

woman I know, someone who sacrificed her life to save her child's, and it was your family who murdered her!" He poked a forefinger into her chest for emphasis. "Would you do such a thing for your child?"

Alyth hesitated, and Lachlan took it as a no.

"I thought not," he sneered. "Why are you really here? Tell me the truth, now, before I become really angry!"

Alyth looked up at his face, which had become so dear to her that she could not bear to see it so distorted with rage. She shook her head and put her face in her hands, weeping even harder than before, and for a moment Lachlan felt a pang of sympathy before he hardened his heart again.

He would not be swayed by these crocodile tears, he resolved. He had always prided himself on being a good judge of character, but he had to hand it to Alyth MacAdams. She was a very good actress, and she had completely manipulated him into doing her will with her beauty, her intelligence, and last but not least, the charms of her body. Lachlan cursed himself for being so stupid.

Alyth gradually began to calm down, but when she met his eyes again, tears were still running down her face.

"I told you that I wanted to find the pendant and go on my way at once," she said sadly. "Davina gave me the pendant—she must have found it on her own—and when I told her I had to go, she begged me to stay. I thought about it for a long time because I knew how hurt she would be, and I knew how much I would miss her, but I had to go in the end."

"So you thought you would sneak out in the middle of the night and let her find out in the morning?" he asked disgustedly. "Did you even think about how that would make

her feel? No? Because you are a typical MacAdams, with no concern for anyone but yourself!”

Alyth shook her head vehemently. “No,” she cried. “I do care—very much, Lachlan.” She raised herself to kneel beside him and gripped his arms. “I wanted to stay and tell you everything, but I knew that you and Davina would be better off without me. And I stayed because I fell in love with you, and that made it almost impossible for me to leave. I think you feel the same about me, do you not?”

Lachlan looked at her in horror and disbelief. “Are you mad, woman?” he demanded. “Love you? I despise you with every fibre of my being!” He stood up and pulled Alyth to her feet, then reached down to pick up her clothes, which he thrust into her hands.

“Get dressed, and leave, and if I ever see you again on my land I will personally escort you to the dungeons. As well as that, I will attack your family too and make sure that the peace lasts this time because there will be none of them left!”

He turned to leave, but Alyth grabbed his arm and he whipped around to face her, frowning at her fiercely.

“Lachlan, please—” she began, but he shook himself free.

“It is ‘M’Laird’ to you, Alyth MacAdams.” His voice was thunderous as he pulled on his breeches. “The only word I want to hear from you now is ‘goodbye’.”

He opened the door and stepped outside. The morning air was bitterly cold, but he hardly noticed it; all he wanted to do was distract himself to stop himself thinking about Alyth.

He could, of course, drink himself into a stupor, but that was a coward’s way out, and

he would only feel worse for it later. No. Today there were rents to collect, tenants to see, problems to solve. He had better things to do than waste his time thinking about an enemy, no matter how beautiful she was.

Alyth took the Robertson guards' horse and rode swiftly out of Leithmuir Castle without looking back. The guards were rather startled to see her go; they had never seen her riding a horse before.

Just before they opened the gate, Gavin Ballantyne stepped forward. "Jeannie!" he said, looking astonished. "Where are ye goin'?"

Alyth stared at him sadly, and tears sprang to her eyes again. "My name is not Jeannie, Captain," she replied. "I am not who I said I was. Ask the Laird, he can tell you everything, and please say goodbye to everyone for me. I am sorry to be leaving you, but I'm afraid I have no choice. Goodbye."

Gavin opened his mouth to ask another question, but he never got the chance. Alyth urged the horse into a trot, then, as soon as they were over the drawbridge, a canter. Gavin stood looking after her, baffled, and resolved to speak to Lachlan as soon as he got the chance; his instincts told him that something was not right.

Alyth did not intend to rush and tire out both the mare and herself, so she kept to a reasonable pace. Where possible, she tried to stay under the cover of the trees, but this was not easy, since the Highlands were not heavily forested. When coming out from undercover, she always scanned the land around her for bandits, but this was difficult, due to the hills and the rocks which impeded her view. The Highlands were lovely, but their ruggedness had many disadvantages. It was certainly not the romantic place many people thought it was.

However, she was armed with a broadsword, a dagger, and a small but lethal crossbow. As well as that, her intuition was so finely tuned that she could sense the

presence of an enemy by the prickling of her skin.

While she was riding, she thought of Davina and Lachlan, and found herself weeping again. She could picture Davina's little face clouded with disappointment when she realised that she was never going to see her Jeannie again. Lachlan would have to hold her and tell her that everything would be fine, that he was sure she would see her again at some future time.

Alyth visualised Lachlan having to read Davina's stories himself, and imagined the bitterness and anger he would feel towards her. Why had she fallen in love with him, her sworn enemy? What if she had provoked him so much that he started another war with her father?

She began to weep again, unsure of whether she would be able to bear the guilt and the shame of knowing that it was all her fault.

Alyth was so engrossed in her misery that her usual finely honed instincts did not alert her as they usually did, and before she had a chance to react she found herself surrounded by a party of five horsemen in the livery of the Robertson Clan.

Almost without thinking, she drew her broadsword and slashed at the nearest rider, knocking him off his horse, which reared up and trampled on him.

Alyth hardly had a chance to look around before she found the point of a stiletto at her throat. It was an uncommon weapon, and the man wielding it was dark and appeared foreign. Perhaps Laird Robertson was now recruiting guards from far away—was he so desperate?

She was still gripping her sword, but realised that one false move could cost her her life; all it would take was a tiny thrust from the needle-like weapon the soldier in front of her was holding.

She was completely outnumbered, and the Robertson men had grasped the advantage of surprise with alacrity, rendering her helpless. Alyth was forced to lower her sword and was quickly disarmed by the cool, professional soldiers.

Desperately, she looked back to see if there was any help coming from Lachlan at Leithmuir, but of course, there was none. She was not visible from the castle any more, and even if she had been, Alyth doubted he would have interfered anyway. Why should he risk his men's lives to save an enemy? It might have started another war, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Alyth looked into the face of the senior officer, who had piercing, pale blue eyes that gave her the impression that he was made of ice. He whipped the sword out of her hand and held it up in front of him to study it before giving it to one of the other men.

"Good blade," he said, before turning back to Alyth. "Give me your name."

The question was phrased as a demand, and was utterly disrespectful, but she was in no position to protest. "Alyth MacAdams," she replied, looking the man up and down scornfully, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin to look down her nose at him.

"I thought so." The man gave her a thin, evil-looking smile. "It is a very good thing for you that I have orders tae take ye alive an' unharmed, Mistress, for ye have caused our Laird a lot o' grief."

Alyth felt enormously relieved at this news, but she was also terrified. She was going back to Laird Robertson, but what did he intend to do with her? She knew the answer to that, of course. He would marry her, even if he had to drag her into the church kicking and screaming.

If that is his intention, she thought, then he has a fight on his hands because I would rather be dead than have to see that monster every day!



She thought of Lachlan again. Was it only a few hours ago that they had been tangled in passion? Already it seemed so far away, and now she was riding to a fate that was probably going to be worse than death.

Alyth was surrounded so closely by the Robertson men on the way back to her family's castle that there was no chance of escape. They made swift time on the short trip, keeping their horses at a swift canter, and soon they were within sight of the massive building.

She had always felt immense pride when she looked at Cairnloch Castle. If she had been an enemy, she would have turned away from it at first sight. It had not been built for beauty; it looked like what it was—a towering fortress meant to intimidate, threaten, and finally crush any enemy that dared approach it. Its outside curtain walls were twenty feet high, with crenellations and loopholes for archers to aim and fire at invaders, and inside it had a massive keep, the most fortified part of the castle.

This was a circular tower with no windows, which was surrounded by overlapping layers of turrets that climbed to a height of a few hundred feet and gave a panoramic view over the countryside. The castle had no moat, merely a deep ditch with upward-pointing sharpened stakes in the earth that would impale any man or horse who trod on them. Alyth had seen the castle many times, of course; she had lived in it for years, but it never ceased to amaze her.

She wondered hopefully if there was any possibility that Lachlan had changed his mind. If he had, would he even be able to reach her? Her heart sank; she knew who she was going to meet now. Laird Robertson was the last person on earth she wanted to see or speak to. She decided to try to put on as calm and cool a facade as she could muster.

The party of guards, with Alyth in the centre, rode over the drawbridge and into the courtyard, and Alyth was surprised to see a few men in Robertson livery mixed amongst the MacAdams. However, the two families were allies, and she realised that there were a lot of other things they would be sharing too.

Including me, she thought, with a pang of dread. As she had expected, she was marched towards the Laird's study, his most private place where they would not be overheard by anyone. There were two guards standing outside the door, one on either side, but they were Robertson men.

What on earth is going on? she thought. Had Laird Robertson taken over the castle and moved his men inside it? Alyth screwed up her face in horror. She despised Robertson with every fibre of her being.

The door opened, but when Alyth was led inside she almost fainted with shock because the first person she saw was her father, sitting on a chair beside Laird Robertson and looking pale, dispirited, and sick.

As she met his eyes, he dropped his gaze to his hands, which he was twisting in his lap; they were so bony that they looked almost like claws. He looked almost as thin as Robertson, since he had lost pounds of weight. Although it was only a short while since she had seen him, his whole face was sagging, and looked deeply lined and wrinkled, as if he had grown years older instead of months.

Despite her resolution to stay calm, Alyth gave a gasp of shock as anger surged through her like a hot jet of flame.

"Da!" she cried. "What is he doing here? You must order this man away, now." She flung her hand out to point to Laird Robertson, who had risen to his feet and was smiling at her, a smug, triumphant expression which disgusted and repulsed her.

For a split second, Alyth felt like spitting on him, but knew that it would do her no good; she was surrounded by his men, trapped and helpless. She could expect nothing from her father, since he looked thoroughly cowed.

Laird MacAdams looked up and nodded. “We are allies, Alyth. Ye know that.” Then, he dropped his gaze to the floor.

Alyth was speechless, and stood looking dumbly at her father as he continued to avoid her eyes. She wanted to shake him, but Laird Robertson’s guards were outside, and they were much stronger than she was. She stood motionless, trying to compose herself, until Laird Robertson came strolling over to her.

“It is so good to see you, Alyth,” he drawled, with a leering smile. He looked her up and down several times, letting his gaze linger on every part of her until Alyth felt filthy. “I must say, I have never seen a woman wearing breeches before. They look very fetching, they outline your curves beautifully.”

He smiled again, letting his eyes linger on her breasts. Alyth wanted to cross her arms over them, but did not want to give the loathsome creature the satisfaction of knowing he had upset her.

He walked around her, and Alyth felt his gaze on her, stinging as if someone was burning her with a flame.

Any more of this and I am going to be sick, she thought disgustedly.

At that moment, Robertson came to stand in front of her, his thin, skeletal face wearing a smile of deep satisfaction which turned Alyth’s stomach. She wished she had nails like sharp claws with which to rake his face and make him bleed and scream with pain, but she could do nothing.

She looked at her father again. He was sitting with his elbows on his knees, his face resting on the heels of his hands, dejectedly looking at the floor. Alyth had never been so ashamed of him. If her mother had been here, she thought, she would be creating hell, not sitting in cowardly resignation.

Alyth was unaware that her face was betraying her thoughts until Laird Robertson said, “Your father and I have been doing a great deal of talking while you were away, Alyth.”

While he was speaking, he was pouring three glasses of wine, one of which he gave to Laird MacAdams. Alyth’s father took the wine but stared into the glass instead of drinking it, as if he were trying to see the future or cast a spell. He could do neither, of course. He was just a man, and not much of a man either. Alyth thought.

When Laird Robertson offered a glass to Alyth she shook her head and said disgustedly, “No, thank you.”

However, Robertson was not taking no for an answer, and he tried to force the glass into Alyth’s right hand, but she swept it sideways in a cutting gesture. The glass flew through the air and landed on the floor, where it shattered with a resounding crash, dissolving into a thousand smithereens and showering wine everywhere.

Robertson threw back his head and laughed, then his expression changed to one of pure rage as he stepped forward and grasped Alyth’s chin so tightly that she winced with pain. Robertson, seeing her reaction, gave her an evil smile and leaned so close to her that their noses were almost touching.

“That was a very stupid thing to do,” he said in a voice that was almost a hiss. “That was one of the best crystal glasses you have, and a very good vintage Spanish wine. Nevertheless, I forgive you, since I am a soft-hearted man and I understand that this has all been rather a shock for you.

However, I will not tolerate this behaviour from now on. The day after tomorrow, you will be my wife, and under my command.” He paused to watch her reaction, satisfied when he saw the fear in her eyes.

Alyth’s knees went weak as a bolt of sheer horror shot through her, and she could simply not hold back the fear and revulsion on her face. Laird Robertson’s eyes glinted with dark, evil glee, and he leaned forward to place a cold kiss on Alyth’s lips, which made her recoil in disgust. If anything, this made Robertson even happier, since he thrived on the fear of others.

“After we are married,” he went on, “our combined armies—the Robertsons and MacAdams—will take on the Carricks. They have had everything their own way for long enough, and it’s time they were put in their place.”

His face was even uglier than usual, since it was red with fury, and for a moment Alyth found it impossible to speak, then she cried furiously, “I will not marry you, you monster, and I will not take your side against the Carricks or anyone else!”

She turned to her father, who was seated in the same chair as before. He still had his head in his hands, and had not moved since she had last spoken to him.

“Da!” she cried desperately. “The Carricks do not want to fight. They want peace, the same as we do. Tell this man we will not do battle with them.”

Laird MacAdams looked up at his daughter and shook his head slowly. “Alyth, I cannot,” he replied. “If I do, he will unleash his army on us, and if the Carricks do the same, we are doomed.”

“You talk like a coward, Da,” Alyth yelled back. “And I know you are not like that!” She glared at him fiercely, but he turned away, too disappointed at himself.

“Where have you been hiding then, dear?”

One of the men who had captured Alyth came into the room, summoned by Laird Robertson. The guard whispered in the Laird’s ear for a moment, and Robertson’s eyes widened in surprise. He turned back to address Alyth, and this time the look on his face was the most disgusting she had seen yet—an evil, suggestive leer. Alyth almost felt sick with revulsion.

“So you were found on Laird Carrick’s land?” he asked. “What happened to you after that?”

“When they found me, I was cold, hungry, and desperate,” Alyth told him. “They were kind to me, and I was grateful. I was sick for a while, but the servants nursed me back to health. I might have died of exposure if it had not been for them and Laird Carrick. They treated me very well.”

“I see,” Robertson said thoughtfully. “When you say ‘kind,’ what exactly do you mean?” He raised his eyebrows in a suggestive manner. “In what way was he kind?”

“If you mean what I think you mean,” Alyth answered disgustedly, “then you are wrong. Laird Carrick is a man of honour, unlike some I could mention!”

She raked her glance down from Robertson’s head to his feet and back again, telling him in no uncertain terms exactly what she thought of him.

“He has never taken advantage of me. I was sorry to leave, but it was time, and I knew I had to come back to my father.”

However, her voice was scathing as she said, “But if I had known he was throwing in his lot with you, I would have stayed where I was. I would rather be a maid servant or even a stable hand than your wife!”

Robertson's reaction was to sit down in his chair again and address Laird MacAdams. "Well, that gives me a wonderful idea," he said as he grinned and rubbed his hands together.

"What idea?" Laird MacAdams spoke up, looking even more fearful than before.

"Look at your daughter," Robertson said, using the excuse to once more devour Alyth with his eyes. "She is a lovely woman, is she not?" He narrowed his eyes and steepled his fingers. "I will spread the word that Carrick kidnapped her, and that will give me a reason to take up arms against him."

"No!" Alyth's scream tore through the air like a jet of flame. Now she was so desperately afraid, she was reduced to pleading with Robertson. "Please, no! He is a peaceful man. You must not do this. So many men on both sides will die for nothing!"

"The Carrick land and wealth is not nothing," Robertson replied scathingly. "We will say that Lachlan Carrick took advantage of you, and you are ruined for every other man. Any man worth his salt wants a virgin to take to bed on his wedding night, as I do. I will be hailed as a hero for marrying you and saving you from a life of wretched spinsterhood."

Alyth almost laughed out loud. If Laird Robertson expected a virgin on his wedding night, he was going to be sorely disappointed! She said nothing, however, merely gazed at him with eyes that were full of hatred.

"Come now," Robertson said soothingly. "It will not be as bad as you think. I will be very gentle with you."

He patted Alyth's cheek and turned away to summon a maid servant, who rushed by the door awaiting orders.



“Shona!” Alyth cried. She was overcome with relief and pleasure to see her old lady’s maid, who had looked after her since she was a girl.

“Milady!” Shona smiled warmly. “I am so glad tae see ye.”

“Come in, maid,” Robertson said. “Your mistress, Lady MacAdams and I are getting married the day after tomorrow. I would like you to find a dress for her.”

Laird MacAdams spoke up. “You should be able to find something from some of the old ones that were left behind by house guests. There is bound to be one that fits, do you not think?”

Laird Robertson took the chance to look Alyth up and down again with the same lascivious leer on his face, pretending to be interested in her dress.

“Aye, M’Laird,” the old woman agreed. “I think I can find somethin’.”

“Then we will leave the preparation in her capable hands,” Robertson said with an air of satisfaction. Laird MacAdams had fallen silent again, and it seemed as though he was the guest, not the Laird of the castle.

“Would you like to come down a little later for our midday meal?” Robertson asked.

“Are you the Laird now?” she demanded.

Robertson laughed contemptuously. “Of course not. But I will be the Laird’s son-in-law, so I think I have some authority.”

Alyth shook her head and looked at him contemptuously, then she treated Laird MacAdams to a venomous scowl. “I cannot believe you let this happen, Da.”

Alyth followed Shona upstairs, expecting to go to her own bedchamber, but instead she was led to a spacious room on the first floor. However, she was not surprised. Robertson was clearly making himself at home!

“Why am I not in my own bedchamber?” she asked Shona.

“Because your father said so, Milady.” The old lady frowned, but said nothing more. She did not have to; evidently she felt the same about Laird Robertson as Alyth did.

When Alyth walked in, she could see that the room had not yet been prepared for her arrival, since the bed was unmade and the rest of the furniture was covered in dust.

Two maidservants were busy sweeping and dusting, and both of them curtsied as Alyth and Shona entered. Alyth knew their faces because they worked in the castle, but she was ashamed to realise that she had never before asked their names.

Yet, everything was different now; she knew how much these women were worth.

The two women looked hesitantly at Alyth, unsure of what to do next. “Carry on with what you are doing,” Alyth instructed, smiling at both of them. “You were obviously not expecting me.”

“No, Milady,” Shona answered nervously. “We didnae know ye were comin’ till a wee while ago.” She looked distressed, as if expecting a reprimand.

“Then please don’t let me bother you,” Alyth said, soothingly. She felt a pang of sadness as she remembered the camaraderie she had enjoyed with the maids at Leithmuir.

Alyth looked around the room and suddenly realised why she had been moved into it. This was not going to be just her bedchamber, but hers and Laird Robertson’s for

their wedding night. She felt a wave of sick rage rise in her belly, and wondered if there was anything she could do to damage it so that it would be useless.

By the time the room was ready for her occupation, the three maids had concluded that their mistress was indeed a very unusual lady indeed, but they liked her immensely.

Alyth had deeply impressed them by climbing a ladder to reach up and dust the decorative cornice on the ceiling, although they were rather astonished that she was wearing breeches.

Alyth wanted to get to know the maids better for two reasons; because she genuinely liked most of them, and if she wanted to find a way out of the castle, she knew it would be better if she became friendly with them.

However, today she knew she would have to stay quiet and cause no more fuss, so she allowed herself to be bathed and changed into a dress that Shona brought her.

Alyth looked around herself as she walked downstairs, searching for an escape route, but there were two guards constantly at her side, and she had to be careful that she was not making herself too obvious. It amazed and saddened her that she was looking at her own home as if it were a prison.

When she arrived in the dining room, her father and Laird Robertson both stood up and bowed to her, but Alyth sat down without giving them a curtsy.

“How do you like your bedroom, Alyth?” Robertson asked.

Alyth said nothing.

“Did you hear me?” The Laird’s voice had a note of irritation in it.

Again, Alyth was silent, but she looked up and met his eyes. If there was one thing at which she excelled, it was staring someone out, since she had absolutely no fear or feeling of awkwardness. Now she put that skill to the test. She and Laird Robertson looked into each other's eyes for a full minute before he dropped his gaze with a frustrated grunt.

For the rest of the meal, there was complete and utter silence. Alyth looked up at her father once or twice, but he seemed to be concentrating hard on his food and ignored her. She was not hungry in the least, but knew that if she were to escape, she would need all her strength. So she forced her food down with a Herculean effort before standing up, turning away and walking out without a word.

Neither her father nor Laird Robertson tried to stop her.

Lachlan woke up the next morning with a thumping headache, and sent to the kitchen for a cup of willow bark tea to soothe it. It eventually calmed down, but after he had eaten his breakfast, he felt sick.

Later in the morning, he summoned Gavin to practise his swordsmanship with him, hoping that the strenuous activity would take his mind off Jeannie. Alyth. He could not get his mind away from the sight of the tears streaming down her face and her declaration of love for him.

He decided to begin his sword practice on his own, since Gavin had not yet made an appearance. Usually when he and Gavin started to fight, maid servants would hide behind pillars and gaze at him in admiration, whispering and giggling, but not today. Today there was a heavy atmosphere of gloom which had settled over the castle with the news of Jeannie's, or rather Alyth's, disappearance.

Of course, Lachlan told himself firmly, Alyth's feelings were not reciprocated since he was still in love with Sandrina and always would be. She was the love of his life; of course she was, they had been married for years. He might have had her permission to marry or love again, but at this moment, it was the furthest thing from his mind. Now he would devote his life to Davina and help her grow into the woman he knew she could and would be.

Yet, he was uncertain if he could do it without Alyth's help. Davina only seemed to have responded to her, and had never said a word to anyone else, but it was still a mystery to him why that should be so. Had she somehow seen something inside

Alyth that was invisible to everyone else? He was not much of a believer in such things, but lately, he had begun to reconsider; there was obviously more to Alyth than met the eye.

Gavin came out, broadsword at the ready, to begin their bout. Lachlan was not aware of how pallid and tired he looked. Every muscle in his body was tense and aching, due mainly to a lack of sleep the night before. Consequently, he was not performing to his usual excellent standard, and Gavin noticed this almost at once.

Usually, they were quite evenly matched, with Lachlan winning some bouts and Gavin winning others, but not today. Gavin knocked Lachlan down time and time again, and even backed him into the wall once.

Gavin said nothing, and neither did Lachlan, but he had no need to. Alyth's departure had obviously affected him badly, and it was all too obvious.

Gavin had known of Lachlan's affair with Alyth long before her departure. In fact, he knew everything. He had not asked questions or sneaked around watching them, but he had a well-developed intuition honed by many years of watching and spying on his enemies. As well as that, he had his wife!

The first indication he had had was the way Davina responded to Alyth. The child had been extraordinarily sensitive since her mother died, and the fact that she had immediately responded to Alyth was noticed at once by Gavin, and so was Lachlan's reaction.

When Alyth had started reading stories to his daughter, Gavin had noticed that at first he had been hostile, then intrigued. However, after the Robertsons' attack, there was a subtle but very noticeable change in Lachlan's behaviour.

Every time he saw Alyth, he turned his gaze away and looked at something else, as if

he did not want to be caught staring at her. It was a small but telling sign of his attraction to her, and was probably only visible to those who knew Lachlan very well.

Now, as they trudged back into the castle, Gavin patted Lachlan's back and asked, with some concern, "No' feelin' well, big man?"

Lachlan laughed softly. "I'm fine, Gavin. My sword is tired, that's all."

"Ye seem tae be a bit bent over this morning," Gavin remarked. "Remember, the first thing they tell ye when ye're bein' taught is tae stand up straight. That is a beginner's mistake, Lachlan. Ye must be really tired oot. Maybe ye should rest for a few days. The place will no' fall down if ye arenae here!"

Lachlan thought for a moment while they moved inside to sit down in his study. He smiled at Gavin. "You are so wise, my friend. I definitely feel a bit off balance this morning, so tell me what else I need to do. I don't want to be skewered by an enemy sword just because I didn't practise properly!"

Gavin began to list his mistakes in meticulous detail, and at the end of the long list of errors, Lachlan said, "My god, Gavin! It's a wonder I am still alive."

Gavin gave him a playful punch on the shoulder. "Ye are just havin' a bad day, Lachlan. We a' dae sometimes."

"We all make mistakes," Lachlan acknowledged. He liked talking to Gavin. He knew that anything he told him would go no further than him and Maisie, and he trusted them both completely.

"I think I've made a lot of mistakes with Davina," he said, with a huge sigh.

"Why dae ye say that?" Gavin asked, frowning. "She is a lovely wee lassie, an' she

adores her Da.”

“I should have been there for Sandrina.” Lachlan clenched his fist until his knuckles turned white. “Instead, I was away trying to be a hero, failing to protect them.”

“Lachlan, stop it,” Gavin said firmly. “Ye have been over this a hundred times. It wasnae your fault, an’ what’s done is done.”

“I know you’re right, Gavin,” Lachlan conceded, nodding. “But sometimes I just wish... Oh, never mind.” He paused to take a gulp of water. “I still have to tell Davina that Jeannie has gone.” Knowing that Gavin would never betray his confidence, he had told Gavin who Jeannie really was, and strangely enough, he had not seemed surprised at all.

“I would tell her exactly what happened an’ why,” Gavin advised. “I think she is a lot stronger than she looks.” He turned to go. “I had better get back tae the lads,” he announced, with an anxious glance at Lachlan. “Call me if there is anythin’ else ye need.”

“You are such a good friend, Gavin,” Lachlan said gratefully. “I’m fine now.”

Gavin waved and left.

Lachlan had a pile of work to do that morning, but he knew he had to tell Davina about Alyth’s absence, and he was dreading the look he knew he was going to see on her sweet face.

Why had he let Alyth go? Surely, they could have worked out something that would have permanently kept the peace between them?

And Lachlan missed her, even though she had only been gone for a very short time.



He missed her smile, her scent, the sound of her melodic voice, but most of all he missed her body, her cry when she reached fulfilment, his name on her lips. As well as that, he missed the fierce glory when his own body reached its climax within her.

He sent for another cup of willow bark tea to soothe the headache which had just come back to torture him, then sighed and went downstairs to his study.

He planned to have a strong glass of whisky before confronting Davina. Dutch courage, as Sandrina had called it, and Lachlan smiled sadly as he thought of her. He reached for his keys, but when he turned the door handle, he found that his study was already unlocked.

He entered cautiously and found Davina standing looking out of the window, clutching her doll to her chest. Tears were running down her cheeks, and her little face was a picture of sadness as she looked around and saw him, then she turned and rushed towards him before throwing herself into his arms.

“Daddy,” she whispered against his shoulder. “Where is Alyth?”

Lachlan was shocked, not because Davina knew that the maid was gone, but because she knew her real name.

“You mean Jeannie?” he asked gently.

“Alyth,” Davina insisted.

Lachlan was astonished, angry and hurt. Alyth had told Davina about her real identity before informing him. “She told you her real name, then?” he asked.

Davina nodded her head.

Lachlan sat down and cradled Davina on his lap, wrapping his arms securely around her. He kissed her forehead and rested his cheek on her soft red hair, which was only a shade lighter than his own. She resembled him so much; what would a child of his and Alyth's be like, he wondered?

Abruptly, he cut short his musings. My god, what am I thinking?

He suffered a spasm of guilt as the impossible thought went through his mind. There was no chance of him ever being a father to Alyth's baby, even if one had already been conceived.

"Daddy," Davina said softly, "Did you tell Alyth to leave?"

"Davina," Lachlan said, shaking his head in wonder, "You are really talking now."

Davina blushed and hid her face in his shoulder for a moment, then she looked up at him and smiled, yet in a moment her face was filled with sadness again.

"Why did she leave?" she asked again.

Lachlan sighed. He had been dreading this moment, and it was even worse than he had been anticipating. At last, he said, "Because she is our enemy, Davina. Our two families have been fighting for years. You know why Alyth came; she wanted to get her pendant back, and after that, she was going to leave us.

She said that the pendant was the only part of her mother that she had left, and it meant everything to her. I caught her trying to get away, but instead of trying to make her stay, I chased her away. I was so angry with her for deceiving us, but now that I look back, I can see how stupid I was."

Then, to his astonishment, Davina said, "You said to sympathise with your enemy,

Daddy.”

Lachlan stared at her for a moment. This was astonishing! Davina was talking like an ordinary little girl again, and she had even remembered the words he had said to her just a few weeks ago. She had not been able to talk then, but she had obviously been listening intently.

“You are so clever, Davina,” he said fondly, stroking her hair and smiling as he spoke.

In some ways, a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, since he could now stop worrying about how Davina’s lack of speech would affect her future. But there was still the vexing problem of Alyth MacAdams...

He felt his cheek being patted softly as Davina tried to attract his attention, and when he looked at her, she said, “Please bring her back, Daddy. I miss her, and—and I like her.” She paused. “Do you like her too?”

For a long moment, Lachlan sat silently, brooding over what his daughter had just said. Sometimes children were far more wise and perceptive than adults, he thought. Their minds were not clouded with preconceptions made up by years of dealing with people with views and prejudices of their own.

“Yes,” he replied. “Yes, I do, sweetheart.”

And suddenly Lachlan realised that he really and truly loved Alyth. He had done so almost from the first time he laid eyes on her, but his stubbornness and his loyalty to his late wife had not allowed him to admit it. Alyth had only left a day before, and already he was missing her so much that it was almost painful.

Lachlan knew that he had to find her and bring her back, but he also knew that it

would not be easy. Although a truce was still in force between him and MacAdams, he was not sure if he would give his blessing to this marriage.

Marriage? Lachlan thought suddenly. Where had that thought come from? And yet, it seemed to be the answer he was seeking. Marriage to Alyth was not only the solution to a problem, but it would bring him the happiness he had been missing since Sandrina died.

Davina was still looking up at him, hopefully. “Bring her back,” she pleaded. There was a crack in her voice, and the expression on her little face was infinitely sad.

“I will,” he promised. “Just for you.”

That, of course, was a lie; he needed Alyth as much as he needed the air that he breathed. However, Lachlan did not point out to Davina that going to rescue Alyth might be dangerous; there was no need to alarm her more than was absolutely necessary.

Gavin gave Lachlan a grim smile when he was informed of his plan to go after Alyth. “I knew there was somethin’ between ye two,” he said.

Lachlan was puzzled. “How?” he asked, frowning. “We were very careful.”

They were sitting in Gavin and Maisie’s quarters, and as usual, Lachlan seemed to fill the small room with his presence. Gavin pointed to Maisie, who was sitting by the fire sewing.

“Maisie worked it out,” he replied. “Did ye no’, darlin’?”

Maisie looked up, her eyes twinkling. “I have seen many couples fallin’ in love over the years, lads,” she answered. “Tae me it was as plain as day. The way ye looked at

each other an' tried tae avoid lookin' at each other, and the way wee Davina treated both o' ye... It was the same when Gavin an' me fell in love. An' when ye came back the day the Robertsons attacked, ye looked as though ye wanted tae throw your arms around her an' kiss her."

Lachlan shook his head in wonder. "You must think I'm very stupid," he said.

"No, lad," Gavin put in, laughing as he looked lovingly at Maisie. "Women always know these things—an' especially my Maisie!"

Lachlan felt a stab of jealousy as he saw the loving look that passed between them. If only Alyth would look at him like that.

Gavin got to his feet and poured them all some ale. "Now, I think we should make some plans," he said grimly.

"Yes." Lachlan sighed. "I don't think hostilities will be necessary. Laird MacAdams is not too aggressive, and we are under a flag of truce, but it is better to be safe than sorry."

"I am more worried about his ally." Gavin's face clouded. "There might be some o' them devils there. The Robertsons are the worst o' the worst."

"Yes, I had already thought of that," Lachlan's voice was heavy with dread. "Take your best men, Gavin. I doubt if they will be needed, though."

"I am no' sae sure, Lachlan." Gavin's face was clouded with apprehension. "I wouldnae put anythin' past Robertson. He is the devil himself!"

On the night before her wedding, Alyth did not sleep a wink, since she was tormented by thoughts of what would be happening to her in a few hours. She had no illusions that she would enjoy Laird Robertson as her husband. Indeed, she could hardly stand the sight of him.

He had the kind of twisted mentality that would revel in making her suffer, and would enjoy seeing the fear in her eyes. Alyth knew that men in power preferred a quiet, obedient wife, but she was not one of them. Even the thought of it made her shudder.

She thought again of trying to escape, but her clothes and shoes had been taken away from her, leaving her at the mercy of the bitter cold night air. There were guards outside her door, of course, but they were not her father's guards, since they were dressed in the livery of the Robertson Clan. Then she wondered if she could climb down the wall outside.

Alyth sighed as she looked down. The room was at the front of the castle, unlike her own cosy chamber, which was at the back and enjoyed a view of the gardens. Here, there was a sheer drop to the ditch, where she would be impaled on vicious stakes if she fell. Alyth was agile and fit—she could scale walls of a moderate height and climb trees, but she could never scramble down a wall like that.

This was the reason she had been moved here, she realised. She had no idea if that was to be the room in which she would spend the first night of her marriage, but there was no way of escaping it, so she settled down to try and get some rest.

However, she tossed and turned the whole night, and in the morning Alyth did not have to look in the mirror to see that she looked like a wreck. Her dark grey eyes were bloodshot, and there were shadows underneath them.

Good, she thought viciously. The worse I look, the better. Maybe he will leave me alone then.

However, Alyth knew that this was a forlorn hope. The more Robertson could intimidate and humiliate her, the better he would like it. She guessed that he would enjoy using insults and foul language to intimidate her.

She laughed inwardly at that thought. Having listened to the kind of insults the guards tossed at each other every day, she was completely immune to it!

Yet Alyth had one ace up her sleeve; Robertson had no idea how fit and well-trained for combat she was. If he tried to use any violence against her, he would find that he would receive the same amount and more back again. Alyth was quite capable of flattening him with a few well-placed blows.

That would be a surprise for him tonight, she thought, then a sinking feeling of disappointment assailed her. Unless her action was accompanied by an escape plan, it would prove fruitless. Robertson would love the violence, and would be ready to turn it into a game. Either that or he would take revenge on her for hurting him.

No, if she was going to use force against him, it had to be enough to kill him. Could she do that with her bare hands? Alyth knew she could, but she had no intention of giving up her own life in the process, since there were so many of Laird Robertson's guards about.

When Shona came in with her breakfast, she looked at Alyth with dismay.

“Ye look very tired, Mistress,” she said, her voice filled with pity. “Did ye no’ sleep?”

“Not very well, Shona,” Alyth answered, yawning.

“I expect ye are nervous about the wedding,” Shona said, nodding. “Most brides are, Mistress. Dinnae worry. Ye will be fine.”

“Thank you.”

Alyth pasted on a smile and began to tackle her breakfast, once again having to force down every bite. A headache was beginning to throb behind her eyes, and she pushed away her plate after eating only a few mouthfuls of food. She felt nauseous at the thought of confronting Laird Robertson, but her mind kept straying to the terrible prospect of what lay ahead that night.

“Is that a’ ye can manage?” Shona asked as she took Alyth’s plate away.

“I am feeling a bit sick,” Alyth replied. “But I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Aye, well, as ye say, ye are nervous, Mistress,” Shona said soothingly. “But I am sure ye took the right decision fer yer people.”

Yet Alyth could tell by the tone of Shona’s voice that she was only trying to comfort her, and that she herself was uneasy about her marriage to Laird Robertson.

“Do you really think it is right for me, Shona?” Alyth asked. “Or are you just saying that to comfort me?”

Shona looked awkward for a moment. “I think after ye get tae know yer husband, he will be good for ye,” she replied with a sigh. “But it might take a wee while.”



She stopped speaking as Alyth's bath was brought in, then helped her into it. The warm rose-scented water was soothing, but Alyth could not relax.

"Did ye find somebody else while ye were away?" Shona asked, looking down at Alyth suspiciously.

Alyth stared up at her, considering what to say.

Shona had been Alyth's maid since she was twelve years old, and could practically read her mind. Now, something about her mistress was bothering her; for a bride-to-be, she seemed desperately unhappy. She had seen plenty of arranged marriages where the two parties hardly knew each other, but eventually settled down into some kind of relationship where each accommodated the other.

However, she had come to feel a great affection for her young mistress and hated to see her upset. She also disliked Laird Robertson, but it was not her place to say so, and there was nothing she could do to stop the wedding.

"I did find someone," Alyth replied at last. "While I was away I fell deeply in love with Laird Carrick."

"Carrick!" Shona cried out in horror. "But Mistress, that was the clan that killed your mother! How can ye fa' in love wi' your enemy?"

Alyth shook her head and put her face in her hands. "I knew you would say that, Shona," she said sadly. "But you don't know him. He is truly a good man, and inside he is very gentle, but he has to cover it up to look strong for his men. Even though he appears tough on the outside, he is really very soft inside. He cares about all the members of his clan, and they are all completely loyal to him. He has a little daughter called Davina who is seven years old. Her mother took an arrow in the heart to save her life, and for three years the wee girl was unable to speak. He is so tender and

caring towards her, and she adores him. ”

Then she smiled. “But for some strange reason she started speaking to me, at first just a word at a time, then more and more. The Laird asked me to read her bedtime stories, so I did, and we became very close. One day, we went out riding and were attacked by the Robertsons, and Lachlan, Laird Carrick, saved our lives. Is that the act of a bad man?

And that was when I fell in love with him. He has been so good to me! But the people who have not been good to me are the Robertsons, and my father wants me to marry one of them. And not just anyone, but the worst of all of them, the Laird. How can you marry a man you hate, Shona?”

Shona sighed and helped Alyth out of the bath. “You know Laird Carrick is your family’s enemy, Mistress. Your father willnae like this at a’.”

“My father will never know.” Alyth’s voice was firm, and she looked at her maid threateningly. Shona nodded in understanding as she helped Alyth into a dressing gown. “Because what I just said will never leave this room, will it?”

“No, Mistress—have I ever betrayed ye?” Shona looked hurt, and Alyth felt wretched.

“I’m sorry, Shona,” she said, sighing. “I should never have said that. I should not take out my fear and anger on you. You have been so good to me all these years.”

Shona smiled. “Thank ye, Mistress,” she said. “Now, shall we dae your hair?”

Now was the part of any celebration that Alyth hated. She had always wondered why it was that women had to be squeezed into corsets, have their faces painted, and their hair twisted into plaits, curls and coils. As well as that, they needed to bedeck

themselves with enough jewellery to sink a battleship!

Men had to do none of these absurd things, and they seemed to be perfectly content. There was nothing like a handsome man in a kilt, especially if his name was Lachlan Carrick; he needed no adornment of any kind.

Alyth thought of his beautiful blue-green eyes, and her throat began to choke with tears. She remembered the cry he made when he came to his climax, the way he laid his head on her shoulder afterwards, the feel of his silky chestnut hair. Those times would never return, and all she would have of him would be beautiful memories to sustain her in the years to come.

How she wished there was a way to record those recollections so that she could look back on them and relive them! Yet, there was no good yearning for the impossible, she realised.

Alyth's wedding dress was not new. In fact, it had belonged to one of her aunts, who had left it in the castle by mistake. It was very old-fashioned indeed, perhaps twenty years out of date, and she screwed her face up as she looked at herself in the mirror. Her reflection was not pleasing.

The garment was made of layers of pale grey velvet with an underskirt of white lace. It had puffed sleeves trimmed with more lace, and Alyth thought it was the fussiest, most overdecorated dress she had ever seen. However, she had chosen it on purpose, since she had no wish to appear attractive for Laird Robertson.

Just as she stood up, there was a heavy banging on the door and a Robertson guard barged in without invitation. He looked rather disappointed to see Alyth standing looking in the mirror fully dressed; perhaps he had been expecting to surprise her in a half-naked state.

“The Laird wants ye in the chapel, Milady,” the man said with a perfunctory bow.

“Tell the Laird, he can wait till I am ready,” Alyth replied in a pompous tone.

The guard frowned, nodded and retreated.

She turned to Shona. “Well, I suppose I am as prepared as I’m ever going to be,” she said, sighing.

“It willnae be as bad as ye think, Mistress,” Shona said soothingly.

“Oh, god, Shona, I hope you’re right,” Alyth said fervently, wiping a tear from her eye. “Because I feel as though I am walking into hell itself.”

Laird Colin MacAdams was standing at the back of the castle chapel at Cairnloch, waiting for his daughter to arrive so that he could give her away to her new husband. Give her away—it sounded as though she was a commodity, something to trade, instead of the most important person in his life. Was he trading her? Yes, but for a noble cause—peace.

Robertson was strong, and his soldiers were ruthless. However, that was not what worried him; it was James Robertson himself, whom he knew to have a streak of cruelty running right through him, and now he was handing Alyth over to his dubious care.

Care? He did not have a caring bone in his body.

Just then, he saw Alyth coming into the chapel with a fully armed guard on each side of her and her maid a few steps behind. He knew at once that she had not had much choice over her own dress; it was fussy, frilly, years out of date and did nothing to flatter her at all.

He swallowed nervously and smiled at her, holding out his arm, “You look lovely,” he lied. “I am very proud to be your father, Alyth.”

Alyth linked her arm with the Laird’s, but she did not return his smile, merely gave him an ice-cold stare in response. “Thank you,” she said coldly. “Now, let me tell you something, Father. I was planning to run away from everything, but then, I could not just leave you alone. I thought I could count on you, but you betrayed me, selling me away. Now let us get this farce over with.”

She squared her shoulders and tilted her chin, then began to walk down the aisle, feeling utterly ridiculous and embarrassed in the hideous dress. As she did so, she saw the leering, skeletal face of Laird Robertson, looking as though he were anticipating the prospect of devouring her like a favourite treat.

If only Lachlan was standing in Robertson’s place, she thought sadly. He would be dressed in his clan tartan great kilt, with the plaid over his shoulder sporting the clan crest. He would be wearing a snow-white shirt under his plain woollen jacket, but she would still be able to see the breadth of his shoulders and his strong, muscular calves. She knew that their wedding night would have been glorious.

And his face—his sculpted, masculine face with its square jaw and full lips. Alyth knew he would be smiling at her, his eyes shining with love. She was certain that she would be walking, not into paradise—she was a realist after all, but into a happy future with the man she loved. Instead, she was marching into hell with a monster.

When her father put her hand into Robertson’s icy cold one, Alyth gave him such a venomous look that he took a step backwards as if she had given him a physical blow. Then he walked away to sit in the front pew.

The ceremony was very sparsely attended, since Laird Robertson had wanted to organise the ceremony in great haste so that it could not be stopped or interrupted.

Alyth doubted that any of the guests actually wanted to be there at all.

They were mostly men who traded with the Laird and their wives. However, Alyth was glad there were not more people there to witness her disgrace because she felt dirty, as if even standing beside Robertson was staining her with his filthy character.

“You look wonderful in that dress,” he whispered. Alyth was just about to thank him, merely for the sake of politeness, when he said, “But I am sure you will look even better without it. I cannot wait to make you mine—you should feel the same.”

Alyth looked into his leering dark eyes and felt like spitting at him. She wished she had brought a knife with her because then she could have cheerfully put an end to Robertson’s miserable life and smiled while doing it.

Damn the consequences! she thought. Anything is better than living with him.

The minister, Reverend Morrison, was late, which was very unlike him. He had been serving the village of Cairnloch for over twenty years—for all Alyth’s life. In fact, he had baptised Alyth when she was only eight months old, and she had an enormous affection for him.

Now Alyth wondered if he had come to any harm because she had a growing feeling of dread inside; something was about to happen, and it was not going to be pleasant. She pulled her skirts up to her knees, ready to take to her heels if she had to.

Laird Robertson was not gifted with such foresight, however, and neither was Alyth’s father. Robertson frowned in irritation.

“What is keeping him?” he grumbled. He looked at a clock on the wall and tutted. “Five minutes late,” his voice was a growl, and he turned to call one of the guards, only to find himself face to face with the last person he wanted to see.

Lachlan approached Cairnloch Castle very cautiously. He had told his men not to attack the MacAdams garrison unless they did so first, since he had not come to make war, but to talk peace. He also wished to ask for Alyth's hand in marriage, and he wanted nothing to get in the way of that because he knew a refusal would break his heart.

However, as they approached the castle he noticed that the guards were dressed in the livery of both the MacAdams and Robertson Clans, and a feeling of deep apprehension came over him.

Something is wrong, he thought, as he went forward to meet one of the guards who was manning the main gate. He greeted the man politely.

"May I speak to Laird MacAdams, please?" he asked, smiling and bowing pleasantly.

"The Laird isnae available, Sir," the man replied. "His daughter is gettin' married."

Lachlan felt as though he had been punched in the stomach. He dropped his calm facade at once, urged his horse forward and galloped into the courtyard with all his armed horsemen behind him.

Could he stop the wedding before the vows were said, or was he already too late? He had no doubt that Alyth was not entering into the marriage willingly. No, she was being forced into it by her weak and spineless father. Lachlan had a notion that a forced marriage was not valid, but he could not be sure if that was true, and was not

willing to take the chance. It was better to be safe than sorry, he thought grimly.

Could it be that she was telling the truth about running away from her betrothed? Could that betrothed be Robertson himself? The thought was dreadful.

The MacAdams and Robertson guards never stood a chance as the Carrick horses ploughed through them. However, when the Carricks reached the entrance to the castle many of the Cairnloch men had risen to their feet and unsheathed their swords, and a fierce battle started in seconds.

Gavin, who had been at Lachlan's side and heard the guard's words, managed to shout to Lachlan, "I will take care o' this! Go an' stop the weddin'!"

Lachlan needed no second bidding, but dismounted and sprinted into the castle, brandishing his sword ferociously. He asked a terrified maid where the chapel was, and when she told him the way, he ran there as fast as his legs would carry him, knocking down anyone or anything that got in his way.

A dozen of his men were following behind him; they knew that Laird Robertson and Laird MacAdams would not be unguarded, especially on a day like this.

As soon as they approached the entrance to the church, Lachlan saw the minister standing by the door reading a prayer book. He was a small, bald man in late middle age with a kindly air, but at that moment Lachlan was feeling anything but kind.

He took the clergyman by the front of his robe and said, "There will be no wedding today, Reverend. Go and find somewhere safe to hide."

The man looked shocked, but hurried away without a word. Lachlan crept to a position just behind the door so that he could look into the church without being seen.



He was horrified. Alyth, looking miserable and wearing the ugliest dress he had ever seen, was standing by the side of the man whom Lachlan hated most in the world.

Lachlan had summoned ten of his own guards to stand behind him, while he unsheathed his sword, but when he saw Alyth's face, miserable and terrified, his rage boiled over, and he roared, "You swine, Robertson! Get away from her, or I will take your ugly head off your shoulders! Get away!"

He did not take a moment longer to think about his own safety, but advanced, his face a mask of fury, while behind him his guards fought the joint MacAdams and Robertson men.

Robertson slowly unsheathed his own sword. He was holding on to Alyth's hand and gripped it more tightly the moment he saw Lachlan. Evidently, he wanted to use her as a shield against any attack from Lachlan, since any false move could result in her injury or death.

"Well, well, if it isn't Laird Lachlan Carrick," he said with a mocking grin. "I am so glad to see you, M'Laird. I have been wanting to send you to hell where you belong for a very long time now, and now you have delivered yourself right into my hands! You may have invited yourself to my wedding, which is very rude, but I forgive you. Look at my bride-to-be. Is she not beautiful? Would you not like to be standing here in my place?" His eyes glinted with malevolent triumph.

Lachlan took another few paces forward, holding up his sword threateningly. He glanced at Alyth, who now looked scared and furious in equal measure.

"Let her go," Lachlan growled again. "Or I will break every bone in your body."

"Before or after you take my head off?" Robertson's words were dripping with sarcasm. "Well, you may try by all means, let me tell you, however, that you will not

succeed. You see, I outsmarted both of you once, and I will do it again. It was my men, not the MacAdams' who raided your castle and I personally killed your wife while you were busy fighting his men." He flung out a hand to point at Alyth's father. "My men raided your village and killed the men while dressed in MacAdams' livery."

Lachlan was now trembling with rage. "Why?" he asked angrily, taking another threatening step forward.

"Why does anyone fight anyone else?" Robertson said simply. "Because they want something. You have the best and most fertile land for miles around, and I wanted it. I still want it, and I will have it." His voice was so smug and self-assured that Lachlan's blood boiled even hotter.

"Over my dead body," Lachlan's voice was a snarl, and Robertson replied with an evil snigger.

"Well, that can be arranged," he said, raising his sword so that it was pointing straight at Lachlan's chest.

Lachlan did not hesitate for a second more before charging towards his enemy. He was in danger of being impaled on Robertson's weapon, but his strength came to the fore as he swiped his sword sideways and knocked Robertson's blade out of his way, leaving his chest open to Lachlan's attack. However, his foe was nimbler than he looked, and he sidestepped at the last moment.

Lachlan stumbled, then deflected a stroke of Robertson's sword, leaving them standing at a stalemate, glaring at each other thunderously.

Alyth stood looking at them helplessly, trying to find a way to help Lachlan. However, she had no weapon, and to try to interfere with the raging battle between

two experienced fighters wielding swords would have been tantamount to suicide.

If her hatred could have killed Robertson, he would have been stone dead by now, she thought.

As she watched, Lachlan parried towards his opponent, but Robertson blocked it and brought his blade down in a chopping motion on Lachlan's. Lachlan took a step backwards, then, with a roar that shook the whole chapel, he ran at Robertson, the point of his sword aimed straight at his chest.

Again Robertson sidestepped, but while he did so he grabbed the front of Laird MacAdams' waistcoat, dragged him to his feet and pushed him in front of himself as a shield, holding a sword to his throat. The smile on his face was an evil sneer, and Alyth, who had been about to run towards Lachlan, froze in terror.

"Let him go," she begged. "Please, I will do anything. Call the minister back, and we can finish the wedding service—but please don't harm my father. He has done nothing to you."

Robertson threw back his head and laughed heartily at that. "No, indeed he has not," he agreed. "He has done nothing at all because he is as weak as water, and he could not win a battle with my pet dog!"

He turned Colin MacAdams around so that he could look him in the face. "I have always despised you," he sneered. "Ever since we were boys I knew you to be too feeble to stand up for yourself, and when my wife died and your daughter came of age I was determined to take her away from you—and I have succeeded!" His voice was ringing with unholy triumph. "Now she is mine, and there is nothing you can do about it."

Laird Colin MacAdams looked at the floor. He was filled with fury, and although

most of it was directed at James Robertson, a lot of it was for himself. He was equally filled with shame because he was a wretched, spineless coward who had allowed himself to be intimidated by a greedy and spiteful man whom he had been stupid enough to think of as his friend.

Now he was getting exactly what he deserved, but his beloved daughter was suffering too, and she deserved none of this. He glanced up at her fleetingly before looking at the floor again to avoid her eyes. She looked afraid, but her fear was for him. Inside, he knew she had a core of steel.

Alyth turned to Lachlan, her eyes wide and desperate. "Lachlan, please help him!" she begged.

Lachlan, however, was powerless as long as his enemy's sword rested against her father's throat. He stood, helpless, as Robertson cried, "Men, take my woman away to her room and stand guard over her. I will deal with her shortly."

He turned to Lachlan and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, a dozen more of Lachlan's men burst into the chapel. It took them a matter of moments to overcome the remaining Robertson guards, who were completely outnumbered. They dragged their wounded and trapped enemies away, but one of them, who had managed to break free, was efficiently dispatched by a swipe from Gavin's sword.

Yet, Robertson still stood with his sword against Laird MacAdams' throat, and as they watched, he moved it slightly sideways so that a little blood trickled over the blade and ran down the Laird's neck. Alyth let out a scream of fright, and Robertson gave her a satisfied smirk.

Colin MacAdams looked utterly terrified, which, of course, he was. He knew that these were his last moments on earth, and his gaze settled on Alyth, begging her to

forgive him. He had always assumed that he would die in battle or in bed with his family around him, not trapped by an enemy, humiliated and filled with shame.

He mouthed the words, “I love you”, to Alyth, and she nodded slowly in acknowledgement, then shifted her gaze back to Lachlan. Now that he had the advantage, he wasted no time in using it.

“Well, Robertson,” he drawled. “It seems you have a choice to make between life and death. My men are all around you. They have captured, wounded or killed yours, and there is no one to save you if you try to run or kill your captive. How far do you think you will get, even with your blade at his throat, if you try to leave? You will be cut down, and I will take great delight in doing it.

So I suggest this. Let go of Laird MacAdams and I will spare your life. You will be treated well and given a fair trial—on that you have my word. The alternative, as I have said, is death. You choose.”

The two men glared at each other for a moment, neither moving a muscle, before Robertson sneered, “Your word? You think I trust in your word? Give me one good reason why I should.”

Lachlan smiled and shrugged, looking utterly unconcerned. “It is very simple. Because if you don’t, you will not escape here alive.”

The first sign of fear appeared on Robertson’s face and the hand holding his sword started to tremble. Then suddenly he turned to make a dash for the side entrance of the church.

However, Lachlan was too fast for him. Acting involuntarily and without thought, he rushed to intercept Robertson and struck him down with the point of his weapon straight through his heart. He fell onto the stone-flagged floor and there was an

audible thump as he struck his head on it, but by that time he was already dead.

Lachlan had killed before in self-defence and in battle, but he usually experienced some remorse. This time, however, he felt nothing but satisfaction that he had rid the world of a truly dangerous and loathsome creature. He could not even think of Robertson as a man.

Laird MacAdams had dropped to the floor in a dead faint, and Alyth rushed over to him, thinking the worst. She patted his cheeks and cried, “Da! Wake up! Oh, please wake up!” Tears began to stream from her eyes again as she shook him, but he showed no sign of regaining consciousness.

Presently, Lachlan appeared beside her and knelt down by her father’s side. He touched the pulse at the Laird’s throat and said, “He is alive. I think he might have fainted from shock.” He looked closely at her. “Are you all right? Did Robertson harm you in any way?” He looked anxious.

“No,” Alyth replied, shaking her head. “But I dread to think what he would have done to me afterwards.” She sighed and shook her head, then covered her face with her hands.

Lachlan had to use all his willpower to stop himself from taking Alyth in his arms, kissing her, and telling her exactly how he felt. However, there was still work to be done and he needed to help with the cleaning up, removing bodies and taking care of the wounded.

“Is there a healer in the castle?” he asked.

Alyth nodded. “Yes. Sometimes I help her a little, but she is much more skilled than I am.” She looked up at Lachlan, hopefully. “Will you let my father go to her?”

“Of course I will,” Lachlan answered, frowning.

He summoned two of his men, and they lifted the Laird between them and took him to the sick room.

“May I go with them?” Alyth asked. She looked uncertain, and Lachlan’s heart skipped a beat. Did she think he was a monster?

“Of course you may,” he replied. “I have no right to stop you.”

“Thank you.” Alyth managed a faint smile. “Take whatever you want from the castle, but please do not harm anyone.”

Lachlan frowned. “Do you think I came here to rob you?” he asked, astounded.

Alyth nodded, and he took a step closer to her.

“Alyth, there is only one thing—or rather one person I want—you. I want you to be my wife, and I want our families to be allies. So, will you marry me? Because I cannot imagine living without you.”

Alyth was stunned, and her eyes filled with tears as she gazed at Lachlan in disbelief. Had she heard him right? Then she smiled and nodded her head, too overcome with joy to speak.

“Thank god,” Lachlan breathed. His face broke into a wide, joyful grin. “Thank you, my love. I want to say more, but this is not the time nor the place. Go and see your father while I help to clear up this mess. We can meet later.”

He hugged her briefly and kissed her forehead, then made his way out to the carnage in the courtyard. Alyth followed more slowly, but began to run as she saw the corpse

of Laird Robertson a few yards away. She never wanted to lay eyes on him again, dead or alive.

Out in the courtyard of Cairnloch Castle, the Carrick and MacAdams men were working together to tidy up the post-battle debris, while the Robertsons were all being escorted to the dungeons.

Lachlan sought out Gavin, who was talking to the Captain of the Guard of the MacAdams, a man called Douglas Montgomery.

Montgomery snapped to attention as Lachlan stopped beside them. He was a tall man like Lachlan and Gavin, and he had an air of effortless command about him. His men obeyed him without question, and now that he and Gavin were on the same side, discipline, and order were guaranteed.

“What should we do with Robertson body?” Gavin asked, and Lachlan gave him a look that told him exactly what he needed to know.

“Let’s just bury him somewhere and forget about him,” he said grimly.

Gavin gave Lachlan a wicked smile. “Good,” he replied. “Now ye can turn your attention tae happier things.” He raised his eyebrows inquiringly. “Did ye ask her tae marry ye?”

“Yes,” Lachlan replied, with a hint of a smile.

“Dinnae keep me waitin’,” Gavin said impatiently. “What did she say?”

Lachlan gave him a grin that looked as if the sun was coming out.

“She said yes,” he replied happily.



*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:10 pm*

One Month Later...

The Great Hall in Leithmuir Castle was bursting at the seams. It seemed that every Carrick and every MacAdams from all over Scotland was there, and the rift that had existed for decades between the two clans had been bridged by patience, negotiation, and compromise.

There were still a few personal issues to be solved between individuals, of course, but this was a normal situation in any great gathering of people. On the other hand, friendships had been forged between individuals and families, and the overall result was what everyone desired: peace.

The wedding of Alyth and Lachlan had been postponed until all these matters had been resolved, and now it was time for the celebration to take place in an atmosphere of calm and contentment. It would not only be a wedding, but the seal of an alliance that would achieve safety and security for everyone.

Alyth and Lachlan had been very discreet and had exchanged no more than a few passionate kisses during this time. They slept separately too, Alyth in her bedchamber and Lachlan in the Guards' quarters. He had done this many times, and had earned the respect and trust of his men by living in the same conditions as they did.

For her part, Alyth had visited the maids in the kitchen, expecting to be greeted coldly now that they knew her true identity. However, although there were a few moments of hesitation at first, a little friendly banter and the sharing of some fond memories restored their old relationship.

Alyth had spent the month having a wedding dress made, and to make it perfect, she decided to use Lachlan's favourite colour. When she asked him what it was, he said without hesitation, "Crimson. It was the colour of my mother's wedding dress, and I have always loved it."

Now Shona was putting the finishing touches to Alyth's hair while Maisie looked on with a proud smile. "Well, I never thought I would see the day when Lachlan would gie his heart tae another woman," she said happily.

"And I never thought I would give my heart to anyone!" Alyth said in disbelief.

"Well, it's in good hands, hen," Maisie remarked, smiling at her fondly.

"I know, Maisie," Alyth agreed, smiling. "The very best."

She stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. Her dress was made of crimson satin with a modest round neckline, fitted to the waist and flaring out at the hips. It had an underdress of cream satin visible through a slit in the front, and sleeves that flared into a bell shape from the elbow, and it was neither too elaborate nor too plain. She wore no jewellery except for her mother's pendant.

"Ye look like a queen, Mistress," Shona said, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Aye," Maisie agreed.

Maisie offered Alyth her elbow and they walked downstairs. Alyth's heart was beating nineteen to the dozen as they approached the entry to the Great Hall, which was where the wedding was to take place. The chapel was simply too small.

They waited for a moment while Alyth collected herself, then she nodded to Maisie and went inside.

Immediately, all eyes turned to her. Although she had thought she was prepared, Alyth was overwhelmed by how many people were in the enormous room.

Presently, her father approached her and took her by the elbow. He had to separate himself gently from Davina, who had adopted him as her grandfather almost as soon as she saw him, just as she had adopted Alyth. He looked so much better, Alyth thought. He had put on weight and his face looked younger, having lost all the lines of strain that had formed during Laird Robertson's stay.

"I must go now, Davina," he said, kissing her on the forehead. "You know that your Da and Alyth are getting married? Well, when the wedding is over, I will be your grandfather, officially. So I will see you in a wee while. You can sit beside me at the table."

Davina almost pushed him out to Alyth's side. "Hurry up!" she said, grinning.

She was speaking fluently now, and could often be seen chatting to Laird MacAdams while walking around the gardens. They would even go riding together on the same horse, and it warmed both Alyth's and Lachlan's hearts to see how much she had progressed in such a short time.

The Laird took Alyth's arm, and they walked down the aisle that had been made for them between the guests. Now Alyth was living the scene she had visualised when she was moving towards the living hell she had faced with Robertson. She had imagined that her future was with Lachlan, and now it was no longer a fantasy, but a reality.

Lachlan could hardly believe that Alyth—his Alyth, his love, was coming towards him, looking like a rose in full bloom. She was beyond beautiful, and as he gazed at her, his eyes were shining with love.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered,

“So do you,” she replied, making him laugh softly.

They turned to the minister, Reverend Gillespie, and the service began. They repeated the usual vows as the minister instructed them, but as Lachlan slipped the wedding band on her finger, Alyth felt tears pricking her eyes. From this moment on, she was Lachlan’s wife, bound to him by ties of love and loyalty. Her life had changed from the moment she felt the gold ring touching her finger; she would never be the same again.

When they were done with the formal part of the wedding, Reverend Gillespie said, “Now, Lachlan, I believe you an’ Alyth have something tae say tae each other.”

Lachlan took Alyth’s hands and kissed them. “My love,” he began. “I want you to know how much you mean to me. You are my whole life, and I promise to be the best man I can be just for you. You make me feel as though I could do anything. If we are blessed with children—and I hope we are—I will be the best father I can be. I will be strong for them, and protect them with my life, as I will do for you and my beloved Davina. I cannot imagine living without you, my Alyth, my love, my wife.”

Alyth wanted to throw herself into Lachlan’s arms at that moment and kiss him hungrily, but it was not the time or the place. She satisfied herself by standing on tiptoe and giving him a soft kiss on the lips, then said, “Lachlan, you are my love, my heart, my shelter, and my home. I cannot imagine what would have happened to me had you not rescued me from a fate worse than death. I want to be the best wife I can, and the best mother to Davina and all our other children because there will be many of them, I promise.”

Lachlan put his arms around Alyth and hugged her tenderly, then gave her a look that held the promise of great things later when they were alone. Her body shivered in

anticipation. They turned and walked out of the hall, which had to be made ready for the feast.

As they reached the door, Davina came out of the throng of guests and made her way straight to Alyth. Looking up at her with a smile, she asked, “Are you my Mammy now?”

Alyth was stunned. This was the last thing she had expected, but she felt a wave of happiness wash over her. “If you want me to be,” she replied.

Davina’s face broke into a wide grin. “I do,” she said happily. “Can I call you Mammy?”

“Of course,” Alyth answered. She was a little too young to act as Davina’s mother, but if it made her happy, Alyth was content.

Lachlan was watching them, thinking how much his life had changed for the better since he met Alyth. After Sandie’s death he had thought he would never be happy again, but now he was—gloriously happy, and so was Davina. His life was complete.

Alyth had never seen so much food as she did that evening. It was, of course, a feast for a few hundred people, and Alyth had insisted that all the servants and guards should be catered for too. She and Lachlan circulated amongst their guests being as polite as the occasion required, but both of them wanted nothing more than to be alone in their room. There they could truly express their love for each other without interruption.

However, there was still one thing weighing on Alyth’s mind—her father. She felt that she had been unduly harsh on him and it was time to put things right.

As the bridal couple, Alyth and Lachlan were obliged to dance the first dance

together. After that, however, Alyth sought out her father, who was sitting talking to his steward.

“Would you like to dance with me, Da?” she asked. The Laird looked delighted. “Of course I would, my lovely daughter!” he answered, and they made their way onto the floor. Alyth had wanted to have a discussion with her father, but the music made it impossible. However, afterwards, when it stopped, she said: “Da, I have something I need to say to you, Something I should have said earlier.”

Laird MacAdams looked at his daughter quizzically. “What is that, Alyth?” he asked.

“I need to ask for your forgiveness,” she answered. “I have said some very cruel things to you. I told you that you were not my father, that you were dead to me, that you were a coward. I am truly sorry.”

Laird MacAdams took her hands in his. “I deserved every one of those words,” he said sadly. “To think I was going to let you marry a fiend like Robertson! There is no need to be sorry, Alyth. You have married a very good man and I predict that you will be very happy indeed.”

He stood up, then pulled Alyth to her feet, smiled at her fondly and hugged her tightly. “Now go and be with him.”

Alyth kissed her father’s cheek. “Thank you, Da,” she said, then with one last smile she disappeared into the great hall again.

Laird MacAdams stood looking after his daughter for a moment, feeling happier than he had for a long time.

“I think we should go,” Alyth whispered a few hours later.

Lachlan nodded and gave her a mischievous smile. “Have you eaten enough?” he asked. “You will need all your strength. I think it will be a long night!”

Alyth gave him a playful punch on the shoulder and giggled. “I hope so!” she said.

Lachlan looked down at her, and then—because he simply could not help himself—he said softly, “You are adorable,” and kissed her tenderly.

A cheer went up from the guests around them, then Maisie came up to them and said, “Your room is ready if you are.” She gave them both a fond smile, but there were tears in her eyes.

“Are you all right, Maisie?” Alyth asked anxiously.

“Aye,” she replied. “I am just so happy for ye.”

“I am ready,” Lachlan said, looking inquiringly at Alyth. She smiled and squeezed his hand, which was an answer enough.

They turned towards their guests to say farewell, and Alyth was overjoyed to see Davina holding her Granda’s hand. Both were smiling at them, and Davina blew them a kiss, which they returned, before Lachlan announced, “Thank you all for coming to celebrate our wedding with us. My wife and I appreciate it very much. Now, enjoy your evening!”

They made their way upstairs to the sound of applause and cheering behind them, and Alyth sighed with relief. She was desperate to be alone with her husband.

When they arrived at their bedchamber, Lachlan swept Alyth into his arms and opened the door with his shoulder before crossing the room and setting her down beside the bed and looking deeply into her eyes.

“How are you feeling, Lady Carrick?” he asked her, smiling.

“I feel as if I could fly,” she answered, as she ran her hands over his chestnut hair, revelling in its silkiness. “Alyth Carrick. I love my new name. Thank you for giving it to me, Lachlan.”

“I will give you anything you want, forever, Alyth,” he answered. “Everything I have is yours. I love you with all my heart and soul.”

“As I love you,” Alyth replied, smiling at him tenderly as she stroked his face.

“Would you like some wine?” Lachlan asked, his eyes twinkling. He knew the answer to his question already.

Alyth smiled wickedly. “I would rather taste something else first,” she replied, her eyes full of mischief.

“I am so glad you said that,” Lachlan said, laughing and breathing a sigh of relief.

He kissed her hungrily until they both fell backwards onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, then reached underneath the skirt of her dress. He caressed the inside of Alyth’s thigh until he came to the barrier of her underwear, and growled softly in frustration.

“I thought you might have done without these,” he grumbled.

“Blame Maisie.” Alyth sighed. “She insisted.”

“I insist you take them off,” he said in mock anger.

“I will leave that duty to you, husband,” Alyth replied, then she pulled him down to



lie on her and kissed him fiercely. “And while you are about it, take off my dress too.”

“With pleasure.”

Before Alyth could stop him, he took hold of the front of her dress and ripped it completely down the middle. It tore with a fierce rending sound. When Alyth made a squeal of protest, he said carelessly, “I will have another one made, sweetheart, don’t worry. Now, let me see you properly.”

Alyth let Lachlan divest her of what was left of her dress, her drawers, and her stockings, and then he knelt back on the bed and let his gaze wander greedily all over her.

“Mine,” he whispered. “All mine.” He cupped her breasts in his hands, shaking his head slowly in wonder. “I have dreamt of touching again like this. It is like no time has passed at all. So beautiful.”

“But you’ve touched me before,” she replied.

“Yes, but every time feels like the first time.” He was gazing at her as if she were a delicious meal he wanted to enjoy.

Alyth smiled at him through eyes that were glazed with desire. “Then what are you waiting for?” she asked huskily. “As you said, I am all yours now.”

Lachlan bent over and took one of her nipples in his mouth, suckling and licking it, then gently scraping it with his teeth, all the time playing with the other between his thumb and forefinger, before he switched sides.

“I think I’m in heaven,” Lachlan whispered, as he kissed his way down to her navel,

where he stopped to tease her for a few seconds by running his tongue around and inside it, making Alyth giggle. Tickling was both pleasure and torture, but she knew that Lachlan would never do anything that she found less than wonderful.

Lachlan worked his way down between Alyth's legs, then looked up and gave her a wicked smile. "Do you want me to stop?" he asked.

"No, I want you to do whatever you like, husband," she replied suggestively. "Whatever you like!"

"Husband. I like that word," Lachlan said huskily, before he bent his head to the sweetest spot on her body and began to tease and pleasure it as he had done with her breasts.

He inserted his first two fingers into her entrance, as he would do later with another part of himself, and began to ease them in and out, in and out.

"You are so wet, so ready for me," he murmured, before he bent to inflict more heavenly torture on her.

Alyth wanted to hold back, afraid that if she let go her climax would be over and done with before Lachlan was inside her, but when he began to kiss her nub she cried out as it overwhelmed her.

Yet even as a tide of pleasure washed over her, she knew it was not the end. Somehow, she knew that Lachlan would bring her back to completion again, and she arched her hips up to him as he kissed his way back to her lips again. He stopped, his face inches from Alyth's, and gazed at her in wonder.

"I never thought this would ever happen, Alyth. I am so happy." His eyes were darker than she had ever seen them before, almost black with passion and need.

Alyth's body was throbbing with desire, and she made no answer, but pulled his head down so that they could share another kiss. Then she felt him gently easing inside her; however, Alyth wanted more. She did not need gentleness now; she wanted passion, raw and rough.

She raised her legs and wrapped them tightly around Lachlan's waist, pulling him further inside her and forcing him to push harder. Then once again she was climbing up to her climax, and she cried out as it exploded in a shower of rapturous sensation.

Lachlan, however, had not completed his journey yet, and she watched his face as he climbed ever nearer to his moment of fulfilment. Just as he reached it, he called out her name in a hoarse shout. "Alyth!" However, Alyth silenced him with a passionate kiss while he shuddered against her in the throes of his climax.

She lay back on the bed, and Lachlan lay beside her, smiling. "Are you happy now, Milady Carrick?" he asked.

"I have never been so full of joy," Alyth answered, then shuddered a little as the last of the tremors of her climax shook her. "Maybe we can have that glass of wine now, and later I can have another taste of Chateau de Lachlan. I like that vintage very much." Her eyes were shining with love.

"Milady Carrick," Lachlan replied. "There is an endless supply of it. You may have as much as you wish."

Thank you for reading my story!

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:10 pm*

After the battle...

When Alyth saw her father collapsing with shock and fear, she thought that the bottom had dropped out of her world. The short time when she thought he was dead had felt like years instead of minutes, and when Lachlan told her, he was still alive she almost fainted with relief herself.

### 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: August 8, 2025, 4:10 pm*

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.