



SHARON DABELL

*A Backward
Glance*

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‘To the men and the women of the 45’
and to the men and the women of the
Battle of Prestonpans [1745] Heritage Trust
who keep their memory alive.’



Cuthill Press

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It contrasts with the mainstream publications by PUP of non-fiction historical works in association with Burkes Peerage & Gentry. Cuthill Press nonetheless advances the same community mission as PUP, which is to honour our local history through all the creative arts for the socioeconomic regeneration of Prestonpans and vicinity. Such creativity potentially raises both the artist's self esteem and that of the community at large and leads to the Hope and Ambition for Victory in life that Prince Charles Edward exemplified in the '45.

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BOOK ONE

1

The flames were ever stronger now. I felt the heat from them even from the distance at which I was held. The smoke reached the back of my throat, making me cough and the dreadful smell of burning and all that it implied made me want to retch.

But still I tried to release myself from those hands that held me. I twisted and turned to be away but I felt the fingers dig even deeper into my skin. The blaze had engulfed the building and there was no attempt to extinguish the wicked flames that snatched at the fabric of the place and the air around it. I tried to call out but the smoke had rendered me speechless; in fact the more I tried the harder it was for me. I could not form the words I wanted to shout, I was struck dumb by what I saw and the horror of it all.

Suddenly I heard an almighty roar, one that seemed to shake the very ground on which I stood, and I saw the top part of the building fall, and at last I found that I was able to scream out loud, but the words were lost to me.

The vision was followed by darkness and then gradually I began to wake.

I opened my eyes and looked around the bedroom, searching for familiar objects on which to focus. This dream wasn't new to me; it had been with me for as long as I could remember. Even through childhood these dreadful flames had haunted me, but the fear it generated was always the same. I didn't know what the building was and whose hands prevented me from moving, but the terror I had at the sight and smell and the taste of the fire was all encompassing.

I took deep breaths and tried to regulate my own heartbeat. Slowly my thoughts became organised. I was safe, it was a dream and there was no fire. The only warmth came from the radiator and there were no grasping hands pulling me back.

I reached across the bed to turn on the bedside lamp; the site of the familiar objects in the room made me feel better and a comforting reality crept over me. The alarm clock said four am in the morning, 'just four hours sleep then' I thought. Not very much for the drive I had ahead of me, but the timing of the dream was not of my choosing. It never was.

It always happened at times of stress and yesterday had, in its own way, been stressful.

I had woken early and had gone downstairs for a rushed breakfast before setting off for work when I heard the slap of a letter on the doormat.

Pulling my dressing gown further across me I walked to the door, and stooped to pick it up. I was still holding a half eaten slice of toast in my hand and I noticed that some of the honey from it had dripped on to the carpet. 'Sod it' I thought, 'another thing to clear up.' I made a mental note to see to this before I left for work whilst I turned the envelope over.

All thoughts of house-keeping were banished as I saw the postmark. 'Henderson and Partners Solicitors' I swallowed hard. I had been expecting this letter, even looking forward to it in a kind of way; in the way that you look forward to an operation that would rid you of something that had pained you, although you knew there would be pain involved in the recovery process.

I absentmindedly put the toast on the bottom stair on which I now sat and there, in my dressing gown, I opened the letter from my solicitors.

'Dear Mrs Steadman,' it started, 'we enclose herewith the Decree Absolute in relation to the dissolution of the marriage of yourself and the Respondent Mr Peter Steadman.' It continued to advise me that this was an important document and that it should be kept safely. My solicitor went on to inform me of the cost of this matter to my pocket, and finally to wish me well for the future.

I put aside the piece of paper and looked at the certificate. I rather stupidly totted up the reference number to see whether it added up to thirteen, this being my lucky number. It didn't. Old habits die hard I suppose.

I saw my full name, Helen Margaret Steadman (nee Taylor) written as Petitioner and Pete's, Peter Edward Steadman as the Respondent. I read them out loud; it seemed to make it more official.

I remembered the night it had finally dawned on us that it was a better idea to end the marriage than to continue with it. We were sharing a bottle of white

wine whilst watching something not very entertaining on the TV. I had looked at him, and slowly said. "You've got someone else haven't you?"

He had looked shocked, but had had the good grace not to deny it. He looked at me and said. "I'm sorry Helen, I didn't mean to. It just happened."

I had smiled. A sort of sad smile – but a smile all the same. "Don't worry Pete, it was inevitable really," I said "We have been like brother and sister for most of the time we've been married and that's probably more my fault than yours." I looked away for a moment and then turned to him again. "What do you want to do?"

He looked awkward. "Well I suppose we could separate and see how we felt," he said quietly.

I thought for a moment and in doing so I remember that I looked at our wedding photograph in its silver frame on the bookcase in the corner. Both of us looked scared. It had not been a white wedding; we hadn't seen the point. Just a quick ceremony at the local registry office and then off to the pub with some friends from university. But Pete's friend Alan had insisted on taking at least some photos. So we had dutifully stood and smiled for the camera.

My eyes lingered on the picture for a second longer and then I turned to Pete again.

"No" I said. "I think it's better if we divorce, it will be better for us both I think."

He had looked relieved.

I'm not sure why I asked the next question, perhaps for some masochistic reason, but I asked quietly. "Do you love her?"

Pete looked taken aback.

"Don't worry I won't be upset," I said, and when I said it I realised I was being honest.

He looked away, and replied quietly. "Yes."

It had hurt a bit, but only my pride.

I smiled again and said. "Then it's as well we do this quickly because you can have a life together without the spectre of the estranged wife looming in the background."

A tentative smile crossed his face. "You wouldn't loom would you?" He asked.

"Probably not, but you never know, so I think you should get out while you can."

He did laugh at that, he hadn't laughed much lately and it was good to hear it.

“How do we go about it?” He asked.

I thought for a minute and then said. “Well, as I suggested it, I’ll go and see someone on Monday and set the ball rolling.”

He nodded, and looked away again. Then he said quietly. “Can I ask you a question now?”

“Yes” I replied.

“Did you ever love me?”

I was stunned by the question, by his asking it and equally by the answer that had come immediately to my mind.

Pete and I had met at university, we mixed with the same crowd and us coming together was almost inevitable. I had no family and he had a big boisterous one. If I am honest it was as much his family that I married as Pete. He used to call me his ‘Orphan Annie,’ which annoyed me, not because it rather succinctly summed up my parentless state but because it poked fun at my very red hair.

I had no wish to hurt him so I replied. “I did at first, but perhaps you and I have grown up and changed. But I will miss you.” That, at least, was honest. Pete and his family had been the only relations I had ever known.

It is odd to think that even in the twentieth century people left babies on doorsteps, but they did indeed and I was living proof of it. My names had been chosen after the nurses who looked after me and my surname had been the doctor who brought me back from the brink of death from hypothermia. My childhood had been a succession of foster carers and children’s homes where I was always the quiet one and I found that I excelled at school but not at making friends. I just did not fit in.

Thanks to my teachers I managed to get into university, and there for the first time I began to make friends and then Pete and his large and lively brood came along, and I lapped it up.

“Helen?” Pete’s voice stirred me from my thoughts.

“Er yes, sorry I was miles away.” I replied.

“You will be all right won’t you?” He asked. “I mean, I’m sure Mum and Dad will want you to keep in touch and everything...” his voice trailed off.

“That would be nice,” I said. “But rather unfair on your new lady.”

“Oh, back to the spectre again I suppose,” he said.

“Exactly,” I replied. “But I will be fine, there are some things I’d like to do, and you never know I might actually get a permanent job, or I could even give everything up and go round the world or something wacky like that.”

“I wish you would.” He said. “You are wasted temping, and I suppose with me out of the way you could do anything you wanted.”

“I can indeed.” I said, but I followed it with. “But right now I’m very tired and I think I’ll go to bed.”

He looked at me and then said. “Do you want me to sleep in the spare room?”

I laughed. “Good God no, don’t be stupid. We’ve slept together for years and I doubt this one night together will hurt.” I got up and stretched and as I walked past him I gave him a peck on the forehead and said. “Goodnight.”

After that things had moved at a pace. Pete left and went to live at his parent’s house, there were several tearful telephone conversations with his family, all assuring me that they still considered me ‘one of their own,’ but almost inevitably the links broke and I hadn’t spoken to Pete or his family for a while when I received that final document. It was sad but not unexpected and I had carried on in my normal daily routine.

Suddenly that routine had interrupted my musings and I realised that I had been sitting on the bottom stair for quite a while and I panicked. Whatever time it was, I was going to be very late for work, and whether it was the last day of the contract or not, being late wasn’t something I did. So taking the stairs two at a time I ran upstairs to get dressed.

2

I looked at the clock again, four-thirty.

I decided to turn out the light and try and get some extra sleep so with the flick of a switch I plunged the room into semi darkness again and put my head on the pillow, I soon sank into a deep and fortunately dreamless sleep.

The alarm finally woke me at eight o’clock I stretched and, after one last yawn, got out of bed.

‘First a shower, and then breakfast’ I thought. I grabbed my dressing gown and went into the bathroom and switched on the shower. I looked at myself in the mirror whilst waiting for the cubicle to steam up. “This is the first day of the rest of your life,” I said out loud and grinned at my reflection. I had always hated those ridiculous sugary sayings; they usually went with pictures of small puppies or kittens looking dolefully at you from posters. But still I supposed this time it was true.

I pushed my mane of unruly hair off my face and stared at myself. No

wrinkles yet then, still at twenty-five I shouldn't have any, but it was still nice to know they weren't there. Freckles I did have though in abundance, although if I avoided lengthy sunbathing I managed to keep most of them at bay. Pete used to hate it when we went on holiday and I insisted on wearing huge floppy hats. He had said it was like going away with a slightly potty aunt. I hadn't cared, the less freckles the better in my mind.

I let my hair fall back in to what can be roughly described as its place and turned from the mirror towards the nicely steamed up shower and dropped my dressing gown on the floor and entered the cubicle.

After my shower I went downstairs, noticing, as I passed it, the mark on the carpet that I had forgotten to remove the previous day. Again I made a mental note to clean it up before I left.

Once in the kitchen I switched on the kettle and opened the cupboard. Now Pete was no longer living in the house the kitchen cupboards were looking decidedly bare, but there didn't seem much point in replenishing them yet, not when I was going to be away for at least a fortnight.

The good thing about temping is that, to some extent, you can be your own master. It allows you to have time off in between contracts if you can afford it and there was not a problem there; one good thing about having a quiet social life is that you don't spend a lot, and since mine and Pete's big decision I had been saving for the treat that I had promised myself.

One of the girls at work had asked. "Why Scotland for your post divorce holiday?"

"I don't really know," I had replied. "But I fancy it. I can drive there, the scenery is supposed to be beautiful and I wanted to go somewhere without having to go through all the fuss of booking flights."

She had then gone on to say, probably because she was new to the firm. "Are you going to drop in on any family on the way up?"

I had smiled and said that I don't have any family to speak of and she had gone a very bright shade of pink and stuttered her apologies. I had assured her that I hadn't minded, and that she hadn't upset me. She had looked relieved then, and after another spluttered apology she had hurried back to her desk. People often acted that way but it wasn't a problem to me, as I had never felt particularly ashamed of my parentless situation. I had always been honest with people, it made them feel less awkward I think. Neither did I blame whoever my parents might be. I very much doubted that the decision had been an easy one for the woman who gave birth to me, and it didn't seem fair to judge a situation of which I knew nothing. Some of the kids I had lived with in the

homes hated their parents for not wanting them, some made up stories about who they might be, but I just got on with it, there seemed no point in wondering about something I would never know.

The noise of the kettle brought me back to the present and I poured the steaming water into a cup and popped in a tea bag. I stirred in the milk and with the other hand reached down for a sachet of microwave porridge that one of the girls at work had put in her leaving card to me. I had laughed as she insisted that I must start my journey with something Scottish, I doubted that there was anything at all Scottish about microwavable sachets of porridge but I was going to do it all the same.

I had been quite surprised at the send off I got from the firm, even with me being late on my last day. My presentation had happened at four o'clock and had been made by the senior partner. All my colleagues had gathered round and he had made a speech wishing me luck and emphasising that if I didn't decide to do something hugely adventurous he would be pleased to offer me a permanent job with them.

I had been a little bit overwhelmed by that and the present that I had been given. It was just a cool-box but inside was everything that I would need for my trip, from maps, guide books to all the places I was going and a huge book of Scottish history, lots of non perishable provisions and a tartan rug and lastly a rather bright orange 'See You Jimmy' wig. I was urged strongly to put this on which I did after some protestation and someone took a picture of me. They assured me then that they would send me a copy, and in some strange way I looked forward to seeing it. For someone who was used to 'not fitting in' this had been a new experience.

'Ding,' the timer on the microwave announced that the porridge was ready and I took the bowl and sat at the table while I ate the contents. 'Not bad' I thought, and after drinking the tea I washed the pots and left them on the drainer before going to get dressed.

3

It took me a couple of hours to get dressed, load the car, tidy the house, check everything twice, and then to clean that honey stain off the carpet.

The 'For Sale' board had gone up in the last week and the estate agents had the keys in case there were going to be any viewings whilst I was away. Pete and I had put it on at a reasonable price; we both hoped for a quick sale, he had

insisted that I have two thirds of the equity. When I argued that this wasn't fair he had simply said. "I don't need it, and I will know that you are all right financially for whatever you want to do and I will not take no for an answer." I had very grudgingly eventually agreed to this. I had to admit though that this would leave me well provided for financially, as our house was in one of those parts of London that had seen house prices rocket.

I took a last look at each room to make sure they looked their best. I had slavishly spent the previous weekend spring-cleaning and every speck of dust had been removed leaving the place looking like a show home. Someone would buy it I was sure, it would make a lovely family home and I hoped that whoever eventually bought it would be happy.

I stood in the hall with the door open going through my mental checklist. The automatic light timers had been set and the curtains been arranged in 'not at home but don't let the burglars know' mode, the switches were off, and the TV aerials had been pulled out in case of freak thunderstorms. I was ready to go.

"Goodbye," I said as I closed the door, it was a habit of mine to do this and Pete had always chuckled at it, but I did it all the same.

My mini stood on the driveway suitably packed. I got in and started the engine and reversed out of the drive. I stopped the car and got out to close the gates. I took one last look at the former marital home but once back in the car I turned on the engine and pulled away without a backward glance.

Getting out of London wasn't easy and I spent a lot of time on the car park known as the M25 until finally I was on the A1 and heading north. I had decided to break my journey at Berwick, I was not in a rush and I was not overly fond of motorway driving. I had passed my test on the third go, 'third time lucky' Pete had said, and I wasn't keen on sitting sandwiched between lorries for longer than I needed to be.

I passed Peterborough at around mid-day. I could see the cathedral where Katherine of Aragon lay entombed. I had always been a bit of an addict for history; it had been my favourite subject at school. Most of the other kids had found it boring and irrelevant but I was enthralled, what fascinated me was that these people had been real, they had had lives just like ours only with different challenges, they had loved, they had fought and they had lived out their lives as we do. I had nearly chosen history as my degree, but ever practical I had chosen accountancy, as it was likely to be more profitable. But history was my hobby. I would drag Pete around castles, stately homes and museums wherever we went. He would make all the right noises but I always knew that

he was relieved when I said he could leave me on my own and I would meet him in the café later.

But now I continued on the journey and when I next took my eyes off the road momentarily to check the dashboard clock, it was two pm, about time for lunch I thought. I was now in South Yorkshire and Doncaster was behind me, I pulled in to the service station, took a quick loo stop and stood in a queue for a coffee and sandwich. I looked around as I ate, people were hurrying about; it was a real mixture of humanity. Business men and women shouting into their mobiles; mums with fractious kids dragging dads around after them and lorry drivers breaking their journeys to suit the tachograph. I loved people-watching, it's one of those things you can do when you travel alone without fear of appearing to ignore your companion and I whiled away the next hour doing just that.

At about three o'clock I headed back to the car and pulled out of the car park and carried on with my journey. I passed Leeds and then later Newcastle, I saw the famous 'Angel of the North.' I quite liked it, but I wondered if anyone else thought it looked like a very large man carrying a very large plank. But still I doubted that the artist who created it would be much bothered by the passing observations of one woman driving a mini.

The scenery past Newcastle became more impressive, I could see the sea. I passed signs for Bamburgh and Lindisfarne, the beautiful 'Holy Island' that is cut off from the coast at times of high tide. The traffic was noticeably thinner now and driving was not such a chore. It was not far to Berwick, I aimed to be there by five and I looked forward to having a rest and to being able to 'take my driving head off'.

Eventually I pulled into the Travelodge just off the A1 in which I had made my reservation, I checked in and then hauled my luggage to my room.

I had made it, I was proud of myself. It was the longest journey I had made alone since I passed my test and for fun I saluted my reflection in the mirror to acknowledge this achievement. I lay on the bed for a rest and all intentions of going for a walk were thwarted by the fact that I promptly fell asleep.

It was eight o'clock when I awoke, and I was starving. I went over to window and pulled the curtain back, it was raining hard and I didn't really fancy going out into it. But my stomach told me otherwise and reluctantly I opened the case and pulled out my waterproof jacket and a very old fashioned, but very useful, green wax fishing hat and once suitably attired I ventured into the wilds of a Border rainstorm.

There was a pub nearby and I struggled through the driving rain towards it.

The traffic on the A1 hurtled past; cars and lorries spraying water as they did so, and by the time I arrived my coat was soaked.

I opened the door and was met by a reassuring heat and the smell of food. I quickly whipped off the hat and hung up the coat before the waitress handed me a menu and led me to a table in the corner.

There followed another hour of people-watching while I devoured my meal in the company of boisterous families and couples who were obviously on their way to somewhere or other and began to focus my mind on my plans for the next day.

I had booked into a hotel in Edinburgh for two nights, Pete had always promised to take me there but we'd never quite got around to it. I had always sneakily wondered if it was because there appeared to be an abundance of museums and places of historical interest; which he would be forced to visit in my company. Either way I had chosen to start my 'holiday proper' there.

I had decided that I wanted to visit the castle and the royal palace of Holyroodhouse which should take most of a day, and then see what else there was to visit, I thought I might even take a trip round the shops and treat myself. I was really looking forward to doing exactly as I pleased.

I couldn't put off leaving the cosy pub for much longer and after paying the waitress and pulling on my nearly dry coat and hat I went out into the rain again and hurried as fast as I could to my home for the night.

When after a sprint in the rain I arrived back at my room I was really very tired and it was quite by accident that I saw I had a message on my mobile, it was from Pete; it read. 'Hope you have a great holiday and the very best of luck in your new life. P.'

I smiled, it was good of him to think of me, and I sincerely hoped for the very best for him and whomsoever he chose to spend it with. I replied. 'Will do – lots of museums – & U 2 – say hi 2 the folks. H', I pressed send and then turned the phone off. I hoped we could be friends, if only long distance ones, I would miss that closeness with someone, that sense of belonging, it was not something I had experienced a lot of, but I realised that this was not a good reason to remain in a relationship that had run out of steam. I stood in the room listening to rain when out of the corner of my eye I caught my reflection in the mirror. I looked very sad.

"Pull yourself together Helen," I said out loud. This wouldn't do, I couldn't end the first day of the rest of my life in this frame of mind, so I quickly went in to the bathroom and turned on the bath and treated myself to a long hot soak before finally going to bed and falling into a deep sleep.

4

The next morning brought sunshine and a much lighter mood. I quickly got up, dressed, packed my case again and hastily devoured a cereal bar before leaving the room and dragging my luggage to the car.

It was nine in the morning, another couple of hours driving and I would be in Edinburgh. As I drove I switched on the radio and found myself singing to the music, other drivers must have thought I was mad but I wasn't bothered.

I had passed the sign indicating I was in Scotland a while ago and as I drove towards Edinburgh the scenery began to change. I could see the sea to the East and to the West the ground began to rise, a promise of the hills and glens for which the country was renowned. It was lovely and I began to get quite excited about the day ahead.

I reached Edinburgh just after eleven, I wasn't in a rush and I doubted that I could check in immediately in any case. I found the hotel without much difficulty; just a couple of wrong turns, but not bad for a novice. I had chosen one in the Old Town facing on to the famous Royal Mile that stretched between the castle at the top of the hill and the palace of Holyroodhouse at its foot. I wanted to be 'in the thick of things' and when I had eventually checked in I realised that I had made the right decision. My room faced on to the street and I pulled back the nets to see Edinburgh life going on beneath my eyes, I watched for a minute or two and then decided that this would be a good time to join it.

I left the hotel and went for something to eat, the cereal bar had worn off and I was hungry, I decided to grab a table somewhere that I could people watch, and chose the Theatre of the Spoken Word. There was a seat in front of the large plate glass window, and after hastily grabbing it I ordered a glass of wine and something luxurious and settled down to lunch. After whiling away an hour just enjoying myself I decided to tackle the castle.

I walked up the hill, my rather unsuitable boots made the cobbles hard going, but I didn't mind. The buildings towered over the street, solid structures with impressive frontages shouted Edinburgh's prosperity down the ages, the closes and wynds that ran between them promised even more interesting places to see. Every third shop appeared to sell at least some kind of tartan and they all appeared to be doing a roaring trade with American and Japanese tourists, I was even tempted myself but decided to leave shopping to the following day.

When I finally reached the castle I stopped for a while to look over the wall

at the other part of the town below. Whoever had chosen this site had chosen well, the cliff on which it stood towered above the other parts of the city below and the relatively narrow route to the castle gates could be well defended against invaders as it had many times throughout the country's turbulent history.

I walked past the kilted tour guides and the crowds of tourists and through the main gate. The building was impressive, its thick walls were testimony to its importance, and as I wandered round listening avidly to the taped guide I tried to imagine what it had been like.

I had wandered into one part of the castle when I was attracted to a glass case which contained a picture of a very self-satisfied looking fat man on a horse under which was a large sheet of yellowed paper. The sign on the case indicated that the man was the Duke of Cumberland and the paper showed the list of men who had been members of the Jacobite Duke of Perth's regiment who was one of the members of eighteenth century Scottish nobility who supported 'Bonnie Prince Charlie's' claim on the throne of Scotland. I was fascinated, when I was in my first year at secondary school I remembered our history teacher showing our class an old black and white film depicting the battle of Culloden. I recall watching that film in absolute silence and being moved to tears at the end. I had been saddened at the sheer desperate folly of this battle between the Duke of Cumberland's troops and the remnants of the Bonnie Prince's army. I remember our teacher telling us it was the last battle fought on British soil and had been a virtual slaughter of the Jacobites, and afterwards of their way of life. Even then there appeared to me to be little wonder that this victory did not appear on the battle honours of any British regiment, and the fact that so many men died in so little time in appalling conditions – most of them starving, poorly equipped and utterly outnumbered – had affected me greatly. I had fought to hold back tears to avoid humiliating myself in front of the rest of the class; ours was not a school where being moved by historical events was commonplace.

I read each and every name on that paper and wondered at the bravery of those men who had signed their name to a cause that was eventually doomed to failure. I moved from the case reluctantly to see the other exhibits, but still it lingered on in my mind as I walked around the rest of the castle.

I looked at my watch as I finally left and saw that it was three o'clock. I decided that I might as well walk down 'The Mile' to Holyrood, I was not ready to go back yet, I was enjoying myself.

By the time I reached the palace my feet were beginning to really smart so I

sat for a while in the courtyard. This was another impressive building, but differently so, it was elegant and spacious and once inside you could see it was a royal palace and not a defensible fortress. The rooms were finely decorated and again, once my feet had been rested, I spent another self-indulgent hour looking around.

I marvelled at seeing Mary Queen of Scots' jewellery and a lock of 'Bonnie Prince Charlie's' hair, I was in my own type of heaven. I wondered what sort of memories these items held and wished that they could be unlocked. To think that these were the only remaining vestiges of these people who had lived and breathed and played such an important part in history made me feel honoured to be able to see them. And I lingered by each exhibit so long that I was one of the last to leave the building and head for the ruined abbey from which the house took its name.

After wandering through the abbey and the beautiful gardens which, as it was getting late I now had to myself, I decided that I would visit the gallery. There wasn't much time but I estimated that I had just enough left to have a quick tour.

So I entered the building and wandered, albeit it rather more quickly than I would have liked, through the rooms, almost alone except for the guides standing quietly at each doorway.

I reached the final room twenty minutes before the building closed and I was aware of the eyes of the guide following me. 'Probably wants me out so he can pack up' I thought. I had no intention of inconveniencing him; everybody wants to go home at the end of the day, so I quickened my pace and stopped only momentarily in front of the pictures hanging there.

I reached the last picture with ten minutes to spare but as I looked at the canvas all thoughts of time left me.

For in front of me was a portrait of a woman in a green velvet dress, with a long drape of tartan over her shoulder and a gold locket at her throat. But it was not what she wore that had shocked me; no, it was something that made me shiver inside.

It was the fact that the painting appeared to be a portrait of me.

5

I felt slightly sick as I stared at the picture, and I realised that my hands were shaking as I nervously pushed my hair back from my forehead.

The painter had obviously been skilled; the detail was excellent which made it even more of a shock to me. I raised my hand to touch the small brown beauty spot on my cheek, which had been faithfully represented in the painting, I almost expected the woman in the frame to raise her hand, as if in a mirror. But nothing, her image remained implacable.

Whilst I had been transfixed I hadn't noticed the guide walk across the room. I found that he was standing next to me and he looked from me to the picture and then his gaze returned to me.

"It's extraordinary isn't it? It might even be a picture of you. I did wonder when you came in whether you realised that it was here," he said. I noticed that he was English.

"No I hadn't," I replied, my eyes didn't leave the picture when I spoke as I was still examining every detail of the face. "I have never seen it before," and then I continued. "I don't even know who she is." I turned to him then and said. "Do you?"

"I can have a look at the exhibition guidebook if you like," he replied. "This is quite a new exhibition and I'm not the usual guide to this room. I'm a student at the uni' and I'm doing this to earn a bit of extra cash during term. The guy who is normally here is on holiday."

"When is he back?" I asked, rather more abruptly than I had intended.

"Not for a fortnight" he answered and then added. "Sorry."

"No I'm sorry" I replied, forcing my gaze from the woman's face. "It's just that it's a bit of a shock, she's so like me."

"She is too," he replied. Then he said. "Just wait here a minute and I'll fetch a book." I looked at my watch; it was after five o'clock. "You should be going home now, and I shouldn't be here, they will have closed the doors by now," I said, not really wanting to leave, but feeling that I should.

"Don't worry we've got a bit of time yet," he said. "They don't close fully until six, and anyway my auntie runs the show here." He smiled. "That's why I'm here. It's not what you know!"

I smiled back and replied. "I'm very grateful to you."

"No worries," he said over his shoulder as he walked quickly across the room and out of the door.

I turned again to look at the picture. Her eyes, or as it appeared, my eyes, seemed to return my gaze. Standing on my own I began to feel even more unnerved. There were chairs arranged in the centre of the room for lengthy viewing and, a little shakily, I sat in one.

It seemed a long time until the guide returned; he was holding a large book

and had a look of triumph on his face. "It's not much, but it's a start," he said as he sat down next to me. He had marked the appropriate page and I leant over as he opened it.

"Her name is, or I suppose was, Isabel Cameron."

I looked at the picture almost if there should be a response from the mention of her name.

He continued. "It seems that she was married to one of the men involved in the Jacobite rebellion."

"Seventeen forty-five," I said, almost whispering.

"Yes," he replied, and then in what seemed to be an attempt to lift the tension. "Well, at least you won't bump into her in the street."

I smiled as I continued reading. There was not a huge amount of detail, even the painter was listed as unknown. But what it did say was from where in Scotland she came. I said out loud "Gairloch" then I looked at my companion. "Do you know where that is?"

"I don't," he said. But I know a woman who will. Just a minute I'll go and ask my Auntie Jean." Before I could protest he was off, striding across the gallery, and I was alone again.

I rose from the chair and obsessively began checking every detail of her features, against mine. They were identical, even her hair was almost an exact representation of my own.

"Who are you?" I said. "And why are you so like me?"

No answer came, just the noise of two sets of footsteps returning across the polished wooden floors.

The guide, whose name I still didn't know, came back with the woman who was obviously his 'Auntie Jean.' She was a short, no nonsense, woman, nothing like her tall nephew but she was smiling, so obviously she was not going to summarily evict me.

I turned to face her and she stopped and proclaimed. "Aye Simon you were not kidding me." And then to me she said. "If I wasn't sure that picture was genuine, I'd say you had sat for it yourself."

At reaching me she held out her hand and when I offered mine, she grasped it firmly. "Jean McDonell," she said smiling warmly.

"Helen Taylor," I replied, I realised immediately that I had used my maiden name for the first time since my marriage.

Simon's auntie looked at the picture and then again at me. "It's uncanny don't you think?" And then. "Could she be a relative? Do you have any Scottish relatives do you know?"

“She might be, but I wouldn’t know,” I said.

“Well I suppose you could try and trace your ancestry,” added Simon helpfully.

“A bit difficult unfortunately,” I said, and thought ‘here we go again’ before I added. “I’m an orphan, so my family tree is really a bit of a stump.”

To my relief neither Simon nor his auntie replied with the phrase ‘you poor thing’ or something in that vein.

Jean directly, and I thought, rather refreshingly, said. “Well you are stuffed there then!”

I laughed and replied. “You are not wrong.”

“Auntie Jean, do you know where Gairlochy is?” Asked Simon helpfully.

“Aye Simon I do, it’s up in the Highlands, the other side of Loch Ness, really beautiful but a bit wild in the winter.”

“How long a drive is it?” I asked.

“It’ll take you the best part of a day to get there, depending upon the roads and the weather,” she replied.

“Will you go?” that was Simon.

“Oh yes,” I said, looking again at my facsimile in the frame. “I have no choice.”

Just before six, the three of us left the building, I had taken one last long look at Isabel Cameron before Jean plunged the gallery into darkness and locked the room. Once outside I bade farewell to Simon and his auntie, after I had promised to let them know the results of my trip.

I watched them walk away and then took one final look at the palace of Holyroodhouse; which stood an implacable reminder of times past and made my way thoughtfully up towards my hotel.

6

Once back in my room I took off the now very offending boots and sat on the bed staring at myself in the mirror.

The only problem about being alone is that you have no one to discuss things with. I even thought momentarily of ringing Pete, but soon dismissed that one. It wouldn’t be fair and I wasn’t sure what I would say in any case. ‘Hi, its your ex wife, I’ve seen a picture of someone who looks like me,’ seemed a little pointless really, and didn’t represent the very strange feeling I still felt at the thought of what I had seen.

So I sat alone in my room as the day turned into evening lost in my own thoughts.

After a while the room became dark and I got up and turned the lights on, and then the television, it was comforting to hear the voices in the background. I had wanted to go to the restaurant and do a little more people-watching but I found that I had lost my appetite somewhat so I rang room service and ordered a sandwich and a coffee, and belatedly, a large glass of wine.

Whilst I waited for the order to arrive I pulled out the map of Scotland and looked up Gairloch in the index. I found it, it was indeed remote, however I could get there by car and I had already decided to curtail my Edinburgh stay and start my journey north tomorrow. I might not find anything but I was curious beyond belief to find out who this woman was.

I spent a cosy night in my room in front of the TV and eventually switched off the light at around ten o'clock and drifted into a deep sleep. I awoke the next morning at eight o'clock and after dressing and packing and having a quick breakfast I paid the bill and made my way to the car. I readied myself for my journey, it would be a long one, but judging by the map, a beautiful one too. I would take the motorway out of Edinburgh and then just after Stirling I would drive across country which included the Trossachs National Park, the area around Ben Nevis and through Glen Coe until I reached the shores of Loch Linnhe and then Fort William, my destination lay somewhere between Fort William and somewhere called Loch Lochy. It was going to be a long journey and I was glad that it was not mid winter.

As I started the car I was filled with a kind of excitement mixed with a little fear at what I might or might not find. But excitement was the paramount emotion and as I reversed out of the parking space I saw in the mirror that I was smiling.

The motorway took me out of Edinburgh and to Stirling, this was William Wallace country and I made a mental note to stop off on my way back. It had been one of the places I wanted to visit and for a second I felt 'put out' because my careful plans had gone slightly awry, but after visiting that gallery I felt compelled to find out who this woman was who looked so like me.

After Stirling the countryside grew even more beautiful, I stopped the car at times just to look. Each twist of the road opened up new glories and the sun brought out some of the most wonderful colours. It really was quite a remarkable place. As I drove I wondered just what sort of conditions people of Isabel Cameron's time faced. They had to be a hard race these Highland folk,

they had their own language and their own heritage, of which they were still proud and looking on either side of me as the car sped towards my destination I understood why, the majesty of Ben Nevis dwarfed me and my little car as I drove slowly past. There was not another car on the road and I was able to dawdle as much as I wished.

The route then took me to Glen Coe where the infamous slaughter took place of the McDonald Clan by the Campbells. The Campbells, having been invited to a gathering by the other clan, rose in the night and murdered their hosts. Clan Campbell's chief the Duke of Argyle gave his and his clan's allegiance to the new British Hanoverian monarchy of that time and the Campbell men used old clan hostilities against the largely Jacobite Macdonalds to inflict this crushing blow. The scenery belied nothing of this dreadful slaughter. It kept its secrets well.

After crossing the bridge of Loch Leven I drove, with the lovely Loch Linnhe on my left, until I reached Fort William.

It was now four o'clock in the afternoon and from the map Gairloch was not far. I was glad. It had been a beautiful but long drive and the twisting roads had taken their toll of my newly acquired driving skills. I thought that Pete would be quite proud of me and than I checked myself. Pete was no longer part of my life after all.

I called in to a shop in the old garrison town and bought some sandwiches for lunch and some water. The lady behind the counter was very helpful with directions and she assured me that I would be there within the hour.

After eating lunch in the car I was on the road again and passing through some continually lovely countryside once more. The first sign bearing my destination came in to sight after about twenty minutes and I began to feel almost childlike in my excitement. What would I find? Or more to the point, would I find anything at all? I couldn't wait to learn the answers.

I finally reached Gairloch just before five, it was small as I had expected, with a shop, pub, post office and church surrounded by a collection of houses. I parked the car in front of the shop and went in.

A man stood with his back to me and as the bell clanged as I opened the door he turned towards me.

"Ayup love what can I do for you?" I had expected a soft Highland accent like the lady at Fort William but this man had been born and bred in Bradford if I wasn't mistaken.

"Oh" I replied. "Um, I was looking for somewhere to stay, is there anywhere nearby?" I asked rather taken aback.

“Well we’ve not been here over long but I know the pub has rooms but there’s a lovely place just down the road which is actually on the loch. It’s where Anne and I stayed the first time we came, it’s not cheap but it’s well worth it.”

It took me a second to decide, as this holiday was planned ‘to celebrate my new life’ I thought I’d take the second option. Well I was meant to be treating myself.

“Sounds lovely,” I said. “Could you give me directions?”

“Of course love. I’ll write them down, I’m useless at directions meself and I always forget them as soon as I’m told them.” He said as he grabbed a paper and pen from under the counter.

He wrote the directions down, they seemed easy enough to follow I hoped. “What’s the name of the hotel?” I asked, almost as an afterthought.

“Cameron House,” he replied.

I halted momentarily at that but then thanked him and left the shop with the paper clutched in my hand.

7

The route led me out of town and through a wood, which opened out on to the banks of Loch Lochy. It was very beautiful and in the evening light it appeared very romantic. I understood why the shopkeeper and his wife had fallen in love with the place.

I had been driving for about another ten minutes when I saw a sign announcing ‘Cameron House’. So I was here I thought as I turned up the tree-lined drive that twisted round until the trees ended and revealed a grand house set on the side of the loch. I pulled the car into the car park, parked and turned off the engine. I looked at the house; it was large but decidedly Victorian, long after Isabel Cameron’s time I calculated. I was slightly disappointed but as I got out of the car I breathed in the clean fresh air and was glad I had made the journey.

There weren’t many cars in the car park and I hoped that this was a sign that there were rooms available. I kept my fingers crossed as I crunched across the gravel up to the front door.

I opened the door on to a grand hall with thick red carpet and oak panelling, there were fresh flowers in large vases on the polished tables and there was a definite air of opulence about the place. I felt guiltily glad that the

divorce settlement had been so generous; I'd never have been able to afford to stay in a place like this otherwise.

The receptionist was friendly and assured me that there were plenty of rooms, she asked whether I wanted one with a view of the loch, I agreed at once.

She gave me a key and directions and after returning to my car for my luggage I climbed the oak stairs to my room. Immediately I opened the door I thought 'wow!' The room was dominated by a huge bay window that was almost floor to ceiling, there was a window seat that ran along it and it was hung with luxurious drapes that framed a magnificent view of the loch and all that surrounded it.

The room was large and the furnishing was antique and the bed was as befitted the room, with an ornate headboard and plush counterpane. This was lovely I thought, I almost skipped to the bathroom and opened the door to find a large Victorian bath and lots of thick white fluffy towels for my edification.

I walked back into the room and held my breath for a second.

The sun was setting and through the windows I watched the most beautiful site of the surface of the loch reflecting the reds and golds of the sunset. I walked across to the window and stared out across the water towards the hills in the distance. It was truly wonderful and I was grateful to Isabel Cameron, whoever she was, for bringing me to this place.

8

After unpacking I decided to explore, there would be a couple of hours of daylight left and I really wanted to get the feel of the place.

I left the room and walked down the corridor, across the landing and descended the grand staircase. I went over to reception and left the key with the receptionist. I didn't know how long I would be out and the key was quite a hefty one, not exactly pocket sized.

"Do you like your view?" She said. "It's probably the best in the house."

"It's lovely," I said and then as an afterthought. "How old is this house?"

"Oh it's over a hundred years old. I think it was built about eighteen forty for a rich Glasgow merchant. He was a Cameron and wanted to live where his ancestors came from."

"So there was a house here before this?" I asked, my curiosity awakened at once.

"Oh aye," she replied. "You can see the ruins along the side of the loch. It's

about a ten-minute walk from here. If you go, you want to be careful though, it's a bit awkward underfoot, it's very overgrown but you can still see what's left of it."

I looked at my walking shoes; I thought I'd be all right.

I wanted to ask her more but the phone rang. She raised her eyes heavenward and went to answer it. It sounded as though it would be a long call so I decided to make the most of the fading light and wait to ask my questions on my return.

I walked out of the front doors on to the car park and turned left around the side of the house facing the loch. The downstairs rooms appeared from the outside as opulent as those I had already seen and I made up my mind to explore the inside afterwards. I hoped there would be at least one roaring fire by which I could sit.

I walked from the house through the formal gardens that were beginning to sprout shoots and down a gravel path to the shores of the loch. There was a little pontoon jutting down into the water and I imagined Mr Cameron, whoever he was, going fishing from there in the house's heyday.

The path skirted the loch and I walked out of view of the hotel along it. The air was crystal clear and there was no sound apart from birdsong and the lapping of the water on the shore. I walked along mulling the question of Isabel Cameron in my mind; were these ruins I was looking for her home? What was the story behind them? And how would I find out?

The receptionist had been accurate in her timing, after about ten minutes the trees on my left thinned out into a type of clearing. It was large, about as large as that in which the hotel stood, but there was no fine house there only bushes and shapes covered by ivy and creeping weeds. I walked closer to it and pushed some of the weeds away, under them I could see stones, some still in a wall formation, others toppled. I carefully walked around, I could see now remains of larger walls, now covered by the tangle of Ivy, but they were there all the same.

I stood for a while in the dusk with the setting sun at my back, casting a strange light on this forlorn scene.

I shivered slightly, although I was wearing a sweater and jeans and a jacket I began to feel a cold breeze, I wrapped my arms around me and decided that it was time for me to make a move back to the hotel.

It was then that I saw him.

I'm not sure if I had heard footsteps but something made me look across to the trees behind where the house must have stood.

At first I thought it was a shadow but as I looked a figure stepped out from the trees.

My breath caught in my throat and I stared.

It was not so much how he looked but what he was wearing that made me start.

It was obvious, even in the evening light, that he was wearing a kilt – not the type of kilt that people who think they may have a Scottish auntie somewhere hire for weddings – but a proper kilt that had not been pleated by a machine. Over one shoulder he wore a long tartan plaid which part covered what looked like a velvet jacket. I could see the silver buttons glint in the fading light as he moved towards me. Under this jacket I saw that he wore a white shirt and across his chest was a leather sword belt, his broadsword hung at his side.

He moved slowly, one deliberate step at a time, and once out of the shadows I could see him more clearly. Whoever he was he had attractive features; he appeared to have long dark hair upon which he wore a traditional Scots bonnet, the same as I had seen in the pictures at Holyrood. And in that bonnet he wore one white and one dark feather and what looked like a white rosette.

As I watched him progress towards me I realised that all of the nocturnal sounds had ceased. I realised too that my heart was pounding and involuntarily I took a step backwards.

He raised his hand slightly as if to halt me, he was close enough for me to see that his eyes were green and that he looked very concerned.

We stood only feet apart and then he spoke, it was only one sentence, but it was enough to make me feel as though someone had pierced my heart with cold steel.

He said quietly. “Isabel, do ye not know me?”

Then my world went black and my legs gave way and I fell to the floor in a dead faint.

I don’t know how long I had been lying there but someone shaking me gently awakened me. I opened my eyes, half expecting to be looking into the green ones I had seen earlier, but found that it was an elderly couple that had come to my rescue not the strange Highlander.

“Are you all right?” The man said as I struggled to sit up.

“Yes I’m fine, not sure what happened, but I think I’m OK.” What was I supposed to say?

“Did you fall lass?” asked the woman.

“Yes,” I replied thankfully. “I must have tripped over some of the stones.

Thanks for finding me but I think I'll be fine. Nothing hurt except perhaps my pride," I said.

"Are you at the Cameron?" It was the woman again.

I replied that I was. "Oh well we'll walk you back just in case" the man replied, and despite my protestations they wouldn't take no for an answer, so I left that strange and lonely place between my own Good Samaritans. As I did so I had a distinct feeling that we were not alone, but I didn't dare turn to look back. I continued towards the hotel, my head cluttered with thoughts and pictures that wrenched my attention from the questions of my rescuers.

I managed to dislodge myself from my rescue party as quickly as I could, they were lovely people but I needed desperately to be on my own. I needed to think.

Once back in room I didn't turn on the lights, but instead went to the window seat and stood watching the night steal across the loch.

What had happened in that clearing? Who was he? Why was he there? And why in God's name did I feel the way I did when he spoke to me?

After a while, despite my experience, I realised that I was hungry so I eventually turned on the lights, closed the drapes and changed into something suitable for dinner.

When I was ready I went downstairs and into the dining room. It was beautiful, and absent-mindedly I recall thinking that it was indeed very romantic. There were a few couples at the tables and I waved across to Duncan and Jean, my rescue party, and chose a table in the corner.

Dinner was very tasty, and I found that whatever had happened I hadn't lost my appetite. So I ate heartily and eventually, thoroughly full, I adjourned to the hotel's lounge where there was indeed the roaring fire that I had hoped for. I soon found myself drifting off to sleep and rather than end up curled up in this public room I decided it was time to go to my own room.

Once there I took off my clothes and once in the bathroom I put on the hotel's luxurious towelling dressing gown and washed, cleaned my teeth and then padded back into the bedroom. I parted the drapes and looked out across the loch. It was a full moon and the water shimmered under its light, it was truly beautiful. I opened the window to let the clear air in and left the drapes ajar in order that I could watch the moon on the loch from my bed.

I shrugged off the dressing gown and, at last, climbed into the sumptuous nest that was the bed and immediately went to sleep.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep before the nightmare crept upon me. But creep it did, only this time it was more fierce. Again I was held by unseen

hands, but this time their grip was even tighter and the more I struggled, and I did struggle, the firmer the hold became. I even felt myself being lifted off whatever ground I was standing upon. I was kicking and screaming as I watched the flames devour the building in front of me. I could feel the smoke raking my lungs and I could smell the acrid fumes as I fought against those arms that held me. And when I heard the noise of the building falling I could feel myself again trying to scream, but this time I knew it was a name; it was a name that meant everything to me, yet I could not make myself form the word. But suddenly from somewhere inside me I found the knowledge to say what I had been trying to say since the first time this dream had invaded my sleeping hours as a child.

I screamed at the top of my voice, a name that had previously meant nothing to Helen Taylor.

Into this strange still night I screamed. "Rory....."

And then I woke with sweat pouring from my forehead, and my hair tangled about my shoulders and my heart racing.

As I calmed down I whispered the name again, as if to speak it at all would break some spell.

"Rory," and then. "Who are you?" and then very quietly. "And who am I?"

No answer came as I sat up in bed, my breathing now calm. I slowly rose and wrapped the previously discarded dressing gown around me and walked across to the window and stood looking across the loch. It was a cloudless night and the water looked like a sheet of silver. I sank on to the window seat and drew my feet up and wrapped my arms around my legs, and as I leant against the window, the glass cool to my face I slowly fell asleep.

I was awakened by the dawn's light creeping across the distant mountains and I uncurled my body, now stiff from the chill air. The bed looked very inviting and I swung my feet on to the floor, but before returning to its warmth I took one last look across the water.

It might have been my imagination but when I did so I thought for one fleeting moment something or someone moved in the trees in the old clearing. I could not be sure but when I looked again I saw nothing except for the first rays of the morning sun casting its own shadows in the trees. I walked away and climbed into the bed, I was too tired to think and I soon drifted off to sleep.

9

This time my sleep was undisturbed, so undisturbed in fact that when I awoke I realised that I had missed breakfast. It was ten-thirty and for a short while I pulled the sheets and the quilt up to my neck and luxuriated in the fact that I did not have to respond to a timetable.

In the clear light of this spring morning my mind was also clearer. I tried to recall the dream, and to find an answer to the name that I had called.

In my whole life I had never known anyone with the name Rory, not even when I was very young. But somehow this name was of such significance to me that it had been the culmination of my nightmare, of all my nightmares in fact, except that it hadn't been until that last night's dream that I had known it.

Logically there was no explanation. Illogically I could not rid my mind of the conclusion that the name was linked to the man by the lake and in some way to Isabel Cameron. But what was the link? Yes her resemblance to me was uncanny, but I have heard it said that everyone has a double, mine just happened to have preceded me by over two hundred years or so.

My mind had always erred on the logical side of things so I satisfied myself with that explanation for the moment, but I made up my mind to find out more about this woman, this place and about the man who may, or may not, be called Rory.

This decided I got out of bed, washed and dressed, dragged a comb through my hair and after grabbing my handbag and jacket, made for reception and latterly my car.

The receptionist smiled when I walked past.

"I decided to have a lie in," I said as I smiled rather guiltily back. I suddenly realised that someone might have heard me in the middle of the night and I hoped that no one had complained.

"Are you going into town?" she said. I presumed she meant Fort William.

"Well no, I was going to try and find a library," I replied. "I want to find out about local history."

"Oh you needn't bother with a library," she replied with another smile. "Just go and see Dr. Mac. What he doesn't know about this place isn't worth knowing."

If I had have been a dog my ears would have pricked up at that. "Where does he live?" I asked.

"In the white house just on the outskirts of the village, it's the first one you come to on the left as you drive from here," she answered.

“Would he mind me just turning up?” I asked.

“No, he likes the excuse to talk about the place,” she said. “He’s my uncle so I know you’ll be fine,” she finished.

I thanked her for the information and I turned and hurried across the lobby and out into the fresh air. At last it seemed I might get somewhere.

I pulled out of the car park and drove down the drive and on to the main road. There were no other cars and it was a joy to be surrounded by such beautiful scenery. Very soon I came to the house. It was a cottage, but larger than most, it had a tidy garden and appeared newly painted.

I parked the car outside and took one look at myself in the mirror. I quickly applied some lipstick and, satisfied that I didn’t look too unkempt, I picked up my bag, got out of the car, locked it and walked towards the black wrought iron gate.

It opened noiselessly and I closed it behind me before walking down the neat path. I stood before the shiny blue door and tentatively used the brass knocker.

I waited. Nothing. So I knocked again, this time a little harder.

I thought I heard footsteps and then I heard the sound of the door being unlocked from the inside.

The door opened and the man who must be ‘Dr Mac’ stood before me.

I had expected someone in his later years, wearing a cardigan and glasses. The man who had opened the door was tall, in his early forties with blonde hair and he wore jeans and an Arran sweater.

“Can I help?” He said.

“Er yes,” I replied, wondering how to start. “Your niece at Cameron House said that you wouldn’t mind if I came to see you. I’m sorry if it’s inconvenient, I can always come back if it is.”

“No it’s fine,” he said. “I was hoping to find a way of putting off doing my tax returns, so anything that can stop me is a plus. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Local history, if that’s all right?” I replied.

“That’s more than all right,” he said with a smile. “I’m afraid I’m a bit of a bore about that. Come on in, it’s about time for a coffee I think.” He opened the door wider and stood aside while I walked past him.

The inside of the house was completely different to the outside. The walls were white and they were hung with contemporary art, the furniture was modern and the floors were polished oak. ‘Dr Mac’ followed me along a corridor that led in to a lovely room that overlooked the loch. The lawn swept

down to the shore and I noticed that it was directly in line with where the old house would have stood. I gazed across but saw nothing. I didn't really know what I was looking for but my thoughts were elsewhere when my host brought me back to reality.

"Coffee or tea?" He said smiling.

"Tea please if that's all right?" I replied turning toward him. He was a good-looking man and I imagined he was very popular with his female patients.

He asked me to sit down while he got the drinks and whilst he was away I looked about the room. It was very tastefully decorated with deep red sofas and cream rugs setting off the artworks on the wall. I looked at the paintings, they were very good and my eyes moved from one to another until I saw one that made me take a sharp intake of breath. I immediately stood up and walked across to the painting. It was Isabel Cameron.

The Doctor had obviously bought a print of the original that had inspired my search and I leant closer to take another look.

I heard the chinking of china as he carried the tray back in, and I turned from the painting. He stood for a moment and then said. "So that's who you remind me of. I have been trying to work it out while I was making the drinks." He put the tray down and walked across the room. "Bloody hell," he exclaimed as he came closer. "It could be you."

"I know," I said, it was a relief to admit it. "That's why I'm here." I turned to the picture and looked into what might have been my eyes. "I saw her at Holyrood at the exhibition. I was told that she came from round here, so I decided to find out more. Do you know anything about her?"

He stood behind me. "Oh yes Isabel Cameron was quite a heroine of these parts. Her family was involved in the forty-five Jacobite rebellion. She was married to the nephew of 'The Gentle Lochiel,' who was one of 'Bonnie Prince Charlie's' main supporters; it is said that he mortgaged his house and his lands to help the cause. They were a huge power in the Highlands then and could guarantee hundreds of men in support from the Camerons themselves and others associated with them. Isabel's husband fought in the army and it is said she was with him at Culloden."

"She was?" I said remembering the carnage I had witnessed in that film all those years ago. "That must have been incredibly dangerous. Did she survive?"

"Oh aye it seems she did," he said, his slight Scots accent came to the fore when he said it.

"That must have been very dangerous," I replied. I knew that the Duke of Cumberland who led the government forces had given orders that 'no quarter'

be given. Which basically gave permission for full-scale massacre of the injured.

“Aye it was very dangerous,” he repeated more to himself than to me.

“What happened to her?” I asked.

He didn’t answer but I heard him move away and I turned around.

I walked over to the sofa in front of the window where he was pouring out tea into a large china mug. He gave me the steaming mug of tea and a plate on which sat a huge piece of chocolate cake.

I realised that my lack of breakfast had made me very hungry indeed and said. “I bet your patients love you,” as I sat down on the sofa balancing the cake on my knee.

“Oh I’m not that type of doctor,” he said. “It’s funny how many people think I am, but I wouldn’t know what to do if someone came to me with a cold.” He too started tucking into his cake and continued between mouthfuls. “No, I’m a doctor of psychology. I studied at Cambridge. In fact I still live there most of the year. Coming here is an indulgence for me; this was my Granny’s old house, she left it to me in her will.”

“It’s lovely,” I said. “The view from here is wonderful,” I continued.

“It is isn’t it?” He replied. “Sometimes I sit here in the dark and just watch the sun go down.” Then he leant forward and pointed across the water. “That’s where the old house stood,” he said.

“I know I’ve been there,” I replied. I didn’t look at him but somehow I knew he was looking at me.

“What happened?” He asked, almost as if he knew something.

And for some reason I told him, and the words just kept coming. I told him about what I saw, the dream and the name I called out and how I had no idea why but I felt that there was some link between Isabel and me and the man with the green eyes.

He didn’t interrupt he just listened and poured me another cup of tea. When I had finished telling the story I felt more than a little drained.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ve gone on for ages. I do apologise.”

“It’s no problem,” he replied. “It’s fascinating. But it’s not entirely uncommon.” He stood up and walked to the window and then said. “Do you believe in previous lives?”

I was somewhat taken aback, before then I had never given the matter much thought.

“I don’t know, it’s not something I’ve thought about,” I replied. “Do you?”

He sat down and looked at me. “Yes I do. One of the things I have studied

since leaving college is hypnotherapy, you know the sort of thing, stopping people smoking and helping with phobias.”

I nodded.

“Well it can be very effective if done properly. And I have trained in that field.” he nodded towards a framed certificate over his desk. “That’s my certificate of qualification over there; it took quite a lot of training to get it. Most people think of swinging pendulums and metronomes when you mention hypnosis, but it’s more complicated than that, it’s much more about relaxation techniques and trust. It doesn’t work with everyone but the majority of people can be hypnotised, it gets a lot of bad press because of the stage acts but it’s a very serious subject and,” he paused and smiled. “I have never ever made anyone stand on one leg and do an Elvis impression, well not yet at least,” he said raising his eyebrows.

I laughed with him and he went on. “I’d studied regression therapy during my training, it’s used sometimes when people have experienced a trauma which they can’t revisit in their conscious state but the unconscious memory is still there and has an effect on their lives. But it was a couple of years ago that one of the people I had helped came to me because she had visions of things, particularly recurring dreams that meant nothing at all to her in reality but had a huge emotional effect all the same. I suspected that these memories could be from a previous life. It’s something I’d been interested in, so I asked her if she would let me work with her to try and help. It’s amazing how many people have these seemingly unrelated memories that can be triggered by a place, or an experience or even a smell.”

‘Or a picture,’ I thought quietly.

He carried on. “One of my old professors was an expert in that area and he tutored me the first time.”

“Did it work?” I said quietly.

“Oh yes, it was quite dramatic,” he replied. “She discovered that in her previous life she had been a nurse in the First World War and it helped her piece together dreams and feelings she had experienced and afterwards she told me that she felt better for knowing why she had felt that way. She keeps in touch even now.”

“So that’s what you think has happened to me?” I said somewhat incredulously.

“Well, I don’t know. It may be just a huge coincidence but it may not. You see Isabel was married to Roderick Cameron whose father built the original Cameron House, and as local folklore will have it, and remember we are only a

few generations back, he was known to everyone as Rory. Now how could you have known that?"

I didn't reply, not because I didn't believe him but because I had felt as I did when I had first seen the man by the lake. It was almost a physical pain in my chest and as I put the teacup on the table I noticed my hand was shaking.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's all a bit strange to most people but I do believe that sometimes we get a second time around and even more in some cases. But it is a bit unnerving and I can get off the subject if you like." He smiled and carried on. "You could even help me with my tax returns, that's enough to bring anybody firmly back to earth."

"Well that's another coincidence," I said, feeling as though I was on solid ground again. "I am an accountant and I'll be happy to help especially if you have some more of that chocolate cake."

"You've got a deal and I will pay the going rate, and there will be no objections," he said as I was about to protest.

"By the way," he added. "My name is Iain Macallan."

"Helen Taylor," I replied. And we shook hands.

It didn't take too long to sort out his accounts, by mid afternoon the figures had been neatly transcribed and we had polished off the whole cake and a vat of tea and coffee.

I had been concentrating so much on the work that I had failed to notice the change in the weather. I looked up to see the rain 'stair-rodding' down, as Pete's mum used to say. The sky was black and, from what I could see in the dim light, the surface of the loch was choppy as the wind whipped up the water.

"I'd better be leaving," I said. "The weather is really awful and I think I'd like to get back before it gets much later."

Iain smiled. "Well I don't mind you staying it's good to have the company. But I know what you mean."

I rose from my seat. "Thanks for your time and for listening," I said.

"No problem at all," he replied. And then he said after a short hesitation. "If you ever do need my help you would only have to ask. It is quite safe and you wouldn't remember anything of it but I would tape it for you, if you were a bit nervous I could ask my niece to sit in on the session."

I looked at him then. "I will think about it," I replied.

"Well you know where I am," he answered.

I left Iain and that nice warm cottage after a hurried goodbye on the doorstep. I was not equipped for rain so I ran down the path and quickly got in to the car. He stood on the doorstep and waved and then turned and I saw

the blue door close behind him. It was then that I realised that he had never answered my question as to what had been the fate of the brave Isabel and her husband.

I shrugged, I would have to call him tomorrow and ask him, and anxious to get back to the hotel I started the car and pulled into the road, the window wipers swishing manically as I made for my destination. Once there, the driveway to the hotel seemed quite eerie as the trees moved with the wind and I was glad to find a parking spot near the door. I quickly made a bid for the warmth after hurriedly locking the car.

I ran up the steps and through the door into the lobby.

I saw that Iain's niece was still on reception.

"Was my uncle able to help you?" She asked as she gave me my key.

She must have noticed my surprise because she smiled. "Oh you can't do anything around here without the whole place knowing."

I returned the smile. "Yes he was really helpful, thanks for putting me on to him."

I was just about to head for the stairs when it occurred to me that I should ask her if I could extend my stay. I was only booked in for another two nights.

"I'm sorry," she said when I asked. "We have a conference booked for the rest of the week, it's a huge group of American dentists. They tend to take over the whole place."

I thanked her and then turned for the stairs.

I would have to do some thinking I didn't appear to have much time.

10

I unlocked my room and closed the door behind me. I didn't immediately switch on the lights but walked to the window instead and sat on the window seat. The scene outside was wild, it was spring but it appeared to be mid November. The sky was black and the rain drummed on the windows. As I stared across the loch I could just see the clearing where the old house was. I had hoped to visit it again that night armed with some information, but it would be impossible with the weather as it was. So I just sat and stared and tried to arrange my thoughts into some coherent pattern.

Was Iain's theory right? Was I in some previous existence this Isabel Cameron? And was the man with the haunting green eyes my long lost husband? In the comfort of the hotel room it all seemed rather implausible to a

practical woman of the twenty-first century but there were the dreams and there was the fact that I had known his name. And most importantly the fact that had started all of this was that, to all intents and purposes, the painting of Isabel Cameron appeared to be a picture of me.

I suddenly shivered, the wind must have changed and even the large windows rattled as the gusts drove into them. Time to get ready for dinner I thought, so I pulled the cord and the drapes closed over the blustery scene outside. I groped across the bedroom and found the switch that activated all of the lights in the room and switched them on.

I had a shower and then spent an hour drying my hair, which was basically a process of turning my head upside down and applying the hair dryer to it. I put a little make up on and then, casting aside the luxurious dressing gown; I dressed and left the room.

Dinner was pleasant again, my rescuers of the night before were nowhere to be seen so I had a peaceful meal and then went into the lounge and ordered a whisky from the waitress. Well, I thought, when in Scotland.

It was about ten o'clock when I decided to go to bed, the alternative was to fall asleep in my chair and disgrace myself so I returned to my room. I switched the lights on, undressed, put my clothes away and once again put on the dressing gown. I walked to the drapes and pulled one aside, the night was still stormy, the rain had lessened perhaps but it was still not a night to be out.

As I was about to drop the drape back in place I thought I saw movement in the clearing over the loch. The rain made it very difficult to discern shapes but I had a very strange feeling of being watched, I dropped the fabric back in place and stood just staring at the curtain. I did not believe in ghosts, I tended to avoid any ideas about the supernatural, I was an accountant and accountants didn't believe in that sort of thing. Pete used to laugh at tales of people who said that they had seen ghosts or heard things that went bump in the night and I had always readily joined him.

But the events of the last days were shaking that somewhat. I remembered the green eyes, and the clothes he had been wearing; although he had not been a shadowy spirit, if my encounter had indeed been with Rory Cameron, the only explanation was that I had indeed seen a ghost, not only that but the ghost had spoken to me. I felt that strange feeling again, not fear but a kind of apprehension, a kind of knowing that I had never experienced before. I shivered a little and walked into the bathroom. I had a brisk wash, which helped clear my mind a little, and then cleaned my teeth and got into bed.

I flicked the TV on with the remote control, but there was nothing on and I

felt my eyelids begin to droop. I had never been a late night person and I was really tired.

My last thoughts were of the fact that I had only tomorrow to try and sort out this mystery and then I drifted off to sleep.

The dream came slowly, it was different though; this time there were other images and voices. Voices of people I recognised but couldn't put a name to. These images and sounds flashed across my mind but they were all too hazy to identify who or what they were. It was like viewing something from behind a piece of gauze, shapes and colours but no outlines.

Then the fire again, only this I could see clearly, as always this was real. The hands were there again holding me, I was fighting them but I was paralysed with fear. I was trying desperately to break free, I felt compelled to run into the flames but whoever held me would not let me break from their grasp. This time though the dream was different, this time I knew the name I wanted to call out. "Rory," I shouted, and again "Rory," but there was no answer and I felt myself begin to sob.

Then the dream changed, if indeed it was a dream. Instead of waking I lay in something of a dark fog, there were no images now and no fire. It was as if I was suspended between sleep and waking, then I heard a voice. I recognised it as that of the man in the clearing, but there was something more to it than that, even in my dream state I knew his voice meant something to me, something that went deeper than I understood.

"Isabel, why do ye not come to me? I canna stand to see ye and to think that ye do not know me." The voice paused and then continued. "I have waited so long for ye and I love ye so much. Ye promised me don't ye remember?" I tried to open my eyes; the speaker seemed to be next to me, I could sense his presence but I was not frightened. Then he said. "I gave ye this on our wedding day, do ye not remember? I will leave it with ye. Please lass come back to me." And then nothing.

When I opened my eyes I realised that I was crying, not just a few tears but long deep sobs. I had never experienced grief before but now I felt as if my heart would break. I put my hand to my eyes to rub away the tears and touched something on the pillow. My fingers closed around it and it was warm to the touch, as if someone had been holding it only moments before.

I sat up then and turned on the bedside light. I almost expected to see him standing there. But nothing, I was alone.

I looked down and opened my hand and gasped at what it contained. I was holding a beautiful gold locket. I stared at the object in disbelief and turned it

around in my hand half expecting it to dematerialise as a remnant of my dream, and then I remembered something that made my heart pound. I had seen the piece of jewellery before; it was the same as the locket worn by Isabel Cameron in the portrait. It was a tangible link between she and I, and it was tangible proof that someone had stood beside me and placed it on my pillow, but for some reason I was not afraid and as it lay in my palm I examined it closely. It was inset with tiny rubies and emeralds and intricately carved. I had never owned anything like this in my life. But had I? Somewhere deep inside me I knew this object; it had meaning for me; I felt it. I carefully opened it and inside I saw on one side that there were two tiny locks of hair, one black and one red, they were curled around each other under the glass. Somehow I knew that hair to be mine. The other side of the locket was plain gold and on it had been engraved the intertwined letters I and R.

I stared at it. This was no dream this was real. I felt it in my hand. And I felt it in my heart.

“Are you still here?” I said very softly. No answer came. I didn’t expect it to somehow.

I stared at the beautiful piece of jewellery and then slowly got out of bed and went to the dressing table, and there in front of the mirror I put it on. I looked at my reflection. I felt the locket against my skin and I closed my eyes. I knew that tomorrow I would go to Dr. Iain Macallen and I would accept his offer of help.

11

I wore the locket that night in bed, and I felt it against my skin when I woke up the next morning. I lay for a few minutes until my thoughts were organised and then I got out of bed, put on the dressing gown and went to my handbag. Iain had given me his card and I looked at it in my hand before I rummaged in my bag again and pulled out my mobile.

I checked the time, eight o’clock. I hoped he wouldn’t mind me ringing but I had to make sure he was in.

I dialled the numbers and held my breath while it rang, and then at last he answered. His voice sounded sleepy and I felt guilty but this was the only way and I didn’t have much time.

“Iain it’s Helen,” I said. “Look I’m really sorry but I must come and see you. Something’s happened and I need your help, if that’s all right?” I waited.

“Yes,” he replied, and then as if he had finally woken. “Yes, of course, it’s fine. When do you want to come?”

“As soon as possible,” I said. Then I added, “If that’s OK with you?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “About nine-thirty. I’ll put the kettle on.”

“I’ll be there,” I said and then. “Thank you so much.”

Before he put the phone down he said. “Helen you are all right aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I replied. “At least I think I am. I’ll see you in a bit.”

And before he could say anything else I ended the call and replaced my phone in my bag.

I touched the locket again, somehow it felt reassuring, and then I got dressed.

I had a quick breakfast and left the hotel at about nine fifteen. I was glad that Iain’s niece wasn’t on reception. This was not a time for answering questions, well not yet anyway.

I walked outside, the weather was completely different; it was warm and the loch was peaceful. I stole a look across the water but it appeared that my gaze was not returned.

The journey to Iain’s seemed longer, every second was precious I didn’t want to waste time. When I arrived I parked the car hurriedly and almost ran down the path.

He opened the door before I could knock.

“Helen what has happened?” he said.

“You might not believe me when I tell you,” I said. “But I can prove it’s true.”

We walked into the sitting room. There was already a tray of tea things on the table.

I smiled. “I am sorry to barge in on you like this, but I need to speak to someone.”

“It’s no problem at all. Have some tea and tell me.” He said handing me a large mug.

So I told him, he sat silently whilst I spoke. Afterwards I took the locket from around my neck and placed it in his hand. He examined it carefully and when he opened it he took a deep breath and looked up.

“Helen this is amazing. I have never known anything like this before,” he said.

“Neither have I,” I said quietly. “You will help me won’t you still, it has to be today I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Of course,” he replied. “You know it’s strange I’d always dismissed them,” he continued almost to himself.

“Dismissed what?” I asked.

“Oh tales of strange things over there,” he nodded in the direction of where the old house had once stood. “There has always been talk of people thinking they saw someone, local legend has it that it is Rory Cameron waiting for his Isabel to return, I’d always dismissed them as ‘old wives’ tales’ but after this I’m not too sure.”

“I’m not sure what to believe any more either but I know one thing, I must know the truth,” I said.

“I’ll help you,” he looked at me for a moment and was about to say something but thought better of it. I didn’t pursue it.

He got up then. “I’ll just get things ready, there’s nothing sinister. It’s quite a simple process and you’ll be fine afterwards.”

He moved about the room arranging cushions on the sofa while I watched him in silence and then he left me alone for a short time. While he was gone my eyes went again to that picture, her picture or, could it be my picture? The locket at her neck seemed to shine more brightly and I knew that this was the only chance I had to find out and I was anxious for Iain to return. When he did he was carrying a hand held recorder. He went to a desk in the corner and took a tape out of one of its drawers, and I noticed that after he closed it he too looked at the image on the wall before he turned away.

Then he came over to me and said. “Are you ready?”

I replied that I was and he asked me to move over to the sofa.

“Just put your feet up and lean against the cushions,” he said putting the tape in to the machine and laying it on the table beside him. I did as he asked and when I was ready he continued. “Normally we would have a couple of sessions first where we could talk about the subject. But as we don’t have the luxury of that we’ll have to go straight into it although,” he said with a smile, “although in the circumstances I think you are probably as prepared as anyone could be.”

I smiled too but before he could carry on I plucked up the courage to make a request.

“I want to remember it all,” I said quietly.

“But that isn’t recommended,” he replied looking at me.

“I need to know,” I said, I realised as I was speaking I was holding the locket that I had replaced around my neck. “I will not do it unless.”

He scratched his head and thought for a while, I had bargained that his inquisitive mind would win through against caution and I was relieved that I was right, because he said. “All right then, but I would advise against it.”

“I’ll accept the consequences,” I replied.

He didn’t answer but finished his final preparations and then sat on a chair close behind me and began speaking. “Firstly I want you to relax and I want you to clear your mind and focus on a calm place where you feel safe and secure.” His voice was slow and deliberate and as I relaxed my shoulders in to the cushions and stared ahead my eyes and my mind focussed on the view from the window. The waters of the loch glistened in the sunlight and I watched the ripples on the surface as it was broken, I saw the flash of a kingfisher dart across the water and then make a perfect dive for food, and as I did so I felt myself begin to relax while I waited for the bird to reappear.

Iain went on, a reassuring presence behind me, his voice calm and soft. “I want you to breath slowly and deeply and concentrate on lowering your heart and pulse rate, and I want you to imagine an empty space where you can’t feel anything.” His voice seemed further away somehow and it seemed that I was only half listening to him, but I felt myself relaxing into some sort of half sleep. I felt my eyes close and then as if I was floating. It was not an unpleasant feeling.

Images of Pete and of people I had known seemed to appear inside my head, then images of my childhood, of the homes and then of the children I had met there.

And then there was nothing, just an almost velvet black and the sound of a voice in the distance asking me to go further back and then I saw a pinprick of light. I knew it was daylight and that I was travelling towards it and that I was not afraid. Slowly the image opened up and gradually it was as if my eyes were opening and then, when they were fully open, I looked around me and all of my senses were alive and I was fully awake.

I was home.

BOOK TWO

Part one

12

The sun's rays were warm, not exactly hot but compared to the cold Highland winters this was wonderful. I had been allowed out to play; having done all of my duties in the house the thought of freedom from responsibility was very welcome.

Even for a seven year old, being the only daughter in a family with three boys I carried the major brunt of the housework and farm jobs that my mother was unable to do. I didn't mind, I loved my mother but sometimes, just sometimes, I wanted more time to play games. As an only sister I was already well versed in games my youngest brother and his friends played. Angus was nine, Andrew and Gordon were much older, they already had men's duties and they helped my father as Senior Tacksman to the laird. But sometimes they took me with them and I loved being in their company.

But I loved no one as much as I loved my father. He was everything to me and even at the age of seven I realised that I was his favourite. He would come back at night, sometimes very late, but he always came into my tiny room to whisper 'goodnight' and if he returned early he would sing me to sleep, he had a lovely voice and occasionally I would refuse to go to bed until he was home.

Today though I was going to my favourite place alone, it was not far from the cottage in which I lived but far enough to be out of sight. Unlike my father's own tenants' cottages ours was built of stone, we were fortunate that his position had enabled him to finance such a property boasting three separate rooms and a fireplace. And the fact that we had a separate stone barn built into the side of the hill meant that we didn't need to share our dwelling with our beasts as others did. My mother and father had chosen the position together and had helped to build it. They had chosen well, it stood on the side of a hill, sheltered by the rock itself and some nearby trees and overlooked the loch. The views were wonderful on a day like today, but in the winter the wind would drive the snow into drifts that were as tall as the cottage itself. But we were Highlanders, we were from stock who were used to this weather and my father

and brothers would go out and clear a path in order that my mother and I could see to the livestock and that they could go about their business. My mother would wrap a shawl about her shoulders and, her head down, she would go to the well to draw the water, sometimes having to break the ice with an axe with her fingers almost blue. We were tough, we had to be and we were proud, proud of our heritage, proud of our language and traditions and proud of our family.

But today there was no need to be hardy, today I took off my boots and ran, my skirts flying, up the hill and down the other side towards the burn that flowed over rocks and pebbles to Loch Lochy in the glen below.

This was one of my favourite places, I loved to be alone, our house was not too small but there were six people living in it and especially in the winter it seemed overcrowded, there was nowhere to be me. But here by this burn I could lie on the soft grass and gaze in silence at the fish which swam there, and marvel at the colours of their skin as they twisted and turned on their way to the loch below.

I chose my place carefully, I wanted to be near to the water but not too near, I didn't want the fish to see me, but I wanted to see them. I walked around for a while and at last selected a spot. I put my boots neatly on the grass and then knelt down on the ground and finally got myself into position. I lay on my front, my chin on my hands, and made ready to watch.

It wasn't long before the first fish came and it was beautiful. I knew that it was a salmon because I had been fishing with my brothers. They had caught many fish, it was a skill that had been passed down the generations, and it was an essential skill to have in the Highlands where in winter food was scarce and smoked fish was a staple diet.

But this time I was just watching, and I lay there for a long time taking in the sights and smells of this clear spring day.

I lay there half asleep, basking in the sun, when I heard someone coming down the hill. I was annoyed at being disturbed and I wondered if it was one of my brothers.

I heard the footsteps coming across the grass and I turned round, shading my eyes with my hand.

It was indeed a boy, but not one of my brothers. I hadn't seen him before, but then again I had never strayed very far from the cottage, he looked older than Angus and I didn't recognise him.

He stomped up to me and said, rather rudely I thought. "What are ye doing here?"

I didn't reply.

"I said what are ye doing here?" He repeated, this time he was very rude.

"I dinna have to tell ye. Mind your own business and go away," I replied.

He looked a little surprised but carried on. "Aye it is my business, my father is laird and ye have to answer me."

"No I dinna. I dinna care if your father is the King I dinna have to tell ye anything. Anyway ye are rude," my retort had the effect of bringing him closer, so I stood up.

He was taller than me of course, he had a shock of black hair and I noticed he had green eyes. I had never seen anyone with green eyes before, my own were blue, as were my father's. My brothers and my mother had brown eyes. But these were a vivid green.

"What are ye staring at?" He said.

"I dinna know I dinna recognise it," I said. I had heard Angus say that to one of his friends once and I had thought it quite clever at the time.

He stepped towards me, I stepped back.

He looked as though he didn't know what to do next, then he bent down and picked up a stone and threw it into the burn.

"Dinna do that ye'll scare the fish," I said.

He took that as his cue to do it again and this time picked up a much larger stone and heaved it into the water. The splash sent the fish darting in all directions and drops of water splashed my dress and my legs.

My father had always said that redheads had a very bad temper; he and I both had the same colour hair, another fact of which I was very proud. He was right, even at seven I had the capacity to get very angry indeed and on this occasion I was not going to disappoint.

The boy's smug face didn't help and in one movement I was at him. He had moved dangerously close to the burn and the force of one angry seven-year old redhead, girl or no, throwing herself at him had the effect of toppling him, green eyes and all, into the water.

I didn't wait to see whether he could get out, I just grabbed my boots and ran.

13

The rest of that summer was uneventful; we took the cattle up to the sheillings for summer pasture. Scottish summer days are beautiful and long, and it was almost a holiday atmosphere for my mother and my youngest brother and I. Father stayed at home most of the time with Andrew and Gordon to see to the farm and attend to any business the laird might have for him and to that of our own tenants. But some days he would come up to us and we would cook on fires outside, sometimes with other families, for such wild country there were lots of other folk leading the life we led. There would be singing and sometimes dancing and always whisky passed around and sometimes brandy that was a present to my father from the laird. These days were a reward for suffering the hard winters and we children lapped it up.

There was no more sign of the boy with the green eyes and I thought no more on the subject. And as September drew near and we took the cattle down the slopes back to the cottage I knew that winter was drawing in and there would be no more lazing by the water and watching the fish and no more long carefree days.

During the winter my parents took it upon themselves to tutor us. My mother, who was a MacGregor and a distant relative of the famous Rob Roy, was from a family who believed that girls should be educated and my father admired this in her and wanted his children to be knowledgeable about things other than farming. I was lucky, because of who my parents were they believed that I too, the only girl, should receive the same tutoring as my brothers. So in the long winter nights we learnt our figures, and to read and write not only Gaelic, our native language, but English too.

“I willna have any of my children being called heathen by any sassenach” my father would say. “And it is always for the best to be able to understand your enemies,” he would add with a warning look.

So diligently we studied, my brothers and I.

I learned fast, it was not just my own inquisitive nature that drove me, but it was the joy of being with my family. My elder brothers spoiled me and I was very proud of them, they were almost god-like to a little girl and they were always patient with me, although they often lost their tempers with Angus. But that is the way with younger brothers.

And so my life went on, for the next three years nothing from the outside world, apart from occasional visiting drovers and tinkers, interrupted what to me was a safe and secure haven.

But in the summer of seventeen thirty-six things were to change.

I had turned ten in the April of that year, and I was growing almost as tall as Angus. Andrew who was twenty-two had been married the previous year to a girl from a nearby croft called Margaret and my brothers and my father had built a cot-house near our own home for the newly-weds. Margaret was now a member of my family and I was mature enough to see that she was much welcomed by my mother as a friend and an extra pair of hands. Andrew and she were very much in love and I knew they were hoping to start a family because I had heard her telling my mother so.

But one day in May when I had finished my duties and was sitting outside the house on a bench my father had made I saw him striding up the hill, his philibeg kilt swaying as he came closer. He was covering the ground quickly and his stride seemed somehow urgent.

I started towards him as I always did; every moment alone with my father was precious to me. But something made me stop, I could see from his face that he was worried, and somehow I stemmed my inclination to run to ask him what was wrong.

Eventually he reached me and he stopped and looked at me for a moment and said. "Isa is your mother in the house?" I replied that she was, and he put his hand on my shoulder. "Will ye give us a moment lass? I have something that she would be best hearing alone."

I nodded dumbly and the fear that coursed through my body must have shown because he smiled and said. "Dinna worry lass, it will be all right." He then fixed his gaze on the house and walked on while I watched him go. I watched as he pushed the door open and I watched as he closed it behind him, and then I waited.

After I had waited for what seemed to me a very long time I slowly walked to the door and walked in.

My parents sat at the scrubbed pine table in the kitchen area and they both looked up as I entered.

"Should I go away again?" I asked.

My father smiled. "No lass, we have done our talking." He looked at my mother then and she nodded and said. "She'll know soon enough Davie ye may as well tell her now."

"Tell me what?" I said, my voice shaking.

My father held out his hand to me and I took hold of it. At ten years old his hands still engulfed mine and I could feel the calluses of years of working on the farm and wielding the broadsword.

“Well it is like this,” he said and then took a deep breath. “Ye know that your brothers and I have sworn an oath as Camerons to the laird.”

I nodded; I remembered this.

“Aye well, it is now time for us to prove that the oath was said in truth.”

“By doing what?” I said.

“By going to fight for our clan.”

“Why?” I said.

“Well lass, because we have a duty to do so.”

I nodded, I understood that part; any child brought up in the Highlands understood that part.

“Where will ye go? The Isles?” I asked.

“No lass, to France.”

“France.” I almost screamed, I stared at my father and looked to my mother for her to tell me that this wasn’t true. But she nodded and I could see by her eyes that she had been crying.

“Why France, we are Scots, why do ye have to fight for them?” I was too young to understand the ‘auld alliance’ that had existed between our two countries before even the great Braveheart, Robert the Bruce’s time.

“They are our allies, our friends, Isa and one day they may help us bring our King back to Scotland. So we will fight for them so that we will have the English out of Scotland and we will have a King of the Scots once more. We Camerons will rise high because of this.” He looked at me again, and gently squeezed my hand.

“So ye see Isa that we have to go.” He had finished speaking and he looked at me with his blue eyes seeking some sort of proof that I understood why the man I loved most in the world and my own brothers would travel to fight some other country’s battles. I didn’t understand, I thought it unfair that my life should be upset by a place and a people that meant nothing to me, but because I loved him and because I loved my mother and my brothers I nodded.

My father didn’t speak, he just pulled me to him and held me and I could feel the rough fabric of his plaid against my skin and inside I sobbed, but outside I buried my head in his shoulder and made no sound.

It was not long before my father and my two brothers left us.

It was a beautiful morning and my mother, Angus, Margaret and I stood outside our house and watched the three of them descend the hill towards the loch.

We had all eaten together that last precious night and my mother had sung

beautiful songs of parting and sorrow and my father and brothers had sung proud stirring Highland warrior songs and drunk whisky, and it was not until late in the night that we went our separate ways to bed.

In the morning the men had breakfasted first, on porridge and oatcakes and honey from the bees my mother tended. They were dressed for war, each one bristling with gleaming weaponry. My father, as with most Highland men, had not taken much heed of the act of the English Parliament that banned us from possessing our weaponry. They had simply removed them to the barn for a while, but as searches were never carried out the weapons were back in their rightful places in the house.

They wore their broadswords and dirks in their sword belts, the polished buckles shining. They wore kilts in the muted colours of hunting tartan and their plaids were swept over their shoulders, and they carried the round targ shield on their left arms. All wore bonnets and had their hair tied back in black velvet ribbons.

They were Highland fighting men and for a moment I was proud that they would be fighting for Clan Cameron and for the King of Scots, no matter that it was in France and the King of Scots was in Rome and not in Scotland. But that moment was short, as moments are, and I was soon once again plunged into misery as I thought that I would not see them for a long time and then it dawned on me that they might not come back at all.

That was too much to bear and I hid my face in my shawl as I stood by my mother and watched as my brothers bade her farewell.

It soon came time for them to say goodbye to me and each gave me a kiss as they did so. Andrew picked me up and swung me round and said. "Shall I bring ye back a present Isa?"

"No" I replied. "Just come back," at which point I heard Margaret begin to sob and he ran to her and held her in his arms as my father was holding my mother.

My father broke away and went down on one knee in front of me.

"I will bring them back Isa, dinna ye worry. Will ye promise me that ye will look to your mother and be a good girl and continue with your studies?"

I nodded; I could not speak.

He kissed me then on the forehead and he stood up, with a final look to my mother he turned and walked away, followed by my brothers. None of them turned back. It was the Highland way, it might bring bad luck and we, who watched them go, understood.

14

It was a quiet summer, we took the cattle to the Sheillings, but this time I went with Margaret and Angus. My mother stayed at the house to tend the livestock and the crops we grew to see us through the winter, and to hear news of France.

Margaret tried to remain cheerful, I could see that she made a great effort during the day, but in the night if I awoke I often heard her sobs.

I thought about my father and brothers every hour of every day and I prayed for them every night before I went to sleep. I sometimes dreamed of them and when I awoke I hoped that it had been real, but I learned to live with the fact that it wasn't.

As August came to a close we drove the cattle back to the pastures, it was no mean feat for one young woman and two children, but we made it and my mother threw her arms around us when we returned.

We began to hope that our men folk would return too, late August and early September would see the harvest and there had always been an unwritten code in the Highlands that the fighting men would return from war to their homes in time to ensure that provisions for the winter would be brought in. The snows sometimes came in late September and we had precious little time to get the harvest in for ourselves and livestock, and every day we hoped for news of their return.

As the days moved on we were on tenterhooks. My mother went down to the 'Big House' to enquire but they had heard nothing either. All over the mountains and glens women were waiting for their men to come back and an air of expectancy descended over that beautiful land.

It was on one September morning I saw him, far in the distance. The figure striding up the hill, now and then he was hidden by trees but he was climbing quickly and I rose from the bench on which I was sitting to get a better view.

My heart began to beat, I didn't know whether to run to him or wait.

I waited and as he came close my heart sank.

It was not my father; it was a man of about his age, he was dressed in Cameron tartan, and as he moved closer I could see that his clothes were fine. On his head he wore a bonnet with two feathers, one white and one a darker shade, I knew that to be an eagle's feather, the sign of a clan chief.

I turned and ran to the house. "Mother come quick, there is a man coming, he is wearing a chieftan's bonnet," I said, my breath coming in gasps from running.

My mother stood on the threshold for a while, she wiped her hands on her apron and took it off and placed it on a stone near the door. There was something about the way that she did this that worried me. Her movements were slow and deliberate. She smoothed her hair and for a moment she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. And then she walked towards me. Shading her eyes with one hand she took mine in her other and we walked slowly towards the man who was now quite near.

When we met him my mother dropped a slight curtsey and then said. "Ye have news?"

I looked from her to the man who was dressed in full Highland finery, I saw that his face was pale and there were dark rings under his eyes, the same as those under my mother's. His hair was brown but it was streaked with grey and I saw that his eyes were green. I remember thinking then that I had only seen eyes that colour once before, in the boy who said his father was laird. I realised then who this must be, and even though I was only ten I realised that a visit from the laird meant something important had happened.

It was only a matter of seconds until he replied to my mother's question, but it seemed to me that the world stood still.

"Aye Mary, I have news for ye," he said, his voice was gentle and it seemed to shake a little as he spoke. He took a deep breath and then continued speaking. "I have news from France."

My mother didn't wait for him to tell her more. "How bad was it?" She asked.

"It was bad Mary, we were outnumbered but we fought well and eventually turned the campaign in our favour. We lost the first battle but we continued and eventually our experience and spirit won through. The French said our men fought well, and their king congratulated us on our victory." He stopped then suddenly as if embarrassed by what he had said.

"Ye have news though, ye had better tell me," my mother spoke without emotion, her voice was cold and her face held no expression at all. I had not seen her this way before, and it frightened me.

Our laird began speaking, his voice appeared to be breaking. "I canna say it any way other than this Mary, and it grieves me more than I can tell ye but Andrew was killed in the first battle."

As I heard those words I felt as though my legs would go from under me, I stared at the man in disbelief, but he was looking at my mother as she spoke. "And my husband and Gordon, are they to come home to us?"

"Aye Mary, they fought through the whole campaign, Davie fought like

the man he is and Gordon proved himself a fine soldier,” the visitor looked at my mother for some sort of acknowledgement of the compliment, he got none.

“And why are they not home with ye?” She asked.

“Gordon was injured and Davie stayed with him while he recovered,” he continued. “They will be back soon that I promise ye, and any assistance that I may give ye I will.”

“I am sure that Davie will speak with ye on that matter if it is necessary,” my mother said and then went on. “And how is Gordon injured?”

“He lost an eye, it was a stray shot that hit him from a musket, but he fought on and saved the lives of two men afterwards by his skill with the broadsword alone.”

My mother nodded. The two adults stood facing each other, neither moved.

There was silence until my mother spoke. “I will tell Andrew’s widow that ye came and that her husband fought bravely. I am grateful for ye coming yourself to give me the news.” And then as an afterthought she said. “Will ye be having a whisky before ye go?”

I was surprised at my mother’s bluntness to the visitor even in these circumstances but the laird took it as his cue to depart and declined the offer.

Before he left he said. “I am very very sorry for your loss lass and I wish that I didna have to give ye this news, I would have it any other way than this.”

My mother gave a small smile and said. “God go with ye Jamie Cameron.”

He nodded and turned away and began his journey back down the hillside to the serene loch below.

We watched him go, my mother and I. My eyes followed him until the first trees blotted his diminishing figure from view and then I turned to look at my mother.

She stood still as one of the standing stones down in the glen beyond. Her face showed no expression, the only movement was the curls of her hair lifting as the September breeze caught them.

She was a McGregor, her clan were descended from the ancient clan Alpin who ruled Scotland before even The Bruce, and as I looked at her I thought that she stood like a queen might.

After a few minutes she seemed to shake herself and she turned to me and without speaking held out her hand and drew me to her, and then she held me as I buried my face in her dress and cried until I thought I could cry no more. She stroked my hair and whispered soft words to me and eventually I stopped crying and looked up. She returned my gaze and knelt down in front of me

and said. "Isa my love, we will have to be brave for Margaret and Angus. Can ye do that?"

I nodded in reply; I couldn't speak.

"I will go now and tell her, wait here for us to come back and then we will tell Angus together. Ye heard the laird, Andrew was brave and we will have to honour him by being as brave. Will ye do that for him Isa?"

I nodded again. And at that she kissed me on my forehead, just as my father had done those months before and then she stood up, dusted her skirts and turned and walked towards the cot-house that my father and my brothers had built for Andrew and his bride.

I watched her go and after a while I heard Margaret cry, it was a cry of pain and I put my hands over my ears to keep that sound out.

But soon there was only the sound of the wind over the grass and I stood and looked down the hill, the same hill that had seen my brothers and my father descend those months ago to fight for the return of their king. I could almost see them; kilts swaying as they walked and I closed my eyes at the pain that the memory had stirred in my heart.

And on that day in September I ceased to be a child.

15

It was over a week before they returned, my father and brother.

It was Angus who saw them first, he ran into the house breathless and shouting. "They are home Ma, they are home."

I turned to look at my mother, she stood very still, and I saw her close her eyes momentarily, she then untied her apron and laid it carefully on the table top and ran her fingers through her hair, I noticed for the first time that it showed tiny strands of grey. She looked at me then and held her hand out and, holding hands, we followed my brother out of the house.

We stood and watched for a while as the two figures ceased to be dots in the distance and took on the forms that we recognised.

"Isabel, why do ye not go to meet them lass?" My mother spoke quietly, she was right; normally I would have been halfway down the hill by now, but I stood quietly beside her, not knowing what to do.

"Because I am scared," I said, immediately ashamed of myself for even thinking that.

"Aye lass," she replied. "We are all scared in our ways. But your father and

brother will be hoping for a welcome as warm as we are able to give them and ye are the one to begin it, now get yourself on down to them and I'll fetch Margaret. The sooner we are together the better it will be for all of us."

I needed no second bidding and began to walk, and then run, down the slope, leaping over stones and other obstacles on my way to find the quickest route down.

The nearer I got the clearer I saw them, their clothes were coated with the dirt of months of fighting and sleeping rough, both sported beards and I saw that Gordon's injured eye was covered by a black patch which was tied around his head. They trudged quietly and slowly up the hill without looking up. So I shouted as loud as I could manage whilst still running. "Ye have come home, welcome home, welcome home."

My father looked up and I saw his face transformed by a smile that sent a message stronger than any words could convey, and any fears over what I should say or do were banished from my mind. I saw that Gordon too was smiling and he waved his right arm in salute.

And soon enough I had reached them. My father picked me up in his arms and held me to him and there was no need for words. We stood there with the last of the September sun warming our backs and at last I cried. I cried tears of welcome mixed with tears of relief for the fact that they had come back at all and tears of sorrow for my brother who had not returned. Eventually the tears abated and I looked up at my father. His face was thinner and the beard made him look a little different but he was still my father and when he smiled down at me I felt a warm feeling inside that I hadn't felt for a long time.

Gordon stood watching, he was thinner too and his complexion seemed as if it was tinged with the grey of someone who has endured suffering and sadness and I extricated myself from my father's arms and walked to him and put my arms around him.

"Isa, ye are the best thing I have seen since we set sail for France, how have ye been little sister," he said ruffling my hair.

"Oh we have been fine, we took the cattle to the Sheillings and we have looked after the farm, but we have missed ye and we are glad ye are home again," I said hoping that I sounded suitably sure of everything.

"It is good to be home lass; ye dinna know how good." He said the second words very quietly, almost to himself, but I heard and squeezed his hand to let him know that I had.

So we walked the rest of the way home together, me in between the two returning men, until my younger brother reached us.

My mother and Margaret stood before the house. As we neared them I could see that Margaret was trying very hard to maintain the degree of self control my mother had managed, but as we reached the top of the hill and the plateau on which our homes were built, tears began to fall down her cheeks and she began to utter loud sobs.

It was Gordon who went to her, he took her in his arms and held her as she cried into his plaid, his glinting broadsword was the only sign that the young man whispering words of consolation was capable of other deeds.

"I am sorry," she said over and over again.

"What do ye have to be sorry for?" He asked her.

"I have tried to be brave, but I canna help it. It is just that ye looked so like him and for a moment I thought that it was Andrew." She sobbed as she spoke and he took her gently by the shoulders until she looked up at him.

"Ye have nothing to be sorry for lass. It is me who should be sorry, because I didna save him." He paused then and began to speak quietly. "It was impossible," he went on. "We were so outnumbered and the French had no idea what to do with us, where they wanted us to fight or who we were fighting with. It was a disaster and it was all we could do to keep our lives. I saw him go down, and tried to help him but I was attacked from behind and it was only this," he said nodding at the weapon so evident at his side. "That saved me from going down with them. I wish it was Andrew that had returned to ye lass," Gordon's deep voice was choked as he spoke.

Margaret pulled back she looked horrified. "Don't ye ever say anything like that again Gordon Cameron," said his brother's widow. "Ye are home, when ye could so easily not be, and by the looks of ye, ye have suffered greatly. The laird came to us to tell us of what had happened and said ye fought very bravely, ye and your Da. Ye are the only reminder I have of my husband and in his memory I will not have ye feeling guilty for surviving when it could have been that none of ye returned at all."

It was the strongest statement that Margaret had uttered since she had heard of Andrew's death and her eyes showed how vehemently she meant every word. Gordon bowed his head and then said. "As ye wish lass."

My mother and father had stood only feet apart from each other throughout, but I noticed that they were not touching and not a word had been spoken between them. It was almost as if they were waiting for something.

Gordon went over to where my mother stood and was about to say something when she hushed him and took him in her arms and held him as she had with all of her family in times of trouble.

He raised his head and she moved a lock of his hair from the patch that covered his eye.

“Can I see?” she said. He nodded and she gently eased away the leather, she did not flinch at what she saw and she gently raised her hand and touched the area that had been shielded.

“It is fine work son,” she said. “I thank God that ye had a fine physician at least.”

“Aye, the fighting was near a monastery and the monks saw to the wounded. No doubt they saved many lives that would have been lost. I was lucky to have only this,” he said.

She replaced the patch tenderly and said. “And I am lucky to have such a son.”

There was silence then as we stood in front of the door, my mother went to stand near my father, I saw her look up at him and there passed between them a look of complete understanding; a look that can only be shared by two people who know and love each other well, and I saw him take her hand. But still she did not let that veneer of self-control slip.

The rest of that day and evening we all spent together in our house, talking, and picking up whatever thread of normality that we could and just starting very slowly to heal the great hurt that had been done to us in that foreign land. The practicalities of the farm would wait until tomorrow and after we had eaten the meal that my mother Margaret and I had cooked, my brothers and I went to bed early, exhausted both emotionally and physically. I heard Margaret leave and then the house was quiet, apart from the rushing of the wind outside.

I slept fitfully that night and I woke in the middle of it to hear a sound in the house I didn't recognise. I crept out of my bed and opened the door a very small way and peered into the room beyond. There in front of the fire I saw my father sitting on one of the large wooden chairs that stood either side of the hearth, and on his knee he was holding, as you would a small child, my mother. I could see that her arms were around his neck and her face was buried into the shirt he wore, I could also see by the movement of her shoulders, that she was crying. And it was the noise of her stifled sobs that I had heard. My father was stroking her hair and whispering softly to her, his own eyes were closed as he did so. I silently closed the door once more and crept back into the darkness of my little room and climbed into bed. I closed my eyes then and said a silent prayer for all of my family and especially for my brother who would never again return home.

16

The healing process continued throughout the next two years, slowly my family learned to accept what had happened. It is said that time heals all and to an extent that is true, although I would rather have it said that in time you learn to handle the terrible hurt you have been dealt and that you learn to live life a different way.

Just after my father and Gordon returned home Margaret asked my parents if she should leave and go back to her own kin. They were horrified and told her that she was part of our family and that Andrew would have never forgiven them for abandoning his wife. So she stayed and slowly, and almost inevitably, she and Gordon became close. They comforted each other, it was only Margaret that Gordon could share his feelings with and it seemed to help Margaret for her to listen. Slowly through the next year they became inseparable. I wondered how my parents felt about this but I saw no signs of disapproval and when Gordon and Margaret asked for their permission to wed my mother and father gave it gladly and without condition.

The wedding took place the following year. It was a quiet affair with only our family present. It was in the early winter and the passes were blocked with snow preventing Margaret's people from attending. But they sent word through a letter carried by a passing drover that they gave their blessing and that they wished the young couple well. A prayer was said for Andrew during the ceremony and I saw Gordon take his new wife's hand and hold it tight throughout, it was almost as if their wedding was a fitting memorial for the young life lost.

Being the only girl in our family I had never ventured far from our home, but it was in the year in which I had celebrated my twelfth birthday that my father asked me if I would like to go with him to the 'Big House' for the Quarter Day rent payments. This was an occasion of great ceremony when all of the laird's tenants would gather and pay their rents either in money or goods, my father's position at these occasions was very important as he assisted our clan chief in presiding over the whole day.

It was my first visit to the Big House and it was an honour for a twelve-year old girl to be asked, my brothers had been before but this time my father offered me the chance to accompany him. So the night before we were to go down I barely slept with excitement.

In the morning I woke early, and lay in bed for a while listening to the noise of the house awakening. At last when I thought I heard my father's voice I leapt out of bed and quickly dressed. It was another brilliant summer and this day was to be no exception, my mother had washed and mended a blue cotton dress for me to wear, she had spent a long time pressing it with the red hot iron she heated over the fire and I carefully pulled it on over my shift in order not to crease it.

I pulled on my stockings and boots and laced them tightly and then made my bed and went into the kitchen. My father stood near my mother as she stirred the pot that hung over the fire containing the porridge she was making for our breakfast. He was dressed in his finest, he wore the ceremonial kilt and plaid and stockings to match. The silver buttons on his velvet jacket were polished and my mother had spent a long time ensuring that his linen shirt was as white as she could make it. His broadsword was hung over the fire and it shone as the light from the flames caught it. He would carry it today. It wouldn't be purely for ceremonial purposes either, it had been known for defaulters to become troublesome.

"Ye look bonnie lass," my father said as he turned to look over in my direction.

"Aye she does Davie and ye must make sure she stays that way," my mother said in mock disapproval, and then to me. "Have ye brushed your hair Isabel?" My parents rarely called me Isabel, and when they did it was usually when they were emphasising the seriousness of something.

"Aye, I have. One hundred times as ye told me Ma," I replied. I had indeed brushed it until it shone, although my hair would never respond to brushing in any other way, it had a life of its own.

"Well lass, have a wash after ye have eaten and then ye and your Da had better be leaving," she said as she ladled the porridge into two wooden bowls. My father ate his standing up and when he had finished he took the shining broadsword down from its place over the fire and slid it into its carved leather holster which he buckled over his shoulder so the leather went across his chest and the buckle rested on his waist.

And at that moment my heart swelled with pride.

After eating my breakfast and washing in the bowl of cold water my mother had ready for me, I picked up my shawl and we left the house. My mother waved us off and then went back inside quickly to see to my brother's meal.

So it was now to be only the two of us and I was going to enjoy this day.

Our family had a number of Highland garrons in a paddock near the house

and my father went in and selected one sturdy mount to carry us both. He climbed on its back and then hoisted me up. The garron is not the tallest of beasts so it was not difficult for him to seat me in front of him. However these horses had for centuries been the best form of travel in our wild land as they were as sure footed as the people that rode them, perhaps more so.

So we travelled together, my father pointing out the birds and flowers on our way and the summer sun rising to warm us with its rays. For the first time in a long time I could truly say that I was happy.

Our journey lasted over two hours but at last we arrived at the seat of our laird, I had never seen anything so grand. It was built of granite and stood imperiously on the shores of the silver Loch Lochy which stretched in to the distance. There were manicured lawns that ran down to the water with neat and resplendent flowerbeds either side. It was truly lovely, we in the Highlands had a reputation with the English and even Scottish Lowland folk, as being savages but there was no evidence of that here.

The house was set around an inner courtyard and it was here that a polished table was set in front of the steps that led to the front entrance. Behind the table was an ornate carved chair and in front of it, already assembling, was a queue of tenants carrying sundry bags and, or, livestock and sacks; in fact every possible means of carrying something that would be accepted as payment for their quarterly rent.

My father dismounted quickly and then helped me down. He handed the horse to a stable boy who seemed to appear out of nowhere and then turned to me.

“Isa I am going in now to see the laird. He will be needing me for most of the day, but there will be ample provision for food and as long as ye dinna go anywhere ye shouldna ye can have a look around. If ye need me though dinna be afraid to come to me, I will be at the laird’s side just over there,” my father pointed to the table.

I nodded and then he kissed me on my forehead and strode purposefully past the waiting tenants, acknowledging greetings as he went up the steps and through the doors into the house.

I felt slightly self-conscious on my own, I looked around for somewhere to sit, which wouldn’t put me in everyone’s view but would enable me to watch the proceedings. There were some straw bales outside a small door that led into one of the outbuildings on the far side of the courtyard and I seated myself on one of them.

More and more tenants filed in, all were dressed as smartly as they could

afford. It was rather like a large social gathering, friends and relatives shouted greetings as they saw each other. For some remote farmers this was one of the few times in the year when they came across people outside their immediate families.

It struck me then that I was the only female present.

Soon the doors to the house opened and the laird came out followed by my father and a couple of lesser tacksmen.

Sir James Cameron acknowledged the tenants as he took his place in the only chair in the courtyard. My father walked behind him carrying a huge ledger, which he placed on the table with a pot of ink and a set of quill pens. I remembered the last time I had seen the laird was when he came to tell us of the death of my brother and for a moment a cold shadow fell across this bright summer day.

My attention returned to the laird as he motioned to my father, who now stood on his right hand shoulder, that he was ready and my father nodded towards the first of the waiting tenants.

And so it began, each man was welcomed and greeted by their laird, some stayed for a short while, just enough to pay their dues and some took the opportunity to speak to their chief of things that were troubling them and some just stopped to pass the time of day. There were a couple of men who obviously could not pay what was due, but James Cameron appeared to be an understanding landlord and my father did not have need of his broadsword.

After over an hour of watching proceedings I started to wonder if I might go exploring. The line of men was never ending and I was beginning to find my place on the bales uncomfortable. It also appeared that there was food laid out for the visitors in one of the barns, and the courtyard was filling up with tenants who had done their duty and were now eating and imbibing at their laird's pleasure. I was beginning to feel a little conspicuous even in my place on the bale so I decided I would go for a walk. Not too far, but far enough to gain some privacy.

I slid off the bail and carefully dusted my dress down and made my way out of the courtyard, making sure that my dress did not come into contact with any of the farmyard dirt that was on the ground. I made for the shores of the loch, through the gardens and away from the house. The nearer I got the more I loved this place, the water rippled where the fish came to the surface to catch flies and birds skimmed the water as they flew. The mountains in the distance were purple on the horizon and the beautiful tall trees came almost to the loch's edge. For a girl of twelve years this was a truly wonderful sight. I turned

to look at the house, its many windows reflecting the colour of the blue sky and I thought it was the finest house I would ever see.

I spent an enjoyable hour or so exploring the gardens, always making sure that I didn't stray too far and that my dress remained in the pristine condition my mother had intended. Eventually though, hunger got the better of me and I decided that it was time to return and perhaps sneak in to the barn and help myself to some food. My father had said it was all right for me to do so and I wondered if he might be wanting some for himself, I decided that I would go and ask him first.

I walked back to the opening into the courtyard and was about to go through when I heard a heated exchange of words. It sounded like the two men I could hear were somewhat worse the wear for drink and I didn't wish to pass by them. I noticed a door into one of the buildings was open so, picking up my skirts, I slipped through.

The building was obviously a store of some type, there were farm tools hanging on the walls and more bales of hay piled against them. There were a collection of barrels in the corner and from behind them I heard the tiny mewling of what I thought to be kittens. I stepped carefully across the floor and peered behind the barrels and smiled at what I saw. A mother cat lay on the straw, safely hidden by the barrels and surrounding her were five tiny kittens. They were fighting each other to get to her teats, at which some of them were already suckling. It was a charming sight and I watched them for a long time. Then my stomach made such a noise that I was surprised that I didn't alarm the little family and I determined that it was time to eat, the men hopefully should have gone.

I turned and crossed the room toward the door but I stopped suddenly. It appeared that one of the kittens must have escaped because I saw a little bundle of black and white disappear out of the door. I slipped out after it and back on to the path.

It moved very quickly for such a small thing and I lost sight of it, then after looking around for a minute or two, I thought I saw it going under some bushes on the other side of the lawn, heading towards the lake. Hunger momentarily forgotten, I followed it. Holding my skirts in a bundle, so as not to tear them, I squeezed past the bushes and out the other side. Here the formal gardens ended and the land that stretched to the loch was nature's own. I looked around and listened. Suddenly I thought I heard a pathetic mewling. My heart fell at the sound and I picked up my skirts and ran to where it seemed to be coming from. It was strange, it seemed the nearer I got, the

further away it was, but stoically I kept on. I had no idea where I was now, the trees had hidden the house from view, but as long as I kept to the loch on my right I thought that I would be able to follow it back.

I stood for a while, and then just as I had almost given up I saw a little black and white object across the other side of a patch of land upon which there was no foliage or trees apart from a few saplings. It appeared not to be moving, but it was still making that pitiful noise. Intent on the tiny form in the distance I ran lightly across the grass. Soon I was nearing the animal and I was relieved that it appeared to have beaten the urge to flee. I began whispering softly so as not to frighten it and I was only feet away when it happened.

The ground seemed to give way under my feet, it was a very strange sensation, it seemed that the grass upon which I stood swallowed my feet and soon I was up to my waist in vile smelling mud. And the more I struggled to get out the deeper I sank, my beautiful blue dress was now submerged in the mire and I was up to my armpits.

I had wandered in to a bog, I realised now why the kitten had stayed still. It was stuck too, but had the sense young animals have to understand it's surroundings and therefore it did not move. I, on the other hand, still tried to move and the more I tried to extricate myself the more I sunk.

I was desperate now, the mud was up to my shoulders; I tried to hold my arms above the surface but my muscles ached. The weight of my dress pulled me down further as the cloying mud saturated the fabric.

I called out for help but there was nobody around to hear me. I felt tears begin to well in my eyes and trickle down my cheeks which were being burnt by the mid day sun. I tried to wipe them away but the movement of my arms seemed to plunge me deeper into the mire.

The mud now was nearing my chin and I could almost taste the sticking glutinous mass.

I had felt desperate before but now it dawned on me that there would be no rescue. I imagined what would happen if I drowned, nobody would find me, my parents would search for days and my mother would again have to go through the agony she went through after the death of my brother. No body to bury and no graveside to visit. I sobbed alone under the blazing sun.

It was then that I heard it, a far off noise that sounded like the rapid beating of horse's hooves. I tried to turn my head but the fact that I could now actually taste the mud stopped me, I didn't have long but it was coming nearer and it did indeed appear to be the sound of a galloping horse.

I silently prayed that the rider, whoever they were, would not change

direction, but the sound grew ever louder and when I thought I could be heard I gathered all of my strength and yelled. "Help," and then again and again until tears came thick and fast.

Then I saw the horse. It was ridden by what seemed to be a young lad, he was pulling the animal back and obviously looking round for the source of the shouting.

"I'm here, over here," I shouted. I used the last of my energy to raise my arm from the mud and waved feebly in his direction.

At last he saw me, and while the horse was still moving he jumped out of the saddle and landed crouched on the grass.

I had suffered for the exertion because I sank even lower, I held my head back so that the mud did not go into my mouth, but I knew it was just a matter of time.

My rescuer got to his feet and ran towards me. He appeared to know the land because he stopped by one of the saplings that seemed to mark the beginning of the marsh; it was a sign I wished I had seen.

"Dinna worry," he shouted. "Just dinna move at all and I will get ye out. Ye hear me, dinna move."

I couldn't even nod, but I stayed very still.

He looked around for a second and then started disrobing. He threw his knife belt, and the shining object it contained, on the floor at his feet. And then unwound his plaid, and took off his stockings and brogans until he stood before me in only his long white shirt and then he moved towards the sapling.

"I willna be long, just stay still," he said as he looked over his shoulder at me.

I couldn't have moved if I had wanted to.

He tied one end of his long plaid to the tree, tightly knotting it under a branch so that it wouldn't slip off, and then picking up the other end he turned and began carefully to walk towards me.

Slowly he too started to sink into the mire, but he seemed to be able to measure his movements in order to prevent the immediate submersion I had experienced.

"I canna come any further," he said. "But if ye catch this when I throw it to ye I can pull ye in from solid ground."

"I canna move my arms," I said.

"Ye'll have to if I am to get ye out. Just try, but slowly," he replied.

So I did, he threw the length of fabric to within about a foot of my face but as much as I tried I could not raise my arm. I was just too tired.

He saw this and without speaking he moved a little closer.

“Ye should be able to reach it now, just one try and ye will be out. I promise,” he added.

He pulled back the now mud spattered plaid and threw it again. This time it was within my reach, and with an enormous effort, taking up the last of my strength; I raised my arm, which was coated with mud and managed to grab the end of the fabric.

“That’s good,” he said. “Now ye have it, dinna let it go. I will walk backwards and when I am out I will pull ye out. But we must do everything slowly, do ye understand?”

I didn’t reply but he took my silence as the signal that I would obey instructions.

Slowly he backed away, he didn’t use the fabric as a handhold, so as not to jeopardise my safety. All the time he moved backwards his eyes never left mine. I realised that they were green.

At last he reached solid ground and pulled himself up on to it. He stood half naked, his long shirt covered in mud finished at his knees.

“Now hold tight and I will pull ye out, try and hold it with your other hand too,” he said as he grasped the makeshift rope with both hands and, hand over hand, started to heave me out.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I felt myself move. I managed to manoeuvre my other hand towards the fabric and soon I was holding it with both. I watched as he heaved, his bare feet slipping on the grass, and I saw sweat gleaming on his skin as he brought me out of the quagmire.

Pull by pull, my top half began to come out of the mud. My hair was caked in the stuff and my freshly laundered dress was unrecognisable. But I was alive and I was certainly grateful.

At last he was able to heave me completely out of the bog and I collapsed on the grass. I was absolutely exhausted and I just lay there. I felt as if every muscle in my body had stopped working. I closed my eyes and then began, face down in the grass, to cry.

My rescuer crouched down at the side of me.

“Are ye all right?” he said, I think for want of anything else to say.

“I am thanks to ye,” I sniffed, I raised myself up with my exhausted arms. “If ye hadna come I would have died. Ye saved my life I canna thank ye enough, I can never thank ye enough,” I said, through the tears.

“Dinna worry, it was nothing,” he said, he sounded very embarrassed. “I knew what to do because I did it myself and one of my father’s men rescued

me the same way. I got into terrible trouble at home for being so stupid," he added to himself.

"Ye are right, I was stupid," I said, sitting up and wiping my eyes.

"Oh no, ye dinna know this land like I did, it could happen to anybody and has done often. It's not a favourite of the Elector's soldiers either," he said with a smile.

Then he looked at me and said. "I'm Rory Cameron." He held out his hand, and I raised my muddled one and took it in mine. "I'm Isabel, and we share the same surname, my father is Davie Cameron."

"Oh aye, Davie is a fine man, my father says if I grow up to be as good a man as your father he will be happy," he looked at me and added in a rather shy way. "My father is the laird."

"I know," I replied. "Ye may not remember but we have met before."

"Have we?" He answered. "When?"

"Aye well it was a while back, I was seven, I am twelve now, but I think I pushed you in the burn near our house." Now it was time for me to be shy.

At this he laughed out loud. "Of course I remember, ye were that horrible little girl who wouldna let me disturb the fish. Still as I recall I deserved it, I was a horrible little boy. I am nearly sixteen now although my father still says he despairs of me." He smiled and held out a hand to me. "Speaking of my father I was expected at Quarter Day this morning and I was already late when I found ye, I canna think what he will say now. Are ye all right to walk back with me since my horse has decided to go home on his own?"

I took his hand and he pulled me to my feet, I was still quite wobbly but I didn't want to get him into any more trouble so I nodded and stood waiting for him to collect his belongings.

He put on his brogen, and he untied his plaid and wrapped it around him.

"Are ye ready?" He said.

I nodded and then I remembered the kitten; I looked over to where I had last seen the animal, but there was nothing there, just the flat marshy ground and I felt suddenly very sad for the little animal. My distress must have been obvious because my rescuer said. "What is wrong? Are ye all right?"

I looked over at the spot again and after a second replied that there was nothing wrong. Then after one last look I turned back to him, and with a silent prayer for the little animal in the hope that it had survived, I took a step forward and slowly we began to walk away from the site of my near demise.

After a few shaky steps he said. "Ye willna get very far on your own and ye are shivering."

He was right, despite the fact that the sun was high in the sky, my legs were shaking and my teeth were chattering. He took his plaid from his shoulder and wrapped it around mine and then he put his arm around my waist; "If ye lean on me ye'll be able to walk better. It's not too long a walk back and then I will find my mother and she will be able to look after ye."

"Thank ye," I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say, I felt at that moment that I owed him so much.

17

It was slow progress; I really was shivering, perhaps because of the shock of it all and of realising that I had been so close to ending my days in that bog.

Rory talked continuously, he was trying to take my mind off the recent incident by talking about anything he could think of. He told me that he had been sent to his uncle Lochiel's stronghold to learn skills with weaponry and in combat. His uncle was the chief of all of our clan and I wondered what he must have learned. He was only just over three years older than me, but even now he was being groomed for the lofty position he would take on the death of his father. He had almost forgotten to collect his sword and belt in his efforts to keep me upright, but the weapon now hung at his side. I remembered how Andrew and Gordon had practiced sword craft; Angus was doing it now. It scared me suddenly that these young men could all easily be summoned away again to fight someone else's wars in the name of Scotland.

My face must have betrayed my thoughts because Rory stopped walking and turned to me. "Are ye all right, do ye wish us to stop awhile?"

"No, dinna worry I was just thinking about my brothers ye reminded me of them a little," I replied.

"I heard they were very brave," he said reverently. "Your brother Gordon especially so. My father said that your whole family fought well and that they were a credit to our clan. I hope one day that he will say the same of me," he added somewhat dubiously.

"Well I hope ye dinna have to die in the process," I said, my response sounding rather more bitter than it was intended, but he took no offence.

"Aye well, I am rather fond of living and I intend to try very hard to continue to do so," he laughed as he spoke. His smile lit up his dark features and it made me laugh with him.

"Will ye go back to your uncle's after this?" I asked.

“Oh no, I am done there,” he replied. “No, after this I am to be sent to Edinburgh to continue on my education. I will be there for three years I am told, hopefully by then I may be near to the man my father wants me to be.”

“Is your father not fond of ye then?” I asked, rather wishing that I hadn’t as soon as the words left my mouth because the smile left his face.

“I dinna know to be honest, my father can be a hard man and I am his only son. A lot rests on my shoulders, I have cousins who would, like as not, take my place as laird if I fail.” He was right; I knew that in some clans weak leaders had been usurped by other relatives and sometimes by other clans. It was a heavy burden for a lad of fifteen.

“I’m sure he is proud of ye. He should be,” I added.

“Well thank ye Miss Isabel,” Rory said smiling again. “When I appear in front of him, late, half naked and covered in mud I hope ye will tell him so.”

“Dinna worry I will,” I said and I meant it.

Our journey eventually took over an hour and by the time we reached the formal gardens the mud on my dress had dried, making it almost impossible to walk. We crept across the grass and when we reached the courtyard he told me to wait for him. “I will come back to ye when I have found my mother,” he said. “Stay here, I shouldna be too long.” At that he left me, and I watched him go through the archway and into the courtyard.

It was only a matter of seconds before I heard the raised voice of his father.

“Roderick Cameron, where in God’s name have ye been? And what have ye been doing? I despair of ye lad, I send ye to your uncle’s to knock some sense into ye and look at ye. I would swear ye were a changeling if I didna know different.”

I pictured the scene, the line of tenants tittering, the laird red with anger and Rory standing alone in the courtyard facing them all for something that had been my fault.

So I wilfully disobeyed orders.

I dragged myself, and my heavy dress, through the arch and out into the gaze of the already entertained crowd in the courtyard. My imagination had made an exact picture of the scene, and I could tell by the laird’s face that he was very, very angry.

“Please sir,” I said. At first he didn’t hear my voice above those of the others, so I raised my voice. “Please sir, it isna his fault it is all mine.” And then as I gained his attention. “He saved my life, I fell in the bog and nearly died, he pulled me out. He didna want to be late but his horse ran off and I couldna

walk fast, please it is not his fault.” At the end of my speech I realised that I was very wobbly.

“Is this right?” the head of our clan said to his son, his voice now without the venom it had contained earlier.

Rory nodded.

Then I heard another voice, it was my father’s, I looked towards him, he was white in the face. “Then lad I owe ye a debt of gratitude that I canna ever repay,” he said, then he left his place by the laird’s side and strode over to where Rory was standing and offered him his hand. Rory grasped it and my father said simply. “Thank ye, she means everything to her mother and me.”

At that my resolve vanished and I ran towards my father who held his arms open and received his sobbing offspring whether she was covered in mud or not.

And somewhere through the fabric of my father’s velvet jacket I heard the voice of our chief say to his son. “I am sorry I was hard on ye, it was a good thing that ye did and I am proud of ye. Ye young heathen.”

18

Above the excited chatter of the tenants I heard the sound of a woman’s voice, it was clear and very cultured and I turned in my father’s embrace to see who the speaker was. She stood at the top of the steps; she had blonde hair and was very beautiful. I knew immediately that this was Rory’s mother, I had heard talk of how the Lady Cameron’s beauty was beyond compare in the country over which her husband presided. In fact it had been said that when he brought her from her Lowland home that Jamie Cameron had kidnapped her. Her looks were even more remarkable because she was a Douglas, linked to one of Scotland’s most ancient clans, her forebears were some of the most powerful men and women in our country. But Clan Douglas were famed for their dark looks, she was as opposite to that as it was possible to be. But those looks had obviously been passed to her son, and as she descended the steps and almost glided across the cobbled yard to stand by him, the contrast was great indeed.

“Rory, what have you been doing?” she said with very little trace of any accent, either Highland or Lowland.

Her husband replied. “I think ye should ask young Isabel.”

She turned a smile on me that mirrored her son’s and said. “Will you tell me?”

So I did, all of it, from seeing the kitten to arriving caked in mud at her grand house. I ignored the laughter from the audience of tenants and when I had finished I emphasised again. "I wouldna be alive had it not been for your son. Please dinna be angry with him."

"Don't worry, I am not angry, I am rather proud though." She emphasised the word am. She was looking directly at her son; he blushed at her words and lowered his eyes.

She looked at us both then and said. "Now I don't think either of you wish to remain in those clothes for very much longer. With your father's permission Isabel, I will take you and find you some clean clothing, you must be freezing."

I nodded and my father let go of my hand and I followed Lady Cameron and her son up the steps and into the house.

Once inside she told her son to change and go back to his father as soon as he could and then she turned to a young serving girl who stood nearby. "Janet will you ask Mrs McClellan to get a bath ready for Master Rory, and then," she looked me up and down before she continued. "Can you ask her to send two baths up to my room please."

The girl curtsied and scurried across the hall and down a flight of stairs that obviously led to the servants' quarters.

"Well then," she said to me. "Let's go and get you out of those clothes and see about finding you something in which your mother will recognise you."

She smiled at me as she spoke and bade me to follow her.

As I did so I marvelled at the grandness of the house; it was like nothing I had ever seen before. The furniture was polished and there were fine portraits of Cameron ancestors as well as heads of beasts killed in the hunt. There were lovely rugs on the stone floor and I made sure that none of the mud, in which I was caked, went anywhere near them.

A flight of stone stairs led to the upper level, and I followed her up them. I had seen Rory take them two at a time, but I stepped gingerly after his mother. She led me down the landing passing polished wooden doors and tables on which there were fine ornaments and bowls of flowers until she came to a set of double doors, which she opened to reveal the most lovely room I had ever seen.

The windows looked directly over the loch and down on the formal gardens, the furniture was finely carved and mirrors and paintings graced the walls. There was a huge bed with luxurious hangings on the left hand side of the room. But the chamber seemed so vast that even this item of furniture did not seem too big. I had heard the story that Jamie Cameron built this house to satisfy a requirement of his betrothed's father because he wouldn't let his

daughter live the life of any 'heathen Highlander'. I thought, as I looked around, that his son-in-law surely had not disappointed him.

Rory's mother was looking me up and down, and she said quietly to herself. "Yes she would be almost the same size, I think it will do." Then she directed her next words to me. "If you wait here for a few minutes I will go and fetch you something to wear," and then, as my stomach took up an ominous noise. "Have you eaten?"

I shook my head, and she said. "Then I will have some food sent up too, no wonder you are shaking so much." At that she took her leave of me and glided out of the room.

Shortly after four servants entered carrying two large copper baths between them, followed by two more serving girls bringing pails of water. Finally their mistress entered carrying over one arm a mound of fabric, and in the other hand a plate piled high with food. I was very embarrassed that all of these people had been inconvenienced by one silly girl who had fallen into a bog, but when I offered my profuse apologies I was told that it was no trouble at all. It seemed that the entire household now knew of their young master's heroics and wanted to see the object of his rescue. I imagined them to be very disappointed by the mud-caked urchin who stood before them.

At last the baths were full and the army of staff left. Lady Cameron motioned to the screens that had been moved to the side of the baths and suggested that I might want to disrobe behind them. I did as suggested and at last I stepped into the vat of hot water and saw the clinging mud silt the water in which I was sitting.

As soon as most of the mud had disengaged itself from my body I stepped into the other bath where Rory's mother poured water over the muddy carpet of my once red hair.

It took a while to get it out, but at last I was free of the stuff. I looked at the baths in which I had been sitting and saw that they were a vile green colour. I shuddered.

I wrapped myself in a huge drying blanket that had been thoughtfully laid over the screen and I dried myself off.

"When you are ready Isabel, you can try this on," said Rory's mother as she passed over what had appeared earlier to be the armful of fabric. I took it from her and held it up to me, it was a dress, in a heather sprigged cotton material, its underskirts made it stand out and it was probably the most lovely item of clothing I had ever seen, let alone worn. "It's beautiful," I said. "Whose is it? I must thank them."

The voice from behind the screen said softly. "It was my daughter's, she was about your age when she wore that," and then she added. "But she died some years ago."

I was immediately eaten up with guilt, why had I asked that question? I recognised the tone of voice my mother used when she spoke about Andrew and I wished that I had not caused this woman who had been so kind to me to be saddened.

"I am sorry," I said.

"There is no need for you to be sorry my dear," she said. "It is good to know that someone has use of her things, I cannot bring myself to throw them away." And then she seemed to shake herself out of her own personal sorrow because she continued. "In any case I think the pattern will suit your colouring and I think we should show the tenants that Davie Cameron's daughter is a fine looking lass." I smiled at that and started to pull the dress over my head; which was difficult as my hair was wrapped in a separate sheet of material.

At last with Lady Cameron's assistance I was dressed. She had been right, the dress fitted perfectly, it had sleeves that stretched just below the elbow and were edged with lace and green velvet ribbon, as was the scooped neckline. The bodice was also edged with the ribbon and lace and the whole effect was perfect.

She then seated me at her dressing table, which was situated in front of the windows and she rubbed my hair until most of the moisture had left it and then she brushed it for me. It all had an air of unreality; here was I a tacksman's daughter seated in this fine place with the lady of the house brushing my hair. Never in my remotest dreams had I envisaged this.

When she had decided that I was ready she bade me stand in front of the long oval mirror that stood by the bed and when I did so I hardly believed that I was looking at my own reflection.

"Thank you," I said, my eyes filling again with tears.

"There is no need to thank me, it was a pleasure." She said. "Now let's see what your father thinks of you shall we."

So we left her chamber and descended the stairs, across the entrance hall and out through the doors into the sunlight.

The courtyard was not so full now, most of the tenants had gone home but there were a few still talking in groups and some waiting patiently in line. My father saw us first and the look of pride on his face made me feel ten feet tall. "Aye lass ye look bonnie," he said as we walked towards the table.

"She does indeed Davie, no wonder ye are so proud of her," replied the

laird. But it was the reaction of his son that took my attention. Rory stood in almost identical clothes to his father. He wore his kilt, plaid and stockings in the ceremonial Cameron tartan, his black velvet jacket covering a fine linen shirt. His black hair was tied at his neck with a ribbon of the same colour and his broadsword gleamed as it caught the sun. But it was not his clothes, fine though they were, but the look on his face that I noticed. His mouth was open in surprise and his eyes were wide. He must have realised this because he coughed and looked away and then looked back at me again, this time he flashed that remarkable smile and I experienced a feeling the like of which I had never had before. It felt as though my heart was racing and my knees went quite weak as we held each other's gaze. Unfortunately our reverie was interrupted by Rory's father who alerted his son to the task in hand, and Rory Cameron diligently turned his gaze once again to the ledger in which my father was making entries.

Lady Cameron then bade me farewell and sent her greetings to my mother, she apologised for leaving me on my own but she said that she was needed to supervise the clearing of the food.

I thanked her again for all of her kindness. "Think nothing of it," she replied smiling. "I enjoyed every minute, it brought back some good memories." And at that she turned and walked, straight backed, up the steps and into the house.

At last after another hour or so the proceedings had finished. Throughout I had sat primly on a bale of straw and it was on that bale that Rory Cameron found me.

"Ye look, erm, well different," he said.

"So do ye," I replied.

"Aye we are well rid of that mud both of us," he said with a smile. Then he looked back to where my father and his own were bidding each other goodbye. He turned to me again, and this time his green eyes held some urgency. "Isabel I will need to be going in soon, but I wanted to ask ye something."

"Ask me what?" I replied.

He seemed nervous all of a sudden but he carried on. "I am going to be away for over three years, I wonder if, well I wonder..." he stumbled over his words and I could see that he was colouring up. Then he continued. "I wonder if I could have something to remember ye by?"

I was very much taken aback, I couldn't think of anything to say.

"I'm sorry he said, I shouldna have said anything," he said quietly. "I will go."

“No wait,” I said, it was suddenly very important to me that he didn’t go. “What would ye like?” I said.

“Ye have lovely hair,” he said, now almost crimson. “Could I?”

We looked at each other for a second and I nodded. I watched as he took out the knife he wore in his sock and, his hand shaking just a little, he cut a small lock of my hair.

“Thank ye,” he said, as he folded it carefully into a clean handkerchief. Then he looked up at me. “Do ye think that ye will remember me?” He said, his voice was quiet and very serious.

“Of course I will remember ye,” I said. “Ye saved my life, I couldna easily forget that.”

He was about to say something in reply when he obviously thought better of it, and as my father approached he said quietly to me. “And Isabel Cameron I will remember you” he emphasised the ‘you’ then he continued. “I will see ye in three years time, ye promise ye wilna forget me.” And I nodded and at that he turned and almost ran across the courtyard, only stopping momentarily as he passed my father.

As I watched him go I felt a feeling of loss, not like the one I felt when I thought of my brother Andrew, but it was real all the same and as he disappeared through the doors into that lovely house it suddenly became very important to me that we kept our promises.

19

In fact it was over three years until I next encountered my young hero, in those three years the inevitable progress of time brought changes to our Highland home.

Firstly Margaret gave birth to a son, he was immediately christened Andrew after his uncle. For the first time I saw Margaret as she had been before Andrew’s death, her laughter at her young offspring’s antics could be heard in their home, and my brother doted on his son.

Angus grew into a young man, he was tall as were all of our family which was an unusual attribute in men of our area, he was also very good looking and my father joked that he would have to fight off the fathers of many a young lass who had improper intentions upon his son. My fear of course was that one day the summons would come for him to fight for his clan and that we would risk losing him in so doing. I knew my mother feared this too, but it was the

way of our world and this was the duty of the men of a clan and was necessary in order for it to survive.

I also became aware, as I grew older, of the presence of the government soldiers in our land. Because of the position of our farm we didn't suffer much from visits from them, but very occasionally news would reach us of movement of men sent to 'keep the Highlands in no doubt as to whom their masters were.' Since our rightful King of Scots and, in our eyes, the rightful King of Britain, James Stuart, had fled from Montrose back to France the Hanoverian King George had sought to quell any possible uprising. The years had passed since then but the majority of the Highland clans, particularly our own, had strong Jacobite allegiances. As I grew older I began to become more aware of these, if only from listening to my father and my brothers discussing political matters.

Fortunately though this seemed far away from my day-to-day life and my thoughts did not often stray to that subject, apart from of course any threat it might be to the men-folk of my family.

In myself I was changing too, I had grown taller and my body was becoming that of a young woman. I no longer was able to fit into that fine dress that Lady Cameron had given to me, but I refused to part with it. It was a reminder of that day that could have been so terrible but became so important to me.

And yes I remembered Rory Cameron; of course in the passage of time it was not so urgent a memory as it had first been. I no longer hoped to hear some news of him from my father and brothers who, in their line of duty, were frequent visitors to the Big House but I still thought of him from time to time. These thoughts usually came when I was alone, often when I was walking the hills and looking over the beautiful mountains and glens of our home. I wondered what he was doing in Edinburgh and wondered whether he had changed much in the time that he had been away. I was not so naïve, even then, to think that he would be able to keep his promise to remember a silly girl who had been stupid enough to fall into a bog, but it was my hope that he might. I wondered how different his life must be and whether his experiences would alter the valiant and headstrong young man. And sometimes I wondered if some Lowland beauty would capture his heart just as his father's had been captured, but I tried not to dwell on this thought very often for it seemed to pain me to do so.

It was in the early autumn of seventeen forty, some four months after my fifteenth birthday, that my father announced that I would accompany my

family to the Harvest Gathering at The Big House. This was held every year after the crops had been gathered in and before the onset of the Highland autumn which could bring snows to our home as early as September. Clansmen and their wives and sons and daughters of suitable age would be invited to celebrate the end of the harvest with their laird. Often this was the last time relatives who lived some distance from each other would have a chance to meet until the spring snows had cleared.

I was very excited; it was a sure sign that I was now to be seen as a young woman. It was not uncommon for girls of sixteen to be married before their seventeenth birthday, often these marriages were arranged for the betterment of their families, but my parents did not support this and I was heartily glad of it.

For weeks before the day of the gathering my mother, Margaret and I would sit in the evening sewing by candlelight preparing the dress that I was to wear. Apart from the one that I had been given by Lady Cameron I had never possessed a dress suitable for such an occasion. My clothes had been those of a young girl, and even then, for a young girl who worked on a farm. This dress was to be special.

My mother had bought a bolt of dark green velvet from one of the infrequent peddlers who visited our home. It was quite an occasion when they came and like as not, replete with whisky and good food, the man would spend the night in our barn, before he went on his way to experience his next slice of Highland hospitality.

It was from one such visitor that she bought the fabric, it was beautiful and I longed to see it transformed into the finished article. The women of our family were fine seamstresses, it was vital or we, and our men-folk, would go naked; and the three of us used our collective skills in planning the design and cutting the dress together.

The night before the gathering it was finished at last and when I emerged from my room wearing it my mother cried. She said through sniffles. "Oh Isa ye are beautiful, ye are no longer my little girl but ye are a fine young woman." Then she laughed. "Your father had better bring down his broadsword for I feel that ye will bring us nothing but trouble from the young men hereabouts." We all laughed at this, it seemed very unlikely to me that anyone but my own family would even so much as glance at me, but it made me feel excited, and a little worried, to think that they might.

20

We left for the Gathering in the early afternoon. Margaret and Gordon stayed at home, young Andrew was teething and neither his mother nor his father had the inclination to take him with them; they much preferred to spend the time together as a family. They had learned the lesson that only bereavement can teach you, that time with the people that you love is a very precious commodity.

My father had brought one of the laird's carts and Angus and I climbed into the back, while my parents sat at the front. It was not an easy journey for such a mode of transport but my father's skilful horsemanship guided us down to our destination.

As we neared Cameron House it looked lovelier than ever, there were candles in every window and the sunset made every windowpane glow pink. With the loch in the background and the gardens surrounding the house in the foreground, the scene had a fairytale quality.

The Gathering was to take place outside; even this house was not big enough to accommodate all those invited. As we drew nearer I saw bonfires lit in the open space near the gardens and tables upon tables of food and drink, which were already thronging with guests.

I was so excited that my legs were shaking when I stood to let my father lift me to the ground. I was careful not to spoil my dress and I held my shawl over my arm as we walked slowly towards the hub of the party.

There were shouts of welcome from other guests, and it made me proud once again of the position my father held in the clan. My parents were dressed for the occasion, my mother looking serene in a lovely dark blue dress, her hair piled on top of her head and her wedding pearls at her neck. My father and Angus wore ceremonial dress and I noticed that he turned the head of many of the young women already assembled. Whether any young man turned their head at me I never noticed, I was too intent in taking in the occasion.

There was a place reserved for us near the space cleared for dancing, the music of the fiddles and pipes and drums was already luring couples to dance even at this early stage. Suddenly I was a little worried, I had never danced before, there had been no occasion for so doing, and I wondered what would happen if someone actually asked me to dance. I soon dismissed that eventuality as extremely unlikely and sat close to my mother, content to watch the proceedings.

As the night drew in, the event grew even more magical, torches were lit and the smoke from these rose into the sky which was peppered with stars. Everyone present said silent prayers of thanks that this was a fine and warm night for the time of year.

It was Angus who suggested that he and I might take a walk to the food tables. I think he was prompted by my mother but he didn't offer grudgingly, so I accepted and he and I walked around the dancers until we arrived at our destination.

I wasn't particularly hungry but the array of food made my mouth water. There were meats of all types, and in addition I saw two pigs turning on spits, these were tended by two serving boys who ladled spices on to the meat as it turned. There were pies and breads and dried fruits and I wondered how long it had taken to prepare it. I had not seen the laird or his lady and I imagined that she was still supervising proceedings.

After I had, after much deliberation, chosen sufficient food for me I moved on to choose something to drink. Apart from an occasional taste of whisky my father had seen fit to give me I didn't have much experience of alcohol but I decided that my new adult status entitled me to at least a small drink of red wine, and I poured a measure from one of the jugs into a goblet.

Now to find my way back. I couldn't see my brother anywhere but I knew more or less the best route, so I turned and gingerly made my way in that direction.

I was skirting the dance floor when I passed a group of young men who appeared to be enjoying a boisterous conversation, unfortunately as I was passing, one of the young men playfully pushed another backwards which forced him to step back straight into me.

In a second the contents of my plate, and more importantly my goblet, found themselves on my new green velvet gown.

Irrespective of the surroundings, the fact that other people could hear me and the esteemed nature of that company, I looked at my dress and in a very angry voice I shouted. "Ye stupid clot, can ye not look where ye are going? Ye clumsy oaf ye have ruined it. I will make ye pay for this."

I must have been somewhat blinded by my rage because when I looked up my next sentence of vitriol died on my lips, for my assailant had turned to face me and as I looked up into a pair of astonished green eyes I realised that mine and Rory Cameron's paths had crossed again.

We stared at each other, and then he spoke. "Isabel, it is ye isn't it?"

"It is," I replied somewhat quieter than my last exclamation.

He then looked down at my dress, on which the red wine was spreading and then he suddenly became galvanised into movement. He turned to one of his compatriots and grabbed his goblet and threw it on the fabric.

I was astonished. "What in God's name did ye do that for?" I asked incredulously.

"Look," he said.

I looked, the goblet had been full of white wine and as the two liquids mixed the red appeared to dissipate.

"We must get some water," he said. "Come with me." He grabbed my hand and we headed swiftly for the doors of his home. When we reached the house it was equally full of people, although I realised that these were perhaps more of the well-heeled variety. He marched me across the hall and then through a small door that led to some stairs, we stood aside on three occasions to let serving men and women come past with yet more plates of food and then we stepped into one of the largest kitchens I had ever seen.

People were so busy that they didn't seem to spot their master's son dragging a strange young woman through the kitchen, a fact for which I was very grateful.

He took me into a smaller room in which two young girls were scrubbing plates and said to one. "Mary can we have some water? We need to get a stain from this dress."

The girl looked up from her task and then looked at me and then at him, bobbed a curtsey and reached onto a shelf and grabbed a bowl which she put into a bucket of water next to the stone sink and pulled it out.

Rory took the bowl and a cloth with which the girl had helpfully presented him and he sank to his knees and began carefully washing the fabric. Mary looked from the top of her master's head to me and she looked back at him, shook her head and went back to the task in hand.

I looked down and it appeared that he had succeeded in his task. The dress, though somewhat damp, had returned to its intended colour.

"Thank ye, I am very grateful," I said.

"It is the least I could do, seeing that I was the 'clumsy oaf' that caused the spill," he said smiling. I was not sure whether it was his smile or the memory of my angry outburst that caused me to blush but I felt that familiar hot feeling course from my neck to my temples and I also noticed that both Mary and her companion were watching us.

"I think we had better return to the party," I said.

"Aye, but I need to speak to ye first," Rory said.

He didn't elaborate on what subject; just turned, thanked Mary for her help and left the room with me in close pursuit.

He didn't go back up the stairs but turned left along a passage that led to a door into the garden. After the stifling heat of the kitchen it was a relief to be out in the fresh air. He led me quickly down the path that led from it and then turned abruptly and took another less visible path toward some trees that wound down to the loch.

We were alone.

"I willna keep ye long, I imagine your family will be wondering where ye are but I must speak to ye before ye go back," he said, he sounded slightly nervous.

"What about?" I asked. I really had no idea.

"About me," he replied.

He stood about a foot away, he was even taller than before and his face had lost some of its boyish look, it had been replaced though by a look of maturity that gave him an imposing air. A mixture of Cameron and Douglas, his features were striking and harked back to two of the most powerful lines in Scottish history.

"What have ye done?" I replied.

"I havena done anything but I would like to ask ye a question," he said and hesitated.

"Ask it," I said quietly.

He pushed his hand through his hair and bit his lip then said quietly. "After the last time I saw ye I have thought of ye often"

My heart skipped a beat at that.

He continued. "Aye very often, Edinburgh is a fine city and indeed I saw many things that I wouldna see if I had have remained here, but I missed home very much." He paused, and his gaze seemed far away. "I missed everything, I couldna wait to come back, it has been a long time. I have learned a lot and I hope that I can use what I have learned to follow in my father's footsteps but I wouldna like to go away again for a while." Then he looked directly at me. "I thought of ye a lot while I was away, I wondered how ye might look and I wondered if ye may have spared me a thought." The last sentence was almost a question.

"I did think of ye often," I replied quietly, I realised that my voice shook as I spoke. "But I always thought that your life would be too exciting to remember me. I was only a girl when we last met, and I couldna expect someone like ye to spend much time thinking of me."

"Someone like me?" he said.

“Aye, ye are the laird’s son, one day all this will be yours, I was just a silly girl who didna look where she was going,” I looked down at my hands as I was talking.

“Isabel look at me,” he said.

I raised my head and met his eyes.

“I am not that much older than ye and when I saw ye on that day when ye came down with my mother I had never set eyes on anyone like ye before. Not only that but ye have spirit,” and then he added. “As well as a foul temper,” he laughed when he said it. He continued. “And tonight when I saw ye I knew that I hadna been wasting my thoughts. Ye are beautiful, and who my father is does not change the fact that I find ye so.”

I felt as if I was dreaming, my heart was pounding and I could feel my knees beginning to go weak and had to fight to pull myself together. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that anyone, let alone Rory Cameron, would feel this way about me.

He looked at me and then said. “So I want to ask ye Isabel if ye might consider me a suitor and if we might meet?”

I could hardly speak but I forced out. “I am not yet sixteen, my father would never permit it, and neither would yours no matter how old I was.”

“Ye can leave my father to me, but while we work out what to do we can meet in secret. I can wait until ye are sixteen and then I will ask your father’s permission to court ye.”

I was in a state of shock, thoughts ran through my head until I felt as if it would explode. I would be deceiving my family and he would be deceiving his. If we were found out there would be terrible trouble for us both, for our world was structured and young women of the likes of me had responsibilities to their families and young men of the likes of Rory had responsibilities to everyone. But as I stood there on that September night, in those magical gardens with the stars above me and the strains of music in the background, nothing mattered.

“I agree,” I said quietly. “I will meet ye, but we must be very careful, very careful indeed.”

His smile lit up his face and he said. “Ye willna regret it and I will make sure that nobody is hurt, I promise ye.”

So we stood there by the loch, neither of us speaking nor touching, but I knew that a step had been taken that could not be reversed and I silently sent a prayer heavenward for God’s blessing on what we had just agreed.

After a matter of seconds, which seemed an age, reality started to interrupt

our reverie. I could hear people nearby and Rory put a finger to his lips and took my hand and we left the way we came through the trees. Just by the path out of sight of the house he said. "Ye go now, I will wait here a while. I canna say when I will come to ye but I will find a way and I willna wait long."

We neither kissed nor even touched before I left him, I just made sure that there was no one around and stepped out on to the path and walked away. But I was very conscious of those green eyes following me and it was hard not to turn and look back, but I did neither and soon I had joined the rest of the guests and was on my way to rejoin my family.

21

The rest of the night passed in a dream for me, and when Rory's father came to talk to us I was relieved that his son did not accompany him. I hated the idea of deception but the feeling inside me made up for any guilt I felt. It was the most wonderful feeling of excitement, anticipation and fear all at once, and when I saw Rory moving around the area and talking to the guests I thrilled at the sight of him, there were some of the beauties of our clan there and I wondered how it was that he had singled me out from them, it mystified me, I almost thanked God for my falling into that mud.

My family and I eventually left after midnight and dawn was rising as my father steered us toward our home. As the sun rose over the mountains the sky was tinged with pink, and soon the land was a similar colour. It was very beautiful but we all knew that this would herald the first of the winter's bad weather; Highland autumns were not known for their length.

In fact the weather changed later that day and by the evening the wind was up and rain was driving into the windows of our home. The thick walls of our house kept out the cold, and shutters both inside and out covered the windows to reinforce the barrier against the elements. With the log and peat fire in the hearth that dominated our home we did not feel the cold, but the sound of the weather outside heralded a harsh winter for us.

It was not the sort of weather for lone travellers to be about and I doubted that Rory would be able to keep his promise, in fact I began to doubt that he would come at all, perhaps it was all some fanciful dream of mine that had been brought on by the excitement of the night. Whatever it was, by the sixth day I began to come to terms with the fact that he may never come at all.

The weather broke on the seventh day and after I had done the afternoon

milking I took my shawl from the peg in the barn and wrapped it around my head and shoulders and went outside. The air was cold, but it was not raining and the sky was clear, there would be a frost in the morning but, just before dusk, I chose to walk for a while to one of my favourite places.

Over the hill, out of sight of our home there was a rocky outcrop, some vestige of ancient land movement that had formed a sheltered oasis from the wind. I decided that I would go there, the heat of the house was comforting but it was also stifling when it contained my whole family and I wanted to be able to breath some clean air.

So I set off up the hill. I was used to walking so I covered the ground very quickly, my lungs sucking in the air as I walked. As I cleared the top of the hill the momentum carried me downwards at an even faster pace and I reached the rocks in quick time.

In the centre of the huge lumps of granite was a small clearing that was completely out of view and completely sheltered and I saw this as my place. From here, if I wished, I could watch the whole of the glen below without being seen and I leant against the granite and closed my eyes as my breathing slowed down. I was not ready for what happened next.

“Isabel,” the voice was a whisper and my eyes shot open.

Rory was standing in front of me, only a matter of a foot or so away.

“How did you find me?” I said, still a little shocked that he was there at all.

“I followed ye from the farm. It is the first opportunity I’ve had, the track was flooded and even my garron couldna climb it,” he said.

“Where is your horse now?” I asked.

“In the stables, I came on foot,” he replied.

“When must ye go?” I said trying to calculate how long we would have together.

“I dinna have long, I must start before nightfall but I had to see ye, I couldna wait any longer.”

He was closer now, but he didn’t seek to touch me in any way, he just gestured to the rock that was close to the ground and said. “Shall we sit awhile? Then we can talk.”

I nodded and there we sat next to each other, our shoulders touching but both staring straight ahead. We talked and talked; there were no awkward silences between us. He told me of his studies in Edinburgh and of the people he had met and the city itself, it seemed so far from anything that I had ever experienced.

He said. “I will take ye one day Isabel, and show ye the Palace of Holyrood.

It is a fine building, we were invited to a function there and I have never seen anywhere so beautiful. There were many fine ladies present," I looked down at my hands at that but he went on. "And I thought of how ye and I should go one day, ye would look very lovely in a ballgown."

I laughed and felt myself blushing. "I am a farmer's daughter and I am very very unlikely to own a ballgown let alone be invited to dance at Holyrood," I said.

"Aye but ye will with me," he replied, he stated it as if it was an accepted fact and I turned my face toward him.

"We have only just met, we dinna even have our parent's permission to be seeing each other and I think it is still very unlikely," I said quietly, it was almost a rebuke.

"Isabel," he said, he turned to face me so that we were only inches apart. "We first met when ye pushed me in the burn, that was over eight years ago. In that time I have saved your life and ye have saved my honour in front of my father and his tenants. Ye enchanted my mother, my father has called ye a beauty and I have thought about ye for three long years whilst I was supposed to have my mind on my studies. I wouldna describe us as having only just met." He looked at me very intently. "I have plans for how I want my life to be, it is necessary for me to have someone beside me whom I trust. I canna make any promises yet because of a variety of things but what I can promise ye is that I will do everything in my power to ensure that ye and I are together," then he added. "If that is what ye wish."

These were strong words for a young man of eighteen but he spoke them as I had heard my father speak and I could tell by the look on his face that he meant every one of them.

He said very quietly. "It is what ye wish, is it not?"

"It is," I replied. "But I am scared, I canna see that it will be possible still. I feel that this is a dream and I will wake up and it will all have been my imagination. I am sorry to doubt ye but I am a little frightened of what might happen."

"Dinna worry," he said. "I will do nothing that will cause ye harm and I mean every word I say. Ye know that I have been brought up to hold honour above all things and that is not just my own. I have waited three years just to be able to talk with ye and tell ye of my feelings and I have no intention of saying anything to ye that I dinna mean to happen."

The urge to kiss him was great, but he pulled away and turned his face towards the glen and said. "I willna compromise ye in any way Isabel, ye are

too important to me for that,” but he added with a smile as he turned to look at me again. “Although I canna pretend that it will be easy for me, but I will wait, ye are worth it to me.”

So we sat there, both watching the sun go down and reluctantly he eventually got up, stretched and pulled his plaid across his shirt and dusted himself free of grass.

“Ye must go down first,” he said. “I will watch ye and make sure ye are safe and then I will go the other way.”

I nodded and he held his hand out to me to help me get up. I didn’t let go of it immediately.

“Ye must be off, your father will send your brothers out after ye and then where would I be?” he said laughing. “It wouldna be a good way to start now would it.”

I smiled back. “When will ye come again?” I asked.

“Soon I hope. I have to go to my uncle’s for a few days on clan business but as soon as I am back, and the weather allows it, I will be here.”

“How will I know?” I said.

He thought for a second and said. “Ye will know before ye get to the top of the hill from your house,” he looked around and then bent and picked up a few stones that lay on the ground. “I will place one of these at the foot of the tree that stands near the track if I am here. Ye can always go back then if ye dinna see it.”

I nodded; it would not take too long to retrace my steps from there.

“Ye must go now,” he said. “I will be back as soon as I am able, believe me.”

And that was it, he did not seek to kiss me and I did not seek to be kissed, it was enough just to have held his hand. As I left him and made my way up the hill I didn’t look back even when I reached the top. And then I ran most of the journey home.

22

That night, and for the two nights that followed, I went to bed early, I wanted to be alone with my thoughts and my memories. I re-lived every minute and my imagination ran wild as to our future together, it really was as if I was living a dream, and during the day I found that I frequently sang as I carried out my tasks.

It was on the third day that my mother asked my brother Angus to take some food to my father; he and Gordon had left early in the morning to see to

the stock in one of the lower fields. It was quite a long journey and Angus was very reluctant to do it.

“I’ll take it,” I said. Angus looked amazed and very grateful.

“Well if ye want to Isa, but this lazy young man should be very grateful to ye,” my mother said shooting a very disparaging look at my brother.

“Aye thank ye,” said Angus with a smile.

I took my shawl from the peg and took the bundle from my mother, kissed her on the cheek and left the house. It was cold outside but thankfully it was not raining or, even worse snowing, and I wanted to be alone with my thoughts so I began walking quickly and I found myself singing again.

It was quite a long walk unless you took the short cut that led across some treacherous country, but it was not a problem for me. I had walked that way before many times and, like most Highland folk, I was used to walking across all terrains. Sometimes it was impossible to go any other way, even with the garrons.

I decided to take the short cut, it would mean that I would be back before dark and I would have no problem persuading Angus to do my stint at the milking with my mother’s encouragement. I would then be able to go and see if Rory was waiting for me; my heart skipped a beat at that thought.

I had reached the dangerous section and was making my way gingerly down the very narrow path which led to the bottom of a steep hill, and eventually on to the track below, when my foot slipped in a rabbit-hole that was hidden by a clump of heather and I lost my footing and pitched forward. As I fell I tried to grab hold of some bushes that grew nearby but I failed and slid down the side of the hill. The momentum carried me down and I only came to a halt when I reached the ground at the bottom.

I lay where I had fallen for a short while until my breathing had slowed down, I was dismayed to realise that I had lost hold of the bundle of food and its contents were scattered before me. I sighed and went to pick myself up from the ground and that is when I realised that I had hurt my ankle; as I tried to stand, the pain was excruciating and I fell to the floor again.

I stayed there for a while and then decided to try and drag myself to one of the rocks nearby. My hope was that someone would be along at some time and that they would be able to take me back home or, at least, down to my father. My situation was not so dire, as this was the track that my father and Gordon would need to use, so I would be rescued eventually. But eventually could be a long time and as I took my place leaning against a rock I felt quite miserable, I took off my boot and immediately the ankle swelled up.

It wasn’t until mid afternoon that I heard horses’ hooves approaching, I

hoped it might be my father and Gordon but as the riders came into view I felt a short stab of fear. For on four large horses rode English soldiers, the first I had ever laid eyes on. I drew my shawl over my head and around my shoulders and looked down to the floor. Perhaps they would just ride past.

My hopes were unfounded because at the sight of me the first rider stopped and instructed his companions to do the same. He walked over to me, or I should say he swaggered, and when he reached me he turned to his friends and said laughingly. "What have we here, if it isn't one of their heathen women."

I cringed inside but I made no sign of understanding his words.

He turned again to me and walked forward until he crouched down in front of me. I could smell the stench of strong ale on his breath and out of reflex I recoiled. But I could not run.

"Well here's a thing, let's have a look at you then," he said as he grabbed my shawl and pulled it down. I pushed his hands away and he grabbed me by the wrists. "Quite a little fighter aren't you then," he said. "Still I admire a woman with spirit."

His face was even closer now and I turned my own away, suddenly he let my wrists go and just as swiftly I felt cold steel against my neck.

"Well, we shall have to have a closer look shan't we," he said and with his other hand he grabbed my hair and yanked my head back and then I felt his mouth on mine. I could taste the alcohol and I was revolted. But the knife at my throat prevented me from fighting back. When he took his mouth away I could feel his saliva on my lips.

"Quite a tasty young thing ain't you," he said and then continued. "Let's see if the rest of you is as good."

I froze as, his knife still at my throat, he grabbed my skirts and I felt his hand creep up between my legs.

"Don't you touch me," I said in his own language. I realised I was crying now but I tried to sound as brave as I could.

It seemed to have the desired effect, even though I knew it was only because he was surprised that I should have command of his mother tongue, rather than any second thoughts over his actions. "So you speak the King's English do you, well then you'll understand this," he came even closer to me and said. "Move once more and I will kill you, it is a long time since I've had a woman and I will not be denied by any Scottish whore." At that he grabbed the ties to my bodice and ripped them apart, his hand slipped under the fabric of my shift and I felt his fingers grab my breast. The knife still at my throat and numb with fear I closed my eyes and prayed that it would be over.

And then he was gone.

I opened my eyes to see him being pulled back by his hair and I saw that the face of Rory Cameron was contorted with rage as he yanked the man backwards. Three other clansmen had pulled the English soldier's companions from their horses and they were being held in the same fashion with dirks at their necks.

Rory didn't speak at all, he just looked at me and inclined his head quickly to the left and I managed to raise myself from the ground, picked up my boot and, keeping to the rock, I hobbled as far as I could around the corner whilst pulling my shawl around me and over my head. I didn't see what happened next but I saw the soldiers' horses gallop past minus their riders. At last Rory came to get me, I couldn't look at him, I felt terrible shame that he had seen what had happened and when he put his arm around my shoulders I shuddered.

He seemed to understand because he didn't speak at all but brushed the hair from my face and took the strain as he half carried me towards some trees in which he and his men had left their horses.

He lifted me on to the garron and climbed up behind me, his arm around my waist, he clicked the horse on and we rounded the corner.

It was quite a different sight that met my eyes; three of the soldiers were gagged and tied to a tree, they were stark naked and guarded by the clansmen who carried their weaponry, their clothes were neatly piled, one to each, on three pieces of sacking. My assailant was also naked and gagged and tied in the same way but he was tied to a separate tree.

I felt Rory slip down from the horse and saw him walk to the man who tried to shrink away. Rory grabbed the soldier's throat and spoke, his voice was loud enough to be heard by the other men and it was a tone of voice I had not heard before.

He said, in English.

"This land is ours and anyone moving through it must pay dues to me. This is but a small taste of what I will do to your men if ye venture through these parts again, and believe me I will know if ye do. But for you," he moved even closer and I saw the flash of steel in his hand as he brought it up to the man's face. "For you I have a reminder of me." And I saw him draw the dirk across the man's cheek in a slow and deep cross. I saw the blood run down his cheek and down his neck and drop on to the floor. Rory continued. "If I ever see ye again I will kill ye on the spot on which ye stand, and that is my oath do ye understand?" I saw the man nod and then Rory stepped back, thrust his dirk

into his belt and aimed a kick between the man's legs; which, even with the gag in place, made the Englishman yell out in pain.

Then Rory turned, gestured to his men to follow and walked over to the horse and mounted and clicked for us to go on. Neither of us spoke.

The journey seemed of indeterminable length but when we eventually reached the track that led to my home Rory shouted to the men to carry on, and then he said softly to me. "I will take ye home Isabel ye are safe now." And as we rode up that familiar path I sobbed.

We came to a clump of trees just before the house came into sight and Rory steered us to them, when we stopped he alighted and then, his arms around my waist, he lifted me down.

I stood in front of him, my eyes red and my cheeks tearstained and he looked at me. "Ye are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen and I will never let another man lay hands on ye ever again."

I went into his arms then, there was no need for words and when I looked up at him I could see that he too had tears in his eyes.

We stayed like that for a while until he asked me tentatively. "Did he hurt ye?" I knew what he meant and I shook my head. "No, ye came in time, I couldna run Rory, I tried to fight him off but I couldna do it, it wasna my fault I did try, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry" I stopped speaking because I was crying again and I knew that I was becoming incoherent.

Rory took my face gently in his hands and turned my head up until I was looking at him. "Isabel, ye have nothing to be sorry for. Ye are not to blame for his actions, and ye must not let him colour your life. He is a poor excuse for a man, anyone who takes a woman so has no right to call himself a man. He will not come here again, because if he does I will keep my oath."

I looked at him and knew that he meant every word he said and as he put his arms around me and held me to him I felt safe again.

After a while I felt strong enough to go home and Rory carried me to the horse that was quietly grazing nearby. He lifted me on and, once behind me, we rode the rest of the way home.

When we reached the house Angus, who was sitting outside, stood up and came towards us. But he stopped when we were close enough for him to see me.

He turned and ran into the house, I could hear his voice. "Ma come quick it's Isabel, something has happened."

Rory dismounted and carried me into the house, my mother looked from me to him and then to me again.

“Isabel, what has happened? Oh lass what has gone on?” She said, her voice shaking, as she came over to us; Rory put me gently on the bench at the side of the room.

My mother knelt down and wrapped her arms around me and held me as if I was a small child. And I remembered then how she had held Gordon on his return from France and I began to cry again.

It was at this moment that my father returned. He walked into the door followed by Gordon. I was suddenly conscious of my torn bodice and my unkempt appearance and my mother saw this. “Lads can ye leave us for a while please,” she said to my brothers. “Your father and I have things we need to discuss, we will call ye in when we are finished.” They left willingly, leaving my parents and Rory and I alone.

“What happened to her? Are ye responsible for this?” My father asked Rory, his voice raised and without the usual tone of deference used when addressing one of our lairdly family.

Before I could answer, Rory began, quietly but firmly. “No sir I am not, if ye do me the honour of listening I will explain what happened.”

My mother and father listened in horror to the story and when Rory had finished my father went over to him and took both of his hands in his own. “I am in great debt to you Sir,” he said. “I willna forget this, ye have saved me daughter’s life on two occasions and for that I give ye my oath that should ye ever need to call on me for anything I will willingly give it.” Rory stood for a brief second with my father’s hands in his and then he nodded and my father stepped back. Rory looked at me then and his eyes had a message in them for he turned to my father and said. “One day David Cameron I will do so.” And then he looked from my father and mother to me and continued. “I will take your leave now and wish ye all well. Isabel I hope we meet again in better circumstances.” And then he gave a slight bow and let himself out of the room.

My mother came over to me and put her arm about my shoulders but my father kept his eyes on the space where Rory had been standing and said to no-one in particular. “The lad has grown up to be a fine man and he will be a fine chief when his time comes and we will be fortunate to have him.”

23

My brothers, particularly Angus who held himself solely to blame for what happened to me, tiptoed around me for a number of days. My father went

down to meet with the laird on the day after my attack and my mother gave me tasks to do around the house in order to take my mind off things. Sometimes it worked but when I least expected it the man's face would flash into my mind or I would recall the smell of the strong liquor on his breath and it would bring it all back to me. It was only Rory's words that helped me then, 'you must not let him colour your life' he had said and I fought my own battle with my demons in order not to do so.

I longed to see Rory again, only in his arms could I feel safe, but the weather was against us. The first snows of winter fell that week; it was so thick and so constant that it made it impossible for anybody to reach our home, even someone who was used to our Highland weather. So, my ankle still not fully recovered, I stayed by the fire at night and listened to my father tell his stories and watch Margaret as she nursed her baby, but inside I prayed silently that the snow would cease.

My prayers were answered at the end of the week, the blizzards abated and all of my family set about clearing the snow from our buildings in order that we could come and go. My father and brothers went out to see to the cattle and our tenants and to get much needed meat for us. We had, like most Highland folk, our stores for the winter but fresh meat was always required to supplement the fish stock, and our men-folk and their hunting skills were the only means of getting this.

After the second snowless day just before dusk I set out for my special place. Angus had agreed to do my share of the milking; he would do anything for me so, although I felt bad about doing it, I used this to my advantage.

I was wearing several warm petticoats, a thick cotton shift and my warm woollen winter dress so I hoped that, with my shawl, I would not be too cold. As I wrapped it around me and opened the door I was met with a wall of cold air and I shivered, still if he was there it would be worth it and I left the house quietly.

I trudged through the snow, hoping that my ankle had recovered enough to carry me all the way and I held my skirts up so that they wouldn't drag in the snow. It took me some time to climb the hill and I prayed all the way that the sign would be there as Rory had promised. When I reached the tree I could hardly bear to look, but I plucked up courage and almost cried out when I saw three stones lying on the snow.

Sore ankle or no I nearly ran the rest of the way and I was out of breath when I reached the outcrop. I crept around the stones and I saw him. He was looking across the glen, the breeze blowing his hair off his face. He had

wrapped his plaid around him and he stood still as one of the stones by which he sheltered.

“Rory” I whispered, it seemed suddenly as if I was intruding on his thoughts.

But he turned and held out his arms to me, and at last we were together.

“Are ye all right?” He said as he wrapped his plaid around me and guided us both to the ground where we were out of the reach of the wind.

“Aye, my ankle is nearly healed,” I said.

“I didna mean that,” he said. “I havena slept myself hardly and I imagine it has been much much worse for ye.”

I snuggled closer to him, my head now resting in the crook of his neck. “I try not to think about it, but sometimes it just comes into my mind, I willna let it spoil things for me. I have ye and that makes up for everything.” I suddenly felt nervous, was that too much to say? Even after all that Rory had told me I still harboured doubts about the reality of what was happening between us and suddenly I was afraid that I had said too much.

But he rested his chin on my head and said. “Aye ye do Isabel, ye have every bit of me. I am only sorry that I couldna finish the bastard off but now is not the right time to antagonise the government troops. But there will be time for that ye can mark my words.”

I didn’t want talk of politics, and particularly the role that the Hanovarian soldiers took in subjugating my fellow countrymen, to spoil the few precious moments we had together, so I lifted my head to look into his eyes and said. “Will ye kiss me Rory?” He laughed and said. “Since ye ask me I must oblige ye Milady.” He bent his head down to mine and I felt his lips brush my cheek. My eyes, which were half closed, opened wide and I said, probably louder than I intended. “Rory Cameron that was not a kiss, I am not your Aunt ye know.”

He laughed out loud then and said. “I assure ye that ye are nothing like her.”

“Well kiss me properly then,” I said, sounding affronted. “I didna come out in the snow and limp all the way up here for a kiss on the cheek.”

He smiled and then his face grew serious. “Isabel do ye not realise that if I kissed ye the way I want to kiss ye I wouldna be able to stop?”

He brushed a strand of hair from my face and I looked up and said softly. “Well kiss me then.”

And he did, and despite the snow and the freezing wind that whipped around the rocks I felt nothing but the touch of his lips and the burning heat of his passion. It was the first time that anyone had ever kissed me properly and I was not ready for the feelings it stirred within me. I put my arms around

his neck and he pulled me to him, his kisses were fiercer now and I returned them in kind. And then suddenly he pulled himself away from me.

“Rory what is wrong?” I said.

“Wrong? Isabel, nothing is wrong but I must stop now. I canna explain what ye do to me but I know that I may not be responsible for what I do and I will not dishonour ye in any way.” He shook his head and ran his right hand through his hair while he sat up and looked back across the glen which was now almost clothed in darkness

I touched him on the shoulder. “When can we meet again?”

“I dinna know,” he said. “If the weather holds out, as soon as possible, but if the snows come again I willna be able to make excuses for leaving.”

I thought for a moment and then said. “Rory, I know, I know what we can do. It willna make a huge difference but at least we’ll be warm.”

“Tell me,” he said.

“I do the early evening milking and I am left on my own to do it. The barn is warm and there is a bar that can be put across the doors so no one would be able to come in until I moved it. At least ye would be out of the snow.”

“Aye that is true, but someone would be bound to see me crossing the yard,” he said somewhat dubious.

“Oh no, ye wouldna have to. There are some loose planks at the back of the barn, ye could make your way from the trees behind it and if ye made some sort of noise I could move the planks and let ye in. If someone came to the front ye could go out the same way. We’d never be discovered Rory and it would mean we could have a few minutes more together. And if the snow was so bad ye could stay in the hayloft and let yourself out in the morning.”

He smiled. “To sleep only feet away from ye Isabel, walls notwithstanding, would be too much for me.”

“Oh shut up fool,” I said playfully hitting him on the arm. “But it is better than meeting here in the winter is it not?”

“Aye it is; we shall try it. I had better try scratching at the planks or something, so if anyone else hears they will think it’s just a big rat trying to get into the barn,” he smirked as he said it.

“Aye they wouldna be far wrong” I said and pecked him on the cheek.

The time flew by after that and soon it was very nearly fully dark and I knew that I would have to leave him and make my way back to the house.

He knew this too and he took me in his arms and gently kissed my lips. “Isabel, dinna go anywhere far from here unless I can be with ye. Ye are too precious to me.”

I smiled. "I will take care," I said. "And ye must do so too."

He nodded. "I will try, for ye I will try very hard."

Then he frowned. "Ye must go now, I will watch ye. I will come again as soon as I can." Then he paused before he asked. "Isabel when are ye sixteen?"

"The twenty-seventh of April," I said. "Why?"

"Because on that day I will be asking your father for the right to court ye properly, so there are only a few more months left that we have to hide in barns and lurk behind rocks."

My heart leaped and he had to almost push me away to make me go.

As I made my way down that hill I had never been happier.

24

That winter passed slowly, the blizzards that swept over our home were some of the worst we had experienced and it was difficult for anyone, let alone someone from the glen below, to reach us at all. But somehow Rory Cameron managed to make it to the barn, the occasions were all too infrequent, and our meetings were even more precious because of this. We spent every minute in each other's arms, making promises for the future and counting the days until my sixteenth birthday. Neither of us spoke as to how our parents would react, I think probably because neither of us wanted to voice our worst fears. I lived for those few snatched moments and my life became a series of wonderful peaks followed by troughs spent waiting and wondering and hoping for the next visit.

There was no Hogmanay Gathering at Cameron House that year, the snows were so bad that it would be impossible for most of the tenants to attend so my family held our own party to welcome in the New Year and bid farewell to the last. And when we raised our glasses in salute to both I sent a prayer heavenwards that this next year would see Rory and I together with the blessings of the people we held dear.

It was not until early March that the snows seemed to clear and the passage between the upper and lower parts of our country could take place. Rory came as often as he could after this, and as my birthday drew near I became more and more worried that things would not go as we hoped. Rory always told me that he would make sure that they would but I still lay awake at nights worrying. One night, exactly six weeks to my birthday, whilst he held me in his arms in the barn I asked him. "What will ye say to your father?"

He smiled. "I will tell him that I have met a beautiful girl who holds my heart in her hands and that I wish to court her."

I smiled at that. "But there is no knowing what he will say to that," I said.

"No there isn't" said Rory quietly. "But my father is no stranger to love himself, it is fabled that he stole my mother from her Douglas family because they refused to let her marry a Highlander, laird or no."

"Did he?" I asked; I too had heard that story.

"I dinna really know but I do know that Cameron House was built in answer to my Grandfather Douglas' demands for a home fit for his daughter to reside in. So I think it may be partly true."

"Do ye ever see them?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Hardly ever, I remember them visiting when I was very young, but that is about all. And I was so young I couldna tell ye what they looked like, I just remember my Grandfather's beard tickled me when he came near. Not much of a memory really."

I smiled at that and held his arms ever more tightly around my waist.

I leant against him and looked into the rafters of the barn and said after a while. "When we are together I never want this time to end, and when we are apart I spend all of the time waiting for ye."

"And I also, but we will not have to wait much longer, soon we can be together openly and then we can plan our future. There is so much I want for us Isabel, so much I want to do, and so much I must do. But we have only six weeks to wait, which is not long." Then he was quiet for a moment before he added softly. "But I would wait one hundred years for ye Isabel if I had to."

I turned towards him and he bent to kiss me, and then I heard a rattling at the door, and my father's voice.

"Isa, can ye open this door lass I need to get in and your mother is asking where ye are."

Rory and I only had time to snatch a kiss and then he was gone.

I watched him disappear through the opening at the back of the barn and I carefully arranged the planks in place and pulled the straw over to hide it, and then, straightening my dress and picking up my shawl, I went to lift the bar that prevented anyone from entering.

Rory didn't come again that week, or the next and I wondered if he had been sent on business to his uncle's. I tried to catch any news from my father's conversations with my mother but nothing was said. And then I worried that he might be ill and my imagination ran wild with possibilities of what might ail him. At the beginning of the third week I was beside myself and it was with

huge relief that I heard the news from my father that there was to be an Easter Gathering at The Big House to which all of our family were invited. This was quite unusual but my father said that he imagined it was because of the cancelled Hogmanay celebration.

The night before we were to go I lay in bed, Rory still hadn't come and it was only just over two weeks until my birthday. I was not worried though as there would be no Gathering held if the son and heir was lying on his sickbed. There would be a good reason and Rory would find some way of us meeting I was sure. I found it difficult to sleep that night such was the anticipation of seeing him this near to my birthday. I looked across the room, and even in the dark I could see my lovely green velvet dress laid across the bottom of my bed. It was the only dress I had fit for occasions such as this but Rory had said that I looked beautiful in it and as I drifted off to sleep I imagined him saying that again to me.

The next day went too slowly but at last we were ready to leave. Again Margaret and Gordon did not attend, their little boy was too young to take to such occasions and it didn't seem to trouble them not to go. So my mother rode with my father, and Angus and I had a garron each, and we began our journey in the late afternoon.

It took some time to get down to the glen but we eventually arrived and our horses were led to the stables. My mother and I took a few minutes to brush down our clothes before we all walked across the courtyard and up the steps into the house.

Of course I had been there before but I was still in awe of it. The fine polished floor and furniture and the lovely mirrors reflected the hundreds of candles burning brightly creating a magical scene.

We followed the throng into a huge room, or it seemed so to me, which was full of people. I looked around but I couldn't see Rory anywhere, I presumed that he and his family must be yet to make their entrance. So I spent my time watching the other people who were there and exchanging greetings with guests who came to talk to my father.

We had been there just under an hour when we heard the sound of the pipes. All heads turned in the direction from where the music came and, as we watched, the double doors at the other end of the room opened, and then, preceded by a piper in full Cameron regalia, Sir James and Lady Anne Cameron made their entrance.

The piper led the family in and I watched as our laird and his lady walked down the room between the parted guests. I saw that behind them was a

couple I had never seen before. I saw that they too wore ceremonial dress but I knew it was not of our own clan.

And then came Rory, and my heart leaped. He was, in my eyes, the most handsome man in the room and I filled with pride to think that in just over two weeks' time he would ask for my hand. I knew that he could not acknowledge me but I craned my neck in the hope that he might notice me, but he looked neither left nor right. In fact I noticed that he kept his eyes locked on the man in front's head, and as I looked I wondered if I had indeed been right to wonder whether he had been ill, because he was very very pale indeed. His black hair and dark green eyes made his skin tone even starker and I began to fear for his health.

I was so intent on Rory that I only half noticed the young woman who walked at his side. She was shorter than me, with mousy hair and quite plain, and I wondered if she was a cousin or something. No doubt he would tell me, but she was not my concern. I was more worried that Rory looked as though he was suffering some extreme discomfort. I longed to catch his eye but his gaze appeared still riveted on the man in front's head.

Eventually all the party accompanying them had entered the room and once the piper had finished our laird raised his arm for silence.

He began. "I wish to welcome ye here to celebrate this Easter gathering, and a little late, this New Year."

There was cheering from the more vociferous of the guests and he smiled.

"I hope that this coming year brings prosperity to ye all and I hope too that it brings us closer to the rightful return of King James." A huge cheer broke out then. I knew it was a daring thing to do, even in his own home, and I hoped that this room did not contain any government spies. Whoever these other people were, it appeared that Sir James Cameron trusted them.

After the cheering had carried on for as long as he thought necessary, he raised his hand again for silence and continued. "I have also asked ye here for another reason." He now smiled at his wife who stood proudly beside him. "I have asked ye here to join me in a family celebration."

'Surely she is not pregnant?' I thought. I had no idea how old Rory's mother was and was suddenly ashamed of my mental rebuke. I changed my thoughts to a prayer that if she were indeed pregnant that she would have a girl to help ease the sadness left by the daughter she had lost.

The prayer over, I returned my attention to our laird.

He was continuing. "All of ye know that when my time comes the responsibility of being your chief will fall upon the shoulders of my son Rory.

And I will say, foreby, a finer son a father could not wish for.”

My heart swelled with pride, and my eyes darted to the subject of that praise. But his eyes were cast downward, almost as if there was something at his feet that so diverted him he must pay all of his attention to it.

I kept my gaze on him, willing him to return it, as his father continued speaking.

“But I know full well,” he said. “That this is not a position a man should have to fill without support and that is why it pleases me greatly to announce the betrothal of my son and heir to Ellen MacDonnell.”

At those words my world came crashing down around me. I could hear him speaking but my ears would not hear his words. It took all of my will not to scream at the top of my voice that this could not be so. That his son and heir would be asking my father for my hand in just over two weeks and that we were to spend our lives together. But somehow I remained silent and I had to dig my fingernails into my palms to stop the tears from falling.

And then Rory raised his head and his eyes met mine and I knew that it was true. All of my dreams were as nothing and all of my hopes had been smashed.

I could not control myself any longer and, my hand to my mouth, I turned and left the room. I forcibly pushed my way past people pushing their own way forward to congratulate the ‘happy couple’. And when at last I was through I fled the house and ran into the courtyard where I stopped at the horse trough, held on to the pump and was violently sick.

25

I have no idea how long I stood there, but I held on to that iron water pump as if it was the only thing that would keep me from falling, which indeed it probably was. Eventually I scooped some freezing cold water from the trough and cleaned my face. Such was my distress I didn’t hear the footsteps across the cobbled yard until they were close, and somewhere deep down I still hoped that it might be Rory come to tell me that it was all untrue and come to hold me in his arms and kiss away the tears that I was now crying.

But it was my mother’s voice I heard. “Isa, ye are here. Put this on lass I can see ye are shivering.” She placed my shawl about my shoulders. I dared not turn around, how could I explain my state to her? And then she said. “If it is any comfort I dinna think that this betrothal is of his doing.”

I was about to reply that it didn't matter when I realised suddenly the significance of her words.

I slowly turned to face her. "Ye knew?" I said quietly and with some wonder.

"No lass, but I suspected and it was not until I saw your face tonight that I knew I had been right."

"What led ye to think?" I said shivering and wrapped the shawl around me.

"When he carried ye into our home after he had saved ye from the Englishman. I saw the look on his face, and I have only ever seen that look on the face of a man in love with the woman in his arms," she replied quietly.

At that my brittle resolve cracked and I began crying again and she walked towards me and took me to her.

"There now lass, ye feel wretched now but ye will recover. In time ye will recover from this," she said as she smoothed my hair.

"I cannot," I said. "I canna live without him, I canna live knowing that he is with someone else and that all that he said to me was lies. Ye dinna know how I feel," I finished the sentence and I raised my head so that I was looking up at her.

"I do know exactly how ye are feeling lass," She said quietly, and then continued. "When I was about your age I fell in love with someone like your Rory. Oh we were very much in love indeed, and we made plans. Even then I knew it was impossible, my father didna hold the prominent position your own does and I knew that our days were numbered. And I was right, his family found out and he was forbidden to see me. I was sent away to my mother's cousin's home and this is where I was when I met your father. I never thought I could love again, it took time but I did and now I know that I love your father more than ever. But I never forgot my first love, but now the memories dinna pain me."

I looked into her eyes, I had had no inkling that my mother had ever loved anyone else but my father and to know that her situation was so like my own gave me the first comfort I had felt since I had heard the devastating news.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Oh, he married well and is a great man to his people. I hear of him sometimes but I know that I married the right man. And one day, God willing, ye will feel the same way Isa. But until ye do I will help ye as much as I can."

I doubted that I ever would but it was a huge burden lifted to be able to share my sorrow with someone.

"I canna go back in there," I said.

"Aye, dinna worry, I will stay with ye. We'll find somewhere warm and we

can wait for your father and brother. I will tell him ye have taken ill and that we should leave early," she replied.

Then she let go of me and walked across to the outbuildings and tried the doors. At last one opened and I walked over to her. As fate would have it I realised that it was the one in which I had seen the kitten all those years ago and another feeling of misery surged within me. I held back the tears though as my mother kissed my cheek and left to go back into the house to speak with my father.

I sat huddled on a barrel and gave in to the urge to sob.

My mother came back after a short while. She brought with her a plate with some food and a glass of brandy. She made me drink the brandy first and then watched as I forced some of the food down. She didn't press me with any questions but just sat quietly by my side with her arm about my shoulders.

"Did ye see him?" I asked. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear an answer but somewhere inside I longed for news, any news, of Rory.

"Aye I did," she said. "He didna look very happy. In fact your father remarked that 'the lad looks as though he is facing the gallows not marriage.'"

"Ye havena told Da?" I said, panic setting in.

"Oh no, this is our secret, your's and mine, and of course the lad's." She replied. "It would serve no purpose to tell him."

I nodded in relief.

We stayed in the storeroom for over two hours in which time I told my mother everything. About the secret meetings, our vows to each other and our plans for my birthday. She listened quietly and held me when I cried. If I was grateful for anything on that day, it was the fact that I had someone with whom I could share what were now going to be my only precious memories.

At last my father and Angus managed to leave the house and our journey back home seemed endless and it was with extreme relief that I excused myself and went to my bed. I lay awake, I felt miserable but I found that I was unable to shed any more tears, so I just lay with my eyes closed, willing sleep to come and rescue me from my misery.

26

The next day and the day after seemed long and hard. I went through my daily life as if I was a ghost in my own body. I was eternally grateful that my mother was there to shield me from the well-meaning questions from the rest of my

family. She ensured that she gave me chores that would mean I was occupied but able to be near her. There was no news of the forthcoming nuptials from my father, and if there was I didn't hear it, as I went to my bed early on both nights.

On the evening of the third day I trudged across the yard with the milking pails and a flaming torch; which guided my way into the barn. I could hear the familiar noises of our three milk cows waiting to be relieved of their valuable burden and, as I lit the torches built in to the stone walls, I tried not to remember the happier times I had spent within its confines.

I took my seat next to the first cow and began to extract the milk from her udder. The liquid squirted into the bucket and I was soon lost in my own thoughts. Thoughts that again were centred on Rory and what might have been.

I almost didn't hear the door open. I had not put the bar across as there was no point in that any more so I did not look up. I felt angry that I couldn't be left alone with my thoughts.

Then I heard his voice. "Isabel?"

I wondered first of all if this was just my imagination but when he repeated my name again I knew that Rory was standing just feet from me. My heart said 'go to him' but it was almost as if a glass wall was between us and, instead of running into his arms, I said, without looking up. "So ye have managed to tear yourself away from your intended then?"

He didn't reply immediately, and I noticed that my hands were carrying on, almost without my bidding, milking the cow.

At last he replied, his voice had a brittle tone that mirrored my own. "So that's how it is?"

That was too much and I stood up and swung round to face him, almost knocking the stool and the pail to the floor.

"Aye, that's how it is. Do ye expect it to be anything else? Do ye expect me to simper and listen to ye when ye tell me your lies?"

"They were, are, not lies Isabel," he said. He looked at me without any emotion in his face but I noticed that he was very pale and that he had dark shadows under those green eyes.

But my defences were strong because I went on. "Well if they are not lies, then tell me this Rory Cameron how is it that I saw ye stood before me with some girl at your side while your father announced it to all? How is it that ye didna stop it? How is it that ye made such a fool of me in front of all our own folk? And how is it that ye come here expecting me to welcome ye with open

arms and forgive ye for it?" I was physically shaking but I carried on. "I may be the daughter of one of your father's men but I am not somebody ye can just expect to use for your own devices." Then I paused and said. "I presume that ye are here to beg forgiveness and ask me to be your mistress?"

His reaction was swift and unexpected; he stooped, picked up the milking stool and threw it at the wall. The wood splintered as it broke on the stone.

I stared, but I stared in silence.

He turned to face me, his face a mixture of hurt and anger.

"Isabel ye accuse me of many things, but dinna question either my honour or my love for ye. If ye will listen and give me a chance to explain I will tell ye how it was and why I couldna tell ye before now and then, if ye hear me out, I will tell ye what I came here for." He stopped and I could see that his breath was coming quickly, then he said. "Will ye listen?"

I nodded.

He ran his hand through his hair and leant against one of the wooden posts, his eyes though were still fixed on me.

He began. "After I left ye the last time we were together my father told me that we would be going away and we were to leave the next day. I didna know where but I presumed it was some business to do with King James and I knew not to ask too many questions. So the next day we left, we didna take many men with us so I knew that it was not intended to put us in any danger. It took most of the day and we were eventually in MacDonnell country. I had been through there many times but had never visited the lairdly family."

"We arrived and were welcomed as anybody would be and we stayed over night. My father spent some time with their chief and then told me that I was to lead an expedition of our men, and some of their own, to settle some business between the MacDonnells and some broken men who were causing problems for their tenants. So I went, it took about a week all told to deal with the matter and when I got back it didna appear that we were to leave in haste."

He stopped and looked at me as if I was about to speak; I remained silent.

"Well that is when I was introduced to their daughter. In absolute honesty I paid little attention to her, I was polite as befitted a guest in their house and when it was suggested that she show me some of the lands I agreed," he paused again and then said. "I could hardly not do so."

I nodded.

"After some more days, and various outings such as that, always accompanied by my father and her father and a variety of other people I was told that we were returning home. And indeed we did." He stopped again and

said. "I hated every day that ye and I were not together and the only thought that kept me from going mad was that each day brought me closer to your birthday."

I nodded again; the glass wall that was my resolve had begun to show signs of cracking.

He carried on. "Almost immediately on our return, my father sent for me. My mother was there also when I came in to his study and they announced that they would hold a Gathering. I wondered why I was to be thus informed, I had never been before but I accepted and asked to be excused, I wanted to come to ye. It was then that my father told me that he and The MacDonnell had agreed a contract of marriage between his daughter and I." His voice broke when he said. "Dear God Isabel ye have to believe that I didna want it. I was horrified; I couldna say, nor do, anything there and then. The MacDonnells were expected the next day and I had no chance of speaking to ye. I tried to get away that evening but it was almost as if my father knew, he had me with him late into the night, and then early the next morning they arrived. They must have left not long after us to be there so quickly. There was a large number of them and, damn my own cowardice, I could not defy my father in front of them."

I stood as if rooted to the spot but the cracks in the glass were increasing in size.

Rory continued. "Isabel, when I came into that room on the evening of the Gathering I knew ye were there. I couldna look up, it was all I could do to walk. And when I saw ye my heart felt as though it had broken in two. Ye have to believe me Isabel none of it was my doing."

The pain on his face was so honest and so real that the wall of glass that had separated us finally shattered.

I walked towards him and I was in his arms at last. I held on to him as he buried his face in my hair and whispered words of love to me. Then he said quietly. "I came here Isabel to tell ye that tomorrow I will tell my father that I will not be marrying that girl."

I looked up at him, his eyes seemed far away and I said. "What will happen?"

"I honestly canna say my love. He will no doubt be very angry but it willna be so bad as to live a life without ye." He kissed me then, and I clung to him as I had many times before. Then he stepped back from me and said. "What may happen is that he may turn me into a broken man and tell me to leave the clan. That would mean, if ye wanted to still be with me, that ye would have to leave

too. Ye'd have to go straight away and leave your family and I wanted to ask ye if ye would be willing to do so. It wouldna be right to expect ye to stay with me without knowing what ye risk losing." He finished and looked at me. Thoughts rushed through my head; how would I feel never to see my family again, to have to leave the only place I had ever known?

"Where would ye go?" I said.

"Likely to Edinburgh, I have friends there, but Isabel would ye go with me and leave everything behind?"

I saw him step back from me again almost as if he was already doubting my resolve and my love for him, and immediately I knew that the answer would always be yes. Despite any sacrifices I would have to make, our lives were inextricably linked and life without him was not to be contemplated.

I smiled and said. "Yes Rory I would come with ye."

"Then" he said, taking another step back. "I will do what I came here to do."

He took my hands in his and then went down on one knee and said. "Isabel Cameron I vow to give ye my life and my love always, to hold ye dearer than any other living person and I ask ye to be my wife."

And there in that barn on that April night I accepted his proposal and I knew from then on that whatever befell the two of us we would be together.

27

He didn't linger long after that and I only stayed long enough to finish the milking and then went back in to the house. I decided that I wouldn't tell my mother until the next day. There was a lot to think about, particularly the fact that I might have to leave her forever and I wasn't sure how I could tell her. So I made my excuses and retired to my tiny bedroom and lay awake with my thoughts, so very different from those of the night before.

I spent the next day on tenterhooks wondering if Rory had spoken to his father, half expecting to hear the drum of horse's hooves at any moment and find him on the threshold to collect me for our journey into anonymity.

All day I waited but heard nothing, it was not until my father's return from his duties at Cameron House that I was to learn of what had gone on.

I was sitting at the scrubbed pine table in the centre of the house when the door opened. I was mending some of my brother's clothes and my mother was stirring some broth when the door opened and my father strode in.

He closed the door behind him and walked over to my mother and held her around the waist as he planted a kiss on her cheek. She turned to look at him and said. "Why Davie ye are unexpected early, the food willna be ready for some while yet."

"It's no bother Mary I have things I need to do here. But it has been a strange day indeed."

"Why so?" My mother asked him without a tone of interest. I marvelled at my mother's gift for self control, as I had told her about Rory's visit after the men-folk had left that morning and she was as anxious to hear of proceedings as I was.

"Well Mary, there was a fine stramash at The Big House. Himself and young Rory at each other's throats for all to hear and to see, I am sure that it would have come to blows had not the Lady Anne thrown a pitcher of water over them both."

At this my mother and I lost our composure completely, it was almost impossible to imagine the beautiful and calm Lady Cameron doing any such thing.

My father seeing our shocked faces replied. "Aye she did indeed, then she gave them both a fair tongue lashing. I think her words were, 'Have you no care for how you both sound, have you no control over your own tempers fighting like dogs in the barnyard, I will give you something to cool you down'. And then she threw the water at them both; it worked for a short while and that's when she ordered all the staff out. She said that if her men insisted on making a spectacle of themselves she could at least deprive them of an audience. So discretion being the better part of valour I left also."

I looked quickly at my mother, but she needed no bidding.

"And what in God's name led them to be behaving so?" She asked.

"Aye well, it seems that young Rory is refusing to honour the betrothal to the MacDonnell lass and it didna seem to matter what Jamie Cameron said, his son wouldna change his mind. Even when his father talked of banishing him, cutting him off from the clan, he said it wasna so bad as living with someone for whom he had no desire for the rest of his life and it was his father's decision whether to send him away."

"Do ye think he would?" My mother said quietly. Only she and I knew of the consequences of this for our own family.

"I dinna know to be direct Mary, but in my own mind I doubt it. This will be a sore embarrassment for the family and will lead to some hostilities between Cameron and MacDonnell. No man wants to see his daughter's name

damaged in this way and the chief of that name will no doubt demand substantial reparation for this. But Jamie Cameron has only one son and therefore one heir to the lairdship. If Rory is banished then the lands go to Lochiel, and much as Jamie admires and pays fealty to his brother I dinna think that he is prepared to give his lands up to his nephews because of his own son's marital preferences."

I tried to hide the look of relief that crossed my face, I was not concerned with Rory's claim on the lairdship but the thought of leaving my family had weighed heavily on my mind despite my love for him.

My mother continued stirring the broth, and said. "So what do ye think will happen?"

"I dinna know but for now I am glad that business with far-lying tenants takes me away for the next two days. I wouldna relish going back there tomorrow."

I went back to paying attention to my needlework, and my father placed his broadsword in its place over the fire and hung his bonnet on the peg near the door. He went over to one of the chairs by the fire and when seated he said. "It is a queer state of things but it makes me wonder if the lad has fallen for another."

I stabbed my hand with my needle and had to bite my lip to stop myself from crying out.

My mother continued calmly stirring the pot; she really was a remarkable woman.

"Oh well, I suppose we shall find out in time," my father said after he had received no replies from his womenfolk and then continued. "In the meantime I am glad to be out of there."

My family went about its usual chores that evening and nothing more was said between my mother and myself, although it remained one of the topics of conversation. My brothers even speculating upon which of the suitable women had taken Rory's fancy. I kept very quiet, my name never having been raised, but then could I be considered a 'suitable woman'? I thought not.

If that day was difficult, the next two days felt like years. With my father not going to Cameron House, and my brothers having their own duties to attend to elsewhere, we received no news on further events. And it was with relief that we bade my father farewell on his way to report the tenancy matters settled to his laird.

That night he joined us at the usual time, and it wasn't until we were all seated around the table to eat that my mother asked him. "Well Davie what tidings of Rory Cameron's refusal to marry do ye have?"

My father took a mouthful of bread and then said. "There have been many developments, never let it be said that Sir James Cameron is slow to work. The MacDonnells are, of course, very put out and it has cost a deal of silver and promises of men to placate them. Even now it would not be a good idea for a Cameron to pass across their lands unaccompanied. Himself has sent a number of men to patrol our borders in order to make sure that any show of strength on their part is countered." My father finished and was about to take another mouthful of bread when my mother asked. "And what of young Rory?"

My father put the bread down and turned his eyes to my mother and said quietly. "He has been sent to France."

My spoon dropped from my hand and after hitting the table clattered on to the floor. I saw my mother look in my direction.

"France," I exclaimed. "But no that canna be, he will be killed, he will die just like, just like Andrew. Da this canna be so."

My father didn't seem to find my concern unnatural, any mention of that country in our home brought back those horrific days when we had learned of the loss to our own family.

"Aye Isa, it is so. I forgot for a moment that ye have a connection with him, he having saved your life." He picked up a piece of bread, not out of hunger but out of something to do with his hands, he had seen the horrors of the battlefield and he was more qualified than any of us to know what it meant to fight with, and to lose, a son in a foreign country.

"Jamie Cameron wouldna send him if he didna think it was necessary. Despite the fact that he is angry with the lad he wouldna risk his life if he didna have to. The MacDonnells are a proud people, as we are, and it is not always possible to vouch for every clan member being placated with the terms over which their chief has agreed. It is likely safer for Rory Cameron to be in France right now than in his own lands. Ye can be sure that he will be sent for when things are better. And a stay in France may be good for him, he hasna had any experience of much soldiering and he may need it soon enough if the clans are raised for King James. He will also be useful as an envoy to the French Court if it comes to that, Lochiel has men already there but his own nephew would be a trusted source of information."

I was not settled by that, I had waited so long and now it seemed that I must wait again. Not even knowing how likely his chance of return would be, if at all. My prayers that night were for his safety and for my own forbearance. Once again my life would be made up of patient hoping and waiting for our

time together to come. But at least I knew, or hoped I knew, that wherever Rory was I was in his heart.

28

The months went slowly, I slipped into my previous pattern of waiting for Rory, only this time I knew that there was a chance that he might not come home at all. If it hadn't been for the fact that my mother knew about us I think I might have gone mad with longing. But she seemed to sense when it was worse for me and there was always a word of comfort when it was needed most. She always asked my father 'if there had been news of the lad', but news seemed to be scarce and I passed that year as pre-occupied with Rory Cameron as I had spent those years before.

Summer, autumn and another harsh Highland winter passed and then after the snows cleared it was April and my seventeenth birthday came and went and still there was no news of Rory's return. If indeed he was still able to return. I went from day to day, with my longing to see him, or at least hear of him, a kind of dull ache inside. I was happy enough outwardly and was glad that spring was returning. It was difficult to be miserable in spring but at night, before I finally slept, I thought of what he might be doing and where he might be and dreaded that he might come to some harm.

When the better weather arrived we went to our beds at a later hour, and Margaret and Gordon would often bring little Andrew to our house and we would sit and watch him attempt to make his own way around the room. He was growing now and was an inquisitive child. His parents were forever having to prevent him from injuring himself by prodding, pulling or picking up things that were a danger. On one night Margaret had to grab him back from nearly upending a bowl of boiling water on the table. He shrieked in consternation and his cries were so loud that we almost missed the sound of horse's hooves coming towards the house.

It was my father who heard them first, he raised his hand for silence and even young Andrew was quietened.

We looked at each other. It had been unheard of for the government Militia to come this far into the mountains from their base at Fort William. However with their new boldness it was possible that this night would be the first occasion for it. My father rose and quickly walked to the fire where he took his broadsword from its place and my bothers did likewise. He motioned my

mother, Margaret and I towards my parent's room and we got up quietly and stood in the doorway. All was quiet, the sound of hooves was nearer now, and I saw Margaret clutch Andrew to her, and I saw that her face was as white as snow.

My father and brothers had extinguished the candles that were burning and the flames of the fire in the hearth were the only source of light.

We heard the sound of a rider dismounting and my father went slowly to one of the windows across which the shutters had been sealed.

He gingerly opened one a fraction and we held our breaths.

Then my father exclaimed. "God in heaven it canna be..."

He let his broadsword drop to the floor. Whoever was calling on us at this late hour was not a threat to our safety and my mother moved swiftly to light the candle on the table.

We looked on as my father strode to the door and opened it wide, letting the spring night air cool the room.

He walked out and then minutes later came in again – followed by Rory.

I stood mesmerised, Gordon went over and shook his hand, he had been to France and it seemed that he felt a comradeship now with this kinsman who had perhaps seen what he had seen.

My mother stepped forward to welcome him as did Margaret, but I stayed back in the shadows unable to move and unable to believe that there in our home stood the man who had held my thoughts for so long.

I watched as he greeted my family, he looked older, taller even. His face was thinner and had lost his boyish looks completely, but he was still as handsome, in fact even more so and as he smiled as my mother kissed him on his cheek I thought my heart would burst. But still I said and did nothing.

It was my father who spoke first after the greetings were over.

"Well lad it's a great pleasure to see ye, and to see ye looking so well."

Rory smiled. "Aye it's a pleasure to be home. There were times that I thought I'd never see Scotland again."

"Was it bad?" That was Gordon.

"Aye it was at times, but I was luckier than ye. There was no great danger if ye kept your wits about ye and lives lost were minimal. I spent a lot of my time as a courier of messages from vessels from Scotland to the French Court. And then they sent me to Rome."

My brother's mouth dropped open at that.

"Ye have been to Rome," Angus said in wonderment. "What was it like?"

It's a strange place, very beautiful but very sordid, it isna a place to which I would choose to return."

“Did ye meet him?” Angus said. He had no need to qualify his statement; we all knew he was referring to King James VIII of Scotland and III of Britain.

“No I didna meet the King but I met Tearlach, he used the gaelic name for Prince Charles Edward Stuart the eldest son of the rightful heir to the Scottish and English thrones.

“What was he like?” Said Margaret in wonderment.

“He is not what I thought he would be but he has a nobility that shows who he is. He is no Scot but if the King can persuade the French to give us the gold and men they promise us then I think he may lead us well.”

My father nodded agreement and then asked. “Has your father asked ye to carry a message to me? It must be urgent for ye to come up here at this late hour, it isna the English militia again is it?”

“I havena seen my father yet,” Rory replied.

My father looked a little perplexed and said. “Aye well it’s good to see ye home and safe but it canna be that ye were just passing by, what brings ye here lad?”

I saw Rory straighten his shoulders.

He replied quietly. “Do ye remember when ye gave me your oath of loyalty Davie?” I noticed that he used my father’s name as his own father would.

“Aye I do,” replied my father. “Ye had just saved my daughter from the hands of the English soldiers.”

“Well,” said Rory. “I am calling in your oath.”

My father nodded and replied. “Anything I can do, ye know I will do it, she is very precious to me.”

Rory looked around the room and then back at my father and said quietly but firmly. “I wish to ask ye for your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

My hands went to my mouth and all eyes, but those of my father and Rory, were suddenly fixed on me.

I stepped forward out of the shadows and Rory saw me and smiled, but he didn’t address me. I longed to run into his arms but I knew the time was not right.

I looked from Rory to my father and saw that his face had changed, and his reply was not of a subservient clansman. He said. “Oh ye do? And what leads ye to that conclusion?”

Rory replied. “I love her.”

My father looked at me now and said. “Well Isa and what do you say to this?”

“I love him too,” I said, my words seemed small and insignificant in this room full of people.

“Aye so ye think yourselves in love then?” My father said, and then he turned back to Rory and said. “Would I be right in assuming that it is this that prevented ye from honouring the betrothal to the MacDonnell lass?”

“It was. I didna have any idea of that arrangement until my father had agreed to it,” Rory said and then. “I was going to come to ye and ask your permission for us to court on Isabel’s sixteenth birthday.”

“Oh ye were, so do I take it that ye and my daughter were courting before without my permission?” My father’s face was blank of emotion but I knew that beneath that facade lurked anger.

“Aye,” Rory said. “I willna lie to ye.”

“No ye had better not, laird’s son or no,” My father’s face was showing his anger now, which I knew to be a bad sign. I was right, because the next question shook me. He said quietly but with the menace of a man who had taken the lives of others before. “Have ye shamed my daughter? Because if ye have I will hang from the gallows tree with your blood on my hands?” His voice quivered with anger as he spoke, but Rory answered calmly. “No Sir I did not. Ye have known me since I was a bairn and I know that ye wouldna believe me capable of such a thing. In any case,” he continued. “I love your daughter and I would never dishonour her in any way. If ye know me well, I know ye equally, and I know that ye would never let me marry her if I had.”

Rory looked at me then and said. “I have waited for years for ye Isabel and it has nearly killed me to do so but ye are the dearest thing in my life and I would wait forever if it means ye and I can be together.”

My father looked from Rory to me, and then back to Rory. “Aye well that may be so but ye will not have an answer tonight. I will only consider this when I have spoken to your father and not before. Bring him here tomorrow in the afternoon and we will speak.” For my father to demand that the laird’s son bring the head of our clan to our home at a time of his choosing was unheard of, but Rory nodded and said. “We will come.”

My father turned away and walked towards the fire where he stood with one hand on the wooden beam above the hearth. Rory took this as the signal to go. He bowed his head to my mother who gave him a smile in return; my brothers were unspeaking, then he turned to leave. But just before he left our home he turned to me and held my gaze for a moment and then he was gone.

We stood silent in the room as we heard the sound of hooves receding on the cobbles.

29

Nobody spoke, my father didn't move from his position with his back to us. Gordon and Margaret were the first to leave. Scooping up little Andrew, they left without saying a word. Angus was next, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour and going to his room. This left my parents and me alone. I was about to speak but my mother put her finger to her lips and mouthed 'go to bed', and, needing no second bidding, I did so. My father never uttered a sound but just stood gazing into the fire, but before I opened the door to my room I saw my mother walk over to him and place her hands around his waist. I hoped that this phenomenal woman would be able once again to make things right.

I did not sleep well that night but the next morning I stayed in bed as long as I could. I had no idea whether my mother had been able to weave her magic and persuade my father to see Rory's request as a welcome move, so I dressed slowly and was very relieved to see that the main room of the house was empty, apart from my mother herself.

"How was it?" I said as I stood next to her watching her making the bread for the day.

"He'll come around," she said. "He is only like all fathers, they see their daughters as little girls and they dinna welcome it when they realise that they may be growing up. Rory is a good lad and ye could have done worse than fall in love with the son of the laird." She laughed when she said it and I smiled.

"I am so glad ye knew," I said. "I canna bear thinking what would have happened if ye hadn't."

"Aye I imagine it might have been a bit of a shock for me too," she said.

I stood beside her watching her knead the dough and then I said. "What shall I do?"

She turned and rubbed the flour from her hands and looked me up and down.

"What you will do Isabel Cameron," she emphasised the word you. "Is to make yourself presentable for Sir James Cameron as suitable to wed his son. We know ye are a beauty but it willna do any harm for him to see it as we do.

"So first we will get some boiling water and fill the tub and then we will see about transforming ye from a tacksman's daughter to the Lady of the Glen." And at that we both laughed.

I felt very guilty doing nothing that morning, except attend to my own appearance. But my mother, and latterly Margaret, seemed not to mind, in fact the two other women of the house found it very amusing indeed.

Luckily the men of the house were conspicuous by their absence and when they did eventually return after midday their sister was a shining example of Highland womanhood. My hair shone, my mother being a vigorous brusher of even my tresses, and I had on my green velvet dress that had been sponged and arranged by Margaret. I had been told to sit still and not move lest anything should be disarranged.

But when my father returned he still didn't speak.

After we had eaten, the men also dressed for the occasion. They sported their ceremonial finery and, I noticed, every weapon available. Margaret and my mother also dressed in their best and even little Andrew had his face scrubbed enough to make him complain bitterly. It was quite a sight to see us all in that one room; it was definitely not a show of subservience.

It was almost three o'clock when Angus, who had been posted as lookout, came running in. "They are coming, they are coming," he shouted, out of breath from running.

My stomach lurched and Margaret put her hand in mine and whispered. "Be calm Isabel everything will be fine ye'll see."

I hoped she was right, in my mind my whole life and my whole future depended on what was about to happen.

My Father took a seat on the opposite side of the table to the door and my brothers stood behind him, their faces set with looks of proud determination. My mother, Margaret and I stood to their left a few paces back. And this is how Sir James Cameron and Rory found us.

My father rose from his seat and walked around the table, his hand held out. "Welcome to our home," he said as he bowed his head very slightly to his guests. "Can I offer ye a drink?"

"Aye, thank ye, that would be most welcome Davie," said Rory's father as he shook my father's hand.

My father poured out the golden liquid into three goblets set on the table and passed them to our visitors.

"Your health," said Sir James and he looked around the room. His eyes alighted on me and I felt the familiar feeling of colour rising up my neck to my face. I lowered my eyes and looked at my hands. I could feel myself shaking.

"Ye have a fine family, ye must be proud," he said.

"We are," said my father.

I heard Sir James take in a breath and then he said. "My son has told me that he has asked permission for your daughter's hand."

"Aye, that is so," replied my father. He was not going to make it easy for his master, but as the potential bride's father it was not his duty to do so.

"What are your thoughts on the matter?" Sir James asked.

"My thoughts are that we should speak on the subject alone," my father replied. At this I raised my head.

"I think that perhaps we should too, this is not an unimportant matter." Sir James turned to Rory and said. "If ye will leave us for a while we will call ye when it has been decided."

My father inclined his head to my brothers and motioned them to go with him and they left the house. He then turned to my mother and said. "Mary will ye take the lasses to our room, ye can wait in there."

My mother nodded and Margaret and I dutifully followed her into my parent's bedroom leaving the Heads of the families alone.

I'm not sure how long we sat there but it seemed an age. If so much hadn't depended upon it I would have laughed out loud. My parent's room was only marginally bigger than the bed that dominated it, and my mother, Margaret and I sat cramped on the edge holding hands. We didn't speak but sat in silence, all wondering what was happening in the next room.

Eventually my father opened the door and said.

"We are ready."

We filed out and returned to our places, it was almost like a piece of theatre.

It was my mother who spoke first. "Well if ye have come to a decision let us hear it now, it does no good to delay the telling of it."

I couldn't have agreed more, I felt sick and once again my legs were shaking under my skirts.

"Aye Mary ye are quite right, it is no fair to make anyone wait any longer," said Sir James, he looked at my father and said. "Well Davie will ye be the one to tell them?"

"Aye," said my father and he took a deep breath and began.

"Sir James and I have spoken and we have been honest in our concerns. It has come as something of a surprise to both of us, and it has great implications for both of our families. We have had to take this into account in making our decision."

My father stopped then and looked at me for the first time since Rory's visit the evening before. "Isabel, ye are very dear to me and I was very disappointed that ye had not thought to tell me of your feelings for this young man before. I

am not such an ogre as ye would have me portrayed and it hurt me that ye didna see fit to speak with me about it.”

It was my turn to speak, and I said in a voice that sounded to me quite unlike my own. “I am sorry Da, I should have, it was wrong of me.”

He nodded and said. “It was, but I forgive ye for it.”

I mouthed ‘thank you’ and was then silent.

He then turned his gaze to Rory. “Well lad, your father and mother had a right to know too. Is it so ashamed ye are of your feelings for my daughter that ye felt ye could not tell them sooner?”

Rory’s head snapped up at that and, his eyes blazing, he replied. “If I had thought that I could tell them sooner I would have climbed to the top of one of the chimneys at home and shouted it for the world to hear, but I would not have Isabel implicated in that business with the MacDonnell lass. In any case I wanted to ask ye first, ye may not have allowed it and ye may not still.”

My father smiled a little at that and after what seemed a very long pause said.

“Well, ye have said your piece and now I will tell ye what we have decided.”

I grabbed Margaret’s hand, not just for support but because I needed something to steady me, my heart was pounding.

He continued. “Sir James and I have decided to consent to the marriage.”

I didn’t have time to react because Margaret grabbed me and gave me a hug, I didn’t even have time to look at Rory before my father continued. “But there are conditions that go with this.”

This time I did look at Rory; he looked as anxious as I felt.

My father carried on speaking. “Ye spoke well lad just now and your father and I are in absolute agreement that my daughter should not be implicated in the business with the MacDonnells. I will not have her thought of as the cause of that, therefore ye are to wait until after she turns eighteen to marry.

My euphoric state plummeted at that, but it was Rory who spoke, and he spoke calmly. “I have loved your daughter for a very long time, and though it will cause me pain to wait another year I understand and agree with your reasoning. I will agree to the terms Sir.”

My father then looked at me.

I found I couldn’t speak but I nodded my consent.

“Then both of ye being in agreement, this is how it will be. We will attend the Harvest Gathering, where it will appear that ye have not met as anything but friends. It will be there that ye will begin your public courting and we will move on from there. Ye will not meet without a chaperone and Rory, when ye

are courting there will be no meetings in secret, do I have your word on that?"

"You do Sir," Rory said.

"And yours Isabel?"

"Yes Da," I replied, able to speak at last.

"Well then I think the matter is settled. You may marry as soon after your eighteenth birthday as ye wish, and may it bring great happiness to ye both," my father finished, and I was rewarded with the first smile I had received from him that day.

It was now Rory's father's time to speak. "I think, don't you? That we can allow them one unchaperoned meeting." He looked at Rory and said. "I am sure nobody has any objections if ye and your intended step outside that door and have a short time together, but only short, mind. Whilst ye are doing so would ye permit me to have another dram of that excellent whisky Davie?"

My father nodded and while he was pouring it my mother shooed Rory and I outside.

I closed the door behind me and we stood together in the cool spring air, at last we were alone.

He took both my hands in his and kissed each one. "I have waited all of my life for this," he said. "Every day I was away I prayed that we would be together."

Still with my hands in his, I said. "I was the same, I was so scared that ye wouldna come back and that somehow I would never see ye again. Or that ye would meet some fine French lady and forget me."

He drew me to him and put his arms around me, I could feel the warmth of his body as he held me. "I could never forget ye, there was no woman who could compare with ye and there never will be, ever. I am happier now than I have ever been to know that ye will be mine. A year is not a long time Isabel and then we have the rest of our lives. We will grow old together and we will be so very happy I promise ye."

And on that spring day in seventeen forty three I saw no reason to doubt it.

30

Then commenced a time that was like no other I had experienced. Strangely now that our relationship had become 'official' Rory and I saw less of each other than at any time when we had not been parted by distance. Rory no longer paid his secret visits to our home and we had to be content with letters

that were passed between us by my father. These precious documents I kept under my pillow to be read over and over again whenever I was to be alone. Fortunately though our parents relented and we were permitted to meet before the Harvest Gathering, this was at the next Quarter Day where again my father would assist the laird in receiving his dues from his tenants. My father had brought word from The Big House that I was to be specifically invited, along with Margaret as chaperone, to attend this occasion. Of course I was not an official guest but I would at last perhaps be able to spend some precious moments with Rory, even if it would be under the watchful eye of my sister-in-law.

In honour of the unofficial betrothal my mother had invested in some more material out of which she had made a dress for me, fit for the summer months. It was pale green with sprigs of tiny flowers and the neck was edged with lovely dark green velvet ribbon; my mother pronounced it suitable for a future Lady Cameron. That had seemed strange, and often as I lay in my tiny bed I wondered how that title would sit with me. Even though I was the daughter of the laird's senior tacksman, a position of some rank in any clan, it was a huge step to being the wife of the future laird. I prayed that I would be equal to it but I was always comforted by the fact that I would have Rory to guide me.

At last Quarter Day came and Margaret and I set off with my father in very high spirits. Margaret had brought Andrew with her and the little boy provided considerable amusement throughout the journey. As we drew near to Cameron House though I began to feel strangely nervous, almost as if I would be seeing Rory for the first time. Until my father lifted me down from the seat beside him on the cart in which we were travelling I didn't realise indeed how nervous I was. My legs were shaking and I was glad of his proffered hand as we walked across the cobbles into the courtyard.

The setting was as before, the table and chair set up in front of the steps and the line of tenants beginning to snake around the yard and out through the entrance. I was almost relieved that I didn't see Rory. I needed to gather myself together. I would have to exercise an extreme amount of self-control to resist the impulse to run straight into his arms but I knew that under the agreement that our fathers had forged I must not show any displays of emotion. Fortunately I had Margaret with me, she seemed to understand and when my father left us for his duties she put her arm in mine and whispered. "Don't worry Isa, he will be as nervous as ye are. Let's find somewhere to sit where Andrew can play and we can wait until he comes out."

We found a place towards one of the corners, and again I sat on a bale of hay trying not to appear anxious, yet continuously watching those double doors for any sign of Rory. Fortunately Andrew kept us entertained and he was in the middle of a particularly funny dance when I noticed the door opening and I saw my father preceding his master down the steps toward the table and chair. And then came Rory, and my heart leaped. I had always known him to be handsome but now he appeared to me to be more so. I remembered the first time I had seen him and marvelled at how the tall man in full Cameron attire had grown from the boy I had pushed in to the water. He wore a velvet jacket and waistcoat and his shirt had fine lace at the cuffs and neck. His kilt and plaid were in vibrant tartan as were his stockings. His broadsword hung from the belt at his waist and I noticed that his dirk and his pistol were also tucked into his belt. I wondered, not for the first time if those gleaming weapons had been used in anger and as I looked at Rory's face, now devoid of all the remnants of boyhood, I suspected that they might.

I watched him descend the steps and take up his position by his father and then at last I saw that his eyes were searching the groups of tenants. I willed him to find me, I could not wave but it was young Andrew who attracted his attention by letting out a wail of indignation at being ignored by both his mother and his aunt. Rory looked over, as did most of the tenants, and I felt myself flushing crimson as our eyes met. There was no need for any greeting just one look was enough to convey our feelings and it was difficult to remember that I should shyly look away under his gaze in case anyone should notice us. But they didn't of course; they were too busy disgorging their sacks, bags and various animals into the hands of my father and several other men while the laird was exchanging conversation with each tenant as they stopped at the table.

Margaret, Andrew and I sat on the hay bales for hours until I was so stiff that even I admitted that we would have to go for a walk lest we permanently seize up. As we rose I saw Rory's head momentarily lift from looking over his father's shoulder and he looked in our direction, but he turned his gaze away quickly and appeared riveted by what his father was saying.

We left the courtyard and despite the fact that the object of my affection was out of sight it was still a pleasure to walk in the lovely gardens on that summer day. We headed for the loch and Andrew ran ahead as Margaret and I strolled after him, her arm in mine.

"Just think," she said with a giggle. "All this will be Rory's one day and ye'll be mistress here."

"I know," I said. "It's difficult to take it in, I've always thought only of Rory as the man I love. The implications of his position never mattered to me but I admit that the more I think about it the more it scares me."

Margaret looked at me then, her face serious. "Isabel ye are equal to it, ye will make a better job of it than some who are high born. Ye will understand the hardship of the winters, what it is like to go without food and what it is like to see your men march to the sound of the pibroch and for them not to come back. Rory is a fine man and a good catch but ye are a fine woman and he should consider himself fortunate to have a wife who will be loyal to him and be by his side in times of plenty and of hardship."

My sister-in-law's voice was full of emotion as she spoke and I knew it was of Andrew and Gordon she was thinking as she said those words. I squeezed her hand as we walked alongside each other, both of us watching my nephew running towards the shimmering loch. I saw his bobbing curls as he chased butterflies and I hoped that there would be no wars to cause sorrow in his life, and as I did so I shivered as if a cold wind had blown across the gardens bringing the promise of a hard winter with it.

Suddenly, as if to break the spell, Margaret changed the direction in which she was walking and shouted to her son to follow us. She almost dragged me at a pace to a small gap in the manicured hedge that surrounded a little clearing. This, I remembered, was the one that Rory and I had spent those precious minutes alone in at the Gathering many months ago. She pulled me through the gap and we moved quickly out of the sunlight and into the shade of this little arbour, and there in front of me stood Rory.

I ran to him and Margaret, chaperone as she was, seemed very preoccupied with her son. "How did ye get away?" I said after I had released myself momentarily from his kisses.

"Oh my father sent me on an errand, it seems he remembers when he was first in love." He smiled and kissed my forehead as I clung to him as if he would be spirited away. "I havena got long but I canna stand there with ye so near without having at least one kiss." He stopped talking long enough to kiss me long and hard on the lips.

"It doesna seem that Margaret is an ideal person for the role as chaperone," he said laughing as he looked in the direction of my sister in law. I looked round to see her with her back to us, studiously ignoring proceedings.

"I dinna agree," I said. "I think she is more than ideal."

He laughed and lifted me from my feet. "It will not be long before we dance our first reel at the Gathering. He well do ye dance my love?"

“I dinna dance at all,” I said. Suddenly I was worried. “I have never had the occasion to dance, let alone a partner to dance with” I continued rather nervously.

He smiled and kissed me again and said. “Dinna worry I will teach ye, it is not hard and it will be a way to have my arms around ye in front of them all.” He paused, and looked serious. “Ye know I do love ye Isabel, it seems too long till we can really be together, sometimes I think about it and it drives me mad.” As he held me close to him I was aware of his physical longing and the thought that I had this effect on him sent a little shiver down my spine. I too had dreamed dreams that were unseemly for an unmarried young woman, but still I had longed for his touch, to lie with him in the same bed, to feel his skin against mine and to do other things of which I could only dream. He must have sensed my thoughts because he let out a deep sigh and pushed me slightly away.

He said, his voice soft. “If I dinna go now I fear I willna be responsible for what I do, chaperone or no.” He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. “I will see ye in the courtyard and tonight I will write to ye.” Then he kissed me hard on the lips and said with a smile. “Ye had better make sure that no-one reads that letter.” And bowing to Margaret, and with a salute to Andrew, he turned and left through the trees.

31

That was the last occasion we had an opportunity to meet before the long awaited Gathering. Our only contact was by letter, but paper was difficult to come by and I was very grateful when Lady Cameron sent me a parcel containing sheets of fine paper and ink. She had included a note that sent her greetings to our family and me; which said that if the amount of paper her son was using was anything to go by that I would probably require some of my own. I was grateful for her thoughtfulness and included my own note of thanks with my next letter to Rory.

It was not the last package I was to receive from Rory’s mother. A week before the Gathering my father walked in with a very large parcel which he handed to me with a wink, and said. “Lady Cameron thought it may prove useful for the dance.”

He handed me the parcel; which was heavy but felt soft to the touch, and my mother and father looked on as I opened it. What I saw made me gasp, it

was the loveliest dress I had ever seen. Again it was green to complement my red hair and it was made of the most beautiful quality cotton with a bodice of embroidered flowers with ribbons to tie at the back. The neckline and sleeves were edged with fine quality lace and again the same colour ribbon. It reminded me of that first dress all those years ago that had once been Rory's sister's. I fingered the cloth and looked up at my parents with tears in my eyes. "It is beautiful, but it is too much. How can I take it? I can give her nothing in return."

"Ye will make her son happy," that is enough for any mother, said my own with a smile. And then she added, practically as always. "When ye are his wife ye will need many more of the same quality so ye had better get used to wearing fine things. We canna have the future Lady of the Glen running around dressed like a milkmaid."

We laughed and my father added. "Milkmaid or no, there is not a girl in the glen to touch ye and Rory will think himself a lucky young man when he has you on his arm."

I smiled at them both, I loved them more than anyone else in the world, with the exception of course of Rory, and I wanted so much to make them proud of me. I looked down at the dress and in my mind I imagined what Rory would say when he saw me.

The days went by slowly until the actual day that I would be able to enact my imaginings but come it did and when I carefully put on the dress I wished that I had a mirror like the one Rory's mother had, so that I could see myself in it. But I made do with the compliments from my family and, unused to receiving compliments as I was, I found myself almost permanently blushing, a fact of which my brothers took great advantage.

That night, as we arrived at the house, again I saw that the food and dancing were set out as before, the music floated over to us as we disembarked and I felt the now familiar nerves at the thought of seeing Rory. Our family walked through the throng and over to the table reserved for us, my brothers teasing me as we went by pointing out young men, hitherto unknown to me who they said were casting glances in my direction. The result being that my face permanently resembled the colour of my hair and my mother was forced to tell them to stop, grown men as they were.

It was not long before I saw Rory, dressed again in his finest. He walked through the crowd of guests, acknowledging greetings as he went. He was walking in our direction when he was halted by a good looking dark haired girl

who smiled prettily at him and seemed intent to engage him for as long as she could. I found myself hating her for that moment and was a little surprised at how strongly I felt that emotion. But I laughed it off in a trice; if he could spend time in Paris and Rome and not cease to love me I had better trust him in his own garden.

He managed to release himself from the girl with little trouble and he continued to come towards us. When he reached us I kept my eyes downward, the impulse to laugh was quite strong but I managed to look demure as he engaged my father in conversation concerning cattle, rents and the quality of this year's crops. My whole family seemed to enjoy the masquerade much more than I did, my brothers engaging him in all sorts of conversation while my mother and Margaret, with young Andrew on her knee fast asleep, looked on with considerable interest as to just how long it would take Rory to speak to me. After what seemed an inordinate amount of minutes he managed to turn the conversation to the dancing and then said. "Do ye dance Miss Cameron?"

Angus nearly exploded, but Gordon shoved him in the ribs and suddenly my whole family made as if they were none of them listening.

It took me a second to deliver my answer, in a suitably shy way, and remembering the contents of the last letter, it took some doing. "I have never danced before Sir, I warrant that I will make a poor partner."

"Then I will teach ye Miss, I am known for my patience." He held out a hand to me and looking for my father's permission, which was swiftly given, I rose from my seat and took his hand.

And as he led me through the crowd to the dancing I felt as though I was walking on air. I lost all feeling of self-consciousness and as we reached the wooden dance floor that had been laid out for that purpose I could not have cared if Charles Edward Stuart was watching; I was so happy.

Rory led me in the steps, it was a simple reel and once I had mastered the dance I felt myself moving to the music and all the time Rory did not take his eyes off me. As the music came to an end he whispered. "Ye will be a fine dancer, I can see ye at Holyrood now and ye know that I will keep my promise."

I smiled at him and as the next dance started I followed his lead as we moved together across the floor. One of the steps of this dance involved him putting his arm around my waist and lifting me slightly off the floor and I didn't want him to let go. I longed for him to hold me close but as he led me through the other steps I knew that all we had to do was be patient and all this would come in time.

After another dance I was a little tired, and Rory suggested that we return to my family. We walked from the dance floor and even I noticed that people's eyes followed us as we made our way back to my parent's table.

When we arrived my mother said. "Well for a first time dancing ye made a good job of it lass."

I smiled and took my seat. Rory stood for a while and talked to my father and then he stepped towards me and said. "Are ye hungry Miss? Would ye care to accompany me to the food tables? Ye will need some more energy for dancing I think."

I wasn't hungry at all but it gave us an opportunity to be together and I happily went with him to see the magnificent feast that had been prepared for the occasion.

As he poured some wine into a goblet for me, he whispered. "Better not spill it this time." I giggled and replied. "I dinna know, perhaps ye would have to take me to the kitchens again."

"Dinna worry I dinna intend for us not to be alone all night," he whispered as he poured himself some wine. "I think that we shall find somewhere to eat this in private. Come with me."

I followed him through the people toward the house, then just behind some trees, he ducked under the branches and I quickly followed, careful not to tear my dress. Soon we were again on path to the loch and then we took the now familiar route into the little glade in the trees.

Once there, he put down his platter of food on the stone bench and took mine too, then he took our goblets and placed them by the side and turned to look at me.

"Isabel ye are truly beautiful," he said. "My mother said she had a surprise for me but I didna guess. The dress is perfect, I canna tell ye how lucky I am."

I remembered the girl earlier and once again I glowed inside at the fact that he should think so much of me.

He put his arms around me and pulled me to him. We stood together like that for what must have been only a matter of minutes but to me the time seemed to stand still. Then he released me and took my hand and we sat together on the bench and we both ate from the platter. I found my appetite had returned and the wine made me feel a little giddy. After we had finished we sat as close as we could, he with his left arm around my shoulders.

After a while he said. "My mother has asked me to invite ye and your parents to the house when it is convenient for them. Now that we have been seen together it would be the next step she says."

"I'm sure they would love to," I said looking up into those green eyes. "It all seems like a dream to me Rory, promise me that I will not wake up and it will all be gone."

"On my heart and on my honour it will never be gone Isabel," he replied. "I will never let anything come between us and spoil what we have. Nothing will part us my love we are meant for each other." And to emphasise this he kissed me long on the lips.

After we had parted he said with a sigh. "Well I think we had better be returning to the charade." He rose and stood in front of me and bowed. "Miss Cameron, will ye join me?" I returned the gesture by taking his hand and dropping a curtsy I said. "I will be happy to Sir," I said.

32

I wore my green velvet dress when we visited Cameron House to take tea with Rory's parents; I was looking forward to meeting Rory's mother again, particularly to thank her in person for the new dress. We arrived at the house in the late afternoon, and the sun was setting, casting a beautiful pink glow across the loch. I knew that, lovely as it was, this heralded bad weather and I hoped that it wouldn't come before we made the journey back.

The door was opened by the chief manservant, a middle-aged man who bowed to us as we entered. My father had always been treated with respect because of his own position but I found it strange all the same to be acknowledged in this way. I would need to get used to it I thought as I stepped into the house.

"Laird and Lady Cameron are awaiting ye in the Drawing Room," he said and we followed him as he walked confidently across the entrance hall and along a corridor, where he finally stopped in front of a door and knocked.

"Come in," said a voice from the room, and the man ushered us in.

The room was bathed in the remains of the sunlight that lit up the loch beyond. The windows were full length and the sun's rays gave the elegantly furnished room a magical pink light.

"Welcome," said Lady Cameron as she rose from her chair and walked towards us. My father bowed in greeting and my mother dipped a small curtsy. Then she turned to me. "Isabel," she said. "You are very welcome, you look very different from the girl who first came into this house covered in mud."

I smiled in reply, I felt very tongue-tied. She must have sensed that because she then said. "Shall we have some tea, we have had a new case from Inverness this last week and it is a fine crop indeed." Tea was a very expensive commodity and I had not tasted it at all before. The manservant went towards the table in order to begin pouring the liquid into the delicate china cups that were set for us, but Lady Cameron stopped him. "Don't worry Laughlan I will serve, you can leave us now and go and see if Mrs McClellan has any more of that cake for you." The man bowed and left the room at her bidding, leaving us alone.

After he had closed the door behind him Lady Cameron suddenly gave a broad smile and said. "Now we are alone, shall we set a date for the wedding?"

"The sooner the better," said a voice from behind me and I turned to see Rory enter the room. He placed his arm around my waist and said. "April the twenty seventh seems good to me."

"Impetuous youth," said his father as he handed my father a glass of claret.

"Well Jamie you did agree that they could marry as soon after Isabel's birthday as they wished," said Lady Cameron as she passed a cup of hot tea to my mother who carefully took the saucer and cup in both hands.

"Aye I did, but it doesn't want to seem as if it is being done in indecent haste," her husband replied.

"Indecent haste Father," exclaimed Rory helping himself to the claret. "I have waited nearly all my life to marry Isabel, I dinna want us to have to delay any longer than we must."

My mother sipped her tea, and said quietly. "The snows are clear by May, so a wedding in early June would mean good weather and long days and the crop sewing is done."

"You are right Mary," said Lady Cameron. "It is a good month for weddings and it would only mean a matter of weeks."

"Isabel?" said Rory, looking at me. "Do ye agree?"

Now everyone was looking at me and I did not delay my answer. "I agree," I said with a smile.

"To a June wedding," said his father and raised his glass and added. "To Isabel and Rory, and their future together."

So it was decided, we would marry in June, the engagement would be announced on my birthday, and the ceremony would take place in the family church. The rest of that occasion was spent in excited talk of weddings. Rory sat by my side, his hand in mine for all the time we were there and I revelled in

the fact that we could be together in the presence of both sets of parents. Those times spent shivering on a hillside seemed far behind us.

My parents and I eventually left after a couple more hours and, as we mounted our horses, I knew my prediction of bad weather was right, it was considerably colder and I hoped that this would not mean early snow.

My worst fears came true and snow it did, in fact the winter seemed to last forever. The next time I was to see Rory was briefly in December when his father sent him with a message for my father.

He arrived at our house late in the afternoon and it was a shock when I opened the door to find him standing there.

“Rory, what has happened?” I said.

“Are ye not pleased to see me?” He replied as I ushered him in out of the cold.

“Of course I am,” I said as I closed the door. “But it is a surprise and I dinna look my best.”

“Isabel, if ye were to put on a sack and tie your hair with rags ye would look lovely to me,” he said.

I heard Angus chuckle but I chose to ignore it.

My mother came in from the scullery and said. “Would ye be staying for dinner lad?”

“No thank ye, I canna, no matter how much I might want to,” he said looking at me. And then he continued. “I have a message from my father for your husband,” he said, looking around the room. “Is he not at home?”

“Aye he is,” she replied, she looked at my brothers and said. “Angus go and tell your father that Master Rory is here.” And as he pulled a face she said. “It serves ye right for listening to things that dinna concern ye.”

He didn't argue and he left the house, pulling his plaid around him, to get my father.

They returned a few minutes later, my father stamping his brogues on the floor to get the snow off and to bring back the circulation in his feet.

“What is it ye need lad?” he asked.

“We have had word that the English soldiers have paid a visit to some of the far lying tenants,” Rory replied.

“What have they done?” my mother said.

Rory looked quickly at my father who nodded and said. “Ye can tell her, we have no secrets here.”

Rory ran his hand through his hair and began. “There were a dozen or so.

They arrived with a warrant for the arrest of Dougal McMahon, ye may know him, it seems his wife has just had her fifth bairn.”

“What had he done?” I said.

Rory turned to me and said. “Nothing, the man is too sickly to be capable of doing anything apart from fathering children. The warrant was for stealing cattle belonging to the garrison at Fort William. It is my father’s supposition that this was a Campbell raiding party but it is easier for the Elector’s men if the blame is placed on a clan suspected to be loyal to King James.” I nodded, although no clan was officially linked with the Jacobite cause there were spies who would inform for a price and it was well understood that Lochiel, and therefore Clan Cameron, were loyal to ‘the King over the water.’

“Carry on lad,” said my father. “What happened?”

“Aye, well it appears that Dougal, sick as he was, put up a fight and the soldiers took this as a reason to try him there and then for theft of cattle, and, as ye know, the penalty is death.”

“Dear God,” said my mother. “What about his wife and the bairns?”

Rory looked at me and then at my mother and said quietly. “They took her from her bed and raped her, the children they left, mercifully. It appears that she raised the alarm after she walked to the next croft.”

“Oh the poor woman, it is inconceivable. Where is she now?”

“My mother has found her somewhere to stay in the meantime until she has somewhere permanent to go,” he replied.

“What does your father want me to do?” asked my own father.

“He is of the opinion that it isna wise to antagonise the whole fort, but we must show these men that we will not allow this behaviour on our own lands.”

“Could ye not visit and speak to the commander?” I said, knowing the answer to my question all the time.

“It would do no good Isa,” said my father. “This is a show of strength and the commander would turn a blind eye. No, this will be dealt with our way and when it is least expected.” He looked towards the selection of weapons hung over our hearth and continued. “We will let the broadsword do our talking for us. It is a language that is understood better than any other.”

33

Rory left soon after, our farewell was muted by the news he had brought, and after he left we sat in silence. My father took his massive broadsword from its

place over the fire and sat staring in to the flames while he cleaned the blade with a piece of cloth.

My mother broke the silence. "What will happen now Davie?" She said quietly.

He didn't look round but spoke, whilst still methodically cleaning the blade. "I will need to speak to Sir James, the matter will wait a while, they will be expecting some sort of response, but they will not anticipate that the heathen Highlanders will be measured in their actions." He stopped smoothing the blade for a moment and then went on. "Aye, it is likely that this was the purpose of the whole affair." Then he turned to face us. "There is talk of a Rising for the King, there is even talk of his coming to Scotland."

We all looked at each other. This was the first time our father had spoken of anything of this nature in front of us. I looked immediately at my mother. She did not seem surprised.

My father continued. "There are changes ahead of us, the Elector's troops have strongholds now behind the Highland Line and Wade's roads make all of the lands behind those accessible. The English will know that they dinna have the manpower to take on all the clans, but they will use the old clan divides to separate us. It is a well known strategy in war, that to defeat a large force ye must divide it to conquer it."

He then rose from the chair in which he was sitting and held the broadsword out in front of him, slowly twisting it so that it flashed in the candle light. "We must remain strong but at this stage we canna jeopardise the possible return of King James or indeed the more likely coming of his son. It is only something like that that will join the clans against a common enemy. It has always been the fate of the Scots to argue amongst ourselves, we need a cause to unite behind and King James would provide that." He put the now shining weapon back in its place and ran a finger along the side of the blade. "Aye," he said, almost to himself. "There will be many such instances as this, I fear, and we are limited in our response." Then his voice changed, and I heard in his words a kind of anger that I had not heard before, he said. "But mark ye Mary, we will respond and they may wish that they had left us well alone."

At that he turned from the fire and walked to the door, pulling his plaid around him and left the house.

A week went by, and my father didn't mention anything of which he had spoken on that night. But there was an air of tension about the house. My brothers and my father were absent during the day and my mother, Margaret and I went about our work without our usual high spirits.

The incident had even replaced my wedding in my own thoughts. I feared for what would happen, not only to the man I loved, but to my father and brothers. I woke in the middle of one night having dreamed again of the day that my father and brothers left for France, only this time Rory was with them, and as they had walked down the hill they had disappeared one by one into a swirling mist. When I had awoken I sat up in my bed and listened to the wind outside the house and I had wished that I could speak to Rory right then, to hear his voice was all I needed to calm myself. But there was no one to turn to, Rory was down in the glen and I was alone in my room. It had taken me a long time to get back to sleep and to rid myself of the nagging fear that haunted my mind that something terrible would happen.

After a further two sleepless nights it soon became apparent, although it was never openly discussed in our home, that the next night had been chosen to perform whatever task of retribution against the English soldiery had been decided upon. My father and brothers returned early from their duties that day and they all seemed in a general state of agitation. The broadswords over the fire were all taken down and cleaned meticulously and as night fell our meal was eaten almost in silence.

My mother was the first to raise the subject, she did this by simply resting her hand upon my father's arm and saying softly. "Will ye promise me Davie that ye will keep the lads," she glanced at me then, and added. "All the lads, safe. I know ye canna tell me what will happen, and I know ye must do what ye have to, but I willna bury another of my men if I can help it."

My father looked at the hand on his arm and put one of his own upon hers. "Hush Lass," he said softly. "All the lads", and he emphasised the word 'all'. "Are as precious to me as they are to ye. And I dinna have any ambition to die yet awhile. This must be done, but there are no many English soldiers who can take on a Highland man and find him wanting on his own soil. We will come home and the English will have been taught a lesson that they may remember for a while. If we dinna do anything then we run the risk of more attacks and then the clans will no be able to stop themselves rising up. And now is not the time, there will be time ahead for that but now we have to act with stealth."

I was about to speak but was interrupted by the door opening and Gordon entering, with Margaret carrying Andrew behind him.

"Are ye ready Da?" Gordon said.

"Aye, we should be away now." He looked at my youngest brother. "Angus, we should be off." Angus almost leaped to his feet. This was the first time that my brother had been involved in anything such as this, and to me it brought

back memories of Gordon and Andrew before they left for France. And I shivered and said a silent prayer as the three of them gathered before the door, pulling on their bonnets and plaids and arming themselves with dirks, pistols and sghian dubh. Finally, broadswords belted across their bodies, they were ready.

The men kissed my mother in silence and Gordon and Margaret said a brief farewell. But before they left, my father turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Dinna worry lass," he said, as if he had read my mind. "I will see that he is safe."

Then, with a final parting look at my mother, my father led my brothers out of the house and into the cold winter night.

34

It was a long night. My mother, Margaret and I sat around the table silently mending clothes; even little Andrew was quiet and soon went to sleep in the chair in front of the fire. The only sounds we heard were the crackling of the burning logs and the wind outside. Time went by very slowly and I could feel my eyelids drooping.

"Go to bed lass, I'll wake ye when they return," my mother said putting her hand on mine. I shook my head. "I willna sleep despite the fact that I am tired. I'd rather be here, I will only think about what is happening when I'm on my own."

My mother nodded and then said. "Well I think on occasions like this there is one thing that might help," and she smiled as she walked over to the dresser in the corner upon which stood the jar of whisky that was always kept there. She put three of her precious glasses, a wedding present from her family, on to the dresser top and poured some of the golden liquid in to each.

She put the stopper in the jar and placed it back on the shelf and then carried the glasses over to us and handed Margaret and I a glass each and raised her own. "To their safe return and to a lesson taught" she said and took a long drink of the liquid. Margaret and I did the same. It warmed me immediately and I felt the colour return to my cheeks. I turned to my mother and said. "I wonder what they are doing now?" She replied, after taking a smaller sip of her drink. "In my experience it is best not to wonder. It doesna help and often your imagination conjures up worse situations than are actually happening."

Margaret nodded in agreement. "I am so scared that I dinna want to think at all," she took another drink and rubbed her eyes with her free hand.

"Sit in the chair by the fire lass," my mother said. "Ye are tired, I will wake ye when they are back and it will not help Gordon any to have a wife too tired to welcome him home now will it?" Margaret smiled and rose slowly from her chair and, taking the whisky with her, walked over to the chair where her son was already asleep and settled herself.

She was soon asleep and it was left to my mother and I to keep the vigil.

I eventually slept, and I'm not sure what time it was that I awoke. I found that my head was resting on my arms on the table and as I sat up I stretched my arms to loosen my back. I looked around and saw Margaret and young Andrew were still in their places beside the fire but the outside door was slightly ajar and my mother was not to be seen. I stood up and walked towards the door, pulling a shawl around my shoulders.

I stood in the doorway for a short while, watching the first light of dawn touch the glen and the waters of the loch below. Then I stepped outside and saw my mother. She stood alone looking down to the glen and I was reminded of the return of my father and brother the last time they went to fight for their clan. I walked over to her and touched her on her arm, she turned her gaze away and said.

"They are coming."

I looked at her and then in the direction in which she was looking I couldn't see anything, just the dim light of morning and the pine trees that crowded parts of the slope down to the glen.

"Where? I canna see them," I said.

She did not alter her gaze but said quietly. "I canna see them either but I know they are coming."

I watched her face, her proud features set in profile in the dim light and I saw centuries of determination embodied in her face. It made me think, could I ever be as stoic or as strong when I knew those I loved were in danger? I knew that my insides were in turmoil, my heart was pounding. I was not only shivering with the cold but with the fear that there may not be four men to be spied in the distance, that all my dreams would have been shattered forever no matter who was missing.

As if she knew what I was thinking she took my hand and said. "Ye will learn lass, that ye have a strength within ye that ye are never aware of until ye require it. It is something that ye will need when ye marry your man and when ye see that danger might befall him and it is worse if your children are

threatened.” She paused and then said. “But I know that ye have it in ye and I know that ye will not be found wanting should such a time come.” And then I saw a smile come to her lips and she put her arm around my shoulders and pointed to the distant horizon.

“They are come. And there are four of them.”

My heart leaped as she said this and it was only when I looked around I realised that there were tears streaming down my mother’s face. She was still smiling though and she wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “It willna do to have your father see me like this, I will go and raise Margaret and the boy.” She turned to me. “I will leave it to ye to welcome them.” And she turned on her heels and strode towards the house, her skirts brushing the grass and stones as she walked.

And so I stood, the sun rising, and watched the four dots in the distance become recognisable as men. I knew them immediately, my father’s red hair, Gordon’s stride and Angus’s excited gestures. But my eyes were drawn to the tall dark figure who walked alongside my father, he matched him stride for stride and when he raised his arm to wave to me I began to run. I had no care for the terrain and nearly fell twice but I could not stop and I was breathless when I reached him. He swept me up in his arms and then, after a brief look for permission from my father, kissed me hard and long until I had to pull away to get my breath.

“Aye ye were owed that lad, but ye mustna think my daughter is too available for kissing,” said my father, but he was smiling as he said it, and Rory let go of me so that I could put my arms around my father.

Gordon ruffled my hair and even Angus pecked me on the cheek.

“Ye shoulda seen it Isa,” Angus said. “Ye shoulda seen them when they saw us, they were terrified; one even pissed himself.”

“Aye lad, there will be time to tell the story but let’s wait till we are home safe before ye become boastful and, dinna say anything that might worry your mother,” my father said.

Rory took my hand, and we walked back in companionable silence until we were greeted by young Andrew who flung himself at this father followed by Margaret.

I saw that my father walked ahead and into the house, and we left it a while until we followed him. Rory still had hold of my hand.

My mother had served up broth and she made us all sit around the table after the men had disgorged their weaponry. Once we were all seated and had a bowl of steaming liquid in front of us she said. “Well tell us what ye can.”

My father took a spoonful of broth, drank it and looked at the faces around the table and then began. "Well it didna take us long to find them once we were on the road. There were about a score of them, camped out. The sentries were half asleep so they didna see us."

"How many of you were there?" My mother asked.

"In addition to the four of us, my father had picked four of the best of the men hereabouts and then there were two who were MacMahons" Rory said.

"So ten against twenty," I said.

"Aye but ten Highland men are a match for any amount of Redcoats," said Angus looking up from his broth.

My father smiled at his youngest son and then continued. "Aye well we watched for a while until such a time as the sentries were not watching anything apart from the backs of their eyelids and then we moved in."

I shivered and looked across the table at Rory, whose eyes were on my father who continued. "We split into two groups, five on each side, and it was no very difficult to set their horses loose, ye could see by the empty ale jugs that they were like as not the worse the wear for drink so it was no huge job to take them before they realised what had happened."

"Did ye kill them?" That was Margaret and I saw the look that passed between my father and my intended as she asked it.

"No lass," my father said. "Much as it was on the minds of the two McMahons we didna want to bring the wrath of the whole garrison on to us, there will be time enough for that, but this isna it. Not yet." He rose then and went to the fire and Rory continued with the story.

"Most of the soldiers were scared enough just by seeing us, it was no difficult for us to round them up and strip them. Nothing like a cold Highland night to bring a man to his knees," he said with a smile.

"What did ye do with them then?" I asked.

"Aye, then we explained why we were there and asked for the man who had strung up Dougal to identify himself and his friends would go free."

"Did they?" Margaret said.

"No they didna, that is when one of them pissed himself, they just shivered, one even started crying," Angus said in disgust

"As well ye might if ye had a dirk pressed into your throat," said my father.

"What happened next?" It was my mother who asked this question.

"We said that in the absence of the true culprit we would pick one and treat him in the same way," said my father. "So one of the MacMahons selected the one who appeared most frightened and made him stand apart from the rest.

It's a fact of life that when a man is in fear of his life his loyalties are no very strong. And our young volunteer soon identified the man who had ordered the hanging."

"He was backed up by the rest," said Angus, his eyes alight. "Aye, so as the representative of the chief Rory was the one to dispense justice," my youngest brother added in an awed tone.

My eyes turned to Rory and then to the weapon by the door.

Rory followed my gaze and said. "There are more ways to mete out justice than by the blade."

Gordon continued the story as Rory looked at me. "The McMahons dragged the man into the clearing in front of the fire and they had their sport with him until Rory stepped in. It wasna going to be easy convincing them that a frightened Redcoat was more use than a dead one but ye did it, though I still dinna know how," Gordon said looking at Rory.

Rory said nothing and it was my father who continued the story.

"Well we gave the man the same sort of trial he had given Dougal and with the same verdict and the same punishment."

"You hanged him, but I thought..." my eyes were wide.

"No Isabel, this was not the time for killing," Rory replied, his face serious and his green eyes dark.

"No but the soldier didna know it," said Angus. "Rory had him mount one of our horses while our men led it under a tree. We had brought a rope with us for the job, the same one as was used for killing Dougal. And Rory told him this," Angus said looking in awe at Rory and continued. "We put the noose round the man's neck and then left him sitting there for a while whilst Rory spoke."

"What did ye say?" I said.

"I'll tell ye lass, it is unlikely Rory will want to boast of his endeavours," my father interrupted. Rory smiled a look of grateful acknowledgement at him and then looked again at me.

My father began after clearing his throat. "He said, 'It has come to our notice that ye and your men saw yourself fit to execute one of our men and so leave his wife, who ye raped, a widow and his children fatherless. We are here to show ye that ye will no commit such deeds without receiving punishment for it. It is for us to make the law north of the Highland Line and it is well that ye remember it. There will be no more acts of this nature unless ye want to suffer the same fate. This is no but a warning to ye, ye can take it as that or ye can ignore it, but if ye choose to ignore it ye choose your own deaths.'"

I looked at Rory and my mind went back to the time he had rescued me

from the soldiers, I had heard him speak then with a passion and an anger that was beyond his years. I had seen the look of fear on the man's face then and I could imagine the reaction of the men this time.

I watched him now, and saw his eyes were not on me but on somewhere in the distance, somewhere that I could not follow and I knew there and then that what my mother had said about the need for me to find my inner strength was true.

Margaret interrupted my reverie. "What happened?"

"Aye well," my father continued. "One of the McMahons slapped the horse on its behind and it bolted."

"My God, you hanged him," said my mother.

"Not exactly," my father replied. "To hang a man his feet shouldna be able to touch the ground. The McMahon family have some experience in this matter and they were under instructions to make sure the rope was not short enough to hang him but just short enough to make it count. It's a precision art or so I'm told," said my father dryly.

Gordon finished the story. "The man was so scared that he shit himself but he was alive, though he may have a very sore throat for a while," he said with a laugh. "We herded the rest into the loch and left them tied and their friend with just enough rope to keep him there and then we left."

"But not without getting something for the widow McMahon and their family," Angus said. "Rory had us empty the saddle bags of the horses and we made a haul big enough to keep them in clothes and food for a while," he finished and cast a look of adulation at Rory who still did not look up.

"Aye, so that's the way of it," said my father. "No-one dead or injured on either side but some very frightened men and a message to take back to garrison. Aye they know now that not only are Highland men not about to let soldiers impose their law on them, but we have the sense to act with a measured approach and not give them reason to outlaw us."

"But ye will be recognised all the same," my mother said.

"No lass, we covered our faces and pulled our bonnets down, besides," he said with a broad smile. "We heathens all look the same to them."

My mother shook her head and then rose from her chair. "Well now ye are back I suggest we sleep for a while and then begin the day and thank God that ye are all safe. Rory will ye stay?"

"No I think I should be away home, my father will want a full report, we need to be ready for whatever might come," he said bowing slightly to my mother.

“Aye lad, go home and sleep, your father should be proud,” my own father said. “Isabel ye may show him out.”

I rose with Rory and we left the house, Angus watching Rory as he passed as if he was a god he’d just discovered.

We walked in silence away to where the horses were tied. Rory slid his broadsword into the scabbard at his waist and then looked at me.

“Isabel I dinna do these things because I wish to torture men,” he said as if he had to atone for his deeds to me.

“Rory, I know,” I replied. “I am not so stupid as not to realise that there are things going on that will make our lives difficult. I have experienced it myself remember and without ye I perhaps may not be standing here. Ye wouldna do anything ye didna have to, I know it.”

He seemed relieved and then he took my hand. “I wish right now I could take ye with me and I could take ye to my bed and I could show ye how much I need ye and how much I love ye.”

It was the first time that he had actually said anything like that in all of the time we had known each other and I saw that his eyes burned with a passion that I had not seen before. Perhaps it was a mixture of relief, of fear and of strength but I longed to be able to go with him and experience this passion but instead I stepped back and said. “It will be soon for us Rory, we only have to wait and I will be able to show ye how much I love ye, it is difficult for me too Rory but we must wait.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “Dinna mind me, I will wait forever if I have to. Isabel ye are all that I will ever need.”

And at that he took my hand and kissed it and then, leaving me standing, he mounted his horse and was away.

I watched him go and I felt the physical need for him travel though my body as if it were a pain that I could not stem. But stem it I did and I too turned away from the spot on which seconds before he had made his declaration and began to walk toward the house.

35

There were no serious repercussions from the garrison at Fort William fortunately, just a few extra troops spotted but nothing of a repeat of the hanging of Dougal McMahan, and we passed Christmas and Hogmanay in peace and deep snow. Seventeen forty-four dawned cold and windy, bringing

blizzards, but I welcomed the year with open arms. This was the year in which I was to be married, this was the year when all of my dreams would come to fruition and Rory and I could at last begin our lives together. When I finally slept on the first of January, I dreamed of weddings and summer and blue skies.

The letters between Rory and I, passed by my father on the occasions when he was able to go down to the glen, were the only means of communication until February when the snows lessened and the nights began to draw out. They were mostly filled with endearments and hopes for the future but one contained some startling news. His father had heard through Lochiel that there was to have been an attempt by King James and his son Charles to land a force in England. It had not gone well and they had been forced to turn back before they even reached land. Rory said his uncle was convinced that this could not be the end and he was sure that this would not be the last of it. When I put the letter down and blew out the candle beside my bed I lay awake and wondered just what this might mean. Clan Cameron were staunch Jacobites and we were known to be by the other clans. I knew that there were other clans whose interests were better served by siding with the government forces. I had heard the story of Glencoe and the massacre by the government backed Campbells, everyone in the Highlands knew of that, and I feared what would happen if we were brought into a conflict. My family would be in danger again and it scared me greatly to think of what sort of danger that might be. But in the following weeks nothing more was heard of the Stuart cause so I put the events to the back of my mind.

As the days drew out and the tracks again became clear Rory was able to visit the house. He brought presents and good wishes from his mother for me and my own mother and Margaret. We spent few minutes alone though and I had no time to speak of any fears, in fact time together was so precious that I had no desire to spoil it with talk of anything that might spoil our happiness.

Soon enough he had to leave and as I watched him go all of my worries returned, he sat proudly on his horse, and I could see the broadsword glint in the sun as the horse moved away. Watching him brought it home to me that one day the responsibility of our part of clan Cameron would rest on his shoulders and that responsibility would include fighting for its survival if needs be. It was a huge burden and I prayed that I could help him if such a time came and at that moment I knew that I had to find this strength to do so to be any sort of wife to him.

As the weeks passed and February melted into March, bringing rain and floods to the glen, winter began to take its leave of our land. Flowers began to

push their way through the cold earth and trees began to sprout leaves. The days became much longer and as each day passed I allowed myself to get a little more excited at the prospect of my birthday and my official betrothal.

It was in the middle of March that my father brought me a letter. This time I didn't recognise the writing. I opened it immediately and read the contents quickly.

It was from Rory's mother, I read it with trepidation, half worried that something had happened to Rory, but as I read I felt a huge surge of relief and then some excitement.

I finished reading and looked up. My father and mother watched me and I began to read out loud.

'Dearest Isabel,

I hope this letter finds you and your family in good health.

I am writing to you, on behalf of Sir James and I, to invite you and all your family to celebrate the occasion of your birthday with us at Cameron House and in order to formally announce your betrothal to our son. We would be delighted if you could attend and I can assure you that all arrangements will be made in respect of accommodation.

I await your reply,

Yours

Anne Cameron'

I looked up from the paper; my parents were smiling.

"Well it seems that it is an occasion for another new dress," said my mother.

That hadn't occurred to me, I had two suitable dresses and that was more than most of the women in the Highlands could boast. But as the intended bride of the laird's son I would be expected to wear fine things and act accordingly. I looked down at my skirt which was worn in places, and suited for the life I led. Until then the practicalities of it all hadn't entered my mind. It was almost as if I was so scared that it wouldn't happen that I hadn't wished to tempt fate by approaching anything that was an acknowledgement that this was not all some dream from which I would awake. But it was not a dream, it was only some six weeks until my birthday and then two months after that would be our wedding day and I would need to start preparing for both. I could not marry Rory wearing a patched skirt and a shawl.

My mother, of course, understood. She asked my father to take a letter from her to Lady Cameron, the contents of which she didn't show me, but three weeks later a large package arrived from Cameron House. My mother took it immediately into her room and refused to discuss its contents.

Nothing else was mentioned but I realised that she spent considerably more time than usual visiting Margaret and Gordon.

I was not to see Rory before my birthday, he wrote to me that his father had sent him to Lochiel's on clan business but that I shouldn't worry and that he loved me and was counting the days before he could show just how much to everybody.

The days dragged on but at last the twenty-seventh of April seventeen forty-four dawned.

The day was bright and thankfully the skies showed promise that this would continue. I woke early and lay in bed staring at the ceiling for a few minutes when there was a knock on the door and my mother came in followed by Margaret.

"Happy birthday lass," my mother said. "If ye would follow us we have a present from us all to ye."

I got out of bed. It was still cold and I was only wearing my shift. I quickly pulled on my skirts and stockings and my shawl and wrapped it around my shoulders.

I walked out into the main room to be met by not only my mother and Margaret, but my father and brothers as well, even young Andrew was there.

My father stepped forward and kissed me on the cheek. "Happy Birthday lass, may all your dreams come true," he said, and I noticed that there was a catch in his voice as he said the words.

Then Angus and Gordon came and delivered kisses on either cheek, they were joined by young Andrew who pulled at my skirt and demanded to be lifted so that he could do the same as his father and his uncle.

Then it was Margaret's turn to come over and after she had deposited her wriggling son back on the floor she took my hand and led me to my mother who moved aside to reveal the most lovely dress I had ever seen. It was a beautiful pale green, with panels of silk and a low neck edged with fine lace.

I felt tears prick at my eyes. "It is beautiful," I said, fingering the material.

"Aye, a beautiful dress for a beautiful lady," my mother replied, also with tears in her eyes. "This is only part of the present, you will get the other half in due course," she said with a smile.

I turned to them all, I wished to remember this occasion, all of my family together on the morning of the day that I would finally announce that I was to

marry the man I loved. I had not known happiness like it, and I knew even in my euphoria that a moment like this should be savoured and then stored in my memory for times when I would need it.

After we had eaten our breakfast, porridge and oatcakes with some precious honey that my mother had saved for the occasion, the men of the family left the house and my mother, Margaret and I did the day's jobs. After that my mother set up the huge tin tub in front of the fire and poured a cauldron of boiling water into it, she supplemented this with water from the well into which we were all to bathe.

The women of the family thoroughly clean, the men returned and went through the same routine, while Margaret and I adjourned to my room in order to fit me into my dress. It was a perfect fit, the material floated around me as Margaret lifted it over my head and as she laced the back I felt the silk fit the contours of my body. I longed to have a mirror like the one in Rory's mother's room to see myself as he would see me.

After I was ready Margaret left to dress herself and I stood by the bed, not wanting to sit down in case the material creased.

I stood there for a while just drinking in the occasion when the door opened and my mother walked in. She looked lovely, her hair was held back by a tortoiseshell comb that had been a present from my father and she wore her favourite blue dress.

"Lass, ye are a beauty," she said. "He had better think himself a lucky man indeed."

I smiled. "It is me who is the lucky one, not only do I have the love of Rory but I have all of ye. I am so very happy."

She walked over to me and put her arms around me. "Keep your happiness Isabel, it is a precious thing, and I wish ye so many more days like this." I saw she was close to tears again, and I knew that it was Andrew who was on her mind, but in her characteristic way she shook herself out of it and then, head high, she took my hand and led me out of the room.

The gathered Camerons let out yells of appreciation, and I felt myself blush from my neck to my temples. My father saw this and rescued me. "Well that's enough of that, dinna embarrass the lass, let's be on our way." So we all left the house and began to get ready for the journey, I took a shawl with me and my father helped me take my place on the waiting cart.

I rode with my father at the front, my mother, Margaret and Andrew sat in the back and Angus and Gordon rode their horses alongside. It took some time to reach the glen and as Cameron House came in to view I felt butterflies in

my stomach and every step the horse took seemed to be too slow but at last we arrived and we clattered into the courtyard. At the sound of the hooves the front doors of the house opened and Lady Cameron, followed by the laird, came down the steps to greet us.

Sir James Cameron walked up to where I sat and held out his hands to me and lifted me down. "Ye look lovely lass," he said. "My son is a fortunate young man, make sure ye remind him from time to time," he added with a twinkle in his eye.

He led me toward the steps and I was relieved that as I walked the creases seemed to drop out of the fabric of the parts of my dress that were visible under the shawl.

Lady Anne waited at the top of the stairs until her husband and I reached her and then she too held out her arms and drew me to her. "Welcome Isabel, welcome to our home and welcome to our family." I thanked her, rather overwhelmed by the whole occasion, then she said. "Shall we go in, I think there is someone who is impatient to see you." She took my arm and we turned and progressed into the house, before we went in she took the shawl from my shoulders and passed it to a young girl who hovered by the door.

On entering I was a little taken aback, arraigned in the large hall were all of the staff of the house, as we walked past they all either bobbed curtsies or bowed, and at the foot of the stairs standing by the door of the main room was Rory. He looked wonderful, my heart surged just to look at him, he was dressed in all his Highland finery and he wore the most amazing smile. As we drew nearer he bowed and then walked towards us. His mother stopped, and slipped her arm from mine. "I think now it is more appropriate for my son to lead you in" she said. Rory held out his arm and I slipped my own in his, then he turned and, as if by magic, the doors opened. I stood for a moment, almost in shock, it took me back to that night months before when I had thought my life had ended.

The room was full of people, some of whom I knew, and some of whom I did not, it was so like that previous night, except for the fact that I was the woman on Rory's arm and it was me that he led into the room to the scurl of the pipes. And as I walked past the sea of faces I felt as if I was floating in some dream state, and when we stopped in the middle I felt my legs were going to go from under me. But Rory must have sensed this because he bent his head close to mine and whispered in my ear. "Ye are the loveliest woman in the room Isabel, ye need not be nervous, ye are home now and from this day I will never give ye cause to be unhappy again I promise ye."

36

I floated through that evening on a glorious cloud of happiness. All who attended congratulated us and those people who, like me, remembered that night where things were so different didn't mention it. And for that I was very grateful indeed.

Rory never left my side, this was the first occasion where neither of us had to watch the way we behaved and it was a huge relief to us both. Occasionally I caught my mother's eye as we progressed around the room and she smiled at me, I knew that she like me was remembering that night where I had felt my world had ended and that Rory was lost to me, and she knew as I did that it had been worth the pain.

During the evening, when Rory was speaking to some distant cousin who had travelled from Inverness, I realised that his mother was standing next to me. "Do you have a moment? There is something I have to show you." She said, taking my elbow. I looked for Rory but he was deep in conversation so I let his mother guide me through the company.

"I have never seen my son more happy," she said as she led me upstairs.

"I have never been more happy," I replied.

"It is very rare that two people love each other equally," she said. "Normally there is some adjustment for one or the other party, but love like yours only comes along occasionally that is why we all should cherish it." I wondered then how she had felt when the young James Cameron had 'spirited her away' from her Lowland family. As if she understood my thoughts she said. "Oh I fell in love with Rory's father soon enough but I might have wanted an easier start." I saw that she was smiling as she said it.

There was not time to elaborate because we were now standing in front of a door in the upper corridor, which was located to the left of the landing, it seemed to be a mirror image of the location of her own rooms on the right.

She took a key from a pocket in her skirts and turned to me.

"This is a birthday present from Jamie and I, we hope you will come to be happy here and that you will look upon this house as your home."

She handed the key over to me and I looked at the object in my hand and then at her, she motioned me to open the door and I stepped forward and put the key in the lock and turned it. The door swung open and I stepped into the room. I looked around in wonderment, the candles in their sconces were lit

and their flickering light illuminated a large beautifully furnished sitting room. The wooden shutters were open on two large long windows, and I walked across the room and peered through the glass. In the light of the moon I saw that the windows looked across the garden over to the loch and beyond, much the same as those of Lady Anne's own room. It would be a magnificent view in the daylight. I turned from the window to Rory's mother.

"Do you like it?" She said.

"It is lovely," I replied, not really knowing what else to say.

She smiled and then walked towards another door that appeared to link this room with another and beckoned me forward. She opened the door and waited for me to walk through. The room was of a similar size, with yet more fine furniture but this room was dominated by a huge canopied bed. It really was the most magnificent piece of furniture I had ever seen.

"We hope you and Rory can call these rooms your own," she said. "If there is anything that you don't like you can replace it. These are yours to do as you wish with."

I turned to her, I couldn't think of anything to say but. "Thank you".

"It is our absolute pleasure," she said. "Since my daughter died I have not had any female company in the house and I am very much looking forward to you living here. There will always be a place to stay for any member of your family. I admire your mother, she is a fine woman and I hope that she and I can be friends too."

I walked over to her then and took her hands in mine. "I canna tell ye how much this means to me and I canna tell you how grateful I am," I said.

"There is no need for gratitude Isabel, it is an absolute relief to me that my son has chosen so well. It is a mother's lot in life to lose her son to his bride, but I feel that in a way I am gaining a daughter and new friends as well. It is I who should be grateful to you."

And then she clapped her hand over her mouth, and said. "I had almost forgotten, come around here." She walked to the wall on the right hand side of the bed and pulled back the tapestry that hung there to reveal the oak panelling beneath, then she ran her hand along it and as she pushed at the wood, the wall appeared to open before us. I stepped forward and peered over her shoulder, only to jump back at what seemed to be an apparition hidden in the small dark room that had been revealed.

She laughed at my reaction, and taking a candle that was set on a little table at the side of the bed, she stepped inside. The room was windowless and the walls were made up of the stone of the house, there was just room for us both

to enter, it was furniture-less apart from what I now saw to be a dummy covered by a huge sheet of muslin.

“And this,” she said. “Is your wedding present.”

At that she slowly pulled the muslin away to reveal a dress that even surpassed the one I was wearing. It was a pale cream satin, with a bodice that appeared to shimmer in the candlelight. I stepped closer and saw that this was because it was inset with tiny glass beads and golden thread. The sleeves were edged in beautiful French lace, as was the neck, and the bodice was edged with satin ribbon. It looked like the sort of dress I would imagine the ladies at Court in Paris would wear.

“It is beautiful, but where?” Was all I could say.

“It is French, it arrived from Inverness two days ago and I have kept it here because I wanted only you to see it.” Rory’s mother replied.

“Does Rory know?” I asked.

“Oh no, only you and me, and your mother of course.”

Lady Anne carried on. “She wrote to me and we have shared correspondence, as I say not only is she a fine woman but she is a fine seamstress and she had your measurements exactly. This dress was stitched by one of the top seamstresses in Paris to your mother’s stipulations and I see by the dress you are wearing now that it will be an exact fit.”

She went on. “Of course, you will need more and I can have materials sent from Inverness from which you can choose your wardrobe.” She stopped then and turned to me. “That is, of course, if you have no objections to my plans. As I said I have been a little starved of female company and am tending to run away with myself, or so my husband tells me,” she said laughing.

I touched the dress almost reverently, it was beyond my comprehension that something like this was my own and I found myself lost for words.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Lady Anne said.

“Oh no I dinna mind, I just canna find the words to thank ye” I said quietly.

“That is thanks enough,” she said and then added. “I think we should return to our guests, your betrothed will be wondering where you are.”

To hear Rory referred to in those terms thrilled me as much as the dress, and as we walked down the stairs my mind was full of thoughts of the wedding and the life ahead of me.

37

The intervening weeks flew by. Planning for a wedding, of what I began to realise was of huge proportions, took over my family's lives and mine. My father's eyes would be raised heavenwards when talk of weddings entered the conversation and he usually found some reason to absent himself from the proceedings, quickly followed by the other male members of the family.

There were many visits to Cameron House for my mother Margaret and I to discuss arrangements and sometimes I felt that things were running away with me. However I soon found that my presence was not necessarily required and I often escaped into the gardens. When Rory was at home he would seek me out and we would snatch precious moments away from the whirlwind that was our wedding. But his father had decided that as Rory was about to be married he should undertake more of the role expected of the future laird and he was often away from home, visiting tenants or at Lochiel's house in Achnacarry, or watching his father and uncle dispense justice. Despite the fact that the relationship was now official it seemed that we were still forced to be apart and our time together was still as precious.

May came and went, taking the last of the winter with it and bringing Spring to the Highlands, the land looked beautiful and flowers bloomed where before there had been only heather. June entered with sunshine and only a few showers and I hoped that our wedding day would be blessed with the former.

At last the week of the wedding arrived, matters were reaching a crescendo and my father rarely ventured into the house during the day and even I began to worry that it had taken on a life of its own.

It was one such day, the last before my wedding, that I slipped out of the house quietly and went in the direction of the stones in which Rory and I had spent those first precious times together. I climbed the hill, breathing in the clear air and the perfume of the flowers and grass around me. When I reached the top I stood for a while looking down at the glen beneath me. It was beautiful in its summer plumage and just to stand looking at the view that stretched for miles against the clear blue sky caused the tension to fall from my shoulders. I walked slowly towards the granite outcrop and stepped into its confines. As I leant against the stone and put my hands face down on the rock behind me it felt warm from the sun and I closed my eyes and breathed in and out slowly, and eventually my whole body relaxed.

And as I stayed there, in this calm warm spot the real spirit of what was

about to happen enveloped me and the minutiae slipped away. It had all started here, I recollected those first tentative meetings, those words spoken and the thrill that Rory had actually noticed me and as I turned my face to the sun I remembered how wonderful it all was and how wonderful it would be. I was to marry the man I loved more than any other in the world. I was to begin a new adventure that would bring great happiness, and soon I would never wake in the morning without knowing that he would be there and that I would feel his skin against my own. The thought of that made small shivers run through me, I would soon know what it was like to be truly loved by a man and I realised that I wanted that very much. But still there was that fear inside me, the fear I had always had at times of such happiness, that somehow this would all be taken from me and I said a silent prayer for our future. And when I opened my eyes and looked around at the view in front of me I could not help but trust that my prayers would be answered.

My thoughts turned then to the member of my family who would not be present at the wedding. I thought of Andrew who lay somewhere on a French battlefield far from home, and I felt a tear prick at my eye then and it might have been the wind and it might have been my imagination but I am sure that I heard a soft Highland voice say. "Ye needna worry Isa I will be there." I didn't seek to question it; all I knew was at that moment any sadness I felt melted away.

I stayed in that lovely spot for some time, drinking in the peace and the sunshine and then I knew it was time to leave. Time to go down and join in with the pre-wedding hubbub and time to enjoy every minute of it.

Once back at home I plunged in to the spirit of things, the planning of what to wear, instructions to young Andrew, and yet more instructions to Angus who saw Rory now as a hero figure and was willing to do anything to be part of this event. The afternoon was spent in a happy chaos and the evening meal was eaten with everyone talking at once and my father's eyes almost permanently turned to the ceiling. As evening drew on I rose from my place at the table to attend to the milking, my mother watched me go, and with what seemed like a catch in her voice said. "I didna realise till now that this is the last time ye will do this Isa." It had not occurred to me either, this was not only the last time that I would help with everyday duties but it would be the last night spent under my parents' roof. I turned to her and she held her arms out to me, I stepped into them and we embraced, mother and daughter sharing the moment together.

She stroked my hair and said. "Ye will make him a fine wife, and ye will make a fine Lady but dinna forget us will ye."

"I'll never ever forget ye. Never. I will only be in the glen and I can come here whenever I wish, can't I?" I said. Suddenly for the first time it had crossed my mind that since this would no longer be my home it might make a difference.

"This will be your home lass wherever ye may be, and should ye ever need it there will be a place for ye here," she replied.

"Just as there will be with me," I said. "Lady Anne said that ye were welcome any time and that she thought ye were a fine woman."

"Oh well in that case I had better live up to it and stop snivelling," my mother said laughing and wiping her eyes. "Now for the very last time Isabel Cameron, unless of course ye have a mind to do so in the future, ye shall go and milk the cows."

I smiled back at her, kissed her on the cheek and turned and left the house into the warm evening air.

I went in to the barn and lit the torches that would shed their dim light on the inside. Habitually I closed the doors behind me and set up the stool under the first cow, which continued chewing the hay in front of her. As I rhythmically pulled at the teats the milk shot in to the pail I carried and my thoughts turned again to weddings.

I'm not sure how long it was until I heard the noise but I turned from my work to hear the sound of scratching at the back of the barn. Probably a rat I thought and then after a momentary pause I jumped from my stool and ran to the loose panel and pulled it away as fast as I could and sure enough he was outside.

Rory crawled through and soon he was standing inside the barn and I was in his arms and we were laughing together.

"My mother almost threw me out of the house, so I came here," he said.

"But ye are not supposed to see the bride the night before the wedding, it is unlucky" I said.

"It would have been more unlucky for me to stay. She is in a fair old mood with all the preparations and I was very much in the way. My father has retired to his study and doesna venture out at all," he added.

He kissed me then and I felt passion stir within both of us, almost like a spark it quickly ignited until I had to pull myself away from him.

"Rory we dinna have long to wait," I said.

He pushed his hand through his hair. "Aye I know but I canna wait much longer I want to take ye now, here in this barn away from all the arrangements and the planning and the guests, and just love ye as I have wanted to do for so long."

“I want to too,” I said. “But we have to wait just one more day and then we have every day of our lives.”

He smiled at that. “I doubt that I will be able to keep that up but right now I’m willing to try.”

I felt myself blush and he laughed. “I’m sorry I shouldna said that, it was coarse and I apologise,” he bowed.

I replied. “Ye needna apologise it is no worse than the thoughts that have been going through my head these last months.”

He coloured up a little at that and held out his hand. “Isabel Cameron we have both waited too long but I will wait for ye tonight and from tomorrow I will honour ye in every way I can.”

I took his hand and he pulled me to him and held me close and buried his face in my hair.

“I canna believe that it is tomorrow,” I said.

“Aye neither can I, it seems that we have waited forever to be together. Most of my life has been spent thinking of ye and wanting ye and now it is tomorrow, I will be counting every minute until I can call ye truly mine,” he replied.

“And me too,” I said. “There are so many things to look forward to and so many things that will be new to me, it will be like a huge adventure.”

“Aye, one which we will go on together my love,” he said.

We stood in each other’s arms in that barn talking and laughing and reliving memories of those early days until he said with a sigh. “Well I should go now, I fear that if my mother wants me and she finds me missing she willna forgive me long after we celebrate our first anniversary.”

I nodded and he stepped back, still holding my hands in his own. “Goodnight Isabel Cameron for the last time I will leave ye.”

He let my hands fall and I blew him a kiss as he turned and left the barn the way he came.

I put back the piece of wood just as I had on those occasions when this was the only place we could meet and I resumed my place under the cow, which seemed to heave a sigh of relief that I had resumed my work.

38

It was the morning of my wedding and surprisingly I had slept, I hadn’t expected to but when my mother came into my room I awoke with a start.

“Ye canna be sleeping today Isa, I need ye up and washed before we go down to the village.”

Rory’s mother had taken rooms in the inn near the church so that we could change before the wedding. She had pointed out that a journey on horseback would do nothing for the wedding dress, not to mention the mother of the bride, and so we were to bathe and leave early for the glen. The wedding was to take place at two o’clock in the afternoon and we were to leave as soon as we could, as it would take longer to get to the village than to Cameron House.

I dressed quickly and pulled my comb through my hair in an attempt at some semblance of order and went into the main room. My whole family were up; Angus, Gordon and my father had seen to the beasts and saddled the horses. My mother and Margaret had prepared breakfast and the men-folk were already eating.

I stood for a while looking at the scene for what I knew would be the last time. If I hadn’t been so happy I would have shed a tear at the thought. It was like watching a play being enacted and realising that I would no longer be part of the cast. And then I remembered how it had felt when Rory held me close to him, and how it had felt when I had thought that I had lost him, and I smiled and my mood lightened.

Bathing for six adults and one child was not easy even when there were two cottages. There were many trips to the well and many cauldrons of hot water until all of us were ready. Afterwards the men dressed in their full regalia, while we women retired to our rooms and dressed quickly, our wedding clothes would be waiting for us in the inn. I rubbed my hair furiously with a cloth in order that it could dry but it was still damp when my father declared that we should be away.

I lingered in the house until my mother and I were the last ones left. I stood in the doorway of my own tiny room and looked around. It held so many memories for me; so many dreams and too many tears and I paused there in silence for a while.

“Dinna worry Isa, ye will have many happy times ahead of ye in your new home, and this time ye will have Rory to share them with. Ye know lass I felt like this when I married your father but ye soon forget and ye will still be close to us.”

She was right of course. I would only be in the glen below and would see my family often. She hadn’t seen her parents since she was sent away and as my father’s parents had both died many winters ago she only had us and we were a small family by Highland standards.

“I know,” I said as I closed the door quietly and turned to face her. “But I wanted to tell ye how much I love ye and to thank ye for helping me when I thought I had lost him.”

“Aye well what are mothers for if not to help their bairns?” She said. “And I will always be here. Even when ye have bairns of your own ye will still be my daughter. Now come on we should go or young Andrew will be wanting to pay a visit again and we canna wait for that.” She smiled as she took my hand and we walked out of the house together.

Once we were all mounted we left and began our descent to the village in a line. My prayers seemed to have been answered, the sky was a clear blue and the day promised to be fine. As the horse carried me down the track the morning sun touched my face and my hair dried in its rays. I saw around me flowers in bloom and their perfume assailed my nostrils as I travelled. It was a beautiful day.

It took three hours to get to the village.

When we reached the inn, the innkeeper came out to greet us, he had the stable lads take our horses and we were ushered into the building with great ceremony. I noticed that he gave me a small bow as I went past and I made a point of thanking him for his welcome and courtesy. I thought Rory’s mother would have approved.

The men took their places at a table in the inn and my mother, Margaret and I were shown into a large room upstairs.

I saw that in the centre of the room stood the mannequin with the wedding dress, still covered in muslin. I walked towards it and took the cover away until the dress was revealed in the rays of light that came in from the small windows.

“Isa that is the loveliest dress I have ever seen,” said Margaret.

“Isn’t it,” I said as I felt the fabric with the tips of my fingers “I had never imagined in my life that I’d be wearing something as fine.”

“Aye well ye are, and ye will do it credit Isabel Cameron,” my mother said. “And if ye stand there staring at it with your mouth open any longer ye will miss your own wedding.”

We helped each other to dress. I was first, I slipped off my old dress and shift and put on the fine cotton one that was laid out on the bed for me and then it was time for the corset. It had bones in it and was laced at the back. I had never worn one before and when my mother pulled the laces I took in a sharp breath.

“Not too tight Ma I’ll no be able to breathe,” I said.

“Aye, those French women canna do much by the way of movement in

these, but still ye will only have to wear it the once," she said as she pulled the laces tight and tied them at a bow at my waist.

Once the corset had been laced, Margaret and my mother helped me to step into the underskirts, which they tied at the back with satin ribbon.

"Shoes next," my mother said, and she passed a pair of dainty slippers to me, which had tiny heels. They were about the most impractical items of footwear I had ever seen, but they felt wonderful, and when I pulled up my underskirts they made my feet look very dainty.

"Now lass we'll dress and ye can put on the wedding dress when we are ready," my mother said turning to her own and Margaret's dresses that were laid out on the bed.

I watched, as they got ready. Lady Cameron had given them the run of her wardrobe and they had both chosen well. My mother had a blue dress with small blue rosettes at its neck and sleeves and Margaret had picked a pink dress, which made her look like rose.

"Ye both look lovely," I said.

"Aye well, I think we'll do our men proud," said my mother standing behind Margaret. "Now for the hair."

Once both my mother's and Margaret's hair was ready it was time for me to put on my dress.

I stood still while it was lifted from the mannequin and over my head.

"Arms up," said my mother, and I dutifully complied. The fabric felt wonderful on my skin and even the corset was worth it to be able to wear something so fine.

Once I was in the dress my mother and Margaret did up the tiny glass buttons at the back and as I looked down I began to see the results of all their hard work, it really was like a fairy story.

Once dressed it was now time for my hair. My mother produced some steel pins and small satin roses of the same material as the dress and she stood on a stool behind me and manoeuvred my hair with the pins until she and Margaret were satisfied with the result. I still didn't know what I looked like but my two helpers congratulated themselves and I could tell by the look on my mother's face that she was proud.

At that moment there came a knock on the door. I put my hands to my face and made to move away.

"Dinna worry," said my mother.

"I have the mirror that Lady Cameron requested and there has been a delivery for Miss Cameron," said the innkeeper from beyond the door.

“Thanks to ye sir but will ye leave them outside, we will see to it,” said my mother. I heard his footsteps receding and when she was sure that he had gone my mother went to the door and opened it.

She nodded to Margaret and they both walked out and came back carrying a huge wooden mirror which they set down in the corner of the room.

“Well lass, ye can have a look at yourself now and then ye can tell me that ye dinna know why Rory loves ye,” my mother said.

“Close your eyes though Isa and we will lead ye,” said Margaret taking my hand.

I closed my eyes and I felt my mother’s and my sister-in-law’s hand take my own and they carefully guided me across the room.

Then their hands left mine and Margaret said. “Now look.”

I was almost scared to open my eyes but slowly I did so and brought my head up.

I was lost for words. My reflection looked nothing like me, it was almost as if the fairies had weaved their magic. Lady Cameron had been right, the dress was an exact fit and as I moved, the tiny glass beads and the gold thread shimmered as if there were tiny lights sown in to the fabric. My mother had worked wonders with my hair and the tiny bows appeared as if they had been scattered there, only I knew that the pins held them tightly in place. I just stood and stared at my reflection.

“Well are ye no going to speak at all?” My mother said in a tone of mock admonishment.

“I dinna know what to say, it doesna look like me,” was all I could muster.

“Oh dinna be silly of course it does, it looks like my beautiful daughter and dinna forget that Rory fell in love with ye when ye were covered in mud so it will be something to see when he sees ye in this,” my mother shook her head.

“Ye look lovely Isa,” Margaret said and then she turned to my mother and said. “What was the package the innkeeper spoke about?”

“Aye, I had almost forgotten that,” my mother said and she pulled a small box wrapped in paper from her pocket.

She passed it to me and said. “I think there is a note with it.”

There was a note, it was wrapped around the box and tied with a green silk ribbon. I undid the ribbon and opened the paper, it read.

‘We are one always – R.’

My fingers shook as I opened the box and then I exclaimed, for lying on a green velvet background was a beautiful gold locket, with the initials R and I intertwined and set with tiny sparkling jewels. My shaking fingers opened the

locket to reveal that under the glass on one side was a lock of Rory's black hair intertwined with one of my own. I was amazed, not just by the beauty of the thing but by the fact that he had kept that lock of hair from so long ago. And I found myself saying quietly. "He really must love me."

"Oh Isabel, ye never doubted it did ye? Ye only have to see the way he looks at ye to know that," Margaret said.

I smiled and I found that I brushed away a tear as I did so.

"Well come on lass, let me put it on and then we will need to leave for the kirk," said my mother as she took the locket from me and fastened it around my neck. I realised then that I was shaking, not through fear but through excitement and through joy. This was the moment for which I had been waiting, I would be leaving this room to become Rory Cameron's wife

39

My mother and Margaret descended the stairs first, I heard whoops of approval from the men gathered below and then it was my turn. I took one last look at the mirror and saw the bejewelled locket sparkle at my neck. I was ready.

I trod very carefully down the stairs in to the now crowded inn but I was not ready for the response. The whole room went quiet. I felt strange, all the faces were upturned towards me but it was my father's I sought. I held his gaze and he walked forward and took my hands and said very quietly and very gruffly. "Ye look like a princess." I looked into his eyes and I saw the tears in them and I took his hand and gave it a squeeze and said. "Are there any cows ye want milking Da?" He laughed at this and squeezed my hand in return and then we turned to leave.

With his hand in mine I walked across the room. With my family and the entire customers of the inn behind us we walked out into the bright sunshine.

I was amazed there was a crowd of people outside the inn. I could not believe that so many people could have gathered so fast, they cheered and shouted good wishes as we walked through and I was quite overwhelmed, never had I had this much attention. My father squeezed my hand again and said. "Aye ye seem quite popular lass." I smiled and then as we came through the crowd I saw the carriage that was waiting to take us the few minutes journey to the kirk. Rory's mother had said that to drag a dress like mine across the cobbles and mud was sacrilege so she had hired one for my father and me and one for my family, so that we could travel the rest of the journey in style.

And style it was, it was driven by two fine bay horses, their manes platted and their coats brushed until they shone. The coachman stood by the door and unfolded the steps as I walked forward. And then I heard the pipes. The music was distant at first and then it seemed to fill the air and I saw that approaching from the direction of the church came two Cameron pipers. I knew one but the other was unknown to me. As if he anticipated my questions, my father whispered “Lochiel’s piper, one of the best in the Highlands, ye are honoured lass.”

I was indeed, the music grew louder as they drew near and the crowd waited appreciatively until they had come to a stop in front of the carriage before they cheered. Both of the pipers bowed to me and I returned their bows with a smile and a curtsy. I felt that this was all very unreal.

When it was time to get into the carriage I was helped in by the coachman and my father, my mother arranging my dress as I sat. My father climbed in and positioned himself opposite me. His kilt, and a deal of his body, enveloped by the fabric of my dress.

“Aye well this is something that we’ve not done before,” he said sotto voce and I giggled.

Once the other carriage that had drawn up behind us was full of the rest of my family the pipers began again and the vehicle began to move, the people of the village walking with us. The carriage bounced over the cobbles and stones of the street and I smiled at the good wishes I received from the well-wishers we passed. By the time the church was in sight we had quite a crowd around us and I was somewhat amazed to see that an equally large number of people were outside the church.

I had thought that some people might be interested but somewhat naively I had assumed that there may be only a few people who wanted to wish the son of their laird well. But I had never imagined that the whole clan, because this is what it seemed to be, would turn out.

When we reached the church the carriage jerked to a halt and the coachman jumped down and opened the door, my father went first and then they both helped me down. My mother and Margaret disembarked from the other carriage and came across to help me to put the dress in order.

At last I was ready and through a chorus of appreciative remarks from the crowd I walked through the churchyard and to the door. Here we stopped for a while, until my family and the last stragglers went inside the church.

My father and I stood alone. “Are ye ready?” he said. “Ye know if ye dinna want to there is always tonight’s milking for ye to do, I’m sure ye’d not be missed.”

I laughed, and replied. "Yes I am ready," and then turned to him and said. "Thank ye for everything."

His face turned serious for a moment and he replied. "Ye have no need to thank me, I am your father, and ye have been a blessing to me all of your life and I wish ye and the lad every happiness. But," and now he looked almost fierce. "If ye ever have any cause to complain about your husband ye must come to me and, laird's son or no, he will have me to reckon with."

I smiled up at him, just as I had many times before, and said. "Thank ye but I doubt I'll be needing to."

And he returned my smile and replied "Aye, then shall we going in? I feel that it would disappoint the crowd if we didna do so, not to mention the lad."

And as we began to walk slowly into the church behind the single piper I felt as if I was walking on air.

Once inside I saw that the church was full, there were summer flowers everywhere and their perfume mixed with the smell of incense was intoxicating. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the interior I strained to see past the piper and for the first time caught a glimpse of Rory as he waited. My heart skipped its own music as I saw him. This was real, this was not a dream, all that I had hoped and prayed for was actually happening.

At last the piper took his place at the side of the church and as my father and I walked the rest of the way up the aisle I had an uninterrupted view of the man I was to marry. I saw him turn and then time seemed to freeze, everything else melted from my sight. All I wanted to do was run to him but instead I walked proudly towards him at the measured pace beside my father, as I came closer he mouthed. "Ye are beautiful."

When I reached his side my father held my hand for a final second and then he was gone and Rory and I stood together before the priest.

Throughout the ceremony it might have been that we were alone in the church, even the singing of the hymns seemed far off. It was truly magical. I could feel my hands shake as he placed the ring on my finger. The band of gold slid over my knuckle and at that moment I knew that this was tangible evidence that my dream had come true. All those years of waiting were over, this was my new life and I felt thrilled, and a little scared, at the prospect.

When it came to our vows, I could hear the tremor in Rory's voice as he repeated that he would cherish me until death us do part, and as he spoke those words his green eyes held my own in his gaze for what must have only been a second and they seemed to have their own message.

40

The rest of the ceremony passed in a haze of happiness and at last it was time for the priest to pronounce us 'man and wife' and it was time for Rory to seal our marriage with a kiss.

He moved toward me and took my hands in his and he kissed me lightly on the lips as befitted our surroundings but he whispered in my ear as he pulled away. "Later," and the crimson blush that crept up from my neck to my face was not entirely suitable for the House of God.

We turned then and made our way down the aisle past all of the congregation and into the sunshine. The crowd cheered as we emerged and I put my hand to my eyes to shield them from the sun. Rory made the crowd cheer even more than as he slid his arm around my waist and drew me towards him for a long lingering kiss. He laughed like a boy at my obvious embarrassment at such a public show of affection, and as I looked at him I saw the look of the young lad who had pulled me from the mud return to his face for a fleeting moment.

The carriages stood at the end of the path through the churchyard and the crowd emerging from the building almost pushed us along ahead of them until we had reached the gleaming transport. Rory and I climbed into the first carriage and waited for our families to reach us before he motioned to the coachman that it was time to go. He flicked his whip and the horses started to pull away, we turned and waved as we left. I saw my mother waving a handkerchief madly in the air as she stood with my father's arm around her by the gate. Both of my parents had tears in their eyes.

"We are not taking the direct route back," Rory whispered. "I wanted ye to myself for a few minutes, I hope ye dinna mind?"

"No I dinna mind at all," I said. "At the moment if it started raining I wouldna mind getting soaked through I am so happy."

He put his arm around my waist and pulled me closer to him.

The carriage turned up into the hills. The track was not really big enough to take such a vehicle and it was a very bumpy ride but to be alone was wonderful.

Rory turned to me and smiled as he saw the locket at my neck. "Do ye like it?" he said. "I had it made in Edinburgh by one of the jewellers there. It was why I wasna around much, I only got back yesterday."

"It is lovely," I said. "I canna believe that ye kept the lock of hair for so long."

“I have cherished it ever since I took it from ye Isabel. It was the only part of ye that was mine until now,” he said and he let the locket fall from his fingers as his hand went to my neck and caressed it as he drew me nearer and kissed me again, long and hard.

And then the carriage came to a shuddering stop; it was so abrupt as to unseat the both of us and have us sliding into the well between the seats.

“What is it man?” Rory said.

The coachman pointed, there was no need for words.

Across the track were twenty soldiers, some of them in the red coats of the English army and some wearing the tartan of The Watch, the Highland soldiers of the opposing clans who kept the Elector’s law this side of the Highland Line. Most of them were on horseback, but some were standing at the side of the road positioned near to the banks.

As we regained our seats I heard the sound of steel on steel and I saw that Rory held his broadsword at his side and that he had his dirk in his other hand. But the soldiers could see neither of these weapons.

The man who appeared to be in charge of the others was riding a large black horse and he now slowly rode towards us and then drew his horse up beside the carriage.

I did not move, but I felt Rory’s body stiffen, but he said nothing.

“On behalf of King George, may I be the first to congratulate you and your bride on your wedding Sir,” the Englishman said as he reined his horse in.

“My wife and I are pleased to accept your congratulations Sir, but if ye could ask your men to let us through we are expected by our guests,” Rory replied in English.

“Of course Sir, we do not wish to delay you from your festivities. But we are on the lookout for a band of men wearing Highland dress who accosted some of the King’s men some weeks ago in these parts. I wondered Mr Cameron, in your position whether you would be acquainted with any of these men?”

So he knew who Rory was I thought. It was unlikely then that this was a chance meeting and I began to feel real fear. Memories flooded back of my one and only encounter with the men of King George and I felt my heartbeat quicken and the colour drain from my face. Rory remained motionless.

“I dinna have any knowledge of such men Sir,” he replied. “But I do have knowledge that one of our people was hanged a while back by some of the King’s men. A hanging that took place without a trial and in full view of his wife and bairns.”

The soldier’s face twitched at that but his tone didn’t change. “I know little

of that incident Sir but for the fact that the man had been accused by one of the people of these parts of thieving cattle. If you are unable to keep your people within the law then it is left for us to enforce it as we see fit," he said.

I noticed that the other men were drawing nearer and my heart was pounding in my chest.

Rory spoke quietly. "I am no inclined to agree with ye Sir but as today is my wedding day I willna press the argument. I will ask ye again to let us through."

The man didn't reply but clicked his horse on and rode round the back of the carriage and drew up alongside me.

"Captain Robert Williams, I am at your service Madam," he said as he executed a bow whilst seated on his horse.

I nodded but I did not raise my eyes.

"In a country such as this I think it unwise for a lady to travel with only one man as escort. My men and I will escort you the rest of the way." He said.

I didn't reply, I could barely speak, it was Rory who spoke for me. His voice was still soft but I knew that the tone had underlying menace. "I assure ye Sir that my wife is well protected," and at that he put his fingers to his lips and let out a piercing whistle.

Men appeared, as if from nowhere. It was almost as if a spell had been cast and the 'fairy folk' from the old stories had evolved from the rocks and trees. But I saw that these 'fairy folk' carried broadswords and wore the dress of Highland warriors.

The Captain's horse was startled and it reared, nearly dismounting its rider.

"Ye may go on with the journey," said Rory softly to the coachman. And as he flicked his whip and the horses started moving forward the clansmen flanked our carriage. I didn't look round at Captain Williams but I did see his men scatter as we drove straight at them. I kept my eyes straight ahead as we went through but a feeling of ice cold fear crept through my body as out of the corner of my eye I saw a man turn away and pull his uniform jacket up to hide his face. But it was too late, I had seen the white scar of a cross on the man's cheek and I knew that he had not heeded Rory's warning.

Despite the heat of the day I was shivering as the carriage picked up speed, and Rory pulled me to him and held me in his arms until I stopped. I didn't dare tell him about the man I had seen. Somewhere deep within me I felt that feeling of shame that I had experienced when Rory had found me on that day, and I also had no idea what my husband would do if I told him that my assailant was only yards from us. I needn't have worried. Rory took my face in his hands and said. "Remember I told ye once that ye mustna let that man

colour your life, well I will say it again Isabel. Wipe him from your memory, it is for me to remember him.”

“Please don’t do anything,” I said. “If ye do, ye will be outlawed and then they will find ye and God alone knows what they would do to ye for killing a soldier. Even if ye are the laird’s son.”

“Do ye not think I dinna know that Isabel, he replied. Do ye not think it is my shame that I canna finish him off now with one stroke of this,” he nodded towards the sword that gleamed amongst the fold of my dress. “But there will come a time when no Scotsman will be controlled by the English and we dinna have to be bound by their law and then I will settle my debt with that one. Until that time comes he is mine to think on, and not yours.” He kissed me gently then, and said. “Dinna let it spoil this day Isabel, we have waited so long and I have longed for ye so much.” His voice, that had previously held such menace, implored me to forget and as the rays of the sun touched my face I made up my mind that all thoughts of the soldier would be banished. While Rory was with me I was safe, and Rory would always be with me.

41

The journey back on the road to Cameron House was relatively short and soon the jolting of the carriage ceased. The clansmen kept pace with the horses as we made our way to what was now my home. “How did ye know to place the men there?” I said.

“I didna know anything for sure but there have been reports of activity among The Watch and the English battalions and if I was going to take my new wife on a detour I thought it safe to have some protection just in case,” he paused and turned to me. “I am only sorry that I was right and I am only sorry I was foolish enough to take the risk. I will not take such a risk again.”

We sat in silence until we passed the bend in the road and saw Cameron House ahead of us. He took my hand and brought it to his lips and said. “Here ye are, we are home.”

I looked at the lovely house against the backdrop of the mountains and the shimmering loch and the final traces of memory of the encounter were pushed further away by the sheer magnificence of the scene in front of me.

By the time we reached the entrance to the courtyard we were both smiling and when the carriage carried us through we were met by the sound of fiddle music from the gardens and the sight of our families waiting for us.

I saw the looks on both of our fathers' faces change as they saw the men surrounding us. My new father-in-law smiled as he handed me down from the carriage but I saw the look that passed between him and his son, and I heard them exchange hurried words as I walked forward to receive a greeting from Lady Anne and I fought to forget the incident as she led me to the festivities.

As the weather had held, the food and the dancing were to be outside and she took me through the other arch into the gardens. She didn't once ask any questions but she glanced briefly at her son, her husband and my father as they talked by the carriage.

The place set out for the party was crowded. It reminded me of that night all those years ago when Rory had come back from Edinburgh and had spilled wine all over my dress. Lady Anne took me through the crowd, most of whom greeted me in some way or other, until we reached a table that had been set out at the end of the dance floor. I was relieved to see my mother. She walked over to us and kissed me on my cheek and said. "Ye took your time to get here lass, I know what it is like to be a newly-wed but surely ye could have waited," her smile died on her lips when I told her what had detained us.

"Rory is right though," she said after I had quickly recounted my story. "Ye must put it behind ye or it will eat at ye. He willna let ye come to any harm." She looked across the garden and then smiled. "Look here he comes now, so no more sad looks eh, he must be blaming himself for it and it isna his fault."

I saw Rory moving through the throng, people were patting him on the back and shouting their greetings to him and I saw that he took time to answer everyone. I felt pride that he was mine and the thought made me smile. When at last he was by my side he greeted my mother and Margaret with a kiss and spoke to Gordon and patted Andrew on the head. He exchanged a joke with Angus then at last he was next to me, he whispered. "Are ye all right?"

"Aye I am recovered, but what did they say?" I asked.

"Who?" He replied.

"Our fathers of course," I continued.

"The matter is in hand Isabel and as this is our wedding can I ask ye to dance?"

I looked at him, he said nothing, but his eyes implored me to not to question him any more so I took his hand and he led me on to the wooden dance floor. As the music started and we started to dance the guests began cheering and clapping and soon the dance was in full swing and other couples

joined us. The mood of the day took over and soon we were laughing as we moved around the floor to the music.

And so the day continued into early evening, one of those lovely Scottish summer evenings when the sky never really gets dark and the beautiful colours of the sky just become more intense. The loch shimmered in the evening light and, with the aid of an occasional glass of wine, the meeting with the soldiers seemed unimportant. I was Rory Cameron's wife and that was all that mattered and I began to relax, Rory never strayed from my side.

Throughout the evening we sat at the table by the floor and people came to give their congratulations. On one occasion I saw a man walk towards us through the dancing. The couples on the floor seemed to part in his presence and I realised that this must be Rory's uncle, Donald Cameron of Lochiel, head of our clan and a man of whom until that day I had only heard stories. Rory led me around the table and when he reached us Rory bowed and I dropped a curtsy.

Rory's uncle held out a hand to me and he turned to his nephew and said. "I approve of your choice young Rory, I would have waited long for her too. But will ye permit me to make ye wait a little longer while I have the honour of dancing with your wife." Rory nodded and the chief of our clan led me towards the dancing.

I noticed the space that cleared as we walked on to the floor and I was a little in awe of him as the music started. He seemed to understand this because he said. "He's a fine young man my nephew. I think my brother underestimates Rory's capabilities but I think he will be a fine successor when his time comes and he will be good to our people. As for his choice of bride, if it is an indication of his character I feel that I have already been proved correct."

"Thank ye Sir," I said. I was a little lost for words, never in my life had I imagined that the chief of all the Camerons would be whirling me around the dance floor. He held the power of life or death over all of us, he could call men into battle at will and it was in his hands that all the septs of our clan rested. I knew that he and Rory's father had a substantial amount of money behind them. There were some in Scotland who had lost their money on the Darien venture when almost all of the monied families in the country had pooled their resources in order to attempt to start a Scottish Colony in the Americas. They had done this to try to avoid the heavy taxes the government had used to bridle Scottish trade. But the scheme had failed, the settlers perished through illness and lack of planning, and all funds were lost. But my father had told us that

Lochiel and Jamie Cameron had only lost money that they could afford to lose and that had made them richer than most of the counterparts. It was to these men that the clan was grateful because we had suffered far less deprivation than had the others. And as the dancing came to an end and he handed me back to my husband I wondered whether he had come to hear of today's incident, but nothing was spoken and he took his leave of us without making reference to it.

The night drew on and I found myself sitting alone at the table, Rory had left to speak to some distant relative who he had not seen for a while and my family were dancing. As I sat watching I stifled a yawn, it was late and I was beginning to feel very tired. Suddenly I felt a pressure on my left arm and I turned and it was Rory's mother.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"Oh yes my dear, it's just that you look tired and, well, if you were to leave now I don't think anybody would notice."

I was about to protest when I saw her raise her eyebrows and smile and I felt myself begin to blush yet again.

"But Rory willna know..." I began.

"Rory will follow ye," she said and then she continued with a smile. "I remember what it was like when Jamie and I were wed, they very nearly followed us into the bedroom. And I imagine that you would wish to avoid that if you could."

I looked at her for a second, this very refined lady, and then we both giggled.

"But I havena said goodbye to my family," I said.

"Don't worry, it was your mother who suggested it," she replied.

I looked towards the dancing then and I saw my mother glance over and incline her head towards the house and infer me to go along with her co-conspirator.

So without further protestation I followed Lady Anne back towards the house along a path between two hedges and to a tiny door in the wall.

"Just go through and you'll see some steps, go up them until you reach the top and you will come out on the landing near my room. You know your way from there."

I smiled, feeling shy and a little awkward, but she gave me a quick embrace and said. "Every happiness to you both" and then she was gone, back the way we had come and I turned and opened the door.

Once inside it was quite dark, so I waited for my eyes to adjust then I

gathered up my ample skirts and began to gingerly climb the steps. I was glad that I only wore the fine slippers as the steps were not deep and my boots would have made it an even more awkward climb.

At last I reached the top and I pushed the door in front of me open. I looked about, there was nobody there and so I closed it and walked down the passage, making sure that when I crossed the part which led towards the stairs I stayed as near to the wall as I could. At last I reached the door to our rooms and I opened it and slipped inside.

Once inside I paused, the shutters had not been closed and the room was bathed in moonlight, it cast a magical light on all of the contents. I stood for a while drinking it all in and then I walked to one of the windows and looked out across the gardens below to the loch beyond. The waters shimmered and the moon was reflected in the ripples on the surface adding to the whole beauty of the view.

I don't know for how long I was there but I only barely heard the door to the room open. I slowly turned around to see Rory standing in the shadows. I caught my breath, suddenly I felt nervous and shy, despite my dreams, the letters and our meetings. We had vowed to wait for each other and now the time had come I felt suddenly very awkward.

He walked slowly towards me, pausing to discard his weaponry on one of the chairs. He took me in his arms then and we stood together in front of the window, his arms around me and his chin resting on my hair. "Aye it is very beautiful, but nothing to compare with ye Isabel. I have never witnessed anything more lovely than when ye walked down the aisle today, I could barely speak my vows. It seemed impossible that anyone like ye would marry me."

I turned towards him and there was no need for words. I lifted my face for his kiss and then I felt myself melt into his arms and my nerves evaporated as the kiss grew more passionate. His hand travelled down my face and then on to my neck, until his fingers rested on the part of my breasts that were exposed by my dress. He let out a moan of absolute desire and then he bent his head and kissed the flesh, I felt a shudder go through my whole body, and I pulled him closer.

"I canna wait any longer," he said.

"Ye dinna have to Rory, the waiting is over" I said as I turned around.

I felt his hands unbuttoning the bodice of my dress as I pulled the pins from my hair. Soon I stood amidst a cloud of French fabric and underskirts. Rory undid the laces of my corset and I felt my whole body relax. Soon that garment too lay discarded and I stood in nothing but my shift. Rory closed his eyes as I

unpinned his plaid and then as I undid the buttons on his velvet jacket I felt his breath quicken. He had already stripped himself of his stockings and shoes and when his plaid, and therefore his kilt, fell to floor he stood in his fine white shirt and nothing else, the fabric showing the contours of his body in the moonlight.

He opened his eyes and stood motionless as I pulled my shift over my head and then as this final garment was discarded he let out a moan of pleasure. "Do ye know how long I have dreamed of this and how long I have imagined what ye looked like naked," he said. "And now my God ye are better than any of my dreams."

I smiled; I did not speak but walked towards him and helped him take his shirt off.

I ran my fingers across his chest and then I kissed his shoulders, he pulled me close to him and I felt the hairs of his chest against my breasts. Rory's hands were moving now, down my back until his fingers caressed my buttocks and he moved me towards him. I felt him move against me and his manhood stiffened at my touch and as he did so he murmured words of love into my hair.

Then he pulled away, "I willna take ye in the middle of a pile of clothes," he said laughing. "And while I can still walk I'll carry my wife to our wedding bed."

So he picked me off my feet and carried me across the room and through into the bedroom. The soft candlelight flickered across the chamber and I saw that the sheets and quilt on the huge bed, which dominated this large room, had been drawn back and the under sheet and pillows were strewn with rose petals. I smiled and lay my head against his shoulder as he carried me across the room. As he laid me gently on the bed I pulled him with me and we lay in each other's arms. He stroked my body with his hand as he supported himself with his other. The feel of his fingers on my skin made my heart pound and when his hands strayed beyond my waist I let out a small cry of ecstasy, I felt myself moisten at his touch and I longed for him to continue.

"I willna hurt ye," he said.

"I know ye won't but I want ye now Rory."

And he did as I asked.

When I felt him inside me I cried out, not in pain but to express a feeling I had never experienced before. It was as if all the nerves in my body were on fire, and as we moved together towards our climax I could not stop myself from crying out again. He held me to him as we reached the crescendo of our

lovmaking and when we had spent all of our energies we lay together, our limbs entwined, on the petal strewn sheets. The long wait was over we were one, and nothing could ever separate us.

42

When I awoke the room was still in darkness. The drapes drawn over the windows did not let in any sunlight, I had no idea what time it was. I looked around the room and began to discern the shapes of the furniture, it was so very different from the room in which I had awoken the day before.

I felt Rory stir against me, I was lying in his arms and I could feel his breath on my back in tiny expressions of air. I closed my eyes. This was what I had hoped for all those years, yet I felt just a little afraid. My life now depended upon the young man in whose arms I lay, his life was to be no easy task. With the fine house and furniture came the responsibilities of other men's lives, of their families' lives and my husband would inherit that responsibility and these were not easy times. I realised then that I knew hardly anything about the politics of our world and those that influenced it. It had come as a shock to me to see the government soldiers and the Watch yesterday but Rory had planned for it, even on his wedding day and in his own lands he had thought that there might be dire consequences in his seemingly spontaneous actions. I began to realise now that such an act of spontaneity was dangerous. In our house above the glen my father and mother had shielded me from all of this and I would have to learn quickly if I was to be of any use to Rory at all as a wife, not just some ornament to be cosseted and looked at.

"What are ye thinking?" Rory's voice startled me a little.

"I, I was thinking that this is the first day of our life together and that I want to be the best wife I can to ye," I said.

"Mmmm," came the reply. "Ye have done nothing wrong so far," he said as he kissed the nape of my neck.

I giggled despite my serious mood and turned round in his arms so that we faced each other.

"No Rory I dinna mean that," I began to speak but he silenced me with a kiss.

When we came up for air I said. "What I meant was,"

"yess," he said, running his hand down my neck and on to my breast.

"What I meant was," I said, raising my voice a little and batting his hand away. "Is that I know little of the world outside that affects our lives. I know

little of politics and even less of any dangers you may be under, and I should know these things. Ye may need my support in the future and if I am ignorant of the facts then I will be no help to ye.”

He sighed a little then and raised himself up on his elbow until he was looking down on me. “What ye say is right Isabel, your mind is one of the things I love about ye. Ye are an intelligent woman and ye have good judgement. I know that ye have a lot to learn, just as I did, and ye need not have any fear on the grounds that I will not let ye in on these things that affect our people and us. My father has always let my mother in on everything, it is one of the reasons he is such a good laird. She is no a Douglas by name only. But Isabel,” and he broke off in mid sentence to brush a tendril of hair that had fallen over my face and then continued. “But, my fair and lovely Isabel, would ye no let me enjoy my first few days of married life without reminding me of all the responsibilities that assail me.” His voice was mock pleading but I saw in his eyes that he meant it and in response I kissed the top of his nose and said. “I promise.”

We lay together then, kissing and talking of inconsequential things, of the joy of waking up together, of the touch of each other’s skin and gradually we became aroused and our kisses more passionate and slowly and luxuriantly we made love on that first morning of our marriage. Sure in the knowledge that we loved each other and sure in the knowledge that, at that moment, we were safe in each other’s arms.

I must have drifted off to sleep then because when the knocking came on the door I sat bolt upright.

“Rory, there is someone there. Please, please don’t let it be your mother; or worse still your father. What can I do? They will see us.”

Rory lay back on the pillow and laughed until tears came to his eyes. The more he laughed the more I panicked.

“No, please tell them to go away. I canna see them like this,” I almost whimpered, and then I took refuge under the covers.

“It is very unlikely to be my parents Isabel,” he replied stifling laughter. “I would imagine it’s Lachlan with a warning that breakfast will be stone cold if we dinna get up. Dinna worry, I think ye are expected to be here, there were a few people who saw us marry ye know. Ye canna deny it now.”

At that he said calmly. “Come in.”

I heard the door open and a man’s voice say, without any tone of surprise. “Good morning Sir and Ma’am, your breakfast is set in the sitting room. Is there anything that ye will be needing?”

“No, thank ye very much Lachlan, please send mine,” and then Rory added rather pointedly. “And my wife’s thanks to Meg.”

“I will Sir.” Came the reply from the world above the sheets. “Shall I bring Elspeth in now Sir?”

“Um no, I think we will wait until we have eaten thank ye,” Rory replied.

“As ye wish Sir,” came the response and I heard the footsteps recede and the door close quietly.

I was then rudely revealed in my hiding place by my beloved whipping the covers off me.

“Come on now, I’m starving, let’s see what Meg has prepared for our wedding breakfast,” he said and he kissed me on my still scarlet cheek and strode stark naked into the other room. I grabbed the nearest sheet and shuffled to the end of the bed and hobbled through.

It was indeed a fine repast, porridge, bacon, warm bread, meats and eggs, and we sat, me in my sheet and Rory his plaid loosely wrapped around him, and devoured the food.

It was a lovely day and we had decided to go for a walk when there was another knock on the door. I was more prepared now and I fixed a smile on my face to cover any nerves I might feel as the door opened.

The man, who I thought must be Lachlan, came in first. A young girl, who seemed to falter as she entered the room, followed him. I noticed that she kept herself a little behind the man as he came towards us.

Rory stood up, his plaid covering everything, and assisted them in the clearing of the plates.

The young girl raised her head for a few seconds and her eyes met mine and she hastily returned her gaze to the floor.

“Hello, what’s your name?” I said in an attempt to ease her nerves.

She didn’t respond, but looked quickly at Lachlan as if for guidance.

Lachlan responded for her. “This is Elspeth, she is here to help ye dress Ma’am. You’ll find she’s a good lass, a little quiet but that is no bad thing,” he said turning and putting his arm gently on her shoulder and prompting her to walk forward.

Without thinking I said. “Oh dinna worry, I dinna really need any help, I’m sure she needn’t bother, I’m sure if she doesna want to I can look after myself.”

The girl moved away again behind Lachlan as if I had struck her and he looked at Rory.

I knew immediately that I had said something terribly wrong and I too turned to my husband for guidance.

Rory smiled and said to the girl. “Dinna worry lass, ye go with Lachlan and see if Megan has anything she needs ye for. I will attend to my wife’s dressing this morning, she has promised me the favour. And ye never know when ye are not around I may be needed again. We will call ye later.”

Now it was my turn to focus my gaze on my hands as the man and the girl left the room carrying the trays of breakfast things and closed the door quietly behind them.

“Oh Rory, “I said immediately the door closed. “I thought I was doing the right thing, the poor girl looked so frightened I thought that it would help.”

Rory knelt by me and kissed me. “Dinna worry ye wasna to know. I should have told ye before. Ye see young Elspeth is Dougal McMahon’s daughter, her mother is too proud to take money from us and so my mother thought that Elspeth could be some help to ye and in that way the family could get some money. Her brother is working in our stables now and their mother does some sewing for mine.” He stood up and went over to the floor where he retrieved his shirt that he had worn the day before and continued. “We probably dinna need all the people we have here at the house, there are only the three of us, and now four of course, but it is one way of making sure that our people are fed.”

“I feel terrible,” I said, and he walked over me, shirt in hand, and took me in his arms. “It is my fault Isabel. Ye said this morning I must teach ye things and I will I promise, this is all as new to ye as it is to her and ye canna be expected to just pick it up.”

He put the shirt over his head and started pleating the tartan of his kilt about his waist. I sat wrapped in my sheet and watched him dress. After he pulled his stockings on and laced his brogues he finally collected his discarded weaponry. I saw the light catch the blade and it made me shudder a little to think what that polished steel could do. I had thought yesterday that it was the only thing between the soldiers and us and I had been glad of it then, but now it seemed to me to be a symbol that my husband could be in danger at any time.

“Why so serious?” he said as he came over to me. “Ye did promise,” he added.

“Aye I know and I will keep it. I was just wondering where my clothes were. Now I’ve sent Elspeth away I don’t know where to look. I can hardly wear my wedding dress again,” I said, looking at the heap of fine fabric on the floor.

“Oh I dinna know,” he said. “Ye looked lovely in it, but I see what ye mean.” He walked over, took my hand and said. “Follow me.”

He led me back into our bedroom, and took me towards a door on the left hand side of the bed, the other side to that of the hidden room in which my wedding dress had previously been concealed.

He opened the door and took me into a long dressing room in which there were chests laid along the wall and a small commode in the corner with a screen around it next to a large china bathtub. I stared at the tub, they were very rare, and I thought that it must be another import from the continent.

I then walked over to the one of the chests and opened its lid and saw my few dresses neatly stored with lavender bags. There were some shoes that I had not seen before next to the chest and as I opened another chest I saw that it was half full of under garments.

“Our mothers did this,” Rory said. “They became quite conspiratorial didn’t they?” he said laughing. “Anyway my mother wants ye to sit with her and choose some more fabrics for your wardrobe. And then ye can fill all of these chests, if ye wish?” He added the last as a question. And I replied honestly.

“Oh I think I wish.”

He laughed at that. “I will go now, my things are still in my old room, and as it is just along the corridor, it’s no far so I thought ye could have the run of this.”

“Thank ye,” I said and then I walked over to him and kissed him long and hard.

He laughed again. “If I get that sort of thanks for a few boxes I will look forward to giving ye things even more,” he said.

He kissed my cheek then and left the room, promising to return quickly.

43

When Rory came back I was dressed, I sat at the lovely dark wood dressing table in the bedroom, it was positioned next to the window to get optimum light and I was brushing my hair when he came in. He stood for a moment before advancing and placed a light kiss on the back of my neck.

I saw in the mirror that he had an envelope in his hand.

Before I could ask, he said. “My mother left this for both of us. It’s a kind of wedding present.” He handed me the envelope and I saw that it had been opened already. “What does it say?” I asked.

“Read it and find out,” he replied with a smile.

So, without further hesitation, I extracted the enclosed letter and read.

‘Dearest Rory,

Your father and I would wish you and Isabel to have some privacy in your first days together and as clan matters call him away I will go with him. We are not expecting to be back until at least a week’s time, so you will have everything to yourselves. The time will go too quickly so make sure you make the most of every minute.

Yours, with love, Mother.’

I looked up at him, he held out his hand and said. “Your gardens await ye Madame.”

Thus began a magical time for us, we spent every minute together, he showed me all of the house from the attics to the wine cellars, and introduced me to all of the people who worked within its walls and gardens. We walked in the sunshine along the paths within the perimeter of those gardens surrounded by flowers and herbs of all kinds. We ventured further on horseback and stopped in the most beautiful of places to eat sumptuous repasts prepared by Megan and her helpers. It was wonderful to think that we could be together and we grew to know each other more as each day passed.

We had been blessed with good warm weather, but one day as we rode into the hills the air seemed sticky and ominous dark clouds gathered over the mountains.

Rory looked at the sky. “I think there will be a storm,” he said. I was a country girl and I knew it too. “I dinna think that we will have time to get back before it breaks,” he said looking at the clouds that were getting closer as the wind began to grow stronger.

“What shall we do?” I said. I was wearing a summer dress and had no cloak of any type.

He thought for a minute and replied. “I know a place, follow me, it isna far but I think we had better lead the horses. If there is lightning it may startle them and I wouldna like ye to fall.”

So we dismounted and led our mounts along a small winding deer-track between the trees. Large drops of rain had begun to fall when he took my horse from me and said. “D’ye see that rock over there, there is a cave behind it, we

will be dry in there. I will tether the horses and then I'll be with ye."

The rain was stronger now and I heard the first rumble of thunder from across the glen. Its noise was magnified by the hills around and I wondered how Rory would deal with the horses on his own. He seemed to read my mind as he turned and said. "Dinna worry I will be fine, now go before ye get soaked." He pulled his plaid over his head and grabbed both sets of reins close to the horses' mouths and I turned and made a run for the rock.

Just as he had indicated there was a gap behind the stone and I squeezed through to find a cave. The entrance belied its size and I was able to walk about in it without having to stoop. It was dry inside and there was evidence that someone had been here before as there were signs of a previous fire. Fortunately there was no one there and as I stood waiting for Rory I hoped that they would not return before he did.

But Rory returned quickly and shook the droplets of water from his bonnet and plaid. "How are the horses?" I said. The thunder outside was rolling across the hills and I wondered how the frightened beasts would fare.

"They are skittish but they willna get far," he replied. "Even if they were to break their bonds it is likely that they will only go back home, so ye needna worry on their account," he said.

The temperature had changed and I felt myself shivering.

"Are ye cold?" he asked.

"A little," I replied.

"Aye well, we can solve that. Have a look around there's lots of dry bracken and wood in here, and it willna be difficult to start a fire."

"Someone has done so before though," I ventured, pointing to the spot on the floor.

"Oh aye, I know," he answered, bending to collect some sticks. "We use it a lot when we're out hunting, when it is too late to get back home. It's sheltered plenty of Camerons in its time."

He walked to the site of the previous fire and cleared the ground with his foot, then he crouched and placed the twigs and the bracken I passed him in a mound, he then produced a small flint from his sporran and proceeded to rub it vigorously against another stone in the centre of the pile of kindling. I had seen this done many times before but it never ceased to amaze me that a tiny spark could start something as strong and as powerful as a fire and I watched, mesmerised, as he did it. This process took a while and the thunder was overhead when the first flames began to seize at the wood. With some practiced management the flames then took over the kindling and the bracken

and we were soon sitting beside a respectable fire, which was warm enough to stop me shivering, although Rory's arms around me helped enormously.

As we sat listening to the primeval force of nature outside we held each other tightly. The thunder was too loud to pass much conversation so we listened to the sounds from outside and now and again a blast of cold wind would send sparks flying in the fire and the dancing flames illuminated the walls of the cave.

Suddenly there came an almighty crash, almost as if the rocks were going to crumble over our heads, and I let out a scream and buried my head in his chest. He put his arms around me and started to sing in a low voice. It was one of the old lullabies mothers would sing to their babies, my mother had sung it to me, and he held me to him as the thunder clapped. I had never heard him sing and was surprised at the quality of his voice. When he had finished I said, "I didna know ye could sing."

"Aye well I can a bit," he replied. "When I was in Edinburgh at the school the music teacher said he thought I had a talent for it. So they had me for the choir, but they soon changed their minds."

"Why?" I asked. "Ye have a fine voice."

"Oh, it wasna to do with my singing, it had more to do with my fighting." He went on. "Ye see, there was this other lad who was a bit of a bully and thought that he could have some fun with a young lad from the Highlands, but he learned quickly that he had picked the one wrong. I believe I broke his nose over some taunt or other." He smiled and said ruefully. "It's a pity, because I did enjoy that choir."

I laughed and kissed him, he put his arms around me and I felt his muscles harden under the thin summer shirt he wore. My own breath began to quicken and soon I forgot to be scared of the thunder as his hands began to undo the ribbons on my bodice and, as I pulled my skirts up and laid down under him, it could have thundered loud enough to shake the mountain itself and I wouldn't have cared less.

We fell asleep in each other's arms afterwards and neither of us knew what time it was when we awoke. The fire had gone out long ago and it was now quite cold but there was no thunder and we couldn't hear any rain.

"I think we had better be getting back," Rory said sitting up. "I dinna feel like spending the night here"

"No, neither do I," I replied straightening up my clothes..

He stood up and pulled me to my feet. My dress was creased and had dust marks all over and I tried to brush it down as much as I could.

"I look dreadful," I said trying to comb my hair with my fingers.

"Ye, Isabel couldna look dreadful if ye were up to your neck in mud." Then he stopped and said. "Although ye didna look your best I must admit."

"Well if that was the case what did ye see in me?" I said in reply.

"First, I saw ye had spirit, and secondly I saw that ye were brave. I'll never forget when ye said your piece to my father in front of all the tenants. I had never seen him speechless before and I thought then that ye must be something special."

"And thirdly?" I asked.

"Thirdly, when I saw ye come down with my mother I fell in love with ye. Ye were like nothing I had ever seen before and ye have had my heart ever since."

And at that he held out his hand. "Come my fair Isabel let us see if we have to walk home or if the horses have stayed where I left them."

Rory's parents returned later than expected and they were full of news. It appeared that there were stirrings in France. King James' son Charles was sending messengers from Rome through networks in France and then to Scotland and England seeking to find out if he had support in the Highlands and across the Border. There was nothing else yet, but Rory's uncle had thoughts that another attempt might be made to cross the Channel or come straight to Scotland. His view, and the view held by Rory and his father, was that this would be a foolish errand as it would rely upon French support for its success. King Louis of France appeared to be a man notorious for inconsistency and there was nothing from that quarter that could be depended upon yet. But it seemed that this was only talk and not to be relied upon, so my blissful life continued.

44

On her return, Rory's mother began to instruct me on how to run the house and how to carry out the duties of the laird's wife.

"One day all these responsibilities will be yours, and the people will look to you. Not only the people that work within our walls but our tenants too," she said. "You will be expected to have an answer to all situations, and if you don't," and she smiled ruefully when she continued. "You will have to put up a show that you do."

I was somewhat disturbed by the fact that for me to use all of the training she was giving me Rory's father would have to have died and she would have had to forfeit her role. When I mentioned this to her one day she gave me a faraway look. "Yes, that is so. But that is the way of things and, God willing, it will be many years yet. Enough for you and my son to have had a life together and by that time I will be glad to pass the responsibility on."

I looked at her then, this tall elegant woman who was the epitome of elegance and wondered how she could envisage the death of her husband so calmly. It was almost as if she could read my thoughts. She looked straight at me then and said. "When Jamie goes part of me will go with him, but life goes on and in our position we must prepare for the inevitable. I just pray that when the time comes that I am able to cope with it. I remember when we lost Elizabeth I felt as if I too was lost."

She had never spoken of her daughter since that day years ago and I felt too shy to say anything, but she seemed to want to talk and she continued after a few seconds.

"She was taken so early in her life that it was a terrible shock for us. She seemed only to have a cold and then suddenly it got so much worse and she had a fever. I stayed by her bed for three nights without sleep. Jamie was away but, thank The Lord, he returned before she left us. He has never forgiven himself, but it was not his fault," she added. "How could anyone know?"

She walked to the window of the room in which we stood and rested her hand on the drapes that hung there. "Poor Rory was only nine and he didn't really understand why his mother and father almost ignored him for what must have seemed too long for him and only minutes to us."

Then she turned and smiled. "And that my dear Isabel is why I am so very happy that he has found you. The love you give him I hope makes up for that which he didn't receive when he needed it most, and for that I am so very grateful."

My eyes swam with tears. I couldn't reply because my throat seemed choked.

She held out her hand and said. "I am sorry for upsetting you, I shouldn't have."

I walked over and took her hand and said. "It is an honour that ye share these things with me. And I promise I will always love your son, there will never be any need for ye to doubt it."

She squeezed my hand gently and said softly. "I know."

45

And so the year continued, as the months passed I began to feel more used to my new surroundings. I enjoyed the challenge of learning from Rory's mother and I tried to help her as much as I could. We visited tenants together, and she helped me learn how to complete the ledgers detailing all of the household expenditure, from wages to the purchasing of the smallest foodstuffs. I enjoyed the work, learning what everything cost and making sure everything was recorded neatly in the huge books. I began to feel that I belonged.

Fortunately I saw my father almost daily, and my mother would sometimes accompany him. She and Lady Anne had become friends and it was always good to see her, she was a reminder of my old life and of the fact that, whatever happened, my family would always be near me. Sometimes too I made the journey back to the house on the hills and spent time with Margaret and young Andrew. The young lad seemed to grow taller every time I saw him and he looked more and more like his father every visit. I also saw my two brothers as often as I could, when they were down at the house. Angus had changed even in those few months I had been away, on one visit my mother told me confidentially that it appeared that he might be courting one of the girls in the village. He had first met her at our wedding it appeared and it made me smile to think of it. Although he was now a good-looking young man I still remembered him as the brother who used to tease me mercilessly. It made me think how things had changed in but a few months and I wondered sometimes how things might be altered in the months to come. But those months held no fear for me, and when I woke in Rory's arms every morning I felt as if nothing could touch our charmed existence.

Those months went by until one day in September Rory's mother suggested that I might want to consider a birthday present for her son and that the first one from wife to husband would be very important. When I told her that I hadn't even thought about it she seemed relieved and she went on.

"It's just that I have an idea, something that will be very special and something that only you can give him."

I wondered to what she was referring. The only thing that had caused a slight blight to my happiness was the fact that as yet I was not with child. I hadn't expected to become pregnant immediately but I had hoped that by November there might be the telltale signs of a pregnancy. When one night I had asked Rory quietly while we were lying together if he minded he had

turned and wound his arms around my waist and said. “Dinna worry, we have years to have a child. My mother and father were married for over four years before my sister was born, and then I came along two years later.” He thought for a moment and then ran an explorative hand along my arm and said. “And in the meantime it doesna hurt to try.”

“Isabel?”

Rory’s mother’s voice shook me out of my daydream and I hoped that she hadn’t noticed the fact that I was beginning to feel a telltale blush creeping across my face.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sounding flustered. “What did ye have in mind?”

“A portrait,” she replied, her normally calm face was animated and she went on. “A portrait of you.”

“Oh wouldna that seem a little immodest?” I asked.

“Oh no, it would be a gift of love from wife to husband. You could wear his favourite dress. The green velvet one, the one you wore on the night of the Gathering.”

I was surprised that she had remembered and even more surprised that she knew.

Rory had said that out of my entire new, and very fine, wardrobe his favourite was the one my mother had made for me, the one that he had spilt the wine over on that very first night when he had returned home from Edinburgh.

She seemed to read my mind. “Sometimes a son tells a mother things,” she smiled. “Although not as often as she might like.”

I smiled. “Well if ye think that he would like it, I will do it. But there isna anyone around here who could paint such a thing,” I replied.

She paused before answering. “I can, it would be a joint present from us, if you will trust me to do it.”

I was surprised, I had never in my time at Cameron House seen her with a paintbrush and I had not seen any of her works.

Again she seemed to know what I was thinking. “I used to paint before I had Elizabeth and then I never seemed to find the time and then afterwards I have never wanted to pick up a brush. But I still have my things and I have ordered some paints from Inverness. I hope you don’t mind but I thought it was such a good idea that I didn’t wait to ask you.”

I looked at this woman, who was the epitome of everything graceful and wondered at the fact that this fine born lady was asking my permission for her to paint my portrait. “I am honoured that ye should want to do something like

this,” I said, “and I am very grateful to ye for suggesting such a wonderful present.”

The paints arrived within the week and Rory’s mother and I began the subterfuge that was necessary to produce the secret present. We would remove ourselves to her rooms where she had set up an easel, and away from Rory and his father, and she would take up her brush. I was not allowed to see the painting until it was finished. My mother however, when she came to visit, was given a preview and she put her hands to her mouth and turned to her friend and said. “It is beautiful, ye have a fine talent. Ye should do more it would be a very great shame to waste such a gift.”

On Rory’s birthday we gathered in the large dining room, just the two families together and it was then that the portrait was revealed.

For a while he didn’t say anything, he just stood and stared at the image. As did I, for this too was the first time that I had set eyes on it. I was not prone to spending hours in front of the mirror, even now that I had a fine mirror in which to look, but I marvelled at the accuracy of the portrait. At last, after staring at the painting for a long while, Rory turned to me and said. “It is lovely, it is the most precious gift anyone has ever given me, but who is the artist?”

So he too had no idea that his mother was a painter.

When I told him he was speechless and his mother glowed with pride as he walked over to her and put his arms around her. Only Sir James Cameron seemed not to be surprised and I heard, after all of the exclamations had been made, him say to his wife. “Dinna put the paints away again Anne, ye have a gift, dinna waste it.”

So everything in my life was wonderful, I had married the man I loved, my family were happy and healthy and my world seemed perfect.

And then the winter came.

We had always been used to harsh winters, it was a fact of our lives that the snows came and we ate the food we had stored. Our people could stand the severe temperatures, we had been born to it. But the winter of seventeen forty-four was exceptionally harsh. It followed a harvest, which had been blighted by rain and there followed a deepening chill that brought with it continuous snowfall. Stocks were even dwindling at Cameron House because Rory’s parents would send out food to tenants who needed it and it was nigh on impossible to travel between Inverness and our lands to bring in supplies.

Rory would ride out with his father, wrapped in his plaid and with his bonnet pulled down low over his ears, to visit far-lying tenants who had been reported in difficulties. They would take food supplies with them in order to try and help the situation. But sometimes they would be too late and they would come home late at night after having helped a family bury a child or elderly family member in the hard frozen earth.

I would wait for him to return in our rooms, sometimes I would be asleep when he came back but I would never actually go to bed before he came home. One such night I heard the door to our rooms open at nearly midnight and as I opened my eyes I saw him creep in so as not to waken me.

I watched him throw his bonnet on to a chair and walk to the fireplace and stand before the fire that was burning in the grate. He held his hands out to the warmth and I saw him shiver slightly as he looked into the flames.

“Are ye all right?” I said.

He turned round and smiled. “Aye I’ll be fine as soon as I can feel my hands again.”

I rose and went over to him and put my arms around his waist.

“How was it?” I asked.

“Aye it wasna good, another death up in the hills, this time a baby, not long born. It seemed as though it was a relief to her parents too, they havena anything to feed themselves let alone a child. It is so cold the cattle are dying and they have nothing to live on. We dinna have a never ending supply of food and it is worrying if this carries on well into the next year that we will no be able to help. We have to have something for the people here to live on.”

There was nothing much I could say, never before had it come home to me so abruptly that my husband and his father were responsible for the lives of these people.

“What does your father say? Can ye go to Lochiel for help?” I asked. As clan chief, Rory’s uncle would take the ultimate responsibility.

“Aye we hope so, but he has his own people to feed.” Rory took up the poker that stood on the stand by the fire and poked the flames. “And it is no a matter of money, even if we could get to Inverness there may not be any food available. It depends on whether the ships have been able to leave port. Its no just the weather, the Elector’s navy are making it even more difficult for our ships to trade and supplies are dwindling.”

I left his side then and went to a table on which there was a decanter of whisky, the amber liquid reflected the gold of the flames. I poured him a glass and took it over to him.

He smiled at me and kissed me as he took the proffered glass.

“This is the only thing that gets me through days like this,” he said quietly.

“The whisky?” I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. “No, all the time we buried that child and helped those people I could only think that at the end of the day, whatever time that would be, that I would be coming home to ye, and that ye would be here waiting for me. Without that thought I wouldna be able to do it”

He put his arm around my shoulders and drained the glass dry of the liquid.

“I am suddenly very tired, shall we go to bed?” He said.

I nodded and took the glass from him and placed it on a table nearby.

We walked slowly into the bedroom where another fire blazed. I drew back the sheets and quilts and revealed the warming pans that had been placed there. I took them out and placed them on the floor and climbed in, pulling the covers over so as not to lose the heat. I watched as Rory divested himself of his kilt, shirt, stockings, shoes and waistcoat and I watched him stretch out his limbs before climbing in beside me. He pulled me close to him and we lay in each other’s arms listening to the crackling fire in the grate and the wind outside that was no doubt bringing with it another fall of snow. His skin was warm and I wrapped myself around him. He turned to face me and said. “I want to take ye and love ye Isabel but all I see in my head is that family and the little bundle wrapped in cloth that we buried. I’m sorry.”

I drew him into my arms then and held him close. “And I love ye for it Rory. Ye can only do your best for them, there is nothing more ye can do but try.”

And that night I held him in my arms until at last he fell asleep.

The months went by, January came and went and still a sheet of white covered the country. My father came down when he could and allayed my worries about how my family were coping. He said that they were managing but he said that this was the worst winter that he had experienced for years.

The only one benefit was that the continuing presence of government troops was lessened. They kept to the three forts, the ones at Fort William and Inverness and the new Fort Augustus where they sheltered from the weather. Even The Watch refrained from making their usual tours, of which I was now familiar.

The absence of patrolling troops had one drawback and the effect of this was more severe than I had imagined for there were reports of problems with small groups of broken men who, without clan and family, were turning to drastic measures to survive. There was talk of what few cattle had survived the

weather being driven off in the night and their owners being threatened, or at worst killed, for trying to protect their own stock and that of their laird and a wave of fear swept across our home.

We had hoped that the New Year would bring a thaw but February seventeen forty-five dawned and brought with it harsh frosts to be followed by an even thicker snow fall, so thick in fact that it even prevented Rory and his father and their men from venturing out. Instead we sat huddled around a fire in one of the few rooms in the house that was heated, such was the lack of supply of firewood. It was not the absence of trees, for these were there aplenty it was the fact that even the rugged highlanders were unable to set foot outside their homes in such conditions.

Rory would spend most of these times worrying about what was happening in the world outside the walls. We were all powerless to intervene until the snow abated, and then, and only then, would we be able to help the people who depended on us for their survival. It was a long long winter.

It was not really until early April that the weather began to thaw. By that time we knew that a good many people had not survived the harsh weather and the count in dead livestock was enormous.

The weather had begun to improve in March and I would ride out with Rory to distribute food and find out the situation with our people whenever I could. I didn't want him to be alone.

Shipments had begun to arrive at Inverness and part of the combined Cameron funds had been used to purchase as much basic food as we could. On these visits Rory and I would take clansmen with us who would lead the garrons loaded down with anything we could carry. Sometimes we would stay with the families if the journey was too long to return in one day. It was on one such visit that we learned the hardships that our people had been facing first hand.

The family we were visiting lived in a croft on the other side of the hills, bordering on neighbouring clan land and there had been talk about the marauding broken men being in that area. Reports had reached us that cattle had been stolen and that one of the crofters' wives had been raped and her husband had been killed trying to save her. The leader of the group of men was a McLeod who had been banished from his own clan for murdering another member. He had fled before he could be brought to justice.

We had arrived before dark. The house was very small and the family lived in one room for which the only light was from the door itself and the peat fire in the centre, the smoke from which puthered up through a hole in the thatched roof. But their welcome was warm and they offered their bed, which

was set in the wall and separated from the room by a curtain, for Rory and me. We both declined but the man of the house, whose name was Duncan Cameron, would not hear of it. "I am no so poor that I canna show proper respect for my laird's son," he said and eventually we very reluctantly agreed to take their bed.

It was late in the night that we were awoken by a commotion outside. There seemed to be men's voices raised and I heard the whinnying of horses and then a woman screamed.

Rory leaped out of bed. We had slept in our clothes, and he grabbed his broadsword and thrust his dirk and then his pistol into his belt. He motioned me to stay and put his finger to his lips. I watched in the dark as he listened and then drew back the thin material that separated the rest of the cottage from us and drew it behind him, leaving me alone.

I waited for a while as bidden but suddenly I heard a woman scream again and I felt that I couldn't lie idly there any longer. I quickly pulled on my boots and crept out of bed and out into the room beyond. I could see that the door to the house was open. It seemed that all the inhabitants of the small building were outside and I made my way toward the door and stood in the shadows and looked out.

I stepped back immediately. In front of the house stood half a dozen men, I could see in the moonlight that they were roughly dressed and wore no particular sign of their clan. They spoke harshly, and as my eyes adjusted I took a sharp intake of breath because one of the men had in his grasp the daughter of the family with whom we were staying. She was being held at knifepoint and she was obviously terrified and as I looked I saw to my horror that the front of her dress was ripped.

"Ye get your hands off my daughter ye bastard." Duncan Cameron stood with his sword in his hand a few feet from the men. But he would be no match for them and I saw in the moonlight that the man with the knife moved it closer to the girl's throat as her father spoke.

"If ye give us your grain and your cattle ye can have her back, otherwise we take her," the man replied. "We have use for a girl like this."

Mrs Cameron let out a cry then, she was standing behind her husband with her remaining children hiding behind her and the sound of her sobbing was the only thing that I could hear. I could not see Rory anywhere.

I looked around me for any weaponry that I could use if I had to, but there was nothing to hand. It was as I had feared, there was nothing I could do to help; all I could do was watch and pray.

At that moment I heard something that sounded like the pounding of drums but no drums could make the bellowing that followed it, and then the source of the noise came into view. Coming from the direction of the open track were about a dozen cattle, and behind them came the sound of voices urging them on. There was no avoiding the beasts for any of the men in their way, everyone scattered. I saw in the darkness that the ringleader let go of his captive and she fled to the shelter of the trees. Some of his compatriots jumped aside but he was knocked to the ground by one of the rampaging animals.

He seemed to be dazed and made no effort to rise as the last of the beasts went past. Duncan Cameron moved forward but Rory, who had appeared out of the darkness, prevented him by swiftly relieving him of this sword. "Leave this to me Duncan," he said. "I have matters to settle with this one."

He strode over to the man who was trying to get to his feet and stopped him with the point of his broadsword; the man fell backwards on to the ground again. Rory paused for a second and then said. "Your name?"

The man didn't reply. Rory moved forward and his sword nicked the man's face.

"Ye'll tell me your name man or I'll use this, I am no feared to do so."

"Allan McLeod," the man replied.

"And where are ye from?"

"From past Lochabar."

"And who are your clan?" Rory continued.

"I have no clan," the man replied.

"Do ye lead these men?" Rory gestured to the men now standing surrounded by our own men who, having followed the cattle, had encircled them.

"Aye," he replied.

"Then ye are the man I seek," Rory replied, and he continued. "Ye are the leader of the men who have been stealing from our people and who caused the death of one of my own and the rape of his wife, and I willna let that continue."

"What will ye do to stop me?" answered the man on the ground, his voice full of bravado despite his position.

Rory paused, and then he said, in a tone of voice that I recognised. "This."

Rory stepped forward and with a flick of his hand he brought the broadsword across the man's throat causing a red slash of blood to appear at his neck. I saw for a second that his victim's eyes showed shock and then he slumped to the floor. Dead.

"Take them to the Watch, they can do their worst with them," Rory said to

the Cameron men who held the other raiders. And then he turned to Duncan who had his wife and daughter clutched to him. "I have seen to it that justice is done and ye will be safe now."

"Aye, I thank ye for it," said Duncan. His sobbing wife turned her face and nodded her thanks, their daughter, I could see, was still shaking.

I stood silently in the dark as I watched Rory walk over to where the lifeless body lay; he moved it with his foot.

"We will bury him at first light," he said. "He willna trouble ye and yours anymore and his men will give the Watch something to keep them busy."

Rory turned then and walked towards the house.

I stepped back in the shadows and he almost didn't see me when he passed, but he stopped and we looked at each other. "It isna something I enjoyed doing but it is what I came to do," he said. He held out his hand to me, and after a momentary pause I took it. "Ye must do what ye have to," I replied.

"Aye I must," he said and led me back to the bed. We didn't speak after that but just lay under the thin covering not touching. It was as if he had built an invisible barrier that he was not prepared to take down. I knew that he didn't sleep that night because I didn't. The face of Duncan Cameron's daughter kept flashing across my mind, as did the flash of metal as Rory put an end to the man's life.

Rory rose early and when he came back to me he was brushing earth from his clothes. There was no-one else in the cottage.

I sat up in bed. "Is it done?" I asked him.

"Aye it is," he replied, then he turned around to face me. "Ye are very quiet Isabel, what do ye think of me now?"

I was surprised by his question. "What do ye mean?" I asked.

"Ye have seen me kill a man in cold blood, a man who in his own way was desperate. Ye may think differently of me," he replied. There was no emotion in his voice.

"Ye had to do it," I replied and then went on. "He had murdered before and I think that if ye weren't here Duncan and his daughter would have gone the same way."

"Aye, ye are perhaps right," he said. Then his voice changed and he took a deep intake of breath and let his shoulders relax and then said quietly. "Shall we go home?"

As winter faded in to spring the hardships of the winter began to fade into a bitter memory. The crops were sown once the ground had thawed and new

cattle, bought at the markets at Crieff and other towns, grazed the glens again. Our resilience appeared to have saved us. But we were not to know then that it would only be a matter of months before it was to be tested again, only this time it was not by the forces of nature but by something that was to be a greater and much more dangerous adversary.

Part two

46

It was a beautiful July day and I was sitting in the shade of a parasol I had been leant by Rory's aunt, Lady Lochiel. I was idly watching Rory's uncle, his father and Rory himself supervise the planting of an avenue of beech trees by the Water of Arkaig. The sun shone on the water making it shimmer as if filled with sparkling diamonds and I luxuriated in the sensory pleasure that the scene afforded.

We had been guests of the chief of our clan for over a week and I still wondered at the fact that I had gained admittance into this world. Donald Cameron was forty-five years old and the nineteenth chief, his grandfather Sir Ewan Cameron had reached almost legendary status in the Highlands, and his father John had been one of those in the forefront of the first Rising in seventeen fifteen. Indeed I knew that Rory's uncle did not shirk from those allegiances and it was said, though I didn't know for sure, that he was in constant correspondence with King James in exile and that if there was to be a second rebellion Rory's uncle would follow in his father's footsteps.

But now Sir Donald Cameron of Lochiel, and chief of Clan Cameron, was wiping his brow with a white handkerchief whilst giving instructions to his nephew as he supervised a party of clansmen digging the trench into which the beech saplings were to be planted.

My eyes returned to my husband and lingered there, he was leaning on the pickaxe that he had been wielding until minutes ago. He had shed his shirt and I could see perspiration trickling down his back, his muscles in his arms were taut and I felt the corners of my mouth form a smile. He turned then as if he had somehow known that I was watching him and flashed me a brilliant smile of his own.

"Do ye need some water Rory?" I asked.

"Aye I think I had better, although there is enough running from my

forehead to quench my thirst it seems. Ye canna believe that only months ago we thought the sun might never shine again.” He straightened up and cast aside the pickaxe. I scrambled to my feet, flicking the grass off my skirts and picked up the jug of water and took it to him. He grasped it with both hands and drank straight from it then poured the rest of the contents over his head. “Aye that is better,” he said and then turned to his uncle who was in conversation with his father. “Do ye think the men would benefit with a rest Uncle? Shall we call a halt for some food?”

His uncle nodded and was about to speak when I saw his eyes drawn to something in the distance.

I strained to see what had attracted his attention and after a while through a whirl of dust I saw a rider approaching. Rory had seen it too.

“Who do ye think this can be? It’s as if the Devil is after him, I wonder what business he has to ride at such a pace on a day like this?” he said, wiping the remains of the water from his chin.

“I dinna know,” I replied. “But whatever it is, it appears to be with us because he is coming this way.”

By the time the rider came to a halt, all of the planting party had stopped work and as the rider slid to the ground our chief walked to meet him.

“MacDonald, what are ye doing this far from home?”

“Lochiel, Sir, I greet ye,” said the man, who was brushing the dust from his clothes. “I come with tidings that couldna wait and should be for your ears only,” replied the visitor looking at the rest of us.

“These are my family and they,” he said gesturing with his head to the clansmen who were now watching proceedings. “They are my men, there is nothing that canna be said that either canna hear.”

The man appeared too tired to put up much of a counter argument and shrugged.

“Well Sir, in that case I come with greetings from His Royal Highness Prince Charles Edward Stuart.”

I heard Rory cough a little and saw a look of surprise momentarily cross his uncle’s face, but he replied calmly. “So ye come from France then, it is a long journey and ye must be tired.”

The man shook his head and drew himself up to his full height and replied “No Sir, I come from my own lands of Borodale and it is there that the prince requests ye to meet him.”

Rory’s uncle could hide his surprise no longer. “Ye mean that the prince is here? In Scotland? Has he an army? Are there French soldiers with him?”

The man shook his head. "No Sir, he has with him only seven men and he has sent the ships that brought him away. He wishes that ye come with me to speak with him."

All eyes now were on Rory's uncle. I saw that his face was very pale and I could tell as he ran his hand through his hair that this news was very much unexpected. He shook his head and turned to Rory's father and said. "This canna be, it is foolish, he canna come alone and expect the clans to take up arms without support from King Louis. I have written and said as much, and now he is here. He must go back, at best he runs the risk of being taken prisoner and at worst killed, not to mention that we are not ready to rise, we are only just recovering from the winter and we havena the funds." He shook his head again and said, to no one in particular. "This is folly, sheer folly."

As he spoke though he was pulling on his jacket, he turned to Rory's father. "Come Jamie we must see what can be done, I canna see any other course but to try and persuade him to go back."

"Aye ye are right Donald and it is likely Archie will advise the same."

Dr Archibald Cameron, was one of Rory's other uncles, and was a very wise man, and I liked him enormously. I was not in so much awe of him as I was with his elder brother and he had made me feel very much welcome during my stay.

"Aye I know, but I must think this through." Donald Cameron walked to where his horse was tethered and undid the reins from the tree. "We'll return to the house," and he mounted the horse and with a flick of the reins he left in a cloud of dust. Rory's father turned to the newcomer. "Ye'll come with us MacDonald and have something to eat?"

"Aye, thank ye," said the man, whose face showed that he was very much aware of the effect of the news he had brought and was sorry for it. "I understand that this news is not entirely welcome. It was as much a surprise to me, but I canna do anything more than convey the message," he said apologetically.

"Aye I know," replied Rory's father. "And so does my brother, but what he will do about it I canna guess."

The men who had been digging the trench followed on foot as James Cameron and MacDonald went after Rory's uncle, the clouds of dust from hooves and feet took minutes to settle. Rory and I were left alone. He pulled on his shirt and tucked it in to his kilt and picked up his broadsword from where it was leant against a tree, the metal flashing as it caught the sun.

"I may be wrong," he said to me as he slid the sword in to its sheath in his

belt. "But I fear that I shall be having use of this soon, and that it willna just be my own sword that is raised in anger." Then he looked at me and I saw a fire burning in his green eyes that I had seen on only a few occasions before. "If the prince stays and he is able to rally the clans it may be that this is the chance we have been waiting for to remove the cursed Elector's troops from our lands. And if we have French support it may be that a Stuart King will sit on the throne of England and Scotland once more."

"Do ye think it will work?" I said quietly.

My husband looked out across the waters of the loch and said softly. "It might, it just might," but he paused before he added. "But if it doesna work we may come to regret this day Isabel."

Rory and I mounted our horses in silence and as we rode away I stole a look over my shoulder at the scene we had left. The sun was still shining and waters of the loch were still shimmering but the saplings lay abandoned on the ground by the half completed trench. It was a sight that seemed somehow poignant and it was sight that made me shiver despite the heat of the sun.

47

When we arrived at the house we could hear voices coming from Rory's uncle's study. Lady Lochiel and Rory's mother stood by the door, which was open and I stayed with them as Rory entered the room.

The conversation was earnest. It appeared that the prince was relying on the support of Rory's uncle to bring the other clans to arms for the Stuart cause. MacDonald reiterated that the prince was convinced that he would be successful in persuading the French king to become involved if the Scottish Highland clans would move as one against the occupying forces. There was value in that argument but practicalities argued more strongly against it.

"We canna be sure even that the clans will rally," Donald Cameron said. "There is no knowing what Louis will do and therefore there is no certainty of French troops or money. If the prince came back with troops then it would almost be certain that all the clan leaders would follow, some chiefs have been feuding for centuries and it will take more than one prince and his promises to rewrite that history."

"It seems, Uncle," I heard Rory speak. "That His Highness might be forcing our hands and that of the French King."

"Aye lad, it is almost certain that that is the case. All the correspondence I

have had from Court indicates that King Louis blows hot and cold on the subject and it seems the Prince Charles is impatient. It might even be that Louis' support is waning altogether and he sees this as his last hope."

"Let us hope," this was Dr Archibald Cameron speaking. "That his impatience is not all of our undoing."

There were noises of agreement from the room and I looked at Lady Anne. Her face was impassive but I saw that she was twisting her wedding ring around her finger in a continuous motion.

"Ye shall go with MacDonald here Archie and try and find out what his intentions are," Lochiel again. "I canna go just yet, as I canna be seen not to support him just as I canna be seen by some to support him. It will give me some time to think and perhaps give him time to think also. Ye never know ye may be able to speak some sense to him and make him see that he is not limited to only this chance."

"Aye I will go brother, and go gladly. If there is a chance for him to return to France with the assurances to King Louis that we will support his cause if we had French soldiers alongside us. Some good might come of this yet."

"Then ye will go tomorrow at first light, take some men and make sure that ye are not followed. It would be our luck that the prince is captured while we were trying to ensure his, and our own, safety."

"I will go with ye Uncle, if ye think I might be of help," my heart lurched as I heard Rory's voice.

"Aye lad, ye might indeed be of help. Ye are a similar age, and as such ye might be able to speak some sense to him."

"We have met before whilst I was in Rome so I willna be a stranger," I could hear the pride in Rory's voice as he spoke. But I wished with all my heart that he had not.

"Then that is settled," Archibald Cameron said. "We will go tomorrow, back with MacDonald here and a handful of men and see if we can talk His Highness into returning to King Louis with a message that all we need is his support and we will rid this country of the cursed Hanoverians."

"Amen to that," said Rory's father.

We retired to bed early that night, but neither of us could sleep.

"Ye will take care, won't ye?" I said, for perhaps the fifth time since we had snuffed out the candles by the bed.

Instead of being exasperated Rory pulled me to him and encircled me with his arms.

"I intend to be very careful. I am fond of my life Isabel and intend to keep

it, but if I can help I will do. And,” he paused before continuing. “And if His Royal Highness is successful and it is Clan Cameron who have made it so, then, well, it wouldna harm our prospects under a Stuart king.”

I turned to face my husband, I could see the outline of his face in the shadows. “I didna have ye down for a schemer,” I said with a giggle.

“Aye, well it isna natural for me to be so, but rather scheme than be schemed against and there are plenty who would do so I imagine. In any case for generations we have been for the Stuart cause and I dinna wish to live under the rule of the Elector if I dinna have to, and if we can assist our prince in that then” his voice trailed off.

“But what if it fails and we have been seen to be Jacobites?” I asked.

“If that happens then we can only hope that there is a fast ship to France, because we will have burnt our boats here,” he replied.

“Could we not just carry on as we are?” I said.

“Aye we could, but I think that the prince may have just forced the issue. I am not an expert on these matters but from what I have heard from men who are, there is little place for us and our way of life in the Elector’s new Kingdom. It is likely that we would face the wrath of Georgie’s armies and the Lowland clans at some stage for some reason or other. Until then he would continue to tax us out of existence so our people starve. Much better we have a campaign of our own choosing rather than wait for Geordie to choose it for us.”

“But this is not of our choosing Rory,” I said, I was sitting up now and looking down at him. “This is of the prince’s choosing and your uncle says we are not ready.”

“Aye lass, ye are right,” he said. “And that is the main reason I go tomorrow. If we can persuade him to return we can breathe again, if not, well I would rather not dwell on it now, for I fear I will have plenty of time to do so in the days to come.”

He reached up for me then and gathered me into his arms and whispered into my hair “I will be careful Isabel, I will always be careful because I have ye. I have spent too long away from ye in my life to want to separate us again, I love ye too much for that.” And then he kissed me and I felt his body harden against my own and all thoughts of princes were lost in the passion of our joining. But afterwards, when I could tell by his breathing that he was asleep, I prayed silently and fervently that nothing would happen to separate us and that, come what may, we would always be together.

48

They left early that morning, before the rest of the house awoke. Rory rose and dressed before I was even aware that he had left my side and it was only when he laid a soft kiss on my forehead that I realised he was going.

“Dinna worry lass I will be back soon,” he said, before I could speak. At that he walked away from the bed and, picking up his broadsword, he left the room. He didn’t look back because, as we both knew, it was bad luck to look back.

Four days of waiting followed, I spent these days in feverish expectation of any news, and when I was not required in the house I would walk to the beginning of the avenue and wait for his return. Here I would sit alone in the shade and scan the road ahead for any telltale signs but there were none, only the sounds of summer and the sound of the river rushing over the rocks. It brought back memories of that day, all those years ago, when my peaceful riverside musings had been interrupted by a young boy with green eyes who now played the central part in my life and for whom my every waking moment was consumed with anxiety.

When in fact Rory did return it was late on the fourth night, Lady Anne, Lady Lochiel and I were sewing in the drawing room when one of the manservants knocked rapidly on the door and entered.

“They are back,” was all he was given the chance to say.

Just those three words had us rushing past him for the hallway, and we jostled, rather unseemingly for two Highland Ladies and the wife of a laird to be, to get through the front doors of the house. Once outside in the dusk I saw the silhouettes of the three front riders accompanied by other men further back, and, forgetting my elevated position I picked up my skirts and ran, full pelt, to meet them. When I reached him, out of breath and with my hair very dishevelled, Rory dismounted and I was in his arms once more. After we separated I looked up at his face and saw behind the smile a tiredness and a look of worry that he did not often exhibit.

“It didna go well then?” I said.

“No, it didna go well at all. His Highness is adamant that firstly he must see my uncle and secondly Lochiel’s Camerons are the ones to lead the rebellion, and” he paused before he finished. “And thirdly that now is the time to stage it. He willna be persuaded otherwise.”

“What do ye think will happen now?” I said as we walked together back to the house, Rory leading his horse.

"I dinna know Isabel, all I do know is at the moment the prince is not for changing his mind."

After that we walked the rest of the way in silence. When we entered the house Rory went again to his uncle's study where the men were in earnest conversation. Lady Lochiel was with them this time but Lady Anne was standing a little away from the room.

"I gather that His Highness has his mind set on acting now," she said.

"Aye, Rory says he doubts that he will be persuaded otherwise," I replied.

"Well then it is up to Lochiel to either settle this matter or we come out for the prince and the campaign begins." As she spoke I saw that she was pale and held tightly on to the table next to which she was standing.

"If he canna persuade him otherwise, it might still succeed," I said, more as a way of comforting her than of speaking my own views.

"You are right, it might," she said. "But then, it might not, but either way we are involved whether we wish to be or not."

I looked over her shoulder and saw Rory's profile reflected in the mirror opposite the open door of the study. His hair was swept back and tied at his neck exposing his features. I knew every inch of his face, I had watched him change from boy to man and now I was suddenly very proud of him and at the same time very scared for him as I stood awaiting the result of their discussion.

Eventually the meeting broke up, the men and Lady Lochiel emerged from the study and Rory came to my side.

"What will ye do?" I said.

"Uncle is going to see the prince as he requests. He intends to give him warning that this plan of his will fail unless he has further support from France and then can guarantee the rest of the clans' support."

"Do ye think he will listen?" I asked looking into his eyes.

"I want him to listen Isabel, we all do, but in all honesty I think his mind is set on the idea and I canna see him bending even without my uncle's support. And if ye ask me my uncle isna likely to withdraw his support for King James' son."

"So ye think we will go to war?"

"No Isabel, I fear that we will go to war." He sighed before he continued. "It isna that I fear fighting and it isna that I dinna wish to rid our country of the Elector's troops. It is just that I fear the consequence of going into battle ill prepared and outnumbered. No matter how brave a man is he can only hold off so many who are better equipped, for so long. If we do fight then I hope the prince surrounds himself with men who are able to advise him well, and I hope that he will listen if they do."

He took my hand then as we entered the dining room after the others.

49

It had been agreed that Rory would accompany his uncles and his father to visit the prince at Borodale. They would break the journey with Rory's other uncle, John of Fasseforn, and seek his counsel on matters before they embarked on the final part of the journey.

The night before they were to leave, as we were preparing for bed, I asked Rory what I had wanted to ask him since the night of their return.

"Can I come with ye?" I said.

"Would ye want to?" He replied. I was relieved that he hadn't dismissed the idea out of hand.

"Aye I would. Ye said yourself we had spent too much time apart and I do not intend to sit here again in misery until ye return." I looked at him, he didn't answer so I went on. "It isna likely that there is going to be any fighting and I willna be harmed. I can ride as well as anybody and, well, I canna stand any more waiting."

He shook his head and smiled.

"Well I married ye for your spirit, so I canna expect ye to be otherwise but it would be for my uncle to allow ye not me."

"Well if he says no of course I willna think about it again, but Rory ye will ask him won't ye?"

"Aye, I'll ask him, but ye'll have to be quick in getting ready. We are to start early."

"Aye I know that, I have everything I need already prepared," I said. "Just in case ye said yes."

He laughed out loud at that and pulled me to him and kissed me. "Ye have spirit indeed my wife, and ye also know me too well I fear."

I slept restlessly that night, I wondered that Rory could sleep at all, but the sound of his rhythmical breathing indicated that he had. Eventually I must have given way because I was woken from a deep slumber by Rory's voice.

"Isabel if ye want to come ye will have to get up now," he said as he pulled the sheets back and stepped on to the cold stone floor.

I woke quickly and went in to my dressing room and quickly dressed. I had chosen a simple gown, one that would not get in the way and one that would be warm if I needed it. I pulled my cloak from the chest in which it was kept

and put on some sturdy shoes. After attending to my bodily needs I washed and walked into the bedchamber carrying my cloak and a small bag slung over my shoulder with the only essentials I could take. As I walked through the room I caught sight of myself in the mirror. I stood for a second and looked at my reflection, 'not very suitable for meeting a prince' I thought but needs must and there was no time for reflection on clothing, I had to hurry.

I left our rooms, I thought Rory must still be dressing, and I walked down the stairs into the entrance hall. I stopped then because I could hear Rory's voice.

"She is my responsibility I will see she is safe," he said.

"Aye so she is and ye know that Davie will skin ye alive if any harm comes to her, my son or not," replied his father.

I quickly walked down the stairs and with a deep breath crossed over the hallowed threshold of Lochiel's study.

"I willna cause any trouble, and I willna cause anyone to regret taking me," I said.

The three men looked round.

I thought I saw the ghost of a smile on Rory's father's face before he said. "Aye that's all very well but sometimes ye dinna have a choice in the matter. This is dangerous enough without the added danger of ye being with us."

"I have told ye that she is my responsibility and I will take the consequences," Rory interrupted.

A quiet female voice made us all turn round. "Her mother is a Macgregor, her father is a Cameron and her mother-in-law is a Douglas. I say that is pedigree enough for her to be able to handle herself in any such expedition. In any case a female presence may ease the discussion some," it was Rory's mother, and I marvelled again at how sometimes a quiet voice can make itself heard above louder ones.

The men looked at each other and then at Lady Anne who stood impassively in the doorway.

"Aye she goes, but dinna let me regret it lad," said Sir James Cameron.

Rory raised his eyes heavenwards. "Now see what ye have made me do," he said, but he was smiling. "We should go and eat, it is likely to be a long journey and we need to cover as much ground as we can."

We left as dawn broke. Sir James and Dr Cameron rode in front and Rory and I behind. We were accompanied by four men on horseback and I knew that there were unseen men on foot who had gone ahead and that there were more to follow us to protect our rear.

It was a long journey, but anything was better than the waiting. We did not go via Fort William; it would have been too dangerous. Instead we rode through Glen Loy and then down to Rory's uncle's house at Fassersfern. We reached there as the sun was setting and when Rory lifted me down it was the first time that my feet had touched the ground since leaving our chief's house.

"Come ye in," said a man whom I knew immediately to be Rory's uncle John by the fact that he had the same green eyes. Rory and I walked together following the others.

"Aye and who have we here?" Sir John said as those eyes alighted on me.

"I have the honour of presenting to ye my wife Isabel," Rory said, taking my hand.

"Well I heard ye were a beauty but I have always thought that gossip is exaggerated, but I see it not to be so in this case," he chuckled then and whispered to Rory. "Aye, and I see why the MacDonnell lass would never have done."

My eyes went straight to Lochiel but neither he, nor any of our other travelling companions, appeared to have heard.

"Aye well, come in and have something to revive ye and then we will talk on what's to do," he said seeming to sense my discomfort.

We ate well, and in comfort. Rory's uncle kept a fine house and a fine table. When we were replete the conversation turned to what was to happen the following day. I had wondered if it would be indicated that I should leave the room but the conversation began in my presence and there was nothing said relating to my leaving.

"So Donald what will ye do?" Said Rory's uncle John.

"I will go to the prince and tell him of the folly of this venture," replied Lochiel.

His brother smiled and sat back in his chair. "Aye Brother, I know ye better than ye know yourself. If this prince sets his eyes upon ye, he will make ye do as he pleases."

"Aye I am in agreement," said Rory's other uncle. "Ye are far too much a loyal subject to resist anything ye are asked whether ye think it is correct or no. Have ye no considered sending a letter, it might lead the young man to ponder on his actions."

Lochiel raised himself from his chair and stood with his palms on the table and viewed his gathered family. "It is gratifying to know that ye have this much faith in my judgement. If I say I am going to reason him out of this plan, that is what I will do whether ye have the confidence in me or no."

Sir John, seeing that his brother was perhaps lacking in humour after the days riding, replied. "Aye Donald I didna mean anything by it. It is very difficult for anyone to deny a member of the Royal family to his face and I wouldna like to be the one to do it, loyal subject or no."

Lochiel appeared placated. "Aye John I have no doubt that there is more truth in what ye say than I will admit to myself, but I dinna think that a letter will suffice. I will go and see what there is to be done and I will try my best to do it."

And that was that, the rest of the evening was spent in conversation about clan matters and I found myself yawning. In fact to my embarrassment I must have fallen asleep at some time because I woke to hear my father-in-law's voice saying "She rode well today, take her to bed lad, it is to be a deal of a day tomorrow and we must all have our wits about us."

So I bade a hasty farewell. I could feel myself blushing at the shame of falling asleep before some of the most important people I had ever met but Rory put his arm around my shoulders and we left together.

Our accommodation, though not as grand as our own rooms, was comfortable and a fire was lit in the grate and the bed had been warmed. And as we sank into the soft mattress it was good to be able to relax in his arms.

"What do ye think will happen tomorrow?" I said sleepily.

"I dinna know, I hope that my uncle will prevail, but I think like my uncle John. I have met the prince and he, like anybody who is used to having his wishes carried out, is unlikely to take 'no' for an answer."

"I shall pray that he will," I replied.

"Aye, we all will," he answered.

And I drifted off to sleep with the prayer still on my lips.

50

We awoke early on the thirtieth day of July; there was little time to reflect on what the day had in store for us, as we were to leave early after a hurried breakfast. Little was said as we ate, the importance of the day was not lost on any of the party, and as we mounted our horses, after collecting together our belongings, we were silent but for the directions given to the grooms who attended us.

Rory and I rode alongside each other, the day promised to be fair and the country sparkled with the early morning dew. As the sun rose in the sky

we rode towards our destination, still the party was almost silent; the sense of anticipation was almost tangible. As we were drawing near we saw a rider approaching, he came closer and I recognised the man as MacDonald, he was obviously riding to speak to Lochiel before he reached the prince's presence.

As he reined his horse alongside that of Lochiel, Rory and I rode nearer and we caught the conversation.

"So ye have come?" MacDonald said to the chief of Clan Cameron.

"Aye I have, did ye have reason to doubt that I would?" Said Rory's uncle with a little more than a touch of chagrin.

"I didna doubt it but I wonder if it is the best approach."

Lochiel snorted. "Well it seems that I canna be trusted with the errand, it's a wonder that ye have permitted me entrance to your lands at all."

MacDonald who was, of course, not aware of the previous evening's discussion, looked somewhat perplexed. "I didna mean anything by it, I just wondered that ye may have thought twice about putting yourself forward so quickly when it seems unlikely that the cause might succeed. His Highness has had fewer visitors than he expected I think."

Lochiel sighed. "Dinna bother about it man, I havena slept well and the weight of the errand is making me ill tempered." Then he pulled himself up in his saddle and said to no one in particular. "Let's go now and get this business done, and pray God that whatever happens it is for the best for all of us."

MacDonald fell into place beside Rory's uncle John and we began our descent into Borodale.

The house was modest in size, not particularly the grandest of abodes in which a future king might receive visitors, and on arrival, as Rory helped me dismount, I almost expected His Highness to come out and greet us on the doorstep

But there was no such greeting and when the party was ready we followed MacDonald inside, he walked towards a closed door and halted in front of it. Before he knocked he looked round at us briefly and he only had time to take a deep breath when his knock was answered.

"Come in," said a voice.

The door opened from the inside and we filed through.

His Royal Highness, for I knew it must be him, stood to receive us, and I dropped as deep a curtsy as I dared. I thought, as I did so, that this was the first proper curtsy that I had ever made and I hoped that I would not shame myself in front of such a person.

I was absolutely taken aback when I felt the man in question take my hand and help me rise.

I dared then to look at him.

I had heard many rumours about what the heir to such a disputed throne would look like. Some said that he was over six feet tall, some that he was short, some that he had red hair and some that he was blonde. There were even stories that he spoke with a Scottish accent.

In the split second before he spoke I saw that he was taller than I, but shorter than Rory, and his wig showed glimpses of soft blonde hair underneath and that he had brown eyes that looked enquiringly into mine.

“Mademoiselle I am honoured by your presence, might I enquire as to your name?” He said, in an accent that was definitely not Scottish, but as I had never met a foreigner before I had no real idea what accent it was.

I stuttered my reply, as his hand still held mine, and I said in English. “You do me great justice Your Highness, the honour is mine.”

“Not so,” he said, with a smile that showed white teeth and what years of learning the manners of Court had taught him. “When a beautiful lady deigns to honour any man with her presence, be him prince or pauper, it is always the man who is in her debt.”

By now I felt that the whole of my face and neck were burning, and I was very grateful for Rory’s interjection. “Sire if ye will permit me, I would like to introduce my wife Isabel.”

The prince looked from me to Rory, and I thought for a moment that he was going to admonish him for daring to interrupt but a broad smile swept across his face. “So this is why you ignored the finest women in Rome. I see that you are a man of wise decisions. And a man of wise decisions is always welcome at my side.”

He looked then towards the coterie of men who stood behind him and the representatives of Clan Cameron in front of him and said. “It does me good to know that I am surrounded by friends. Shall we sit and partake of some of our host’s fine food and wine?”

I hardly touched any of the food but took a large gulp of the fine burgundy that was poured into a glass for me. The atmosphere in the room was cordial, the prince acting as host, but I could see by the faces of my companions, and those of the prince’s, that they expected that the ensuing conversation would be difficult.

It was of course the prince who brought up the subject about which the visit was concerned.

“My father told me that I could rely on his servant Lochiel for loyalty, and I

see by your presence that his judgement is correct. It will do his heart good to know what a loyal servant he has in you Donald Cameron.” I was not sure if they had met before, such things were not discussed, but I presumed that our chief’s attire was indication enough as to whom he was. The prince continued. “It appears that other lesser men are somewhat reluctant to show allegiance to my father in their support of me. But I cannot expect otherwise of lesser men than yourself.”

I watched Lochiel’s face, he remained expressionless but his eyes betrayed the mixed emotions he was experiencing within, and I knew that the prince could see that too.

Rory’s uncle coughed and then began. “Aye Sire my allegiance, and that of my people, to the Stuart cause is something of which I am very proud and I stand before ye a humble servant.”

“My father is grateful for that, as am I. It will be something that will not go unrewarded when the throne of Britain is his.”

“I do not desire a reward for loyalty Sire, it would be reward in itself to see him there, and ye after him.”

The prince nodded, and then he paused and said. “But...?” His brown eyes, in his elegant face, almost skewered his loyal servant.

Rory’s uncle’s first words were faltering. “How many men do ye have Sire?”

Prince Charles Edward Stuart’s eyes remained hawkishly fixed on his prey. “I have the seven men that stand around me.”

“Do ye have any means of returning home?”

“I am home,” came the reply.

“I think, Sire, what my brother is trying to say...” began Dr Archibald Cameron.

“I know what I am trying to say,” replied his brother, his voice slightly raised. He continued but this time his tone was stronger, and he met the prince’s eyes.

“What I am saying Sire is that without the men and the money and arms that the French have promised this is doomed to failure. The clans canna agree among themselves and without promise of such support they will not put aside their differences. They will know that such an enterprise has little chance of success. I beg ye for the sake of your own safety to return and petition King Louis for the assistance he has promised on numerous occasions to provide.”

The prince waited and then he took a step forward and his voice seemed to hold both hurt and pent up rage. “Whilst I am grateful for your fears for my safety I see this as the best opportunity for, ‘such an enterprise’,” he almost spat

those words out. “The majority of the Elector’s best troops are in France and the newly-raised regiments would not be able to withstand the full might of the Highland army. My father has told me, and I have seen for my own eyes, that such an army can be invincible if led by the right men. These advantages, combined with support from our loyal clan leaders would be all I would need for this to succeed. I have sent my ship, the *Doutelle*, back to France as evidence to King Louis that I am here and I know that he would never send me the support from France that he has promised until I can prove that it is mirrored in Scotland.”

Donald Cameron of Lochiel showed then the courage that gave him his reputation as a leader of men for he interrupted the prince and said. “But Sire it would give me time to rally the clans, I could persuade them with letters from you and your father of the French support, then if as ye say King Louis needs proof we would at least have it in the form of men.”

Prince Charles let him finish and then he almost shouted. “In a few days, and with the few friends that I have, I will erect the royal standard, and proclaim to the people of Britain that Charles Stuart is come over to claim the crown of his ancestors – to win it, or to perish in the attempt.” He then took a further step forward and fixed Rory’s uncle with a look of almost utter contempt and continued. “Lochiel, whom my father has often told me was our firmest friend, may stay at home, and from his newspapers learn the fate of his prince.”

I saw, in the seconds that followed, Rory’s uncle’s facial expression undergo a complete transformation. It was as if he had been mortally wounded. And his reply proved me an astute observer, he said. “No, I’ll share the fate of my prince, and so shall every man over whom nature has given me my power.”

Sir Donald Cameron of Lochiel than went down on one knee in front of his liege lord and with his dirk held with both hands out in front of him swore the oath of allegiance, as all of Clan Cameron had sworn to him and his own forebears, and in that one gesture our fate was sealed.

His Royal Highness raised his subject up and said. “My father is a good judge of a man.”

51

The people in the room appeared as if transformed by what had taken place before them. The representatives of Clan Cameron were greeted effusively by

the men who had been positioned around the prince, the relief was tangible.

I watched as the introductions were made, the prince performing the ceremony. There was his banker Aeneas MacDonald, a cavalry officer Sir John MacDonald, an Irishman George Kelly, who appeared to be a protestant minister, the prince's old tutor Sir Thomas Sheridan, another Irish officer John William O'Sullivan and an Englishman Francis Strickland and lastly Duke William of Atholl who, apart from Rory's uncle, was the only man amongst them who could raise men in his own right.

As I watched from the sidelines as these introductions were made I became somewhat imbued by the spirit of the moment. My mind returned briefly to the day when I had encountered the English soldier and the feel of his mouth upon my own. The incident that had marred my own wedding day and the thought that the actions of the men gathered in this room might ensure that such an occasion would never happen again to me or anybody. And the thought that my own people would not live in such fear was a heady one and when Rory walked over and took my hand and I saw that his green eyes were blazing with pride I put my doubts aside along with those of my companions.

We parted from the prince later that day. The heads of the clan septs were to ride back to their own lands and raise their men; the rendezvous was to be on the nineteenth of August at Glenfinnan.

We rode into the night to reach Rory's Uncle John's house and left early the next morning, Dr Cameron going his separate way with Lochiel, which left the party from Cameron House to return to the shores of Loch Lochy.

Lady Cameron was on the steps to greet us on our return, lookouts had been posted to ensure that sufficient warning of welcome, or unwelcome, visitors was given. She walked to greet her husband as he dismounted.

"I see that your brother has agreed," she said. Once again I marvelled at what almost appeared to be her sixth sense.

"Aye, he has," Rory's father replied.

"Well God be with him, and with us all," she said and turned and went back in to the house. He watched her go and said nothing.

That house was soon a hive of activity with preparations commencing for the mass exodus of our men-folk. My father, who had been waiting for our return, greeted me quickly and then left to summon my brothers and our own tenants in order that word was conveyed to all the people of our part of Clan Cameron. Some of this message was carried by word of mouth and some by means of the 'fiery cross.' I had never seen it before, in fact it was considered bad luck to gaze upon it but its message was effective. A giant wooden cross,

covered with tar to ensure that it would burn constantly, was set alight and carried by men who ran from one part of our lands to the other. This was the signal for our people to answer the call of their clan chief and was as old as the system itself, and as powerful.

Men began arriving almost immediately from the nearby settlements. Shelters were erected in the fields around the house and those without shelters merely slept with their plaids wrapped around them. Rory's mother had set about arranging for food for them, and supplies for the march to Glenfinnan. She worked tirelessly and I did my best to help her. She never spoke of whether she supported her husband, but she never said that she didn't, although she seemed quieter than usual.

My brothers came down from our home early on the morning after our return; they carried their substantial weaponry about them. They also brought with them our tenants, some suitably armed, and others carrying makeshift weapons made from tools from their farms. It struck me that this must have been much the same scene as my elder brothers had experienced all those years ago and a cold shiver ran down my spine as I saw Gordon and Angus report to my father and my husband for instructions.

I had not spoken to Rory of my intention to go with him.

I had made up my mind that I would not be parted from him and it was my great fear that he would insist against it. There was not much time for discussion in those few days between our arrival and his planned departure and we were not alone for most of the day and at night he fell almost immediately to sleep.

But on the day before he was to leave he came to me as I was assisting his mother in the constant business of making sure that supplies were packed and arranged for transportation.

She saw him standing in the doorway of the room and said. "Go Isabel, I am nearly finished here and I think that you need a rest."

I thanked her and followed Rory out of the door. It struck me that this was the same corridor which we had used to escape from the kitchens after the Gathering, and my mind flashed back to that heady occasion, so different from the one that was approaching.

We left the house by the path and walked down to the loch where there was a small stone seat. Rory sat down and pulled me on to his knee.

"I am sorry Isabel," he said looking at me.

“For what?” I asked.

“For hardly having time for ye. There has been so much to do and I havena acted as I should. I am leaving tomorrow and I dinna want us to part without having some time together alone.”

I took a deep breath, it seemed the time had come. “Rory I am coming with ye,” I said with more courage than I felt. He stood up, which was not easy as I was still perched on his knee. I almost fell to the floor.

“Ye canna come Isabel, are ye outa your mind? This is no social visit. The government troops may know, the clans that support them may know, either way it will be too dangerous. I willna hear of it,” he was almost shouting.

“And I willna stay here alone and wait.” I took a deep breath and, remembering how the prince had dealt with his uncle, I fixed my eyes on the nephew and said what was in my heart. “A long time ago when I was merely a bairn I watched my brothers and my father leave to go and fight for the clan and I waited for their return, only to find that they did not all come back. And I remember how my mother was. She could not mourn because she didn’t know where Andrew was buried and she lived a half-life for many months because of this. Then when ye were sent to France I waited again, I nearly went out of my mind. I refuse to do that again Rory. If ye willna let me go with ye I will follow ye and if I am unprotected and caught by the Watch or by English soldiers it will be because ye would not have me with ye. I will not be left here. I will not, d’ya hear? I will go with ye.”

He shook his head and ran his hands through his hair. “Isabel your father would kill me for putting your life in danger. If not him, your brothers will.”

“I am your wife, and as such am yours to bid.”

Rory laughed out loud at that. “Aye only if ye wish to be bidden.”

“Well I wish it now. If ye ask me I will go.”

“And if I dinna ask ye?”

“I will go anyway,” I replied, my mouth set in an expression of what I hoped was the same determination I had seen on the face of the prince.

Rory sat down on the bench then and put his head in his hands. “Lord preserve me from strong willed women,” he said. Then he looked up and held out his hand. I didn’t move but waited until he spoke again.

“Aye all right ye can come but if there is any sign of danger ye will promise me now to return here.”

I wasn’t inclined to promise anything of the sort but had a feeling that as I appeared ahead in the discussion I should perhaps consolidate my position.

“I will make sure I am safe.”

“Ye will promise Isabel to come back here where ye will be safe, or ye are not coming, and it doesna matter if ye refuse to talk to me forever.”

“Or ban ye from my bed?” I said with a slight smile.

“Ye wouldna succeed,” he replied levelling me with a malevolent stare.

I knew that I was beaten. “Aye I promise,” I said.

“Then I will take ye, that is if I am still breathing after your father hears of your intentions to come with me.”

“Of your intentions to take me,” I corrected him in as meek a voice as I could muster.

Rory did not reply, he merely sighed and shook his head.

52

It took a while, and a lot of heated conversation, but eventually I defeated the Cameron men folk and I knew that I was not at all popular that evening as we sat down to eat. Lady Anne was again a valuable ally by reminding her husband that thirty years ago she had done much the same thing. My father was torn between a stubborn daughter and fear of what my mother would do to him. I suspected though that my mother would understand. Rory stood with me against them all, which was ironic, as I knew his real views, and he was a fitting advocate. When grudging agreement had been extracted he whispered to me that it would be better that we withdraw to our rooms while victory was still ours.

When we had reached that sanctuary, and the door was closed behind us, he sank into one of the chairs. “I hope ye are grateful, and are mindful that if anything does happen to ye it might as well happen to me too, for my life will only have a short span afterwards,” he said with a sigh.

I walked over to him and sat at his feet, my head resting against his knees. “I am grateful that ye supported me Rory even though ye didna want me with ye,” I said.

“No Isabel ye are wrong there. I want ye with me more than anything, I dinna wish for us to be separated ever again but I didna want ye to be in danger because of my being selfish.”

I looked up at him, he looked tired and he looked worried. “Then I thank ye for caring enough and I am sorry that I am such a stubborn woman. I didna do it to be difficult but I canna bear to be parted from ye. But I promise ye now that if there is any danger I will do as ye wish.”

He brushed a tendril of my hair out of my face and smiled. "Thank ye, that is all I require."

We sat there for a while, watching the fire burn in the grate. Even though the weather had been kind there was still a chill in the air. From my position at his feet I looked around the room, trying to capture everything I saw. Neither of us knew when we would be there next and I was suddenly filled with a feeling of fear that we may not have such an occasion ever again. I turned to look at Rory, his eyes were closed and his head had dropped a little to the side. He looked peaceful and I watched him for a while, wondering what the forthcoming days would hold for him. I knew that this was not new to him. I knew that he had been trained to fight other men, to fight for his life and I had seen him kill a man and mark another. But as he slept he looked more like the young boy who had left me to go to Edinburgh and I prayed that, after whatever fate had in store for us, there would be some of that boy left in him still.

It was almost as if he felt the weight of my stare because his eyes opened and met my own.

"Are ye watching me then?"

"Aye."

"Well, tell me what do ye see?"

"I am remembering when ye asked me to wait for ye before ye went to Edinburgh," I replied.

"Aye, that seems a long time ago," he said. "We have grown up since then. I remember dreaming about ye when I was at the school. Though I didna think they were suitable dreams for a young lad to have about a young lass."

"What happened in those dreams Rory?" I said, lazily stroking his bare knee under his kilt.

"It would shame me to tell ye Miss," he replied. He hesitated a little as I advanced my hand under the material. "But something akin to what ye are doing now may have figured in them."

I turned then and advanced my other hand until they both had found their goal. I watched the expression on his face and smiled as he arched his back and moaned slightly as my hands moved in unison. And then he grabbed me, so fast that I was unprepared and he picked me off my feet and soon I was being carried through the room and into the bedchamber where he laid me on the bed and said. "Aye, but the rest of the dreams went this way."

He undid the bodice of my dress and the ties at the neck of my shift. I felt his cool hands on my breasts and then his tongue, and it was my turn to close

my eyes and moan in ecstasy. His hands did their own work and when he came to me, amid the flurry of my underskirts and the folds of his kilt, I was ready to take all of him, and we held on to each other as we made love on that night before the future could claim us.

Afterwards I lay in his arms as he kissed my breasts and I tried again to capture that moment too, only heaven knew where we would sleep in the nights to come. It was not even guaranteed that we would be able to sleep alone or together, and as I lay in his arms I realised that this was indeed a luxury that I would have to become used to living without.

Rory yawned then and from somewhere above me he said. "We will need all of our energies tomorrow, it will be a long ride and we should sleep now."

I sat up and stripped the rest of my clothing from me until it fell on the floor, as did Rory until there was a small mound of satins and silks and tartan beside the bed. We surveyed each other in our nakedness and he shook his head as my eyes travelled over his body. "No, absolutely no, I willna be able to get out of bed let alone do anything else in the morning if ye have your way."

"Oh, surely ye could find some energy from somewhere?" I said advancing on him.

"Ye are a vixen. If I didna know ye better I would swear ye are a spy from the Elector whose aim is to debilitate the whole Highland army," he said pulling back from me.

"Oh no, I am a loyal supporter of Prince Charles and all I wish is to supply entertainment for the honourable men of his Highland army. In fact it is my particular mission to supply it especially for one Rory Cameron."

For an honourable man he capitulated rather quickly and afterwards he slept in my arms and I eventually joined him. Though before my own eyes closed I said a quiet prayer for the safety of all those who were to leave their own homes for an uncertain fate, and for the resilience of those who were to be left behind.

53

I awoke to feel Rory shaking me lightly. "Come on raise yourself Isabel, we havena much time, ye will have to learn to rise early in the morning or ye will be left behind."

I quickly got out of bed and went in to my dressing room, Elspeth had helped me to pack my clothes the day before and she had laid out my

travelling clothes. She had wanted to be with me to assist my getting ready but it didn't seem fair to expect her to rise at such an hour to perform a task that I could so easily do myself. So I had assured her that she could snatch a couple of hours extra sleep.

Once dressed I followed Rory down the stairs to the room in which Lady Anne was supervising breakfast. I sat between my husband and my father. My brothers had eaten with the men. Conversation was scarce and my father left the room first but before he did so he kissed me briefly on the cheek and fixed Rory with a malevolent stare.

After my father left the room Rory fixed me with a similar one that seemed to say 'see what I mean.' I said nothing and demurely continued to eat.

The bags that were to be carried with us, we were only allowed one each, had been taken to the wagons outside that were to follow us with the supplies and I rushed upstairs to attend to my ablutions before joining the others. As I left those rooms in which Rory and I had begun our married life I surveyed them for what I hoped would not be the last time and then closed the door and hurried downstairs.

I stopped before I reached the hallway. Rory's mother and father stood alone, he held her in his arms, their heads were close together and I saw that he wiped away a tear from her eye before he kissed her. Then he stepped back and turned and left the entrance hall leaving her alone and looking very small.

I walked quietly down the final steps.

She heard me and turned and said. "I envy you Isabel, I would wish to go too. It will be a momentous day and if it succeeds it could bring much our way, but if it fails I dread to think what will happen. Look after them both for me will you."

I walked over to her and we embraced. "I will do my best if ye will look after my mother and family too."

"I will of course, your mother and I have done this before, too many times I think for us both."

We were interrupted then by one of the men coming in through the door. "Begging your pardon but Master Rory sent me for ye Madam," he looked from me to Lady Anne and then back again.

"Good luck to you Isabel, good luck to you all" she said, and then I turned and left her alone again in that house that had been built for her, and I followed the man down the steps.

The emptiness of the inside of Cameron House was emphasised by the activity outside. The courtyard was crammed with men on horseback and

those attending them on foot. I saw Rory in its midst and walked, as fast as the obstacles in front would allow, towards him. He was mounted on his horse and held the reins of my own in his hand. The groom helped me to mount and I took the reins from my husband. I just had time to explain my delay when his father indicated that we were moving off with a wave of his hand and a cry of "Unite with Lochiel," which was echoed by all present. As we began to leave the confines of the courtyard I saw Lady Anne Cameron waving from the steps. Rory blew his mother a kiss as we passed and I saw that she was smiling. I wondered just how much strength it had taken for her to do so; I hoped I would never need to find out for myself.

We were taking just over two hundred men with us, the majority on foot. They were a mixture of ages, some older men, some younger, all equipped with the weaponry that they could muster. It might have been possible to buy extra artillery at Inverness, but to do so would have alerted the garrison stationed there at Fort George and Rory had told me his father was under instructions from Lochiel not to do so, but still they were well armed. Cameron money had seen to that, in fact it was rumoured that Lochiel had mortgaged his house to fund this expedition.

Those on horseback led the way, Rory's father, my own, my brothers, Rory and myself, and other men of seniority in our part of Clan Cameron. Behind us, at the head of the men, came the piper. He too held a place of seniority and was much revered, it was his role to lead us into battle and it was his role to continue at this post for the duration of the battle. The part he played was as important as those who fought with steel and pistol and it was a dangerous part to play.

That danger was nearer than I had thought because after half an hour's riding we saw men of our clan running full pelt towards us. They stopped before us and I caught the gist of what they were saying. There was a party of loyalist soldiers ahead, if they saw us it would be likely that the whole enterprise would end with messages being conveyed to Forts William and Augustus and this would bring down troops from both garrisons upon us and more importantly upon the vulnerable prince himself.

Rory's father waved him forward and my husband left my side. He spoke hurriedly with his father and then, collecting my brother Angus as he rode back, he gathered a party of men around him. Soon they were dispersing while the rest of us drew back under cover of some trees, or as much cover as our men could find. Rory, Angus and their men disappeared out of view and we waited.

My heart was pounding and I marvelled at the way so many people could maintain silence as we listened for sounds of what was occurring out of sight. I doubt it was more than thirty minutes, but it felt like a lifetime until Rory came round the corner leading a man whose hands were tied by a rope which was attached to Rory's saddle. He rode at a pace that allowed the man to walk and it was apparent that this captive was in charge of the other men who came into view now surrounded by our own. I wondered if these were the first soldiers to be captured and I wondered how many more would meet the same fate. I also wondered exactly what would be done with them. It appeared that they would be going with us, as they were escorted under close guard into the body of men behind us. Rory detailing one of the lesser tacksmen on horseback to maintain care of his own prisoner.

Before they parted Rory gave implicit, and loud, instructions that if any harm should befall any of the prisoners the person causing such harm would answer for it to him. He then reported to his father that all was settled and returned to my side and we recommenced our journey to the rendezvous.

We kept up a steady pace, going across country so as not to attract attention. Men were sent out ahead to make sure that we would not run into an ambush. The men on foot kept apace with the horses, they were used to the terrain, and used to hardships and weather that would have acted as an impediment for men from less harsher climes, the worst weather was merely an inconvenience to our own. It was not without reason that it was the Highland forces that had been called upon by the prince. Men like these had played a pivotal part in the making, and breaking, of Scotland's kings and queens and it was no accident that the Elector had built forts and roads in order to quell the force of the clans. It was yet to be seen whether these tactics would work.

Food was eaten as we rode; there was little conversation, each rider intent on the surroundings and his mount. Rory rode beside me and occasionally we shared glances and snatched a few words. I was the only woman present.

As we neared the rendezvous point as agreed by Lochiel we were greeted by out-runners who lead us through the glen until we reached a secluded part amongst some pine trees. There were already men there; I saw Lochiel himself, and Dr Archibald.

We reined up in front of them.

Dr Archibald acknowledged me with a smile. "I see Isabel that ye have won the day again," he said.

"Sssh I said, I didna want to draw attention to myself."

He laughed at that. "A beautiful young woman with flaming red hair amidst

a large group of men. I'm afraid ye may have more attention than ye have bargained for. It's as well that Rory is respected and a little feared, or we'd be having to place ye under guard for your own protection."

He was joking of course but I couldn't manage much humour at what he said.

It appeared that we were waiting for some other Cameron contingents, including Rory's other uncle, John of Fassefern and then we would be ready. Rory lifted me down from my horse and suggested that I might stretch my legs, as there would not be much opportunity later on. He went to check on the prisoners and to provide further reports to Lochiel on the incident.

Men kept arriving; soon the sheltered spot was full. I saw to my relief that at last I was not the only woman present for at the head of a large party of men rode a woman who looked as though she was in her mid thirties. She had the same colour hair as his own and she was greeted heartily by his uncle. I asked Rory who she was. "Aye that is my cousin Jenny, those men are hers. I dinna know her that well but I've heard that she's a braw lassie. Ye should get on," he said with a smile and then left me to speak to his father. I watched him move through the men. Because of his height he was conspicuous amongst them and because of his bearing they moved in order that he could make his way through. Again I felt a feeling of pride that this man was mine.

I watched as they talked, I didn't leave my horse's side; we both stood patiently together awaiting instructions. Eventually, when it seemed all were present, the men returned to their places. Rory helped me mount my horse and then he quickly climbed on to his own.

The August sun was high in the sky as we rode out of the pine trees. All of us on horseback now rode at the front, I looked back, it was an amazing sight. I had never experienced anything like this before. Rory had told me that there were nearly eight hundred men in our army, for that was now what it was, I had never seen that amount of fighting men before and I got a strange thrill at the prospect of having such a powerful force behind us.

Glenfinnan had been chosen for its strategic importance and I understood why immediately we reached the head of it. Even on this bright August day its sheer sides and its narrowness cast a shadow over us all as we entered. The atmosphere was noticeably colder as we left the wider country behind.

We were later than planned, the sheer task of manoeuvring so many men had forced us to be so and we wondered if any of the other clans had arrived before us. We stopped for a short interval though to allow the pipers to take their place at the forefront of our group of riders and then we followed at their pace.

As I rode beside my husband with the elite of Clan Cameron at the head of what was known to be the elite of the Highland fighting force I felt very very proud, and with the stirring sound of the pipes echoing through this narrow valley I felt as though we were invincible. I wondered what was in the minds of those Englishmen who were in our custody.

The glen was not uninhabited, but the cot-houses were of poor condition and the inhabitants, when they came out to stare at us, looked undernourished. Here was reason enough to fight I thought.

It was just after three o'clock that we saw movement outside one of these houses; a glimpse of something bright caught whatever little sun had found its way into the glen. I saw Lochiel point and we changed direction slightly in order that we were heading for this pinpoint of colour, finally we drew to a halt and waited. As we waited I saw a collection of people and I recognised immediately that one was the prince. His smile illuminated his fine features, almost as much as his fine clothing illuminated this dark spot at the head of Loch Shiel.

I saw that there were more men on the other side of the river; Rory told me that they were men of Clanranald and Morar including some MacGregors and Gordons. The MacGregors were my mother's people and I was proud that they were there too. I then saw a standard bearer carrying a red flag across the river followed by some of the men and then by the prince and his retinue. They rode proudly through the water; the banner held high, I saw a man in bishop's regalia amongst them.

When all of the party was gathered, the prince was handed his father's standard and with a flourish he thrust the pole on which it fluttered into the ground.

His voice carried in the wind. "I hereby proclaim that I, His Royal Highness Prince Charles Edward Stuart, do challenge the right of George, Elector of Hanover, to the throne of Great Britain in the name of my father and rightful King, James VIII of Scotland and III of England. I do hereby proclaim that this challenge is legal and in this I am entitled to raise armies in my father's name in order that this challenge can be made."

He looked at the gathered men and said with much emotion. "I welcome you here as my father's loyal servant. I know that with such a force behind me I will succeed in my aims and we will once again have a Stuart King on the throne of Britain. And the people of Scotland will sleep safe in their beds in the knowledge that their King will recognise the part that they have played in reinstating their rightful liege lord."

And so it began, on that nineteenth day of August in the year of Our Lord seventeen forty-five. My own life, and that of those I loved, was now inextricably linked with that of the young man dressed in fine silks who had planted that banner in the earth of our own country.

54

The days following that heady occasion went swiftly as did our men, the ranks of whom were swelling. We were given food and shelter by some of the most important Jacobite families along our route. It soon became clear that we were not heading for Inverness as a lot of our men expected but were making our way into the Lowlands. Rory told me that the prince wanted to convey the message that he was serious in his intent by leaving the relative safety of the Highlands for the Central Lowlands. It soon became evident that our ever increasing army was heading for Edinburgh. Our journey, though seemingly unopposed, was not without its dangers and it was expected that the government troops led by Lieutenant General Sir John Cope would be encountered at any moment. Neither he nor his army were to be seen when on the thirtieth of August we descended towards Perth. And though we were not met with mass jubilation, we were given a warm reception and we entered the city to the sounds of bells ringing. The prince even held a ball in honour of his host Lady Lude. He proved himself a very popular young man indeed.

It was before we set out that we were joined by the brother of the Duke of Atholl, Lord George Murray, who appeared to me to be a confident man who had considerable experience in the field of battle. Lochiel, and therefore Clan Cameron, approved of him although it appeared that Mr O'Sullivan did not share their faith. Rory told me that it was his father's fear that this was a dangerous situation and it would not augur well if some of the most important men around the prince were at odds at even this early stage. I hoped he was wrong.

On the eleventh of September, after the prince had made a visit to the ancient palace of Scone, the place where all of the Scottish monarchs had been crowned, we set off on a direct path to the city of Edinburgh.

During those days I watched my husband work with our men, I saw another side of him, he was hard where he had to be and compassionate where necessary and for that he was respected. His father spent a lot of his time at Lochiel's side and therefore Rory, with the assistance of my own father and my

brothers and a few other men, led our contingent. I knew many of those men, I had seen them at gatherings, many had cheered at our wedding but, their weapons adorning them, I saw them from the eyes of an enemy and they appeared very fierce indeed.

On some nights we were given accommodation by supporters and on others we slept under hastily erected shelters. I was relieved that the campaign had begun in summer. The men would march most of the day until either we arrived at a place where we were welcome or the light ran out. What we ate depended upon where we were staying.

On the thirteenth we left our prisoners at Stirling. The prince had ordered that all our prisoners should be afforded good treatment as he stated that these men were also his father's subjects and therefore should be treated as such. His word was obeyed, and I wondered by their reaction to their treatment whether it was better than that offered to them by their own commanders.

On the night of the fifteenth we made our camp and in the strange summer evening light Rory came to me in the shelter that had been built for the night. There was barely room for us both and we lay close together under his plaid.

"How goes it?" I asked.

"Well, I think," he replied. "We should see Edinburgh tomorrow and then we have the small matter of taking the city."

"What are the plans?"

"I think the prince half expects the gates to be opened to us, but he has been advised that this is very unlikely. It appears from Lord Murray's spies that the city has raised a militia and that the castle is occupied with government troops. It willna be as simple as Perth."

"So what will happen?" I pressed.

"I think we'll have to look for an opportunity to get in and then hope that our supporters in Edinburgh turn the tide in our favour. The prince intends to make Holyrood his headquarters," then he added. "If we reach there."

He held me close and I could feel his breath on my neck, there had been no chance for lovemaking and I ached for his touch, but I could tell by his rhythmic breathing that he slept already. I lay awake listening to the sounds outside the shelter, they were the sounds of men sleeping mixed with the sound of the wind in the trees under which our shelter had been made. I had never been out of the glen and this whole experience was new to me and not a little exciting. But I wondered then what dangers awaited those I loved, what our men would need to face in order to secure Edinburgh and my excitement turned to fear.

The next day we did indeed see Edinburgh, the great city on the banks of the Firth of Forth towered above the surrounding countryside. I saw the old castle encircled by defences atop the hill and the rest of the city appearing to tumble down the slopes behind the city walls. Arthur's Seat was high above the lower part of the city and I knew from what Rory had told me that the Palace of Holyrood was situated in its shadow.

We camped out of sight of the city, and our leaders met as night drew in. I accompanied Rory, it appeared to be acknowledged that my presence was not unwelcome and I listened intently to the conversation.

The prince, although disappointed that the people of Edinburgh had not immediately welcomed us, didn't appear surprised to learn that they had formed a militia and were hastily rebuilding the walls where time and lack of warfare had seen them fall into disrepair. He was also not surprised to learn that the castle was held by government troops whose intention was to hold firm for the Elector. It appeared that if we did manage to impregnate those walls, Edinburgh would be a divided city.

Various ideas were put forward, it was obvious to all that we didn't have the equipment or the experience for a siege and that to attempt such a thing would be a foolish endeavour. But the city would be a tough nut to crack and to do so with minimal losses would not be easy.

To my great pride, it was Rory who said. "Sire, as the city is not under siege would it not be a good idea to send a party of men to attempt to get through the gates by other means. It would only take a few men to open the gates to the rest of us and if it worked it would mean that the city would fall to us without bloodshed."

I looked around, the others were quiet and then Rory's uncle said "This seems to me to be a fine idea, Sire. We have no desire to turn the city against us and it would save our men for battle and it seems that by reported movements one is near."

Somewhat surprisingly Mr O'Sullivan seconded him. "He is right Sire, let us take some men and see what can be done."

And so the prince agreed and the meeting disbanded.

Rory and I left with Lochiel and I heard his uncle congratulate him on his plan. I saw my husband's eyes blaze with pride and I prayed that this idea would work.

It was agreed that Mr O'Sullivan and Rory's uncle would lead a party of our men under cover of darkness to the gate called the Northbow Port. Our spies had told us that this was still being used although it was guarded.

As it was September the strange half-light that is a Scottish summer evening had changed into real darkness and we were grateful that there were clouds that obliterated the moonlight.

I watched them prepare.

The men covered themselves in their plaids and shed every sign of their identity, a small pile of blue bonnets lay at my feet, the white cockades sewn on them looked like a collection of flowers, they looked, I thought distractedly, like a wreath of snowdrops. I shuddered at the thought and dismissed it from my mind.

Before they left, Rory came to stand with me. "If this plan succeeds Isabel it will save much bloodshed and many days, I am told there is an army under General Cope advancing. We dinna have the luxury of time to wait."

He took me in his arms then and I clung to him. "Dinna worry I think it will work and tomorrow ye will come with me to Holyrood just like I promised and soon we will be dancing there. I promised ye this and I have never reneged on a promise yet have I?" I didn't answer, I just buried my face in the folds of his plaid. He held me for a while and then gently pulled away until we were a pace apart and he looked at me. "I am worried about ye," he said.

"Why," I replied with genuine surprise, it was I who should be worried.

"Well my dearest wife ye have been quiet for the longest time since I have known ye and I am no used to it."

I smiled and said. "If ye dinna go now I will demand that ye take me with ye."

"Your father would hang me up by my balls if I did," he responded.

He kissed me then and whispered. "I love ye," and then he turned and walked over towards where the men were gathering. I saw my father glance over and I replied with a small wave. They did not wait long and soon I was watching the last of them disappear into the wooded area and all I could do was imagine.

There had been no time to erect a shelter for us so I returned to where the rest of our men were encamped and sat against a tree wrapped in my cloak. One of our other tacksmen brought some food over and I sat in silence as I ate. My mind, like that of my companions, on the activities of the men we could no longer see.

Despite myself I must have slept, because it seemed almost immediately I was being gently shaken.

"Ma'am, if ye will wake up," said a voice I didn't recognise.

After a split second my memory returned and my eyes snapped open.

“What has happened? Where’s Rory?”

The man smiled and said. “I think by now he may be at the palace itself.”

He put out a hand and I took it and scrambled to my feet.

“So ye mean it worked, we have the city?”

“Not yet awhile but we are in and I dinna think that we will see much opposition. We are moving in while we can and making camp. I have been detailed to be your escort.” He made a small bow. He appeared to be in his early forties, he was of stocky build with brown hair. His clothes, like all of ours, were dusty and spattered with the grime of long days travelled but his smile was bright.

“If ye are to escort me, we should be introduced,” I said.

“My name is Andrew MacDonald,” he replied. “My mother named me after the saint.”

I looked down at the weaponry thrust into his belt and it crossed my mind that his appearance was not in the least ecclesiastical.

“Will ye come Ma’am,” he said, it was not exactly a question, more of an instruction. I hastily gathered together what belongings I had and thrust them into the small bag I carried and followed him.

Once I had been reunited with my mount he kept pace with me as I trotted along with the other ranks of Camerons. I saw Rory’s uncle Archibald ahead and he acknowledged me as he turned. “Your man has proved himself tonight I hear,” he said. “Ye should be proud.”

I rode forward, Andrew keeping pace with me, until I reached his side. “What happened?” I asked him.

“Well it appears, and Rory will give ye more information than I ever can, that they made the gate unchallenged and one of the men attempted to gain entry as a servant but the keeper was having none of it. So the endeavour was looking hopeless when it seemed a carriage appeared heading for the gate. Aye well it was young Rory who, without waiting, went forward with some of our men and rushed the gate as the carriage went in. It didna take much time to open it and the rest of our men gained entry. The gate is now ours and it is there that we are heading, there is a park, which should act as main area for us to gather. From what I hear the local militia melted away at the sight of us, so when ye see him I think ye should give him a suitable reward for his endeavours,” finished Rory’s uncle with a flash of a smile, and I felt myself blush unseemingly and was glad that it was dark.

As we neared Edinburgh the atmosphere became charged. The presence of Andrew with his broadsword in his hand was more comfort than I had

expected and as the walls of the city loomed ahead I hoped that all that our spies had told us was true.

Once we reached those walls we passed through the gate into the city, but instead of proceeding towards the centre we skirted the outside until we did indeed come to a park where I saw there was already a sizeable part of our army already assembled. I looked around for Rory or my family but I couldn't see anyone. My escort must have noticed the concern on my face as he offered. "I should think that he is with His Highness Ma'am," he jerked his head towards an area that seemed full of activity and the senior members of command. "We could go there if ye think it wise," he said with slight hesitation.

"I dinna think the prince would mind," I said, hoping that my judgement of our leader's character was correct.

So, with Andrew making a path through the throng, we made our way over to where I hoped Rory would be.

The sun was coming up and I could distinguish the various people around the prince, whose clothes identified him to the onlooker. It took me a while to spot Rory; he was in earnest conversation with Lord Murray. I was wondering whether I had indeed been right to venture forward when I heard a familiar accented voice call out. "Why Rory your wife has come to congratulate you," Rory turned at the prince's exclamation and his expression proved that I had not misjudged the situation.

He strode towards me and before I could dismount he placed his hands either side of my waist and swung me round. "We have done it Isabel, we are here. I can hardly believe it. No blood was shed and it seems that the people of the city will welcome us; we have had a deputation from the city elders already. Can ye believe it, the greatest city in Scotland and it is ours."

I put my arms around him and we embraced and then he said to my escort, who was standing silently by. "Ye are a good man Andrew, she is more precious to me than any city."

That city responded better than anyone had ever imagined, there was no need to skulk in the park. It became evident that the garrison had retreated into the castle and our advance was met only by the townspeople who raised nothing but their voices in approbation of Prince Charles as he rode ahead of his army on his beautiful bay. It was wonderful to be part of it all. I rode alongside Rory; again we were surrounded by those I loved. I could see that my father had tears in his eyes and my brothers too. "I canna believe it Isabel, it was all so easy," Rory said. "I have had more difficulty with cattle thieves at home."

I laughed; the atmosphere was heady and lent itself to laughter.

The faces of the men and women along the tight streets were lit with smiles and the windows that crowded in on us were open with the same amount of jubilant townfolk. It seems that everywhere there were white cockades and roses. I saw the prince up ahead, he rode his horse as befitted a returning monarch, not a young man who had stolen across the seas with only seven companions only to hide in a hovel.

I wondered what would have happened if Rory's uncle had written a letter as originally advised.

And then through the throng I saw the beautiful Palace of Holyrood, whose corridors had echoed with the footsteps of Scottish monarchs, since before the greatest of them all, Robert the Bruce. The gates swung open and the prince rode through. We followed him and I still find that I cannot describe the feeling of pride that swept through me as I entered those elegant gates beside my husband and family.

At last we were able to dismount and we passed through the gate in the inner wall. We gathered inside the courtyard within, the prince dismounted and it was only his brightly coloured clothing that distinguished him in the melee.

"What will happen now?" I said.

"We will need to legitimise our claim to the city. So there must be a proclamation read as soon as it is possible, and then I think we have other claims on our time."

"What do ye mean?" I said.

"It appears that Cope is closer than we had thought and it might be that we will need to ride out to meet him before we can secure our hold on the city."

I looked around at the jubilant faces, could all of this be yet a brief interlude before lives were to be risked for a bigger prize?

Rory must have read my expression. "Dinna worry lass, we are equal to them. The main army is still in France we have the upper hand but we must press it home. I promised ye a ball remember and we canna have one until after we have beaten the Elector's men."

I laughed at that, I didn't want to lose the excitement of the moment and it appeared that more cause for celebration would be open to us sooner than expected because the prince had mounted his horse again.

"Come my loyal men, let us claim this city for King James."

The proclamation that day was read by the prince himself on the merkat cross in the centre of the city, the castle glowering over us like some angry ogre.

The young royal struck a fine figure and I watched the faces of the people who gathered to watch as he announced that the city of Edinburgh was now held in the name of the rightful king of Britain, James VIII of Scotland and III of England.

The cheering was tumultuous and the heady atmosphere swept all thought of forthcoming battles out of my mind.

55

As the crowd dispersed, some following the prince, Rory turned to me and said. "Before we do anything else I will find us somewhere to sleep where we will not have to endure the company of several hundred others."

"We will have to be quick because the inns must be filling up," I said. Even though most of the men were setting up camp all over the city the higher ranking officers, mostly senior clansmen and their entourages, were seeking accommodation in the city.

"I wasna thinking of an inn," Rory said. "I know of someone who will give us a room and it will be an opportunity for you to meet the people who played a big part in my life while I was in Edinburgh."

"Who?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said smiling.

He wouldn't elaborate but took my hand and led me along Canongate, back towards Holyrood.

Edinburgh was a site to see, buildings with fine edifices graced the main streets with narrow wynds leading off at intervals, containing both houses and shops. We walked past the tollbooth on the way back to Holyrood which stood cheek by jowl with churches, taverns and shops selling all manner of wares.

After living in the Highlands all of my life, this city with its towering buildings and streets full of people, felt very claustrophobic. In addition to this there was the smell. I soon saw that the overhanging windows acted as a place from which to jettison the effluent from chamber pots etc, and every now and then there was evidence of this. The bustling city folk seemed to ignore this and simply stepped around it. Rory told me that they relied on the frequent downpours of rain to wash it away. I screwed up my face at the thought and trod carefully as we went.

We had nearly reached the palace when Rory took a left turn down one of the wynds until he came to a door on which he knocked. The little street was

dark with windows overhanging the cobbles, and I looked discreetly up in order to ensure that we would not be taken by surprise. I was looking up when the door was opened and I heard a voice say in a slightly accented voice. "Well I never if it isn't young Cameron, I can hardly recognise ye lad. Come in, come in."

The man who had greeted Rory so warmly ushered us into a corridor that opened up into a small garden set inside the walls of the house. The spot was dark but there were plants growing there which provided an oasis within the high walls.

"Dr Laidlaw, this is my wife Isabel," Rory said putting his arm around my shoulder.

The man, who looked as though he was in his late sixties, took off his glasses that perched on his nose and squinted slightly at me and said. "Pleased to meet ye madam." Then he blinked again and said. "It is wonderful to see that my best pupil has made such a good choice."

I looked at Rory and he explained. "Dr Laidlaw is the professor who ran the school I attended. I lodged here while I was at school and this house was my home while I was in Edinburgh."

"It was lad, and if ye want to it can be home to ye both while you are here," Dr Laidlaw continued. "It will not be easy to get accommodation I warrant and I imagine ye will not wish your wife to seek rooms in one of the inns."

"I am very grateful Sir," said Rory. "I will see that ye are recompensed for any extra expense," before he could finish our host drew himself up and replied in a voice that I would imagine would have silenced many a small boy. "Ye will do no such thing. I am not in the habit of charging my guests and I will take it as a great insult if ye should mention such a thing again." Then he paused and smiled and said. "And now we have laid down the ground rules, come on in and we will see if Mrs Laidlaw recognises ye as I did."

We followed him into the other part of the house and were greeted by his wife who welcomed Rory literally with open arms and quickly reinforced her husband's offer of a place to stay.

Whilst Rory and the professor were talking, Mrs Laidlaw whose name was Janet suggested that she show me to our room. It was up two flights of stairs and its windows overlooked the courtyard. It was not very grand but it was clean and contained in it was a very large and, as it happened, very soft bed. There was also a small table on which was a large pitcher and bowl and a small mirror, and there were a couple of comfortable chairs in front of the fire.

"I hope this will be suitable for ye?" She said.

"It is more than suitable it is wonderful," I said sitting down on the bed and feeling the soft mattress mould to me.

"I imagine it has not been an easy journey for ye my dear. Perhaps ye would like to wash and change your clothes." I looked down at my skirt, which showed evidence of travel and the fact that I had not changed it since we began the journey. I thought I must look a very sorry state indeed.

She seemed to read my thoughts.

"What you need is to refresh yourself and have a change of clothing, ye will feel much better then."

"I don't have a change of clothing, well not with me anyway. I have a small trunk but that is with the rest of the supplies."

She thought for a while and said. "I know, I have just the thing, wait here and I will bring it to ye."

After she left I started peeling off layers of dusty clothes until I was wearing only my shift when she returned. In her arms was a beautiful satin garment, covered with intricate designs. I had never seen anything like it before.

"It's a kimono," she said. "Malcolm travelled before he settled here and he brought me this back from the Japans." She smiled. "It used to fit me then, but it will be fine for ye while we get your clothes cleaned." She handed me the garment and then beckoned to a girl who hovered by the door. "Mary will ye go and fill some pitchers with hot water and bring some cloths for our guests." The girl bobbed a curtsy and left.

"Take your time to relax lass, I think the men may be talking for some while yet," she said as she busied herself about the room.

After she left Mary returned with several pitchers of water and I luxuriated in washing away the dirt of the previous days. I didn't dare look in the mirror, as I feared I would be ashamed of my appearance. After I had washed my hair and tied it up in a cloth I took the kimono from the bed and put it on. I had never worn anything like it. It felt lovely, no corsets, no underskirts, just the feeling of silk on my skin. I dried my hair as best I could and used the brush from my small bag to ease out the tangles. It was only then that I sank into one of the heavily padded chairs in front of the fire and fell, almost instantly, asleep.

I was not sure how long I slept but I was wakened by Rory's gentle kiss. "Ye look very beautiful lass," he said. "I didna like to disturb ye but I have brought ye some food. Mrs Laidlaw thought that ye must be hungry."

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. "Have ye eaten?" I said; there was only one plate and one goblet.

"I have, but I am no able to stay," he replied.

“Why not?” I said, now fully awake.

“We are on the move, it seems that Cope’s army are approaching south of the city and we are to go to meet them. The main body of troops will move after us but we have been chosen to see the lie of the land.”

My hands went to my face. “Rory when did ye hear?”

“Just now, my father sent a messenger to me and he is waiting outside to accompany me. I must go now.”

I was on my feet in an instant.

“I love ye Isabel,” he said as he took me in his arms and held me. He kissed me long and hard and then broke away.

I fought back tears as he walked to the door and opened it and then he was gone.

I ran to the window and waited until he crossed the courtyard. He didn’t look up.

I heard the outer door close and then there was silence. I stood alone in the room; everything seemed so quiet as I sank into the chair again. I looked at the plate of food in front of me, it was the most decent meal I had seen for a while and I knew I should be hungry but I had lost my appetite.

After a few minutes there was knock on the door. “Isabel, it’s Janet can I come in?”

It was good to have some company on that night. Janet told me what the messenger had told her husband of the situation. It appeared that the prince was preparing to order his troops to leave the city and make for a place called Duddingston on the coast south of the city. It was there that they would wait for news of the government army. The messenger had heard that the prince was keen to engage the enemy as soon as was possible and that Lochiel’s Camerons, and therefore our own men, would be in the forefront; which is why a small party had been chosen to reconnoitre the land where any such battle would take place.

I didn’t sleep that night at all; I lay awake letting my imagination create horrible scenes in my head.

The next day I spent inside with our hosts, they were very understanding and they had cause to be as many of the young boys the professor had taught were likely to be in the prince’s army. Professor Laidlaw went out into the city and on his return said that it was obvious that there was going to be a substantial movement of men. There were signs of great activity and a general air of anticipation. He had seen men leaving the various camps in the city and those that weren’t actually on the move were preparing for it.

I went to bed early that night and again failed to sleep.

The nineteenth of September passed in much the same way, although I did manage to sleep that night but I was awoken from that sleep by a dream. I had dreamt that I was walking through a mist, it was cold and I was shivering, I knew that I was searching for Rory and I knew that he was in great danger but I couldn't find him and I kept stumbling and falling. Every time I picked myself up and went on until I could go no further. And then I thought I heard him calling me but as I tried to call his name the words wouldn't come and the mist grew ever thicker and I tried to run but I could not move, it was as if some force was holding me back and then finally I had cried out his name and that is when I woke. I sat bolt upright and looked around the room, trying to push the images that had haunted me away, I hoped that this was not an omen of the future and I fought to stay awake rather than face that dream again, but eventually sleep claimed me and fortunately the dream did not return.

News of Cope's army reached the professor on the next day, they appeared to be making for the coast and it was likely that battle was imminent.

By now I was a mass of nerves and couldn't settle to anything, time seemed to have stopped. Janet suggested that she and I would walk through the town; I was like a caged animal and couldn't sit still for very long, I welcomed the opportunity for any sort of distraction and we left the professor promising to send Mary for us if anything was heard. As we walked out on to the main thoroughfare it seemed that the whole city reflected my mood. There was an air of intensity that seemed to fill the streets, groups of people stood in earnest discussion and when we passed we knew instantly the topic of conversation. The white cockades and roses that had graced the city windows had been withdrawn by the cautious who, it seemed, thought it prudent to wait until the outcome of the expected fighting and I glanced upwards at the castle at the thought. I wondered if victory were not ours how long it would take the men within to reap their vengeance on the people still wearing the prince's colours who were now gathered in the city beneath.

I pretended to appear interested in the windows of the shops we passed while my patient companion pointed out interesting items in order to distract me. We were walking past a haberdashers with fine shots of material in the window when Janet said. "Why don't we go in, ye are in need of some clothing and Rory did tell us he had promised ye a ball."

Suddenly it was as if the barriers that I had erected around myself had come crashing down and I felt tears spring to my eyes. Janet saw this and she put her arm around my shoulders. "There lass ye let the tears come, it will help to let it

out.” I shook my head unable to speak for the moment and she patted my shoulder. Eventually I managed to sniff. “I am sorry, I feel so ashamed. I should be brave, not cry in the street.”

“Ye should never be ashamed to love someone enough that ye worry for them. And I don’t expect that ye are the only woman in Edinburgh shedding a tear today lass. But let us hope that soon it will be tears of joy at our victory.”

I nodded and took the handkerchief she offered me.

“We shall go back now?” She said, it was a question not a statement and I took a deep breath and said, with what I hoped was a convincing smile. “No, we shall go in and I shall choose some material fine enough to make a ball gown.”

She took my arm then and we walked across to the shop and went in.

56

The choosing of material and the visit to Mrs Laidlaw’s dressmaker stole away the hours of that day, and I managed to push my fears for Rory and my family from the forefront of my mind until I went to bed that evening. The thoughts filled my head again until I finally slept but I awoke with a start in the early morning. It was the twenty first of September and it was not yet light and I was not sure of the time but something had woken me. I looked around the room and listened intently but there was no noise from anywhere. The house and its inhabitants were not stirring and in the end I finally drifted off to sleep, and when I awoke it was much later and it was to the sound of a knock on the door.

Mary came into the room with a tray of breakfast and I climbed out of bed in my shift and sat by the fire to eat it. I was in the middle of sipping some of the fine tea of which the professor was very proud when Janet came in.

“Would you like to walk in the park with me? It’s a fine day and it’s a shame to waste it.”

I knew she was again trying to distract me but her gesture was appreciated and after I finished my meal I dressed and met her in the small courtyard.

It was indeed a fine day and it was lovely to walk in a green space again. I missed my home very much and I understood now how Rory had felt living in the city for so long.

It was nearing lunchtime when we walked again towards the Laidlaw’s home. I noticed at once that there seemed to be an air of excitement, and I

couldn't stop myself from asking one of the shopkeepers who was standing outside his shop what had happened.

"It's the prince's army," he started to speak and my stomach turned over, but he continued. "There is word that there has been a victory at a place near Prestonpans and the enemy has fled over the Border." He nodded his head towards his shop where a white cockade was displayed proudly in the window. "It's a great day for us." I remember wondering then if the cockade was a recent addition to the display.

Janet grabbed my hands. "Isabel they have won, they will come home soon aren't ye happy?"

Not being able to quite shake myself from my fears, I replied. "But people die, even in victories."

"Oh lass for heavens' sake, let's go down to the palace we may find out more," she said taking my arm.

So we did, and it seemed that a large proportion of the city had the same idea, as we were soon part of a large crowd that had gathered around the gates. We tried to push our way through but it simply was not possible, so we waited with the others in the mid-day heat.

As the afternoon drew on there were rumours that the prince had been sighted coming back from the battle bringing some of the men with him and on hearing this I refused to even consider returning to Janet's house.

So she waited with me as the afternoon drew on to early evening. Even I was beginning to waiver when a cry went up from parts of the crowd. "He is here, long live King James, long live Prince Charles."

I saw in the distance that the crowd was parting ahead of riders, and as I stood on the tips of my toes I watched them come forward. I saw eventually the figure of the prince on his horse, he was waving and acknowledging the crowd and they were returning his gesture with cheers.

As the people were pushed back I seized the opportunity and grabbed Janet's hand and somehow forced my way to the front. He was almost upon us and I saw that he was followed by his senior commanders. I strained to look, was Rory amongst them? I couldn't see. The prince rode past, followed by his mounted officials. I saw Mr O'Sullivan amongst them but neither Rory nor any of his family were there. I began to worry again.

Then Janet said. "Isabel, look, isn't that Clan Cameron?"

And I saw that it was. Advancing up the road and followed by our own Highland army rode our chief and the senior Cameron clansmen, and there amongst them to my absolute joy rode Rory, flanked on either side by my

brothers. To their left rode Sir James and on his left was my father. They were all safe.

The cheering continued and Janet and I waved and shouted at the tops of our voices, behaviour which would I suppose normally be considered quite unseemly for a professor's wife, but we carried on. But there were so many people pushing for the front that we lost our place and I was sure that we wouldn't be heard.

I watched as Rory passed by, I was sure he hadn't seen me and, jostled by the crowd, I lost sight of him momentarily.

But suddenly a gap appeared in front of me and I caught sight of Rory again. He had stopped his horse and was looking around him and then, much to the consternation of Gordon on his right and the men walking along side; he turned his horse, scattering clansmen and crowd and started towards where I had been standing. I felt Janet push me forward until I found myself just a little in front of the crowd. But I had lost my voice. I just stood there almost as if in a dream, saying nothing, it was useless. But through some miracle my husband turned again and looked over his shoulder and I knew at last that he had found me. "Isabel," he shouted. I saw Janet through the crowd, she had tears in her eyes. "Go lass this is what ye have waited for," she shouted and I ran across the cobbled street towards him. He leant down and I grabbed his arm and he held mine for a second and then bodily pulled me up in front of him. And without hesitation, or thought that a large proportion of Edinburgh was watching, he kissed me fully on the lips. A cheer went up and he waved and smiled broadly as he tugged the reins and the horse walked forward carrying us both towards the gates of Holyrood.

57

It was in the courtyard that he lifted me down, and finally held me in his arms, when he released me from his kiss I looked up at him and I saw that his face was smudged with dirt and that he looked very tired. But he was alive and he was safe.

We were joined by my brothers. "Ye shoulda seen them Isa, they ran. They ran from us like scared bairns. They didna know what to do, some of our men chased them over the Border. It was something to see Johnnie Cope's proud army running for their lives," Angus looked at Rory for support. "Did ye see it?"

Rory looked from him to me and said. "Aye I saw it, we surprised them and they turned and ran. But dinna think they willna come back because of that. They will come back and they will bring more and we had better be ready or take the advantage." Rory looked at the prince, surrounded by his senior commanders. "We had better hope that all the advice they give is sound and that His Highness chooses wisely."

"Aye that is true enough," said Gordon. "But," and he glanced at Rory for support before he turned to my younger brother who looked a little crestfallen. "I think we owe ourselves a little time for celebration, dinna ye think lad?" Angus broke into a smile and Rory followed Gordon's example. "Aye a celebration never did any harm when it is deserved, and I think ye deserve it, ye did well Angus, I have told my father so."

Angus beamed with pride.

My own father came over then, and after kissing me on my cheek he motioned Rory aside for a moment. I watched my husband's face whilst listening to Angus's rapt description of the events at a place he referred to as Gladsmuir near Prestonpans. I saw a dark cloud cross his features for a moment and then my father touched his arm and turned away with a wave to me.

I didn't have time to ask Rory what was wrong as we were joined then by his uncle. "Ye led a brave charge lad," he said to Rory who looked a little uncomfortable with the praise. "Thank ye Sir, but I have brave men."

"Aye right ye are lad, but ye led them and His Highness is aware of it. I think ye may be rewarded."

"I dinna ask for a reward Sir, but for the safe return of my men."

"Nobly said lad, but if ye get a reward accept it wi' good grace," Rory's uncle raised his eyes heavenward. "I imagine the prince will think that he is doing right by ye, and by your men to recognise ye in front of them."

Rory nodded at that. "Aye ye are right Sir, I will accept it for my men. That is of course if there is such a thing."

"Oh aye there will be, ye can be assured of that," said his uncle. Then, looking at me, he winked and said. "And for now ye can have a reward from me. Ye are dismissed for today and tomorrow, I think your wife might be requiring some time with ye and I dinna think ye will turn your nose up at the reward she can give ye."

Every bit of my visible skin glowed red at that remark and both my brothers laughed out loud. "Aye get along with ye," he continued and then said in a very serious voice to Rory. "Ye fought well and it wilna go forgotten by me."

He gave me a small bow then and turned and walked back to where the prince was still surrounded by his advisors.

“Come on, let’s go while we can,” Rory said. “If I dinna bathe soon my clothes will carry me away.”

He was indeed covered in the dirt of travel and of battle. His hair was tangled under his bonnet and, as he took my hand, I noticed for the first time that he had a cut on his own, which was roughly bandaged in a handkerchief.

“What happened?” I asked as we walked towards the gates leading from the palace grounds.

“I came across an Englishman who didna wish me to proceed I think,” Rory’s eyes were fixed ahead as we walked.

“What did ye do?” I asked.

My husband’s reply was said without a hint of bravado. “He is dead.” Then still without looking at me he finished. “And I am here.”

The streets were packed with townspeople and returning soldiers. There was excited chattering and signs of celebration everywhere as we walked. People stopped to congratulate Rory on the victory, he had never met them and they had no idea of the part he had played, but I think it was that they just wanted to associate themselves with one of the prince’s army. Rory returned their greetings but kept a tight hold on my hand as we hurried through as fast as the crowd would allow.

Eventually we were able to leave the main thoroughfare and escape into the cool wynd down which the professor’s house was located.

On reaching the door Rory knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again and the noise of bolts being drawn back could be heard. When the door opened Mary’s face peered at us from behind it. “Oh come in, come in. Neither the Master or the Mistress are at home but I was given instructions for when ye returned.”

Rory looked at me and raised his eyebrows as we followed her in.

“The Mistress says ye are to leave me your clothes Sir for the washing, and ye are to use the well water to clean yourself before ye put on the clothes she has left for ye. She was particular that ye should not be allowed to put them on until ye were sufficiently clean,” Mary gave a small curtsy for emphasis and I giggled a little.

“It is said little boys never grow up in their mother’s eyes,” said Rory as he followed Mary to the well in the yard at the back of the house. “It appears that it is also true of schoolmaster’s wives. She used to give me the same orders when I was a lad.”

“When ye have finished, there is food for ye in your room,” Mary continued, and before she left she placed a bundle of clothes on the step into the house. “These are your clothes, the Mistress thought they might not be an exact fit but she hoped ye wouldna mind Sir.”

“No I willna mind, she has been very kind, thank ye Mary,” he replied.

She hovered in the doorway and then as Rory began to unwrap his plaid, she coloured slightly, coughed and went in, making a great play of shutting the door.

I nearly collapsed laughing.

“Now be a good boy and take them all off,” I said.

“If ye carry on like this I will take yours off as well,” he said as he removed his shoes and stockings and then his shirt, which I saw was torn in places. He walked towards the well and began hoisting the bucket up.

“She did say all of your clothing,” I said. He had his back to me and he was still wearing his kilt.

“Aye she did that,” he replied, and he loosened the belt and the garment fell to the floor leaving my husband resplendent in all his naked glory. I noticed that there were bruises about his back and his legs, but there were no other signs of injury apart from his hand. And as he lifted the full pail of water over his head and emptied the contents over himself that injury didn’t appear to be troubling him too much.

He let out a yell as the ice cold water hit his skin and soaked him through.

“I willna turn round,” he said. “Ye might wish to divorce me this water is so cold, but it is so good to feel clean again.” He shook his head as if he were a large dog, the spray flying in all directions.

I watched as he repeated the exercise several times until he was standing in a sizeable puddle of water and then I handed him a drying sheet, which he used to remove the excess water. He tied this around his waist and turned round to face me.

I had always thought him handsome but standing there naked with his hair glistening wet and with his green eyes shining it was all I could do to refrain from behaving in a very unladylike manner. He seemed to realise this because he held out his hand and I went to him.

“Shall we? Here in this yard? I have waited too long Isabel,” he whispered in my ear. He kissed me then and pulled me closer and I could feel him hard against me.

“Shall I carry ye up?” He said.

“But ye are not dressed,” I replied, what if...”

He picked me up then, and stooped down to pick up the bundle of clothes.

“Then they will just have to look the other way. I am a very impatient man when it comes to ye Isabel.”

I hid my face in his chest as he strode through the house and carried me up the stairs until we reached our room. Luckily the house seemed empty apart from Mary and she was nowhere to be seen.

Once inside the room he laid me on the bed and looked down on me.

“Ye are very beautiful Isabel, when I saw ye in that chair before I left it was all I could do to go. It was a good image to carry in my head for battle.”

“Ye have not told me about the battle,” I said.

“Aye I will tell ye afterwards,” he replied as he unlaced my bodice and the ties of my shift beneath. “But now I have other plans, if ye dinna object of course.”

I didn't object at all, in fact I had reached the point where if the entire household assembled in front of us I would still have pulled him down upon me and closed my eyes when I felt his tongue explore my breasts.

The pleasure of our lovemaking never ceased to amaze me and when we came together I felt as if every nerve ending in my body was on fire. With every thrust he claimed me and with every thrust I surrendered until we lay in each other's arms exhausted and spent on that bright September day while the rest of the great city of Edinburgh celebrated the prince's victory. And whilst the inhabitants of the castle at the top of the hill seethed with anger.

Rory slept in my arms afterwards, his eyelashes fluttering as he dreamed. I held him close until I too was lost to sleep, eventually waking as the light outside was fading.

I realised then that I was very hungry. I had hardly eaten for the duration of Rory's absence and the frenzied activities of earlier, and general hunger, drove me to leave the sanctuary of the bed and pad across the floor to the table where, just as Mary had said, there was food and wine set out for us. I carried the plates and drink over to the bed and then kissed Rory on the forehead and announced dinner to be served. He blinked his eyes and yawned. “Ye are a rare sight to wake up to,” he said and sat up in bed, pulling the covers around him.

“Wine Sir?” I asked, pouring him a generous amount of the liquid in to the goblet.

“I canna refuse ye,” he answered, taking a swig.

“Now tell me about the battle,” I said sitting down on the side of the bed. I had put the satin kimono on and pulled the material around me enjoying the feel of the rich fabric against my skin. Rory took a bite of bread and some of the cold meats that had been left and began to tell the story.

58

Clan Cameron had been at the forefront of manoeuvres and when the initial party arrived some of the men under Rory's father's command had received orders from the now 'Colonel' O'Sullivan to hide in a churchyard at the village of Tranent which lay to the east of Prestonpans. The men duly went but it was to Sir James' and Lord Murray's dismay that these men were discovered by one of the supporters of the Hanoverian army. The sound of cannon fire alerted the gathered ranks of Camerons and the angry words between Sir James Cameron and Colonel O'Sullivan had vied for competition. This had been the first foray of this campaign and Clan Cameron was lucky that relatively few men were injured.

As more reinforcements arrived it was evident from the spies who watched the opposing forces that General Cope's Hanoverian army were making camp and Rory told me that they could see the firelights from that camp. The prince's army however had been given strict instructions to show no sign of any light and the Jacobites, under cover of darkness, started to move towards the village of Tranent, the plan being to outflank Cope's men.

"I dinna think they knew where we were at all," Rory said. "Although I dinna know how they didna guess at one time because every dog in the village took to barking."

There was a long meeting held by the prince and his military advisors as to the best way to approach the chosen spot. It was difficult to reach because it was covered with marshes and bogs and the only way forward seemed to be a long route, which had been suggested by Lord Murray. Rory had been standing some way from the main group when he was joined by a young man in his early teens.

"I wouldna do it that way," the youth had said quietly.

Rory had turned to him. "Aye, and why would ye know better?" he said.

"Because my father owns the meadows and I know the tracks across them when I goes shooting birds Sir."

Rory had turned directly to him then. "So ye know the way across those bogs then?"

"Aye that is what I said Sir."

"What is your name?"

"Anderson Sir, Robert Anderson."

"Well Robert Anderson, ye had better be able to back up your words because I think ye may be very helpful indeed."

At that Rory had taken the young man by the elbow and made his way to where the prince was listening while his advisors discussed tactics.

After an introduction to the prince and the gathered Jacobite hierarchy a much quieter Robert Anderson explained who he was and what he knew and he had jumped when Lord Murray clapped him on the shoulder and said. "Ye are the answer to our prayers lad. Ye will lead the way tonight and tomorrow the Redcoats willna know what hit them."

So at four o'clock on a dark and misty September the twenty-first the lines of men set off. Their Highland life had trained them to cross terrain without being heard; if you need to stalk your own food you become very adept at not making any noise or you and your family go hungry.

Rory told me that one of the captured prisoners had told him that as the morning grew lighter he had actually seen the Highlanders in the mist but had mistaken them for bushes.

But soon General Cope realised what was happening and he ordered his troops from their beds. There were sounds of panic from their ranks but still the Highland forces crept silently to their allotted posts.

Rory's men were positioned in Lord George Murray's left wing and Rory found himself at the head.

"I closed my eyes prayed for a second for our safe deliverance and then let out a cry at the top of my voice and ran forward," he told me. "It was strange Isabel, it was as if everything happened very slowly after that, we were all running forward. I could hear men yelling as they ran and I could hear the pipes but it felt unreal somehow. That is until I met my first English soldier and I felt the steel of his bayonet on my hand."

"What did ye do?" I asked.

"I used my own steel, it appeared I was better equipped than him."

Rory told me that the ensuing battle was chaos, the government troops were turning this way and that despite the efforts of their leaders to restore order, as soon as the mist cleared he could see men fleeing in front of them. But there were still men intent on battle and when they came closer Rory had ordered his men to use their firearms. "There wasna any point doing this until they were close. Our guns could only be effective at short range and so we waited until the men were upon us and then fired. It was strange they didna appear to have any swords, the men that didna go down with the bullets fell by our broadswords." He looked at me then. "Aye, in the heat of the battle ye will do anything to stay alive, in the cold light of day ye wonder how ye found the courage to do it."

Then he continued, more to himself than me. "It wasna until that same prisoner told us that they had been given orders to leave their own swords at Stirling that I knew why. Very strange that, I didna understand it then and I'm damned if I do now."

I had asked him what had happened next and he had shrugged.

"It was nearly all over, they started to run in their masses and some of our men followed them and I'm told that they chased them through the Lammemuir Hills and over the Border. We had another job to do though."

I had asked him what that was and he explained that he had led men back to the battlefield to search for the wounded. "We had been given strict orders to treat their wounded no differently than our own." He paused and then went on. "I hope in your lifetime Isabel ye never have to witness a scene like that. Still we did our job and brought back as many people as we could manage, there were other men doing the same. There was real terror in the eyes of some of their men. I dinna think they thought we were going to let them live." He had stared across the room then and said softly. "It is one thing to take a man in a battle but it is another thing all together to slaughter a man who canna fight back after that battle is over. I dinna know what is usual practice in Cope's army but some were so relieved to find out our true intentions that they pissed themselves."

Then he turned to me and said. "And that my fair and lovely wife is the noble art of battle."

I touched his cheek gently. "I am proud of ye," I said.

"I did what was expected of me," he replied.

"Aye but ye showed courage and ye fought well and showed compassion. There is not much more anyone can ask of a leader of men than that."

"Thank ye," he said. "But I dinna think that I need to be rewarded for it."

I shook my head and smiled. "Roderick Cameron when ye were a young lad ye told me that ye thought that ye were a disappointment to your father and that he never praised ye. Now ye are getting that praise ye dinna want it." I ruffled his now dry hair. "Do as your uncle tells ye, accept with good grace and take it for your men. The reward will be for them too, the prince canna reward each one."

"Ye are very wise for one so young and beautiful and ye have a very bad habit of being right," he said taking my hand and kissing my fingers and now, if ye like, ye can remind me of your other attributes as well.

59

We didn't see the Laidlaws until the following day, by which time the professor had been fully appraised of the battle and Rory's part in it. However it did appear that his old tutor was better acquainted with his former pupil's character than his uncle, and talk of rewards and of his own valour were kept to a minimum. Janet just winked at me and whispered that she had suggested to her husband that despite the fact that he had wanted to hear all the news first hand, she thought that last night had been a good occasion for dining with old friends, thus leaving us to our own devices. Janet Laidlaw was a wise woman indeed.

And so our stay in Edinburgh began. Rory was indeed rewarded; he was promoted to Colonel and was honoured by the prince himself in doing so, by receiving a very fine diamond white cockade brooch. The presentation was carried out in full sight of Rory's men with the prince acknowledging the part that all had played. My husband was mollified and actually looked quite proud for at least a minute.

Our days began to fall into a routine. Rory's now elevated status meant that he attended the ten o'clock councils at Holyrood, which the prince held with his advisors. He would then return to where a large body of the Clan Cameron were encamped at the Weigh House near the Lawnmarket. Rory told me that they were there to monitor and repel any attacks from the garrison still in residence at the castle. At one time orders were given to barricade food reaching the fortress as rumour had reached the prince that supplies were low but this was met with sporadic firing from within those walls and when Lochiel was peppered on his shoulder whilst in the vicinity it was decided that these orders were rescinded. And a kind of peace between the two sides returned.

In the lower part of Canongate beyond the Netherbow Port the townsfolk went about their daily lives unhindered. And while Rory was playing his part in matters of state Janet and I would visit the local merchants or walk in the parks if the weather was fine. We also made several visits to the dressmaker's establishment and my ballgown was beginning to look very lovely indeed. It was emerald green satin and in honour of the bravery of my husband, and those were the dressmakers own words, there were tiny white cockades sewn around the neckline which was in turn edged with fine French lace. All I needed now was a ball to wear it to. Fortuitously for the dressmaker and Janet

and I, Rory informed me on the same day that the dress was completed that a ball would indeed be held and that it would be at the end of that week. The prince had resisted calls for a ball to celebrate the recent victory and had frowned on the celebrations that took place in the city. Rory told me soon after that His Royal Highness had ordered that a proclamation was to be made forbidding such celebrations, as the victory had, in his words, 'been obtained by the effusion of the blood of His Majesty's subjects, and has involved many unfortunate people in calamity, we hereby forbid any outward demonstrations of public joy'. So the victory went uncelebrated but the ladies and gentlemen of Edinburgh were clamouring for the famous gaiety with which the prince had become synonymous and eventually the prince relented.

During this brief period my life had seemed almost normal, it was a relief to be able to dwell on the fripperies of life and to know that for now Rory was relatively safe. He would meet me whilst the prince was sitting down to his midday meal in the palace whilst watched by his subjects. It was a tradition that royals would dine in public and I wondered how this must have felt to the subject of their ardour. I had not had occasion to engage in conversation with the prince since the day I had met him and I did wonder what it felt like to be plunged into this atmosphere of intrigue. I presumed that as he was brought up to it he did not find it too tedious.

On the night of the ball Rory got ready and then left me to dress. He looked very fine indeed, his clothes were free of dust and there was not a tear in sight. He had bought some new clothes from a tailor in the city, which included a beautiful green velvet jacket with silver buttons and a new kilt and plaid. There were many merchants in Edinburgh who had seized the opportunity of encouraging custom of the Highland gentry by selling tartan of all hues and Rory had been very well catered for, he looked very fine indeed as he left the room.

I looked at myself in the little mirror by the dressing table and was about to take up my brush and attack my hair when there was a knock at the door.

Janet and Mary entered almost immediately carrying the dress and a large mahogany box and a pitcher and bowl.

And so began the job of getting me ready.

Once I had put on the undergarments the two women helped me slip the dress on and then fastened the tiny self covered buttons that ran down the back. I then sat on a small stool while Janet opened the box she carried and pulled out pins and ribbons for my hair. She used pearl-ended pins and I was

very impressed with the result. "Aye well not having any daughters I wasna going to miss this chance," she said, handing me a small looking glass to survey the back.

The ensemble was completed with a pair of satin slippers. I wondered how they would cope with the streets of the city. Janet was extremely perceptive. "Rory has hired two sedans, he didna want ye traipsing across the middens in your finery," she said.

When at last I was ready I made my way down the stairs preceded by Janet who announced that Madame Isabel Cameron was now entering their presence.

Rory, who was enjoying a glass of burgundy with the professor, turned around from his conversation and his jaw dropped.

I heard Janet exclaim. "Doesn't she look bonnie?" but Rory said nothing, he just stared and then glass in hand, dropped to one knee and pulled off the most exaggerated bow I had seen. He raised his head and his eyes met mine and they said more than words could convey.

Professor Laidlaw put his arm around his own wife and said. "Janet it reminds me of our first outing together, ye were beautiful then and ye haven't changed a bit."

Janet told him to stop being a fool but she still preened at the compliment.

Rory, who had by now risen from his pose held out a large black cape for me and slipped it about my shoulders. The hood of the cape was cavernous enough to cover my hair without unseating the elaborate coiffure, and now that we were both ready we bade farewell to our hosts and gingerly picked our way to the sedans, their porters waiting as near to the house as they could manage, taking in to account the narrowness of the wynd.

It was only a short trip to Holyrood but I was glad that we had not walked. It had rained earlier in the day and there were a few puddles amongst the cobbles along with the other detritus of the city.

At our destination we waited until the sedans were lowered to the ground outside the palace entrance and Rory stepped out of his and helped me out. Once we had entered the palace a manservant took my cloak and I caught site of myself in one of the beautiful mirrors in the entrance vestibule. I giggled, who would have thought that the woman in the reflection had been milking cows only months ago.

I was so very proud of Rory on that night, he was greeted by some of the finest Jacobite gentry in the country. He conversed with the great and the good in such an easy manner and I hope that I played my own part well. Holyrood

had been a royal residence for centuries and the grandeur and opulence of the interior reflected this. The reception chambers were lined with beautiful pictures by the finest painters and the furniture was of the finest quality. All of the rooms were lit by thousands of candles made out of the best wax. There was no smell of tallow here, just of opulence and riches and the heady aroma of perfumes. When we entered the main ballroom we stopped. I thought I was going to cry, it was all so beautiful.

“So ye see Isabel, I kept my promise,” Rory whispered into my ear. “And ye are the finest woman in the room. Have ye not seen the way the other men look at ye? I am so proud and at the same time I feel like taking my broadsword to them all,” he laughed when he spoke but I saw the flash in his eye.

I replied, as coquettishly as an ex-milkmaid can reply. “Oh Sir ye are so kind,” and then less coquettishly. “Well ye are receiving similar approval from the ladies in the room so I’ll refrain from taking any action only if ye will.”

He laughed out loud at that and said. “Ye will always be my Isabel, ye will always be that little girl who wouldna let me get on my high horse, and I love ye for it.” He kissed me then, right in front of the whole room and then took my arm and we appeared to glide through them all. I felt as if all my childhood dreams had come true.

We walked and we talked with many people and we danced too. As we moved around the room Prince Charles Edward Stuart’s ancestors looked down upon us and it made me aware of the sheer enormity of what one young man had taken upon himself to do to avenge his eminent forbears and to restore their heritage. It was a task indeed.

The temperature in the room was increasing and after a particularly enthusiastic reel I excused myself to leave the room. The facilities were on the ground floor near to an open door and after using them I felt a cool breeze blow in from the gardens. It was too much temptation. I could feel myself perspiring and longed to get some fresh air so I stepped outside.

The abbey church loomed up on my right, this ancient place had seen much of Scotland’s rich history and as I looked up at those old walls I wondered if the ghosts of those times before were watching us now. The September air was still uncommonly warm that night and I didn’t want to return just yet to the lovely but slightly claustrophobic atmosphere of the ballroom. So I wandered along the path out of sight of the door through which I had come then across the lawns and on to the gravel path.

It was there that I saw him. A young man sitting on a stone bench gazing up

at Arthur's Seat, the rock that towered above the palace making it seem very small indeed. I stopped when I realised who it was, but it was too late the prince had turned around. He must have heard me approaching.

"Who is there?" he said, he didn't sound alarmed but I quickly responded. "Isabel Cameron Sire," curtsying as I spoke.

"Ah Isabel you are most welcome come and sit with me," he responded, gesturing to the stone bench.

I walked over and joined him. It felt very strange indeed to be sitting in a garden in the dark next to the young man who was my own Liege Lord.

"I am sorry I interrupted your privacy Sire," I said looking straight ahead.

"To be interrupted by a beautiful lady is never something for which you should apologise," he replied looking straight ahead himself.

I had heard of the prince's gift for flattery but I still felt extremely awkward to be spoken to in such a way by such as he.

"Ye are most kind Sire," was all I could think of to say.

"Not kind, Madame Cameron, just observant," he replied, and then as if he knew that I felt awkward. "I apologise if I have embarrassed you, the compliment was meant kindly."

I stuttered my reply, amazed that he saw fit to apologise to me for anything. "No Sire, but I feel that I do not deserve such praise from my prince."

I saw him smile. "There are those that expect it, it is refreshing to meet someone who does not." For a young man he sounded very world-weary.

"Your husband is a brave man indeed, and he is modest too, you are well suited I think," he said, still staring at the rock above.

"Thank ye, I think so," I replied.

"I need more like him if I am to succeed. I fear that not all my counsel is based on such motives." He turned to me then. "If we are to succeed it will be a matter of choices, to make those choices I will require sound advice. It will all turn on that I think. The bravery of my army cannot be called into question but the eventual result will lie with those whom I have chosen to advise me. You see it will be my responsibility if that advice is poor, as it was my choice to select them."

I didn't feel I could comment, I just listened as he went on.

"When I came here I was told that what I was attempting was the impossible, but I held fast and now we have won a battle and influential men are coming forward every day. I have succeeded thus far but it is imperative that we follow up this victory soon. The Elector's troops are still in France but he will hear of the victory and bring them back. We are the last vestiges of

opposition to his plans for this country, if we fall he will have absolute power and he will use it I know.”

I didn't know if it was wrong of me but in the silence that followed that statement I ventured. “Would it have been safer to wait for French support?”

He sighed. “Louis would not commit to that if the venture had not already commenced. He will look for results before sending support; I am told that there are ships coming with weapons and gold. This would never have been so without the victory at Prestonpans. To achieve the support we need to succeed we must show results. It galls me so to be answerable to Louis for my father's throne but it is what I would do if I were King of France. It is what my father will do when he is King of these countries.”

He paused again and I spoke softly. “Sire ye honour me with these confidences I will not betray them.”

He looked at me again then and said. “I believe you won't Isabel Cameron, there are few I can trust but I think that you and your husband are two people in whom I can have faith. I am grateful to you for that as it is rare that I can talk to anyone without having to guard what I say.”

“I can assure ye of our support Sire and of our integrity.”

He nodded and then said. “You must have known each other for some time, I remember when Rory came to Court he wouldn't even look at any of the women that came his way, he always said there was someone but he would not tell anyone who it was.”

“Aye, I have known Rory nearly all of my life Sire. But for a long while it was a secret.” Then I paused and went on in the same candid way that he had spoken to me. “I am not high born, my father runs Sir James' estate and we had to tread very carefully in order not to be found out.”

The prince frowned and I almost expected him to send me away because of what I had told him, then he continued. “Living in exile as I have, and seeing how my father has been reduced in status, has taught me not to judge people by what they are but by who they really are. There has been many a ‘High Born’” and he said the words with a hint of sarcasm, “who have betrayed my father, and there are many born without such advantage who have been his staunchest allies. For a prince I suppose that is a strange statement as my own status is because of my birth but it is something I have come to understand. I think it is a good lesson learned.”

He was quiet and then he turned to me again and said. “I wish to present you with something, something as a token of my esteem and as a sign of my gratitude for being my confidante this night.”

I was flustered. "But Sire I cannot accept anything from ye, I have only listened."

He replied in mock authority. "I am a prince and if I wish to bestow an honour upon you I consider it bad manners to refuse to accept." He was smiling and I returned his smile. "I am not in a position to argue Sire," I said.

So he turned and I saw that he had slipped a ring from his finger, it was a beautiful emerald encircled with diamonds and he proffered it to me.

He took my hand in his and said. "I Prince Charles Edward Stuart do give you this ring in a token of my esteem. When my father is King I will ask for this ring back in return for an Earldom for your husband in order that you will both be elevated to the status of which you are rightly deserving." He placed the ring on the middle finger of my right hand.

I was speechless. He smiled. "It is not often that I am able to bestow an honour on someone who deserves it. Both you and your husband are an exception to that and I will not forget my promise."

He looked at me then, my hand still in his and for a brief instant I felt that he was going to say something else but he seemed to change his mind immediately and formally kissed my hand instead.

I heard footsteps then on the path and suddenly panicked. How would this look? A respectable married woman alone with the prince, rumours in this town were rife already about the behaviour of some of the ladies and I didn't wish to add to them.

But the prince rose and greeted the newcomer. "You are a very fortunate man to have this lady as your wife. I would say that any other man would not deserve such as she, but you, I think you both have equal virtues."

It was Rory, I looked to his features in the dark, what would he think?

I need not have worried, he walked forward and bowed to the prince. "I am fortunate indeed Sire, she tells me so often."

This eased the tension and the prince laughed. I took this opportunity to go to Rory's side, and he took my hand in his, his fingers wrapping around the ring.

He looked down at me in question, the prince interjected, he did indeed have the gift of diplomacy. "I have taken the liberty of presenting your wife with a small token of my esteem, the gift though is for you both and she will no doubt appraise you of it. It is well deserved and I will not hear of any objections." He walked forward then and looked in the direction of the house. "I think I had better return to the throng, there will be people expecting to be seen with me I think." And at that he turned and walked away.

Rory and I watched him go, on that moonlit autumn night it seemed as though some spell had been woven and there was not a sound. My husband gathered me to him and kissed me long and hard on the lips. "I am indeed very fortunate and if that had been any other man he may well have felt the steel of my broadsword."

"I am sorry," I said. "I think he wanted someone to listen to him."

"Aye," replied my husband pulling me closer. "It canna be easy being him, it's not a position I would choose. Ye can never know who is true and who is false and I'm not envious of his task, but I think that I may have been a little jealous of his choice of companion for these last minutes and it doesna become me. It is me who should apologise."

He bowed and I expressed forgiveness by another long kiss.

"I suppose we canna slip away now?" Rory said.

"Rory Cameron ye promised me a ball," and I added in mock admonition. "And I am ready for the dancing."

He put my arm through his own then and we left that magical garden to return back to the music and the people.

It had been a very memorable night indeed.

60

I didn't have occasion to speak to the prince alone again. I often wondered as I watched him drill his troops, or address the people of Edinburgh as they visited Holyrood in their droves to gaze and marvel, what was thinking. His face displayed no emotion only affability and patience. Rory was right; to be in his position was not one that I would envy.

It was towards the end of October that I realised that the situation was changing. Rory was his usual self but he seemed more distant somehow, he would talk to the professor alone but when I asked him what the conversation was about he was evasive and changed the subject. I had made up my mind to question him but I was saved the trouble.

It was the twenty-eighth of October, I remember the date well, he arrived at the house unexpectedly early. Janet and I were seated in the small drawing room sewing.

He greeted us both and then asked if I would join him for a walk.

It being October the weather was getting quite cold and I was a little reluctant to remove myself from the warm room. But he insisted that I should.

When I turned to Janet for support she just looked away and concentrated on her sewing. So I rose, went into the hallway and put on my cloak.

While we walked Rory was silent and it wasn't until we were seated under a tree in the park that he began.

"I have something to tell ye Isabel, and ye must listen to all that I have to say before ye reply." For some unknown reason the first thought in my mind was that he had someone else and I blurted this out.

This seemed to break the tension somewhat as he assured me that nothing was further from the truth. So, somewhat relieved, I listened as he began.

"We have been in Edinburgh over a month and as ye know we have received some gold and weapons from France." I knew of this, the French had at last come up with some of their promised support, although they had sent it in private vessels and not those belonging to the French fleet. Something Rory told me was indicative of King Louis' 'watch and see' policy.

He continued. "Well it is likely that we will have to make a move of some kind soon to either consolidate our position or to advance it."

"Advance it, how?" I said.

"By crossing the Border," he replied.

I felt the colour drain from my face but I had promised to listen, so against my own nature I remained quiet.

"There is a meeting of council in two days time and it is expected that there will be a vote as to how to proceed." He stopped and looked at me as if expecting a question but when there was none forthcoming he continued.

"It is the prince's view that we advance, it is the only way to assure French support and that is the only way to continue the campaign. The coffers are not empty yet but they are by no means full."

I understood the logic.

"I think that the prince will prevail and if he does we will move immediately," he said. And then he took a deep breath and said. "Ye are to return home."

I was about to break my vow of silence when I stopped. The look on his face was deadly serious so I remained quiet.

"I know ye willna want to go and in all honesty Isabel I would rather not send ye away. We have spent too much of our life apart and if it were up to me alone I would have ye with me." He then ran a hand through his hair and said. "If I am being really honest Isabel I would return with ye and leave all this behind. I no more want to risk my life than the next man but for us to succeed, and succeed we must for the sake of our way of life, I will go. But if I

go I must think only of my men's and my own survival. We have done well so far, but we dinna know what we will face in England. We dinna know how many men we are up against. Our spies tell us the Elector's armies are being pulled from France. My first thoughts will always be for ye Isabel, and that canna be, I must know that ye are safe to save my own skin and those that depend upon me. So I am asking ye not to question my motives in this and to agree to do what I ask of ye."

He took both of my hands in his and I found that I could hardly speak.

The thought of being separated again was too much to bear but all that he said was true. My own self-interests were not important and I realised that once committed to this cause, his own wishes must also take second place, so I answered.

"How long have ye known?"

"Almost immediately after Prestonpans. My father told me before I left with ye that the prince had said that if we were to emerge victorious his thoughts were to advance for London."

"My God, for London, that will be certain death," I exclaimed and then covered my mouth with my hands, immediately regretting speaking my innermost fears.

"It depends," said Rory calmly. "Upon many things There is talk of an English Jacobite rising. The city of Manchester has indicated that it will receive us well and in the county of Yorkshire we have support. The Welsh and Irish could make effective allies, but it all depends upon our own actions. The prince doesna just want Scotland for his father he wants the rest of Britain as well, and he willna stop. It is what drives him."

"Do my father and brothers know?" I asked.

"Aye, they do," he replied and then he laughed. "Your father's exact words were, 'if I find that my daughter is not sent home then Colonel, hero, laird's son or no I will hang ye by your bollocks from the nearest tree.'"

I laughed too then; I could believe that my father would say those exact words. We laughed together for a short while and then we both fell silent.

It took me all of my strength to break that silence and to begin speaking the words I knew that I must utter, but eventually I said quietly. "I will go Rory, I know that I must, but it will break my heart to leave ye."

I saw that there were tears in his eyes and he faltered when he replied. "And I also Isabel but there is no other way."

We sat, our arms around each other, for a long time on that October afternoon and when we returned to the Laidlaws' it was obvious that they both

had known all along what Rory would ask of me. Neither of them spoke of it but Janet touched my shoulder as I walked past and I knew from her eyes that she understood.

When Rory left for the meeting on the thirtieth I sat alone in our room praying that the decision would be different, that the man I loved and my family would not once more be plunged into danger. But I knew that God had chosen not to hear me when Rory came in to the house that afternoon.

He didn't have to say anything I just said. "When?"

He replied. "Tomorrow."

Janet Laidlaw was a wonderful friend to me on that day, Rory had left almost immediately to begin readying the troops and Janet helped me to pack my meagre belongings into a trunk of hers. As I folded the ballgown and laid it to rest inside the box I felt that I was burying my dream forever.

Rory returned that night. My travelling arrangements had been taken care of. He would escort me to Holyrood where a coach would be waiting to take me to Inverness. He had previously sent word by messenger to Cameron House that Lachlan, who had remained to assist Lady Anne, would meet me and convey me home. I was to be accompanied by Andrew, the man who had escorted me to Edinburgh, until I reached Inverness and I was not to venture anywhere without him.

I nodded my agreement to all this and when Rory had finished he sat down on the bed and looked at me with tired eyes. "Here is where it begins properly, we have met them on our own ground now we go to theirs. There is a great prize at stake, every man must act accordingly if we are to succeed."

"And every woman too," I said, sitting next to him and taking his hand in mine.

We ate alone that night and then we made love, at every touch I knew that it could be the last time and my body seemed to sense this too. The sense of pleasure was heightened by the sorrow I felt and when I lay in his arms afterwards I tried to postpone sleeping for as long as I could, so that I could listen to him breathe and feel his skin against mine. But eventually and inevitably I fell asleep.

61

We rose at first light, neither of us saying much to the other. The sorrow of our parting was silent and we bade farewell to Professor Laidlaw and Janet in quiet

tones. She took my hand as we left and said. "I will pray for ye both." I smiled back, I couldn't manage words. Rory took leave of the professor. His old tutor grasped his hand. "Ye keep safe lad, and remember to have your wits about ye. Don't worry if ye feel fear, fear is a welcome friend to the fighting man, it gives him the edge." Wise words indeed I thought.

We left the Laidlaws at the door of their house that had been our home and we didn't look back. Rory carried my trunk and I walked alongside as close as I could manage.

Every step took us nearer to the moment when we would part as if some force was carrying us forward when all I wanted to do was to stop time.

But reach the palace we did. It was a hive of activity and I felt like a condemned prisoner seeing the executioner's block for the first time when I saw the coach standing outside.

My father and brothers were there, as was Sir James, and it was all I could do to continue walking forward.

Sir James was the first to greet me. He kissed me on both cheeks and then handed me a bundle of letters. "Would ye take these to Anne and tell her that she is in my mind every day," I took the bundle from him and I kissed him again.

"I will of course, she will be glad of them until ye are returned," I said.

"Aye, until I am returned then," he said quietly and stepped back.

Angus was the next. He too had letters. It made me smile to see that they were to different girls. He raised his eyes and grinned rakishly. "Can I help it if I am popular?" I looked at the tall good looking young man who was my youngest brother. His hair the same colour as mine made him distinctive and I wondered how many hearts he had broken already.

He kissed me on the cheek and said. "When King James is on the throne I will be the toast of Court."

"Go on," I said. "Ye just keep that big red head safe."

He smiled in reply and then it was Gordon's turn. He handed me letters to Margaret and Andrew and he held me close to him for a moment. "Tell her every moment without her is too long," he said. "And that I will come home to her." He emphasised the word 'will'. I knew that in his mind was that other parting all those years ago when my family had gone to war and when only two had returned. I realised now exactly how my mother had felt and it hit me with a force that almost made me stagger.

My father knew it too because he walked forward and took me in his arms and for those brief moments I was his little girl again. "I will make sure he is

safe," he said. "I will make sure that we are all safe. I willna see your mother cry again nor ye, my own daughter."

He let me go then and said. "I have letters to your mother, I hope they give her some comfort. Tell her I will try and send more if possible and tell her to be strong and I will come home to her. Tell her I didna marry a MacGregor for nothing."

My father stepped back and said. "Now say farewell to your man, lass."

My resolve shattered and I flew into Rory's arms, nearly dropping the letters in the process. He held me tight to him and I sobbed into the warm fabric of his plaid. But finally he pulled back slightly.

"Dinna cry my love. I will come home to ye, a love like ours canna be extinguished by the actions of mere men. I intend to hold ye in my arms again and in order to do that I intend to see that no harm comes to me. I promise ye that Isabel and have I ever broken a promise to ye?"

I could only shake my head in response and he took a handkerchief and wiped my eyes and my nose.

"Now dinna cry any more lass, the way ye look now reminds me of when I pulled ye out the bog."

I smiled and sniffed. "I'll try not to."

He looked about him for a second and turned back to me. "We must go now Isabel the men are moving out and we must leave." He turned to Andrew who had stood silently by. "Guard her with your life as I would with mine," Andrew nodded.

Rory looked then as though he wasn't sure what to do, but suddenly he moved forward and I was in his arms again, and just as suddenly he stepped back. "Adieu my love," he said and then he turned and walked towards where the rest of the party were standing and I watched as they all walked away. So like that time before when I had stood and watched the people I loved leave the safety of our home. And as I watched them go I broke my promise and wept.

62

The journey to Inverness was long; I sat in the coach with Andrew as we jolted along the roads out of the city and into the country. I was silent for a long time; I simply wanted to be on my own and to his great credit Andrew understood. When eventually we did converse I found him to be a very good

companion. He was younger than my father and was married with three children, two sons and a daughter. He had a small farm, which he rented as tenant from one of Lochiel's tacksmen. I asked him how he felt about leaving them and he shook his head. "Words canna describe the feeling when I left them. It is as if I am acting against everything that is dear to me, but I have given my oath, as did my father before me and his before him. I am Lochiel's man and I will fight where and when he dictates." It was the same ties that bound my own family to the clan and it was the way of the Highlands, it was the way of life for which our men were willing to risk their lives. And as I sat in that coach I wondered if it was all worth it.

We spent two nights in hostelries along the way. I ate in my room and afterwards I crept into bed and pulled the covers over my head and imagined what Rory would be doing. He had told me that they would be splitting into two sections and that Clan Cameron would be using the western route to the Border with the prince and General Murray. The plan was to split that group into sections and enter the towns on the way separately in order that there was sufficient accommodation and food for each group. They were to take no tents and it was still likely that a large number of men would have to sleep in the open with nothing but their plaids and makeshift shelters to come between them and the elements. I hoped each night that Rory had found somewhere to stay and I prayed for his safety before I went to sleep and again when I woke.

And each morning I would meet Andrew at breakfast and we would leave the establishment and climb back into the coach ready for another day of jolting draughty travel.

It was on the final day of our journey that the innkeeper warned us of the fact that some of the Campbell militia had been spotted in the area and that we should be careful to avoid them. Clan Campbell was loyal to the Hanoverians, it was they who had murdered the McDonalds as they slept in Glencoe and it was they whom we feared as much as the government troops. It appeared that, whilst the area was largely safe, renegade groups would make sorties into Jacobite strongholds and it appeared that one such sortie had taken place in the area in which we stayed. As we left that day we made sure that there was nothing of our appearance that would betray our loyalties. Andrew's blue bonnet and cockade were hidden under the seating of the coach and I had made sure that the prince's ring was sewn into the seam of my dress that morning. The Innkeeper's wife having leant me a needle and thread.

So we set out nervously but after a few hours I began to forget the danger and think only of home and it was during this period that the ominous signal

of an enemy approach was heard. The coachman knocked twice on the roof of the coach with his stick and Andrew and I looked at each other. "Ye are my wife and we are travelling to visit my mother, ye are not well and have a bad fever," he said. I nodded, then he gestured to me. "If ye dinna mind I think it would be best if ye came over here, ye could pretend ye are asleep and," he didn't finish his sentence but held out his arm to me. I nodded and settled myself against him and closed my eyes and prayed silently.

I felt us shudder to a halt and heard voices. The coach shook as the driver jumped down and I heard a voice I didn't recognise.

"I am sorry to disturb ye, but we are the King's men and we are seeking out any travellers who may not be loyal to him. Ye will give me your names." It was not a question.

I kept my eyes closed while Andrew replied. "William Munro, Sir and this is my wife Bridget." He paused and went on, his Highland brogue gone from his voice. "My mother is visiting her sister in Inverness and we are travelling to bring her home. It is not safe for a good Presbyterian woman to be in that country and we intend to take her back with us immediately. But Bridget is sick with the fever and I am sore worried for her."

I didn't see, but I could somehow sense that our inquisitor stepped back at that. Then, he began again. "Aye well ye had better be on your way then. I wish ye luck on your journey and that your wife recovers. I would advise ye not to linger too long at your destination if ye can avoid it."

"Thank you for that Sir, we will heed it well," replied Andrew.

I held my breath while I heard receding footsteps and did not breath again until the coach began slowly to move off.

I remained silent until I was sure that we were some distance from them and then sat up.

"Thank ye Andrew, I will make sure that Lochiel hears of your bravery," I said, my voice quivering slightly.

My companion smiled. "I wasna brave Miss, I was fearful. If anything had happened to ye Colonel Cameron swore he would have me court-marshalled."

"Oh," I said, not really knowing what else to say.

Andrew saw that I was uncomfortable and laughed. "He also said that if I got ye home safely he would reward me well. So ye see I was fearful and a little greedy too."

I smiled back. "Well whatever your motives, I admire them and I am very grateful to ye."

He nodded slightly, I could see that my thanks made him feel

uncomfortable, so I shifted back to my original position and we talked of home and our families for the remainder of the journey.

As we descended the hill towards the port of Inverness on the Moray Firth it looked the loveliest place I had ever visited. I was nearly home, and I leaned forward to see all that I could. There were ships in dock, and small craft sculling to and fro transferring cargoes. As the wheels clattered over the cobbles of the docks I could smell the salt of the sea. It brought back memories of earlier visits with Rory and the thought of him was like a stab in my heart and I fought against my impulse to retreat into the melancholy that had haunted my journey thus far.

The coach took us through the town and finally deposited us at a fine hostelry in whose yard there was plenty of activity. It was a relief to stretch myself after hours sitting in the coach and I brushed myself down as Andrew helped the driver with my trunk. And then I saw Lachlan. He was the first person from home and his smile of recognition mirrored my own. The tall man strode over to me and bowed slightly.

“Madam, it is good to see ye returned safe. Lady Cameron canna wait for your return. We are to leave as soon as ye are able if that is convenient.”

I had no wish to delay my return home either but first I wanted to bid farewell to Andrew who had placed my trunk beside the Cameron carriage that was waiting to take me home.

I looked at my travelling companion, I knew that he was to return immediately; he had told me that there would be a horse saddled and ready for him. He was to return to the ranks of Camerons from whom he had been chosen. “I wish ye well, and I thank ye for delivering me safely home.” Andrew bowed slightly and said. “It was an honour Ma’am and I trust that we may meet again in happier times.” He seemed to hesitate and then said. “If ye are able to get a message to my Morag, tell her to take care and tell her,” his voice trailed off then and he looked at me, embarrassed to be sharing his innermost secrets in a coaching yard in front of a woman he hardly knew and a complete stranger. I raised my hand and said. “And if ye are able to get a message to my Rory tell him the same.”

He smiled then and said. “I will pass your message on, but I think that it will no sound the same.”

We laughed, and I watched as he walked away and mounted the waiting horse. I thought of the journey ahead of him and as I watched him leave I wished him God’s speed.

Lachlan placed my trunk in the carriage and then helped me to mount the steps. Lady Anne had placed a small basket of food and drink for my journey and I realised that I was suddenly quiet hungry. A feeling of happiness crept through me, it was the first of its type since I had heard that Rory was to leave and I felt guilty harbouring it. But as we travelled along Wade's road that had been carved out of the rock alongside the beautiful and mysterious Loch Ness I felt as though some of the load from my shoulders had lifted.

The road twisted and turned through the villages and hamlets along its way, I saw with considerable irony that the newly built King's House was being well frequented. But the customers were men who followed the King whose name bore no relevance to that of the one who had set up these hostelries for the comfort of his own officers and emissaries.

At last we saw the banks of Loch Lochy and I knew that I was home.

I took a deep breath of the wonderful fresh air and smelt the clean smell of the pine trees that drank at the water's edge. I knew this country, I knew its people and I loved it and them in equal measures and suddenly I knew the answer to the question I had asked myself. Yes, it was worthwhile; our men were fighting for the right of their way of life. A way of life that had existed for centuries, with its traditions, its language and its rich heritage and I knew that Rory's uncle had been right to risk all he had to save it.

63

As we swept up the drive to Cameron House it was dark, all I could see of the house itself was its shadow against the night sky and the lights at its windows. I saw that the majority of the rooms were not illuminated and it was the first time that I had even considered that this wonderful place could have been touched by the events so far away.

As the carriage came to a halt in the courtyard the doors to the house almost flew open and Rory's mother came out. "Isabel, Isabel, it is you at last? We were beginning to worry, oh my dear girl welcome home. How was your journey?" She almost skipped down the steps and she waited impatiently as Lachlan unloaded my trunk and finally helped me down.

She threw her arms around me. "Oh it is so, so good to see you." Then she stepped back and laughed. "Listen to me, I must sound as though I have gone quite mad. You have had a long journey and the last thing you want is questions."

I shook my head. "It is so good to be home, I am finding it quite difficult to

“speak. I just wish...” I didn’t finish my sentence, I saw a look of anguish fleetingly cross her face and I wished immediately that I hadn’t broken the spell of happiness.

But characteristically she was not to be downhearted. Instead she took my arm and said. “Let’s go in, dinner is nearly ready and we can take it in the library and eat in front of the fire. It’s a cold night and I think that it calls for a drop of something to warm us up.” I realised then that it was indeed cold though, for some reason or other, perhaps it was the prospect of being home again, I hadn’t felt it.

We ate dinner together and then she poured us two small goblets of beautiful ruby Port and we retired to the two leather chairs that were on either side of the fireplace. I imagined that these two chairs were where she and Sir James had spent many companionable winter nights together and I wondered how she felt about his not being there.

She broke the silence, after taking a sip of the smooth liquid she said. “Tell me about it, from the beginning, don’t miss anything out. I want to know everything.”

So I told her, right from the time we left the house until my return. She listened well, staring into the fire and sipping from the goblet. When I had finished she was silent for a while and said, still staring into the fire. “I would have given my heart to have gone with him, but I have a responsibility to him to keep this house and our tenants safe. It has seemed such a long time since he left and there is no telling when he will return, but I must be strong for him Isabel, just as you must for Rory. They must have something to come home to or their efforts are in vain.”

She was silent for a moment and then turned to me. “Go to your bed now, you must be very tired.” She stood up and held out her arms to me. “It is a blessing to have you here and I am grateful for it.”

We embraced for a short while and then she stepped away and poured herself another Port and stood looking at the fireplace. “I think I will sit awhile before retiring. Goodnight and God bless,” I noticed that her voice shook as she spoke.

She didn’t turn around and I left her to her solitude.

I walked across the entrance hall and climbed the stairs; the nearer I got to our rooms the more reluctant I was to go any further. It was almost as if I hoped that I would open the door and Rory would be there.

When I reached the door I took a deep breath and opened it. I looked

around; everything was as we had left it those months ago. There was a fire in the grate and there were fronds of pine in a lovely vase above it filling the room with the fresh scent. I looked over the fire at my picture, and I realised then it would soon be Rory's birthday. A year since I had presented him with that image of myself wearing his favourite dress and his locket. I thought then how the passage of time goes swiftly and of how it had carried us all to this situation in only twelve months.

I turned from the picture and walked towards the bedchamber. If it had been difficult to enter the first room it was doubly hard to walk into the next. I opened the door slowly and stood on the threshold. My eyes went immediately to our marriage bed and I saw that it had been turned down ready for me; I saw that there was something across it. In the dimly lit room, I had to walk nearer to see what it was. And my resolve to be brave nearly broke, for lying across the pillow was Rory's ceremonial plaid, and in its folds I saw an envelope. I hardly dared hope, and as I picked up the envelope my hands shook, it was indeed Rory's writing and I ran my fingers over the strong pen strokes, the ink standing bold on the paper. I turned it over and opened it carefully and then unfolded the single sheet of paper and in my head I could hear his voice speaking the words on the page.

'My own Isabel

If ye are reading this ye are home safe. I asked Andrew to ensure that ye didna receive this until ye were home, and I am more grateful to him than he will ever know for seeing to it that ye are.

Leaving ye is the hardest thing that I have ever done and the loneliness of not having ye near is almost tangible. I dinna know where I will be when ye are reading this but I know that if it is God's will that I am still living I shall be thinking of ye.

I will try and write to ye as often as I can. My uncle has men carrying messages to Edinburgh and Inverness and I will ask that I can avail myself of this when I am able.

I am finding it almost impossible to put my longing for ye into words and I dinna have much time, the professor leant me his study in which to write and I know we will be leaving soon.

Ye are everything to me Isabel, everything and more and if we are not to meet again my love I hope that ye find comfort in these words. But I

hope that we will be reunited and until then take the utmost care and know that I am thinking of ye always.

Yours forever
Rory

I held the letter in both hands and read the words over and over again and then reluctantly I put it down and undressed, after I had done so I extinguished the candles and finally climbed into bed, placing the letter under my pillow and holding his plaid close to me as I finally drifted off to sleep, a prayer for his safety on my lips.

The next day I woke still holding the plaid, the fabric had wrapped itself around me almost as if it were protecting me and I read the letter again before I resolved to emerge from my tartan cocoon. My intention was to ride to visit my mother, I had shamefully forgotten the letters I had to deliver and dressed quickly to ensure that there was no further delay in handing Sir James' letters to Lady Anne. She was her usual calm and serene self and she accepted the bundle with great joy. When I told her of my intentions she insisted that I didn't go alone.

"My son would never forgive me if I didn't make sure that you were safe," she said when I replied that I would go alone. So I left the house with Lachlan at my side, and in the cold winter air we began the journey to my old home.

As the horses carried me upwards, each step reminded me of all the times that I had made this journey and how important many of those journeys had been. The nearer we got the more familiar the surroundings became until I could see the house in front of me, the chimney billowing out black smoke.

When we finally did arrive I didn't wait for Lachlan to help me down, I slid from my mount at the same time as the door to the cottage opened. My mother emerged, wiping her eyes with a white cloth and then she blinked and blinked again, almost as if she couldn't believe what her eyes were telling her.

"Isa, ye are home," she exclaimed.

"I am Ma, and I have missed ye so much," and suddenly my resolve shattered and tears trickled down my cheeks as we embraced. We were soon joined by Margaret and young Andrew who danced around us until Lachlan placed a gentle restraining hand on his shoulder.

I spent several hours there, the letters were handed on and both my mother and Margaret handled them as if they were made of glass. Neither woman

opened them though and I knew that, like me, they would leave those precious moments until they were alone.

My life took on its own routine again. As Lady Anne was both acting Master and Mistress of the house, in addition to acting in her husband's stead as head of our part of Clan Cameron, she was always busy. She soon gave me sole responsibility for keeping the household ledgers up to date and I would sit at the heavy oak desk in Sir James' study diligently entering all of the household accounts in to the books. In the afternoons I accompanied her on her visits to tenants. She often took supplies to the poorest families and on occasions we would, as Rory and I had done before, accept the hospitality of those tenants and stay overnight before returning to Cameron House the next day. On some occasions she settled disputes between tenants although these were rare as the majority of the men were with the prince's army. But at the times that I was present she dealt with matters fairly and justly and I hoped that if ever I was called upon to do such things I would be able to follow her example.

I would visit my mother and Margaret and Andrew at least once a week, Lachlan always accompanying me. There were occasions when I would stay in my old room over night. It was comforting to do so, just as it was when I took my share of the milking. Everything I did reminded me of Rory but I forced myself not to indulge in pointless imaginings of what terrible fates could befall him and the rest of the men I held dear. My mother told me that it was the way she had remained sane on many occasions, worrying could not help or hinder them.

It snowed in November and Lady Anne and I spent those evenings in the library sitting in front of a roaring fire, she had decided that for as long as the men were away it would be sensible to economise on fuel. Sir James, like many of the Highland clan leaders who had signed the muster roll for the prince, had used his own money on assurances that when his father was on the throne, and when the promised French gold arrived, the prince would recompense them for their troubles. Lady Anne therefore thought prudence was required in order to make sure there was money enough to see us through the winter until such a time as the money was repaid.

It was on one of these nights in late November that Lachlan announced that a rider was approaching. One of the young stable boys – the elder ones having gone to fight – was posted each night in one of the towers of the house as a lookout and he had seen a man on horseback coming towards the house at some pace.

Rory's mother and I looked at each other for a second, she rose and stood

before the fire and said calmly. "One rider, well friend or foe I think we are able to deal with him." Then she turned to the old retainer and said. "Lachlan when our guest arrives, show him that Highland hospitality did not leave with our menfolk."

We waited what seemed hours until we heard the sound of feet walking across the shiny tiled floor of the entrance hall and there was a knock on the library door.

"Enter," said Rory's mother and she rose from her chair.

The door opened and the cold air from the hall rushed in heralding Lachlan and a young man, who looked extremely dishevelled and very cold. He was clearly no threat to our safety.

"Who sent you?" asked Rory's mother.

"Colonel Cameron Ma'am," replied our visitor, his teeth still chattering a little, I wasn't sure whether it was nervousness or if he was still cold. I imagined it was a mixture of both.

"Rory sent ye?" I asked, my voice sounded as nervous as his own.

"Aye Ma'am he did. I am to take some papers to Inverness but he asked me to call at Cameron House to deliver these first." He took out of his plaid a sealed paper tied in blue ribbon.

My heart was pounding; this was the first communication we had received. It meant he was alive.

I took them from him, my hand shaking a little.

"There are letters from Sir James Cameron too." He said to Lady Anne. She nodded, but knowing her better after having spent so much time in her company, I saw in her eyes the relief she felt.

Robert Fraser, for that was his name, was soon handed a large glass of whisky. And instructions were given to make a room ready for him and a large bowl of Meg's best broth was soon sent from the kitchen with some bread that had been made that day. The young man was extremely tired but he stood up well to the string of questions he received from Rory's mother and I.

It seemed that the prince's army had met with no real resistance on their way to the Border and Fraser's description of crossing the mighty Tweed into England was very elaborate. It had been swollen with rain and it had taken Lord Murray to lead the way himself for the Highland army to follow. But follow they did and they had made for Carlisle. It was important, Fraser said, to make a show of taking this town and it took a number of days before the Jacobite army entered its walls. It appeared that the townsfolk had believed the stories that all Highlanders were heathens and they appeared to rejoice at

discovering the fact that they were not. It seemed there was a plenty for the men from the North that day. When Fraser had left to make his journey the Highland army were leaving Carlisle, they were heading south towards the towns of Penrith and Kendal. He could not tell us anymore.

Robert Fraser was our only link with those we loved, but he was also a very tired young man and it was almost cruel to keep asking questions, so Lady Anne thanked him for his trouble in bringing us his precious cargo and we bade him goodnight.

Neither of us lingered long after that, both of us wishing to be alone with our letters. I undressed swiftly and once in bed, Rory's plaid around my shoulders, I opened mine. It read.

My darling Isabel

19 November 1745

I canna believe that it has almost been a month since we parted. The days have gone so quickly for me, I hope it has been the same for ye. I have thanked Andrew for ensuring your safe return. He is a good man and I owe him a great debt for his quick thinking. I could never have lived with myself if any harm had come to ye.

I am writing this letter on the only paper I could lay my hands on. I dinna have much so I am forced to be brief. I am lodging in an inn in Carlisle, I canna believe we are in England and have met with no opposition. His Highness is convinced that we can take London, not all of the others share his conviction and I can see that it will be difficult for decisions to be made. For myself I am with the prince, our men are for it and would follow him I think. Though I understand the fears about the Elector's army and their superior numbers. Still time will tell and at this moment I canna predict what will happen.

My candle is almost out and I willna be able to see to write soon, but before the light goes I want to tell ye that I love ye and that not an hour goes by without ye being on my mind. I dinna know when I will write again, but until I do please know that wherever I am ye are in my heart.

Yours always
Rory

I looked at the date, November was now drawing to a close and I wondered where he was, whether he had found lodgings and whether they had

encountered danger. I ran my fingers over the writing and closed my eyes trying to visualise where he was and trying to send some message that I too was thinking of him. And then it occurred to me; in fact I was ashamed that I hadn't thought of it earlier, I could write a reply, at some point. I imagined that Robert Fraser would return to the army and no matter how long that would be it would at least let Rory know that I too was thinking of him.

I wrapped the plaid around my shoulders; it was cold in the room the fire being almost dead in the grate. Taking the candle in its holder from the side of the bed, I padded into the drawing room and sat down at the elegant writing desk that had been a present from Sir James and Lady Anne.

In the dim light I took some paper and put my pen into the ink and poured all my thoughts out. When I had finished I neatly folded it up and took it back into the bedroom with me. I placed it on the table near the bed and extinguishing the candle prepared for sleep.

Robert Fraser left early in the morning but not before I was able to give him the letter. He promised that if he was not able to deliver it himself he would entrust it to someone who would be able to ensure it reached its destination. I thanked him profusely and wished him well as he began his journey.

The first weeks of December went by without any word reaching us. There were rumours of an advance on London and rumours of battles and other rumours that the army had halted. But we knew nothing for certain until another tired and travel worn rider made his way to our door. This man didn't stay; he just left his small cargo of letters and rode on for Inverness.

I couldn't wait until retiring to read my own so I retreated to our rooms and sat on the window seat looking out at the loch and watching the raindrops patter on the surface. The paper on which the letter was written was creased and when I opened it I saw that it had been written in haste.

My darling Isabel

6 December 1745

I am writing the words but I canna believe it. I must share this with ye. We are retreating; it hurts to write it. It appears that the Elector's troops are near and that we are outnumbered. It seems strange none of our spies tell us so but a Mr Oliver Williams presented himself to the prince this morning and on hearing this the Council decided to return back to Scotland.

Isabel it is wrong, I know it is wrong and His Highness knows it too, but we were outvoted and I had to inform the men. They dinna believe it

either. Some are for separating and marching with the prince at their head, but it wouldna work, those who dinna agree would not release their men and we wouldna stand a chance. The prince seems all at once a broken man. I canna face trudging those miles without even a chance to try for London but I will have to as will my men. Dear God the only saving grace is that this may bring us together but even that canna stem my fears that we have thrown away our chance for victory. Pray that I am wrong Isabel for I dare not consider the alternative for us all.

Yours always
Rory

I stared out of the window, at the gardens and the loch and I prayed.

64

The Cameron women gathered together for Hogmanay, Christmas day having been spent quietly. We tried to make the evening as bright as we could, but the celebration seemed hollow. We all faced the oncoming year with trepidation and when the clock in the library chimed twelve and Lachlan stirred the bagpipes into life it was a lament that he played.

January and the New Year brought with them rain and cold weather and it became obvious that the once plentiful kitchens of Cameron House were running low on meat. It was not that there was no game to be had but there were no men to kill it. We ate sparingly and kept fires and lights only in the rooms in which we spent all our time.

It was in the third week in January that we had our first day without rain. The sun shone weakly through the window of Sir James' study and I vowed that as soon as I had finished the last entry in the ledger I would venture out into the garden for some fresh air.

It was early afternoon when, Rory's plaid wrapped about me, I took my precious letters, which I kept tied in their blue ribbon, into the garden. I walked along the gravel path by the once full rose beds. The straggly looking plants belied the fact that come summer they would be laden with the finest of blooms. It was good to be outside and I took deep breaths of the clean air as I walked. Finally I reached my destination, the stone bench in front of the loch where, months ago, Rory and I had sat together and made our plans. I

wondered what would become of those plans now, how would things change? It scared me to think of the future.

There was a cold wind blowing from the loch, it whipped up waves on the surface. It was likely that this would be a prelude to yet more rain. I covered my head with the plaid and wrapped it around me. It comforted me to feel the fabric enfold me. It was the only part of my husband I had to hold on to and I was eternally grateful to his mother for her thoughtfulness for leaving it for me on my return from Edinburgh.

I sat alone with my letters, it was peaceful and reading the words I could picture Rory in my mind as he spoke them.

The wind was getting strong. I knew I would have to return to the house soon but I was loath to do so, it was good to be alone sometimes just to be able to think. I had made up my mind that I would allow myself a few more minutes of solitude when I heard the sound of someone walking across the gravel. I fought to still the feeling of resentment at being interrupted; I felt immediately guilty at having such a thought and framed my face into a smile as I turned to greet whoever it was.

I turned and my precious letters fluttered to the ground as I raised my hands to my face. For there standing a few yards in front of me was their author. I could not speak, I could barely move, it was every dream I had had in those long weeks come true but yet I could say nothing, I could only stare in disbelief.

“Isabel” he said, his voice shaking. “I am home.”

At the sound of his voice my body responded, I ran to him and at last I felt the arms I had longed for envelope me and I raised my head to his kiss. We stood like that for a long time until the first drops of rain started to fall. I came to my senses then. “My letters, they will be ruined,” I said and, extracting myself from his embrace, I ran and picked up the precious pieces of paper.

He walked behind me and carefully placed the folds of the plaid over my hair. “Ye dinna want to get wet either I dinna suppose,” he said.

“I dinna care Rory, I could be soaked to the skin right now and it wouldna bother me. Ye are home and that is all I care about.” Then I stopped and looked at him. “When must ye go?”

“I have two or three days at the most my love,” he replied, placing his arm around my shoulders. It was raining hard now and I could see the droplets falling off his bonnet.

“We should go in,” I said. “Does your mother know ye are home, she will be so happy. It has been so lonely for her.”

I saw a shadow cross his face then, and I saw a look in his eyes that betrayed his silence.

“Rory what has happened?”

“My father died at the battle of Falkirk,” he said, and then he went on in a rush. “We led a charge, we had thrown away our muskets and we used our broadswords, but he was shot at point blank range. I saw him fall. When I got to him he was dead already, there was nothing I could do.” Then he stopped. “I dinna know how to tell her Isabel, how can I do this to her? First my sister, now my father, how can she cope again?”

I couldn't find the right words so I took him in my arms and held him.

“I will go with ye. Ye dinna have to do this alone Rory I am here,” I said.

“I would be grateful for it Isabel. I havena the right words, there was nothing I could do but still I canna help thinking that I should have done something.”

His voice was beginning to break as he spoke and I kissed him softly on the lips. “Come on, we will go together, ye are not alone, I am with ye.”

He took my hand and drew me to him and we walked slowly towards the house.

65

I squeezed his hand for reassurance as we neared the building, as we mounted the steps I looked up at him, he was very pale. We entered and walked through the hall where mercifully there was no one to see us. We walked straight to Sir James's study, I knew Lady Anne would be in there, it was where she retired to at dusk, I think she felt closer to him whilst in that room. Outside the door Rory stopped, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes momentarily and then he knocked.

“Come in,” came the response through the polished mahogany. Rory paused and then looked down at me and I squeezed his hand again and he opened the door.

His mother rose immediately. “Rory you are home,” she exclaimed joyfully. The smile on her face was radiant and she held her arms out for her son. He left my side and went to her, they embraced and then she took a step back.

“How are you? You look thinner and you need a wash,” she said, smiling all the time.

Rory opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came. I saw the smile disappear from his mother's face and she took a very slight step back.

“What is it?” she said. “What has happened? Rory, is it your father?”

Rory didn't answer; it appeared he couldn't answer.

His mother's eyes scanned his face and then slowly she raised her hands to her mouth. “Rory, oh my dear God, Rory tell me it isn't so,” her voice shook.

Rory walked forward, she pulled back, almost as if she was afraid of him, but she came up against the beautiful polished desk, which had been her husband's prized possession.

“He is dead isn't he?” Her voice was quiet, hardly audible.

“Aye,” Rory replied, still dumbstruck, and then as tears began to stream from her eyes, he took her in his arms. “I tried to save him, but I couldna do it, we tried everything but we couldna bring him round.” Still in his arms she let go of her final vestige of self-control and broke down into loud sobs, her shoulders heaving as she buried her head in his shoulders.

I stepped back, I felt almost like an intruder on their grief.

After a while his mother raised her head, her face was pale and tearstained. “Where is he?” She said.

“We have brought him home, Uncle Donald has given me leave to bury him and then I must return.”

She nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and she shook her head. “Do you know I never thought he would come back. I knew when he left that it was the last time that I would see him, but I told myself that I was a stupid woman, but I was right all along.” She spoke as if she was talking to herself, and when she raised her eyes again I saw that she was fighting to regain some of her composure even then.

“Where is he?” she said.

“My men have taken him to the kirk, I have instructed the priest that the funeral will be tomorrow,” Rory paused then and asked. “Was I right?”

“You were. Thank you I will go to see him, I'll ask Lachlan to saddle my horse,” she seemed to be addressing no-one in particular as she went over to the bell pull and tugged it. “I will go with ye,” said Rory.

His mother paused and then she looked at me for the first time and she shook her head. “No Rory, you will stay here. I will keep vigil with my husband this night and you will be with your wife. Isabel has waited patiently for you and now you have these precious moments together you shall not waste them.”

“But Mother ye canna be alone,” Rory protested.

“I will ask Lachlan to make the journey with me and anyway Rory I will not

be alone,” she replied, and then she walked forward and placed her hand on his shoulder. “It is what your father would have wished.”

So we waited until the horse was ready and Lady Anne Cameron and Lachlan, her faithful retainer, made the short journey to the village church.

We watched her go, it was getting dark and very cold and I began to shake. “Ye are cold my love, we’ll go in,” said Rory putting his arm around my shoulders.

So we went back inside and whilst Rory went to our rooms I went to the kitchens and asked Meg to prepare some food and to arrange for two large baths of hot water to be brought up.

When the baths arrived the water was steaming and as soon as we were alone Rory stripped off his clothes, as he did so he dropped the mud-spattered garments on to the floor. They were torn in places and I saw too that he had bloodstains on his plaid. He had lost weight and his muscles had become honed. Days of marching and hard riding and grabbing food where he could, had changed his physique and I wondered if it had changed him in any other ways too.

“Ye needna stare too much,” he said smiling. “I didna wish to feel this self conscious.” He stepped over the side of the bath and lowered himself into the hot water. He pulled a face as he did so but was soon up to his shoulders and he let himself soak for a while and didn’t speak but closed his eyes; I could see the tension flow from his face as the water soothed him.

Eventually he raised himself out of the first bath was now murky with dirt, and lowered himself into the second.

I rose from where I was sitting and took one of the cloths that had been brought up and walked over and sat next to the bath. I began very slowly to wash his shoulders and neck and he bent his head forward as I did so. He sighed loudly. “I have missed ye Isabel, I have missed your touch and your voice and everything about ye. Ye were never out of my mind; it has been hard these past weeks. When we were marching to Derby we had a purpose, we thought we were heading for London, we have heard since that the Elector’s family were preparing to leave the country. But we didna know that, I couldna believe it when we got the order to turn back. From that day it hasna been good for us, my men are tired, there isna enough food and there is confusion as to what we are to do. There is no more gold so there is nothing to fund us but our own money and that which is donated by supporters on the way, and there have been fair few of them. I dinna know what will happen next but I do know that the men around the prince despise each other and that he doesna have the guile to control them. His spirit was dashed when we turned back and I dinna

think he is the same man he was before.”

As he spoke I was washing his body and as my hand reached lower he closed his eyes again, this time smiling. “Aye I have missed ye.” Then his eyes snapped open and in one move he pulled me to him, soaking my dress in the process. He raised himself and pulled me forward so I was half suspended over the water and then he kissed me. His kiss was urgent and strong and I responded. Then he let me go. “There have been nights when I dreamed of your kiss,” he said. “And when I awoke and ye were not there I have felt like crying like a baby. Not very brave eh?”

I didn’t answer, I lifted the jug from the basin nearby and poured water over his hair. He closed his eyes again while I finished the process, and then he raised himself out of the bath and stepped on to the floor, water dripping on the polished boards.

I handed him a large cloth with which to dry himself, and after doing so we ate some of the food that had been prepared for us.

We had both been silent for some time, it was almost as if speech would allow reality to enter again, but after we had eaten he rose and held out his hand. “I am very tired my love will ye do me the honour?”

“I will do ye the honour Sir” I replied. “But I willna let ye sleep just yet.”

He laughed at that and, completely naked, scooped me up, wet dress and all, in his arms and carried me to our bed.

Our lovemaking was passionate, it was as if we were making up for all of those nights when we had been apart and when we were spent we lay in each other’s arms, my head on his chest.

“What will happen now?” I said.

“I will go to sleep, if ye will allow it,” he replied.

“Ye know I didna mean that,” I replied. “What will ye do when ye go back? In fact where will ye go back to?”

“We are to hold Falkirk with Lord Murray so I will go there, there is talk of taking Stirling Castle, but I canna see that that will do us any good at all. It would be a waste of our resources but I will find out more when I return. And Isabel here in your arms in our home I dinna want to consider going back until I have to. My mother is right we dinna have much time and I dinna want to think about it just now.”

I understood, so I raised my head and my lips found his own and we kissed. He fell asleep almost immediately and I lay listening to his breathing, strong and steady and I thought of Lady Anne carrying out her vigil by the side of her husband and I realised then how precious this time was.

66

We woke early that morning, there was knock on the door. Lachlan entered with a tray of food. "Lady Cameron has organised that the funeral be at mid-day Sir," he said. "She wished ye to know that when ye rise she is in Sir James' study."

"Thank ye Lachlan, we will be down shortly," Rory replied and he rose from the bed as the man left the room.

He went to his old room to dress, and when he returned he wore a sombre tartan and a black velvet jacket, his hair was tied with a black ribbon under a dark bonnet to which he had pinned the white cockade, it stood out against the dark background as the only bright thing he was wearing.

I wore a black dress and a black velvet jacket. Elspeth had wound my hair into a chignon and I wore my locket, my wedding ring and the ring that Prince Charles had given me.

"Are ye ready?" Rory said.

"I am," I replied and, placing my hand in his own, we left the rooms and walked down to the hall of the house.

We laid Rory's father to rest in the family tomb, the service would normally have been attended by hundreds but the old church contained only Rory, his mother and I and the staff of Cameron House and some of the villagers who had heard the news.

Throughout the service Rory's mother looked at the coffin, which contained her husband's final remains. And when we left the church I saw her place her hand to her lips and leave one last kiss on the polished surface of the casket in which lay the man who had stolen her away that night to a love that had lasted so many years. My heart nearly broke.

We returned to Cameron House and to the study. When the door had closed Rory's mother walked over to the fine French crystal decanter and poured three large brandies.

She had handed out the glasses and then she raised her own. "To my Jamie, and to my son Sir Roderick Cameron and Lady Isabel Cameron, may your love and life be long and strong."

We raised our glasses, her words brought reality home to me. I had not even considered the implications to Rory and I of his father's death and I felt the colour drain from my face. He was now laird, head of our sept of the clan, master of Cameron House and chief to all our tenants and I was now Lady

Cameron, it was all a little too much and I sat down promptly on the leather chair that was fortunately behind me.

Rory's mother began to speak. "I have asked Lachlan to gather together the staff and as many tenants as possible at four o'clock this afternoon, you will need to speak to them Rory, to explain things and to take their oaths. We will have to wait for the full ceremony until after this is all over, but it will do for now." She then turned to me. "Isabel as you are now Lady Cameron I will defer to your wishes as to how the house is to be managed, if you need any advice I will be very happy to help if you feel I will be useful, and I will vacate my rooms in order that you and Rory can have them."

I stared at her, her voice was higher than usual and she was speaking quickly, her cheeks were very pale. I rose from my chair and walked over to her and took her hands, she was shaking. "Those are your rooms and will always be your rooms, and I could never hope to manage the house as well as ye do. I am still learning, I still need so much help and I couldna manage on my own." She raised her head, her eyes searched mine, I squeezed her hands. "Could we do this together?"

She smiled, and I saw tears gathering in her eyes. "If that is what you wish." She said.

Rory stepped forward. "It is what we both wish."

She nodded and the tears began to flow and Rory took his mother to him and held her as she cried. He looked at me above her head and I saw his eyes mirrored her sorrow.

That afternoon at the allotted time our people gathered in the room in which all those years ago Rory's engagement to the MacDonnell girl had been announced. This time the room was not full and there was no music, just sombre people listening to the words of the young man they had seen grow from a wilful child to a leader of men.

Rory's voice was clear and controlled and I was never prouder of him.

"Ye will have heard of my father's death," he began. "He died bravely at Falkirk ensuring a victory for our forces in what may yet be a decisive battle and lead to the return of the Stuart line to the throne of Scotland and England."

"I have never known a braver more noble man and if I live to be half the man he was I will feel that I have succeeded." He paused then and looked about him and continued. "My father was a fine man and a fine chief to our people. I willna hope to match him in that but I will promise ye that your

wellbeing is at the forefront of my mind in all the things I do. I am returning tomorrow to fight so that our way of life can continue and so that our children can sleep safely in their beds knowing that their fathers will be there to see them grow.” Then he took a deep breath.

“I didna wish to say much more than this, only to express my gratitude to my mother and my wife for continuing in my absence to care for all that is precious to me. This land in which we live is our home and I will not fail it.”

When Rory had finished there was momentary silence and then the gathered people of Clan Cameron answered their chief with resounding applause. Then it was their turn to make their oaths, one by one the men walked to where my husband stood and each kneeling and raising his dirk in front of him, by way of a crucifix, gave their oath of allegiance.

After the final oath was given and the final person had left the room Rory’s mother stepped forward. “He is proud of you,” she said. “As sure as I am standing here I know he heard every word you said and I know that he is very proud, as I am.”

Then she kissed him on the cheek, and turned to leave the room, before she did so she said. “You and Isabel have this night together, make every second last forever Rory.” She looked at me then and mouthed ‘goodnight my dear,’ and left.

67

We walked in the garden that night before we went to bed, it was very cold but the sky was clear and the moon shone across the loch, the surface shimmering in front of us. Again we sat on the little stone bench, his plaid wrapped around me, we were in each other’s arms.

He broke the silence, his voice soft. “If I shouldna come back...”

“Rory dinna even say that, I will no let ye even think about it,” I said.

“I need to think about it Isabel, I must speak to ye of it. These words canna go unsaid. I would ask ye to listen and then I will say no more tonight I promise.”

I stared straight ahead at the beautiful shimmering water, I didn’t reply.

He waited a while and then said. “If I should die for whatever reason I wish ye to know that I will be with ye and that I will wait until we can be together again. I have thought a lot about this Isabel, I have seen many men die and I canna believe that such an ordinary act can separate us. If what I believe is true I know that it will only be a brief parting until we can be reunited.”

I looked up at him then, the moonlight on his features exaggerating his dark eyes and cheekbones, he continued talking.

“I want ye to remember Isabel that if I shouldna return that ye are still mine,” his eyes met mine then. “I want ye to promise that ye willna take another man, I couldna bear it to think of ye in another’s arms, of someone else kissing ye and being with ye. I know I am a selfish man and I know it is unfair but I canna help it. Will ye promise me?”

I kissed him then, and afterwards I pulled back slightly until our eyes were level. “This is my oath Rory, I promise ye that I will never love another man. It is an easy promise for me to make for I couldna love anyone as I love ye.” He took me in his arms and we held each other without speaking for a long time. Both of us saving up the seconds in our memories and then eventually as the clouds crossed the moon, plunging the magical scene into darkness, we rose and went back to the house.

I woke the following morning to find that Rory was also awake; he was propped up on one elbow looking down at me. He kissed me gently on the lips. “Good morning my love, I think ye grow more beautiful each time.” I smiled with the memory of our lovemaking, we had indeed made every second last forever, and had fallen asleep exhausted and now as I looked into those almost mesmeric green eyes I wanted him to take me again. Just one last time before we were to be separated.

He smiled then and without speaking his free hand caressed my left breast and he lowered his head and his tongue explored my nipple making it stand proud from my skin. “Ye really are insatiable are ye not?” he said.

“Is it a fault?” I said quietly.

“Oh no, not a fault, never a fault. It is an asset I think,” he said.

“Oh then ye dinna mind?” I said.

“I dinna mind a bit, but if I fall from my horse it will be your doing and not mine,” he said.

I giggled and then exclaimed as he pulled me to him. He was ready for me and as he entered my body my head went back and I arched my spine in order to take him in further. We rose together to climax, and as we did he murmured. “Ye are mine forever Isabel.”

I lay in his arms afterwards savouring every second, but all too soon Lachlan’s knock was heard and Rory rose in response. I watched him dress, and finally fix his weaponry until he stood before me, my Highland warrior, chief of our clan and my husband.

I got out of bed and pulled on the silk kimono that Janet Laidlaw had given me.

“I will come and see ye go,” I said.

Rory nodded and held out his hand and we walked together to the top of the stairs. The house was quiet but I could hear the sounds of the men in the courtyard. Rory looked at me and then we walked down the stairs into the hall. We stood before the closed door.

“I will love ye always,” he said.

“And I you,” I replied.

“Remember your promise,” he said before kissing me.

“I will keep it,” I said. “But ye will come home Rory.”

“Aye, I will do my best to, my love, I will do my very best.”

Then he kissed me again and opened the door, the rush of cold air made me step back and I let go of his hand and watched him walk to where the groom held his horse.

I stayed there until he was gone, until I could no longer hear the final sounds of the horses’ hooves. Then I closed the door and turned around and leant my back against it.

Then I saw her, Rory’s mother, she was standing at the foot of the stairs.

“I didna know ye were there,” I said. “Ye didna have a chance to say goodbye.”

“This was your time Isabel, yours and Rory’s together,” she said and she walked up to me and placed her arm around my back and we walked up the stairs together.

68

The months of January, February and March brought with them snow and misery for us and our people. Food and fuel supplies were short, so short in fact that Lady Anne and I had insisted that my mother, Margaret and Andrew would come to stay at Cameron House until the spring. So the two houses in the hills were barricaded up and my family, their animals and their most prized possessions took residence at Cameron House. It was good that we were all together; it made the time easier to bear. Young Andrew provided much needed amusement and we provided support for each other.

It appeared that in those months men were returning from the campaign, they came back in twos and threes, they were hungry and tired and we did our best to help them on their way home. They gave us valuable news on what was happening, on the failed siege of Stirling castle, and the taking of the forts at

Inverness and Fort Augustus. These pieces of news were met with cheering from the residents of Cameron House.

In March we were told about the siege at Fort William. Each night when I went to my bed I prayed that Rory would be able to come home for just one night, but my prayers were not answered. And as April began we heard that the Highland troops had abandoned the siege and had been summoned to Inverness by their prince.

The Duke of Cumberland, the Elector's son, was in Scotland, making his way up the east coast. Edinburgh had fallen, he had taken Holyrood, and we were told that his troops had slashed those portraits of the Stuart Kings that hung so proudly in the ballroom. Cumberland had even slept in the same bed as Prince Charles. I wondered then about the Laidlaws and the ladies and gentlemen who had worn the white cockade with pride and had shown white roses in their windows. I began to be more and more apprehensive for the future.

It was in the first week in April that our visitor came, we were in the library reading and sewing and trying not to think about what might be happening when there was a knock at the door. Lachlan stood there and beside him was a dishevelled figure in mudded tartan, who appeared to be soaked to the skin. It was Angus.

My mother jumped to her feet and guided her youngest son to the chair by the fire, while Lady Anne instructed Lachlan to get some of Meg's broth. I poured him a large whisky and handed it to him. He drained the glass.

I looked at Lady Anne, what could have happened?

I filled his glass again and he held it and gazed into the liquid.

"Angus what brings ye here son?" my mother said, she sat at his feet.

"We are bound for Inverness Ma, most of the men have gone already I am here to get those who have returned." He took a sip of the whisky. "It is Lochiel's orders, as many men as possible we need them all. Cumberland's army is on the advance and they outnumber us, we need as many men as we can get."

The door opened then and Lachlan came in with a tray containing a steaming bowl of broth and bread.

Angus ate without halting; he ate as if this was the first food he had seen in days. It began to dawn on me that this was probably the case.

"Where is your father?" My mother asked quietly.

"He has gone on ahead with Colonel Cameron," he raised his head then and looked at me. "With Rory. The prince sent for us, Lochiel received a letter and we left immediately. They should be there now."

"And Gordon?" Margaret asked quietly,

“Aye and Gordon too, they are all there, and so shall I be soon, I have men scouring the hills now. I am to force the others back if I have to.”

“Is it that bad?” I said.

“Aye Isa it is that bad.” He cleaned the bowl and then finished off the bread, then continued. “There was a ship carrying French gold called *Le Prince Charles*, she was chased ashore and her cargo lost, we have had no money since then. No money for food, for pay for anything. We are hungry and we are tired, but we willna desert him.” Angus raised his head then and looked around. “We will never desert him, I will fight until my last breath for this and so will the others.”

I looked at my youngest brother, his red hair had darkened and his face was drawn, he had grown up in those months in the prince’s army. He had become a man and I saw it in his eyes.

“I must go now,” he said.

“Oh no Angus, ye canna go yet ye havena been here past half an hour, ye canna leave, ye are done in lad,” my mother’s voice was pleading.

He stood up, he was taller now, he placed a hand on my mother’s shoulder. “We are all tired, and we all dinna wish to leave our homes and families but we do so all the same.”

He kissed her on her cheek then, as he did Margaret and he bowed to Lady Anne. “I thank ye for your hospitality Ma’am and I am sorry for the loss of your husband. I served under him and it was a privilege to do so.” He took a step towards me. “Goodbye Isa, I will tell Rory that I have seen ye. It would do me well to feel for someone as he does for ye, perhaps if God grants me a long life I might.” He kissed me on the cheek and then, throwing his plaid over his head as protection from the rain outside, strode past Lachlan and out of the house.

My mother looked at us and shook her head. “Aye my little boy appears to have become a man and I have missed it somehow and it grieves me, but I am proud all the same.”

I couldn’t sleep that night, I tossed and turned and eventually I went to the window and opened the shutters. It was still raining and clouds covered the moon but I could see the waters of the loch. I stared out; somewhere out there at the other end of the Great Glen was my husband. And as I sat there an idea formed in my head, an idea that would not go away. It was only two days hard ride from Cameron House using Wade’s road, we had supplies in our cellar of oats and flour and casks of whisky and some preserved meat. If we could load these onto a cart we could take supplies to our men. It would not feed many but at least it would help and I would see Rory again.

I didn't tell my mother or Lady Anne, but I told Margaret, she and I had grown close and I knew only too well how much she missed Gordon.

When she heard my plan she immediately agreed to go with me and that night we put the proposals to Lady Anne and my mother.

My mother at first forbade it; she exclaimed that neither my father, nor Rory, nor Gordon would ever forgive her for letting us go. Lady Anne again came to my rescue. "Mary," she said. "Our men are hungry and it seems that they could be about to fight for us, it is in their and our own interests that Isabel's plan is put into action." She then took a deep breath and continued with great tact. "Her husband is Head of this clan and in her absence she assumes his role. And her first duty should be to the clan."

My mother closed her eyes and took a deep breath and said flatly. "Aye well I've given one son to the clan, and now it is likely that my husband and my other two sons are about to fight, it wouldna seem right if my daughter didna get involved."

I walked across to her and said. "I am already involved Ma, just like Rory is, just like Sir James was, and all of our men. We are not just fighting a battle we are fighting for our way of life. For everything we are, for everything we have been, and if all I can do is drive a cart to Inverness I will do it."

"And so will I" said Margaret.

My mother sighed. "Aye ye will go I know, and I would do the same for my man, but it doesna mean I have to like it." She smiled then and I put my arms around her. "Thank ye Ma," I said. "I willna fail them, I canna fail them."

And so it was on the thirteenth of April that Margaret and I left Cameron House at first light with a cart full of as many provisions as we could muster. Margaret had bidden goodbye to Andrew whilst he was still in his bed but my own and Rory's mother watched us go. We had food for the journey and whisky and we wore our warmest clothes and our stoutest boots. We were each wrapped in a plaid, I wore Rory's as always, and as we left the courtyard, the horses straining at their load, my thoughts were of our reunion and how it would feel to have him hold me again.

69

The journey was not too difficult, there were no Redcoats at Fort Augustus and the ones at Fort William appeared to be reluctant to leave that stronghold as there was no sight of a government soldier on our journey. Margaret and I

passed through the villages unquestioned. We slept in the back of the cart on the night of the thirteenth and set off again the next day again at first light. As we neared Inverness we encountered more and more clansmen making their way east. Some were in groups, some in ones and twos, some old men and some who were obviously fathers and sons. It seemed that all the Highlands were giving up their men-folk for the battle to come.

We reached Inverness at midday, it was my turn to take the reins and I carefully guided our two horses through the crowded streets. There were people everywhere, predominantly men, as we passed through I saw their faces were drawn and very often their clothes were in tatters. Their blue bonnets were dirty as were their faces and I doubted that many of them had slept, washed or even eaten in the last twenty-four hours. They were all trudging in the same direction, south, away from the town and towards the upland moors. The sound of the pipes filled the air as we rode through Inverness, calling men to arms. Different pipers from different clans adding to the general feel of confusion.

We came to the bridge across the river, the passage was even slower there and I leant over to one of the clansmen who was waiting patiently to cross.

“Can ye tell me Sir where I can find Lochiel’s men?” I asked him.

“Aye I can, they will be up at Culloden House Ma’am, it is where most of our men are, either there or on the moor itself, it is where I am heading. It is said that Billy Cumberland’s men are near and the battle is to be on that moor.”

“How can I get there?” I asked.

“Just keep to this road and follow these men, they’ll take ye there soon enough.”

“Can I offer ye a lift Sir?” I said.

“Aye Ma’am that is most kind of ye, I would be most grateful, I have walked some miles to get here.”

He climbed aboard and sat silently, almost as if he was half asleep, as I negotiated the streets of Inverness, following the increasing stream of men out of the town towards our destination.

As we drew near our fellow traveller took his leave of us, he thanked us for our hospitality and lowered himself down and joined the groups of men. It struck me then that we didn’t even know his name.

The park surrounding Culloden House was walled and clansmen guarded the gates. I drew the horses to a halt and waited to be questioned.

“What is your business here Ma’am,” said one of the men.

I took a deep breath and replied. “I am Lady Isabel Cameron, my husband Colonel Rory Cameron is Lochiel’s nephew I am here to bring supplies, will ye let me pass?” The words hadn’t come easily to me, until that occasion I hadn’t used my new title and it seemed strange to say it, but it appeared to have the desired effect as the man bowed and motioned to the men guarding the gates to open them.

“Can ye tell me where I would find them?” I asked as we passed by.

“They will be up at the Big House Lady Cameron, if ye ask up there someone should be able to tell ye more.”

I nodded and thanked him and we proceeded up the drive.

The fine lawns and gardens were littered with men, men sleeping, men standing, men leaning against the trees, in fact men were everywhere. I could hear pipes again in the trees and it seemed a strange scene. Our horses continued towards the fine house in the distance.

When we reached the outer courtyard wall I saw the first person I knew. It was Andrew, my erstwhile bodyguard, he stared in disbelief. “Lady Cameron, good heavens it canna be, what are ye doing here? Does Colonel Cameron know?”

“No he doesna know Andrew, but we have brought food for our men. Can ye tell me where he is?”

“Aye I can do better than that, I can take ye to him,” he shook his head. “Ye have brought food eh, well ye are a very welcome visitor then. I have only eaten a dry biscuit in two days and it is much the same for everyone else. It seems that there may be supplies in Inverness but they havena reached here. God alone knows why.”

He helped both Margaret and I down from the cart and called upon two other men to guard it while we were away.

He led us through the gateway into the outer courtyard. The house was large and whoever owned it obviously was very prosperous, I asked Andrew if the owner was still in residence. He laughed. “Oh no Ma’am he is well far from here, Sir Duncan Forbes is a Whig, we have, shall we say, borrowed his house for a while.”

We walked towards the stable block, and when we reached the large double doors Andrew hesitated. “They are in there Ma’am, they are planning for the battle, I had better go in first, I imagine that your arrival might be a bit of a surprise.” He walked in and Margaret and I followed him. Until then it hadn’t occurred to me that our arrival might not be welcome.

The stables were dark and it took me a few moments to adjust my eyes. To

the right of the doors was a group of men; they appeared to be intently discussing some plans that were laid out on a large wooden table. It looked like the one my mother had and I wondered somewhat abstractly, if it had been taken from the kitchens. There were candles on the table and flaming torches on the walls, the scene looked like a tableau, the men's faces illuminated by the light. They were all there, Lochiel, Dr Archibald Cameron, their brother John, my father, my brothers and in the corner, with his back to us, was Rory.

Andrew coughed and then spoke. "Colonel Cameron ye have visitors."

Nobody looked up, Rory didn't turn round but said. "Andrew we are not to be bothered, tell whoever it is that they will have to wait."

Andrew looked at me.

I spoke then, I spoke without emotion, it was not easy. "I am sorry to interrupt ye Rory, but we have brought food for the men, if ye tell us where it will be most useful we will take it there."

It was almost as if time froze. I saw the pencil he was using drop from his hand and then he turned round. The strange light exaggerated his cheekbones, his face looked gaunt and there were dark shadows under his eyes.

"Isabel what in God's name are ye doing here?"

"We have brought food," I said, I couldn't think of any other words to say.

It was Lochiel who spoke next. "If we need anything lass it is food, how long have ye been here?"

"We arrived just now, Angus told us that our men were going hungry. We havena got much but it might help."

"Aye it'll help all right lass," that was Dr Cameron. "Your wife should be commended for her actions lad." He had directed his final statement to Rory who still hadn't said anything; in fact both my husband and the members of my family had remained silent

Lochiel spoke again. "Angus, go with these ladies and take some men with ye and make sure that these provisions get to those who can turn them into something and do it quickly."

Margaret spoke now. "We have whisky too Sir."

"Good God ye are angels," said Dr Cameron smiling. "Ye have been sent from heaven."

Angus moved forward and we turned and walked out of the barn.

I was a little shaken at Rory's reaction, I didn't know what welcome I had expected but it hadn't been the one I had received.

But as we walked back into the twilight I heard footsteps and then Rory's voice.

“Isabel wait.”

I turned, he was standing awkwardly, I saw that his clothes too were torn in places.

“I am sorry,” he said and walked forward. “But it was a shock, this is no place for ye, there will be a battle very soon, ye are in grave danger.”

I walked slowly towards him, he held out his hands and I took them in mine. “I forgive ye” I said. “and the danger was worth braving if it helps our men.” He kissed me gently then and I closed my eyes and made believe we were alone for those few seconds.

But we were not alone and Rory had to leave and return to his deliberations. Gordon had been excused duties and it was a joy to see him and Margaret reunited. I went to help the men preparing the food, small fires were lit on those beautiful lawns and I wondered how Culloden’s House’s prosperous Whig owner would feel if he was to see his garden used as a make-shift kitchen. I spent hours there until it became too dark to see and I was beginning to wonder how I would find Rory again when I saw him walking towards me. He looked very worried.

“Isabel I have to leave, the men are to be gathered we are going to try and take Cumberland’s camp, it worked at Prestonpans it might work here. We are moving out now.” I looked around and sure enough the fires were being doused and the men were picking themselves off the ground and beginning to move off.

“I will wait for ye,” I said.

“It isna safe Isabel, it isna safe for ye to be here at all. I canna stay with ye to protect ye my love.”

“I understand Rory and I promise ye if there are any signs at all of danger we will leave and leave quickly but I havena come all this way to leave now.”

He shook his head. “Aye, if ye are determined.”

“I am,” I replied. “I believe ye told me it was a quality ye admired.”

He smiled then, just a small smile, it occurred to me then as he did so that it probably had been a long time since he had had anything to smile about.

He held me to him for a moment and then kissed me and said. “I will see ye when I return and we will have some time together I dinna care if Billy himself is after me.” He turned away and walked quickly into the ranks of the men who were moving away from the house.

I walked back to the stables and found Margaret. Gordon, Angus and my father had left just before and we were more or less alone, suddenly I was very tired and we sat down together in the barn and very soon we were asleep.

I didn't know how long I had slept for but a movement next to me woke me. I opened my eyes and saw my elder brother standing there. He was helping Margaret her to her feet.

"Where is Rory?" I asked. All thoughts of sleep had gone in an instant.

"He'll be here soon, the night didna go well and we were pulled back, it is likely that we will do battle tomorrow and the senior officers are in a council of war now. We havena got long." His last statement was directed to Margaret; even in the darkness of the barn I could see the urgency in his eyes.

"Will ye be all right on your own Isa?" Margaret said. I replied that I would be fine, nothing would let me deny her those few precious hours with her husband and they left soon after.

I sat alone in the corner of the barn but I was not alone for long, men were returning. Most of them just lay down where there was room, others sat and talked quietly. There was an all-pervading air of depression in the building. I said nothing but sat in the corner with my back against the stones of the wall with my knees pulled up to my chest for warmth, and I waited.

Rory came eventually. I saw him silhouetted in the open doorway for a while looking for me. I called him in as loud a whisper as I dared and he saw me.

He came over and almost collapsed next to me on the floor, I saw that his clothes were covered with even more dirt and that he was breathing heavily.

He spoke after a while. "Isabel I am sorry my love but there is nowhere for us to go." He looked around the room, at the gathered forms of men who were now everywhere trying to get some precious sleep. "Every inch of the building is being used and most of the grounds, there is nowhere we can be alone and I must stay within reach of His Highness."

"It is enough for me to be with ye Rory," I whispered.

"It will have to be for both of us," he whispered back, then he continued. "Things are not good, I fear that they can only get worse. The commanders are arguing and the men are exhausted and those who canna sleep are hungry. The food ye brought helped, but it was a drop in the ocean. Some of my men have not eaten for these last three days and they are near starving."

"Gordon says that the battle will be tomorrow," I said.

"Today, Isabel, it is nearly three in the morning, we will fight them today. And if ye ask me if we have a chance of winning I will have to answer ye that it would be a minor miracle if we did." He spoke these words very very softly, and he looked around to make sure that he had not been heard.

I don't know whether it was through fear, or the fact that the night was

uncommonly cold even for a Highland April, but I felt myself start to shiver. He must have felt this too as he pulled me close and wrapped both of us in his plaid.

“We dinna have long my love,” he murmured, his cheek resting against mine. “We will rise early, I think two or three hours at best. It will take us time to assemble on the moor and we need to establish our territory before they do. We were there yesterday, we were ready for them but they didna come. It is a barren place with nowhere to find shelter, I only hope that the weather is kind or we are done for.”

He was quiet then, I could feel his heart beating and I could see his breath as a fine mist in the cold barn.

“Ye should sleep,” I said.

“Aye I should, I am so tired I think I could sleep standing if I had to, but I didna want to waste this time together.” He paused and said. “It may be our last.”

He turned towards me then, his green eyes looking intently into mine. “There are so many things I could say to ye, things I should say to ye but somehow I canna find the strength to say them. If I do I fear that I may not be able to stop and I may not be able to hold myself together.”

I brushed a stray tendril of hair from his face. “Ye needna say anything Rory, I know, I feel it too. Let’s not talk about it now, ye should sleep, and while ye do I will watch over ye.”

He smiled then. “Aye, like a Guardian Angel.”

“That’s right” I said. “I will be your Guardian Angel.”

And so he laid his head on my chest and I wrapped my arms around him under the cover of our plaids and he fell asleep. I sat listening to his breathing and prayed for his safety and that of all those who would fight. My father, my brothers, for Andrew who had looked after me, and for those men who, though starving and exhausted, were still prepared to stand and fight and perhaps lay down their lives for their cause and their country.

70

We didn’t have much time together, just a matter of a few hours. I stayed awake for most of those hours just watching him sleeping and praying that God would let the man I held in my arms return to me at the end of the day. But eventually I must have slipped in to some sort of sleep because I was awoken by a hand on my shoulder and my father’s voice gently whispering.

"I'm afraid it's time lass, ye have to let him go."

Rory must have heard as he too began to wake, he rubbed his eyes and blinked as he focused.

"I'm sorry Sir, but the men are mustering. I left ye as long as I could."

It was strange to hear my father call Rory 'Sir'; he had known him since he was a child.

"Thank ye Davie," Rory said. "I will be along shortly."

My father nodded and just before he left he leaned forward and kissed me gently on the cheek. "Goodbye Isabel for now, if anything should happen, will ye tell your mother that I love her and will ye tell her that I thought it a cause worth dying for." He spoke quietly, and I could tell his voice was laden with emotion. I wanted to say all sorts of things in reply, to deny that there was a prospect of him being killed, to say that I didn't want him to fight for any cause, that all I wanted was my family and my husband safe. But there on the morning of the sixteenth of April seventeen forty-five I chose to say only. "I will Da, I promise," and then quietly. "I love ye too." He closed his eyes for a second and said, in a voice I could hardly hear. "And I you lass, very much." And then he stepped back, and turned and left the barn. I watched him go in silence.

Rory got to his feet and brushed the strands of straw from his clothes. He untied his hair from the leather thong in which it had been held and then retied it. His face looked stark, the dark shadows under his eyes even more apparent as the half-light of the dawn streamed through the open barn door.

He held out his hand and I took it, reluctant to stand, reluctant to do anything that would hasten his departure.

He stood in front of me, the man I had loved since childhood. "I will have to go now Isabel, if it is in my hands to return to ye I will, ye will be in my heart wherever I am. But I want ye to leave this place, get as far away from here as ye can and go home. Wait for me there, if it is within my power I will come to ye my love." I nodded, speech wouldn't come.

"Will ye kiss me then?" He said and I saw that he tried to smile.

I nodded again and he took me in his arms, it was all I could do to stop myself from breaking down and begging him not to go, but I held myself together and instead put all my passion into our kiss.

Then it was time, he picked up his broadsword, pistol and dirk and pushed them into their places in his belt and then he was ready, there was no more reason for delay.

"I love ye Rory," I said, it was difficult to speak.

“And I you Isabel. Always.” He kissed me quickly and then turned and made to leave.

But when he reached the door he stopped and turned around. “Remember your promise,” was all he said and then he was gone.

I stood alone, the barn was empty, all the men who had found shelter there had left, the courtyard outside rang with the sound of the pipes, and men’s footsteps and voices. All that ran through my head though was that Rory had looked back. It was something that we never did, it would bring bad luck and the more I thought about it the more I began to convince myself that in that one look he had sealed his own fate.

I felt like running after him to stop him, asking him to bid me goodbye all over again just to make it right. But I couldn’t do that, Rory was in charge of men, he was respected, how would it look if some hysterical woman chased after him talking nonsense? These men were going into battle, this was real, not some superstition that was told to children. But still as I stood there I had a dreadful feeling of impending doom.

I retreated to the corner of the barn in which Rory and I had spent those last precious hours. I sat on the floor and pulled my plaid, Rory’s plaid, around me and hugged my knees close to my chest. I would wait.

There were footsteps outside, and for one wonderful moment I thought it was Rory, come to make things right, but it was Margaret. As she drew near I saw her face was tearstained and I realised then that I hadn’t even had the chance to say goodbye to both my brothers.

She sat down beside me, neither of us spoke for a while until she said.

“Gordon says we should leave at once.”

“Aye Rory said the same,” I replied quietly.

“Do ye want to?” she asked.

“No,” I replied. It was the truth.

“Nor me,” she said. “I have had a husband die and mourned him from far away. I want to be as near to Gordon as I dare. I canna explain it, even if the worst happens I want to be near.”

“I feel the same, I couldna go home and not know what happens, what happens to them all Margaret. If I have to mourn I wish to know it as soon as it happens, not live in hope, only to have it dashed.”

“Then we stay,” she said.

“Aye, we stay. If it gets dangerous then we will move. Are the horses and cart still outside?”

“Aye they are.”

“Then we will bring them in here. If we need to go we will be able to leave immediately.”

So it was decided, we would stay, we would stay and wait for our men.

We rose and went outside to fetch the horses, it was very cold, and there were grey clouds gathering, the first drops of rain fell, the water stung our faces it was so cold. Once we had brought them into the barn they remained quiet, eating the remaining straw disconsolately whilst Margaret and I returned to our place in the corner and sat waiting. It struck me, as it had before, that a large part my life had been spent anxiously waiting for news of Rory. But I knew that if that was the price I had to pay for loving him as I did, it was worth every moment.

71

We stayed there, Margaret and I, until mid morning. I knew the time because in the silence we could hear the clock in the courtyard striking the hours. It was just after eleven o'clock when we heard footsteps. We huddled together in the gloom hoping no one would enter the barn, but our hopes were to no avail, a man appeared in the doorway, he looked around and then he must have caught site of us.

“What is your business here?” He said.

“My husband is a colonel in Lochiel’s regiment and my brother is with him too, this is his wife,” I replied, then I added quietly. “We are waiting for them.”

The man shook his head as if in disbelief, he came closer, he must have been in his late fifties, he was carrying a large set of keys. I thought that he might be the steward of the house.

“Ye are not safe here, ye are not safe anywhere for that matter, we none of us are. Ye should leave now, I am surprised your husbands have allowed ye to remain.” He said; his voice showed signs of panic.

“They dinna know we are still here,” said Margaret.

“Aye well ye should go now and get as far from here as ye can. If Cumberland’s men should win today I doubt there is a woman in these parts who will be safe.”

“We have nowhere else to go,” I said.

“Where are ye from?” He asked.

“From Cameron lands, on the shores of Loch Lochy my husband’s land, his name is Sir Roderick Cameron, Lochiel’s nephew,” I replied.

“Aye I know him, he is a good man, there are many a good man on Drummoissie Muir today, but ye still shouldna be here. Go home lass, if ye take the route that borders the muir ye should be away before the fighting, but mind ye will have to go now.”

Margaret glanced at me, I wondered if she was thinking the same as I was. If this road took us near to this place where our men were, perhaps we could find shelter again and wait there.

“How do we get there?” Asked Margaret.

The man told us and then again urged us to go.

This time we heeded his instructions and he helped us guide the horses from the barn and hitch them to the cart.

We climbed up on the front, it was now sleeting and the parts of my dress that were not covered by my plaid were soon soaked through.

“Go now and dinna stop until ye get as far away as you can, dinna stop for anyone ye hear,” he said, and with that warning ringing in our ears we started to move off.

“We are not leaving them are we?” Margaret asked when we were out of earshot.

“No Margaret we are not, I canna leave, not without...” I paused and then went on. “Well I canna go is all” I said.

“Neither can I. If we find somewhere to shelter we can stay until it is safe or until we know it is not safe, and then we will go if we have to,” she replied. I nodded and we travelled out of the fine parklands in silence. We took the track the man had told us of, it took us upwards towards the plateau of the moor, we passed a small village called Culloden on the way, the streets were empty, there was not a soul in sight. On from the village the track veered to the left, and now I could hear the sound of the pibroch, and, carried on the wind, the voices of men shouting orders. The track took us upwards, nearer to them but then it veered away to the right, it appeared that this was as close as we could get. Before the track turned I saw that there was a hollow surrounded by large bushes, which looked as though they would provide some shelter and also some concealment for us.

“I think this is as far as we go,” I said. “We can hide the cart and horses in that hollow and we canna be seen from here.”

Margaret nodded and we jumped down from our places and began to lead the horses down into the hollow. We hobbled both animals and tied their reins

to the bushes and then Margaret grabbed some of the empty oat sacks from the cart. "We'll need these to blindfold them and cover their ears, we dinna want them shying at the first loud noise or movement." It was a good idea and I helped her with the task. Once we had finished we looked around for somewhere to hide. We finally settled on somewhere that was slightly sheltered by some bushes and away from the wind, which was driving the sleet at us. Heaven alone knew what it was like on the moor.

And there we lay under our plaids and waited.

The sounds we heard didn't seem so far off now, it might have been that the wind had changed or it might have been that as time went on the noises just grew louder, the sound of the pipes had been joined by the sound of drums, further in the distance but they were there all the same. These could only be from Cumberland's army, this sound somehow made it more real for me, there really were men up there whose sole purpose it was to kill our own men, I tried not to imagine how Rory must be feeling, what he and those we loved must be experiencing at that moment. It was almost impossible to imagine. I had never been in a battle, I had never fought another for my own life.

And then after a time we heard it, the sound of a single cannon, a sound that seemed to hang in the air and there was silence, I held my breath and then it came, a barrage of cannon fire, ripping through the air, followed by almost continuous explosions, and all this was accompanied by a sound even more dreadful. Even from that distance we could hear the sound of men screaming, and above them the sound of men's voices shouting more orders. I thought then that I should have gone home, I should have done as I had been asked and made for the safety of my beautiful glen where the water shone in the sunlight and where I was safe. I looked at Margaret, she was white in the face, we didn't speak, one look was enough.

And then after I don't know how long the cannon fire ceased, only for a short while but enough to highlight the sound of voices and again those drums in the distance. But soon, and it seemed slightly different now, the sound began again and this time if anything the aftermath was worse. The screams of pain were louder, and this went on for even longer than before, it was so bad that I covered my ears with my plaid and then my hands but still those shrill cries found their way in. And all the time the cold rain and sleet battered the ground, my face was only inches away from the mud of the bank and small rivulets of it were slipping down into the folds of my plaid and my clothes beneath.

Then in the distance I heard a sound I knew, I had not heard it myself but I still knew that it could only mean one thing. This was the sound of Highland voices raised in anger, these screams were not from pain, these screams were for vengeance on what had been done to them and this crescendo of voices I knew heralded the Highland charge. It was what had turned the tide at Prestonpans and Falkirk, and in the great battles of our history, it struck fear in to the hearts of men and I hoped with all my heart that it would turn the tide now. I closed my eyes and prayed, prayed for Rory and my family and all those other men who would run brandishing their swords towards their enemy screaming. Screaming for their country, their families, their way of life, screaming to cover their fears of dying at the hands of an enemy who were not starved or exhausted and who believed in their cause as strongly as our own believed in theirs.

But though I did my best to prevent the sound from reaching me I now heard the sound of musket fire, not individual sounds but a barrage of continuous noise creating horrendous pictures in my imagination. Pictures of men cut down as they ran, faces contorted with pain and anger as they saw their friends, family and compatriots fall before them. I could not stop the images and I could not stop that sound. I realised then that I was crying, that tears were streaming down my face almost mirroring those streams of mud before me.

I don't know how long we were there, it seemed to go on forever. My tears seemed to stop of their own accord though I had no control over them. I knew that but at last the distant noise had lessened. I looked at Margaret again and was about to speak when there was a different noise, a noise coming closer. It was not guns this time but the sound of men running, of shouting and of fear.

I looked up and saw them, clansmen running for their lives, some with bloodstained clothes, or their faces streaming with blood, but all with terror in their eyes. I saw old men and young, some older men carrying mere boys away from that place and now I knew for sure that what I had feared had happened, that victory was not ours and that all of the things of which Rory had warned me might now come true.

My body was gripped then by a dreadful surge of fear, not for myself but for Rory, I got to my feet and scrambled up the bank, my outer clothes were soaked and heavy and it was difficult to move. I grabbed at chunks of grass to stop me from falling back. I reached the top, and now I was among them, the stream of men passed by me almost without noticing, their eyes fixed on escape and on the only thing that was left for them to fight for, their lives.

I stood there as if stricken and then as if at last God had been listening I saw faces I recognised and I found my voice and shouted. "Andrew, Andrew, please..."

My own Guardian Angel looked around, he was one of a group who were carrying someone, they had been running too, but they stopped and when they did I saw to my horror that the man they were carrying was Rory's uncle, our chieftain our leader. The Gentle Lochiel lay on the ground, his face contorted in pain while Andrew ran over.

"What in God's name are ye doing here?" He almost screamed at me.

I couldn't find words to string a sentence together all I could say was. "Rory, Rory, where is he Andrew? Ye have to tell me."

Andrew stood in front of me, I saw blood on his clothes and on his face, the hands that now held mine were shaking. "Go Isabel, ye shouldna be here, ye must come with us now, dear God lass why are ye here?"

"Where is Rory, is he dead? Where is he Andrew? Ye have to tell me," I was screaming myself now.

"He isna dead lass," Andrew's eyes filled with his own tears. "But he is badly injured, we broke through their lines and he was shot in the back, we pulled him back with us but he ordered us to leave him."

"Where is he Andrew?" I repeated.

"There is a perimeter wall to one of the parks that border on the muir, the Electors' men pulled it down and hit us from the side but there is some of it left and he asked us to leave him there."

I pulled myself free of his grip. "I will go, I willna leave him," I said. His face was a study of disbelief. "Isabel ye canna mean to go, it will mean certain death lass, ye canna go there."

"I wouldna care for my life if I left him there," I said.

He looked at me then, he seemed to realise that I would not be persuaded otherwise. "I will go with ye," he said. "Ye could never do it alone."

"She isna alone," it was Margaret she stood behind me.

"She is right," I said. "And if ye were to go back ye would be taken, but we may have more chance. Tell me where he is."

Andrew shook his head in resignation.

There were calls from the men he had left, anxious calls for him to return to help carry their precious cargo away.

"I willna go," he said. "I will stay here until ye get back, ye can never carry him yourselves."

"We have a cart and our horses are hidden down there," said Margaret.

“Aye well I’ll stay with them, if anybody sees them ye are lost, men are desperate now.”

He ran to the men who had waited those precious minutes and soon they were making their way again, running for Lochiel’s and their own lives.

Andrew jumped down into the hollow and Margaret and I turned and began our journey into what I later knew to be ‘Hell on earth’.

72

As we followed the muddy track we were passed by many men, we kept to the side and I pulled my plaid over my head, but it seemed that these men were too intent on saving their own lives to notice us.

We walked for a time and then I knew we were very near. The sounds and the smell hit me before I saw it but when I did nothing in my whole life, or my nightmares, could have prepared me for the sight in front of me. The moor spread out before me, it was featureless except for what seemed to be a carpet of bodies. It was horrific, there were men everywhere, covered with blood and mud and the residue of carnage. I heard Margaret vomiting behind me. But I couldn’t lose control, I had one thing to hold on to, the fact that I knew where Rory was and that as far as I knew he was still alive. That was what drove me to go on through that appalling place, to pick my way through the dead and the dying, to ignore the entreaties of the injured and the sight of the disembodied corpses clad in tartan. I dared not even consider my other loved ones out there. I could only think of Rory.

I saw the wall just as Andrew had described it, half demolished but part was still standing and I made my way towards it. I had been oblivious of the actions of our victorious foe until then but now I became aware of splashes of red in the distance moving across this sea of death and I doubled up and went as fast as I could, my soaked plaid my only cover.

When I reached the wall, I dropped down on the ground and began to crawl on my hands and knees. There were many men there, some already gone and some injured, I scanned their faces but I couldn’t find him. I began to feel panic surge through my body, I fought to keep it at bay, there was no time now, this was not the time to lose control.

And then I saw him, or at least I thought it was him; his bonnet was pulled down over his eyes and he lay on his side, but as I crawled closer I knew it was him. He lay very still, my heart pounded and I began to repeat in my head.

‘Please be alive.’

I crawled up to where he was; he didn’t move he just lay there. His clothes were matted, covered with mud and blood and he was soaked. His broadsword lay at his side, the blade smeared red.

I ventured my hand forward and pushed away his bonnet. Then I knew for sure he was alive as his hand grasped my wrist, yanking it down to the ground. His eyes were open now and he stared at me, almost as if he didn’t realise who I was and then they opened wider and he spoke, his voice weak through pain. “Am I dead or am I dreaming?”

Despite it all I smiled and answered. “No Rory ye are not dead, and this isna a dream.”

“But ye canna be here, ye went home, I sent ye home, why are ye here?” He said.

“I am going to take ye home Rory, I canna leave ye,” I replied.

“Dinna be ridiculous, ye have to go now, Isabel do ye not realise the danger ye are in?”

From somewhere a new emotion surged through me, it was anger and I replied. “Aye I know the danger, I have crossed this place, I have seen it, but I am here and I willna leave without ye, so it is your decision whether I stay with ye here or whether we go.”

He looked at me, his beautiful green eyes streaked with red veins, and smiled, only for a moment before his features were contorted with pain. He clenched his teeth until it passed. “Isabel I am badly injured, I canna move my legs, I canna walk, ye’ll never be able to lift me let alone drag me off here. Better to leave me and let the English take me prisoner.”

“I am not alone Rory,” I said. “Margaret is with me.”

“Oh dear God, ye are both mad,” he replied.

I heard Margaret move closer.

Her voice behind my shoulder was quiet. “Rory, do ye know if Gordon is alive?”

He closed his eyes again, this time not in physical pain, then he answered. “I willna lie to ye Margaret, I willna lie to either of ye. They are all gone, we broke through their lines and it was hand to hand fighting, I saw Gordon and Angus go down and it was your father Isabel who saved me, he took the man who fired the shot down with his sword and then he – then they killed him too.” He paused then before saying. “I have no right to be alive, ye should leave me here to die with them. I owe them that much.”

I expected to feel a body blow of grief but I felt numb, my mind seemed to

reject the information, it seemed only to concentrate on the task I had set it, but I heard Margaret's voice. It seemed almost distant.

"When Gordon came back from France he told me that he was sorry that it was he who had returned and not Andrew, I said to him then Rory that he should never say such things and though my heart is broken in two that he is dead I willna let ye think the same." Then she continued. "Isabel and I will take ye home if we can, ye have to let us, I have my son but ye are all Isabel has, ye must let her do this."

I watched Rory's face as she spoke, he was intent on her every word and then he closed his eyes again and then looked at me and whispered. "Aye lass, take me home."

73

We managed to get him to his feet by sheer determination. One arm over my shoulders and one arm over Margaret's and we began to drag him away. He did appear to have lost the use of his legs, he couldn't take a step at all, but at least whatever had happened had taken some of the pain of the injury. I didn't dare look at the wound; I had no experience of treating injuries, I would have to wait until we were clear before taking that step.

I don't know from where the strength came to move him, but we found it from somewhere and though we stumbled over the body lain moor we were making good ground until we heard a voice behind us.

"Stop or I will shoot," it was a man's voice, and an English voice and we stopped in our tracks.

I heard footsteps and then he was standing in front of us.

"Put that man down, he is our prisoner," the man appeared in his late twenties, he was blonde and stocky and his red coat was spattered with mud.

"You have no business here," he said, brandishing his musket.

I replied slowly in his language. "This man is my husband, he is dead, I am taking him to bury him. Surely you cannot have further use for him."

Rory hung there between Margaret and I; he didn't move or utter a sound.

"We have orders not to allow anyone on or off the battlefield," replied the soldier.

"We are going, you need never have seen us. He is dead for God's sake, what use do you have for a dead man?" I replied, trying to quell the panic I felt.

"Those are my orders Missus," he said.

As I watched him I caught sight of a plain gold band on his finger, he was married, he had a wife. And then I remembered the prince's ring, there would be no use for it now, no Earldom and presentation at Court but there was something much more important, my husband's life. I held out my hand. "See this ring, it is worth more than you will ever earn in your life, it would mean that you didn't have to fight any more. You could go home to your own wife and family and have whatever you dream of. All for letting a woman take her dead husband home to bury him."

He looked at the ring and he looked at me and for a moment his eyes became those of a man, not those of an enemy. His eyes turned to Rory and to Margaret and he walked forward and I felt his hands shake as he slid the ring from my finger. He glanced at it and quickly slipped it beneath his coat.

"Go then, but go quickly before Hangman Hawley's men come or the 'Butchers' from Kingston's Horse. We have orders to give no quarter to the enemy, it is likely that any man who lies injured will not see the end of the day."

I thanked him and then we turned with our precious cargo between us and made for the direction of the hollow, of safety and of home.

74

How we did it is still beyond me but eventually we reached safety. I was relieved to see that Andrew had waited; he had hidden with the horses and thankfully had remained undiscovered. He looked at Rory and then at me. "He is alive," I said. "But he slips in and out of consciousness, we must get him home as soon as we can."

"Let me," said Andrew and he placed one arm around Rory's back and one under his legs and then he lifted him. He carried him the few feet to the cart and placed him as gently as he could in the back; then climbed on and I saw that he had made a sort of mattress from some of the sacking. Andrew laid Rory on his side and I saw for the first time that my husband's clothes on his back were covered with blood. I closed my eyes and put my hands to my mouth, I was used to blood, I was a farmer's daughter after all, but to know that it was Rory's blood was different.

Andrew must have noticed because he jumped down and came over to me. "Ye have got him this far Isabel but to get him home we need to bind his wounds. Are ye wearing any undershirts?" I nodded and lifted my sodden woollen skirt. Thankfully the second layer of cotton skirts was still dry and I

grabbed them and tore them apart. I saw that Margaret was doing the same and soon we had a pile of dry material on the back of the cart. Andrew looked at both of us. "I will need your help, ye will have to hold him while I see to the wound." He paused then. "If only we had some whisky."

"We have," said Margaret. "We had some for our journey but we didna drink it."

She was right I had forgotten altogether that under the seat of the cart was a jar of whisky that Rory's mother had given us, I watched as Margaret ran to fetch it. Andrew was now aboard the cart, I clambered up beside him, all the time looking round for signs of the government soldiers. Andrew began urgently to tear off Rory's clothing, he discarded his bloodstained plaid and tore open his soaked linen shirt and I gasped at the wound, it was open and ragged and when Andrew raised his head from his work and looked at me his glance said it all.

The movement must have brought Rory back to consciousness as he groaned in pain. "Dinna worry Sir we'll have ye home soon," Andrew said softly and then to me. "Give him the whisky and hand the jar to me. I have seen it done by the physics for men with severe injuries, I dinna know what it does but I will try it now." So after I had helped Rory take mouthfuls of the pain numbing golden liquid I handed it back to Andrew and I watched as he poured the whisky over Rory's wound. I was holding his hand and as the whisky hit the torn skin Rory's fingers closed on my own, his face contorted with pain and then it relaxed as he passed out again.

Andrew used some of the cotton to clean what he could from the wound and then Margaret, who was now beside me, and I held my husband up as Andrew wound the fabric tightly around him. Once finished we laid him down again on his side and covered him with sacking.

"He should stand the journey better now, one of ye must ride with him, and ye must go now. I'd go with ye but ye'd be more in danger with me than without. If ye can convince them he is dead then ye have a chance. But ye must go now."

"But what about ye?" I said, this man had risked his life for us.

"Me, I will be fine. I have a wife and children I need to go home to, I must get them as far away from harm as I can. I will find my way home, I have to, I am their only chance." He jumped down from the cart, he was holding Rory's broadsword and dirk. "Take them and hide them within reach, ye may need them yet." He paused and said. "Goodbye to ye Lady Cameron and to ye Margaret; may God keep ye safe."

“And you,” I said, and then he turned and scrambled up the bank and was gone.

It was not easy getting the horses and cart out of the hollow but with Herculean effort we managed it. I asked Margaret if she would stay with Rory, she looked exhausted and I knew that I had the strength to get us back, and I needed to do it to keep my mind free from all of the terrors that threatened to invade it.

So I took the reins and started for home. I didn't dare look back, for fear of sighting any pursuers so I kept my eyes ahead. I tried not to think of my father and brothers lying dead on that field, of my mother at home, of the fact that I hadn't eaten or slept for almost a day but especially I tried not to think about the men we passed who shouted for me to stop the horses. They were our men, they had fought alongside my husband, my family and my clan but to take one might jeopardise Rory's chances of safety so I urged the horses on, gripping the reins with my hands and shouting for them to go faster.

The track took us past the road to Inverness, then towards Loch Ness and on to Wade's road. I hoped that Cumberland's men had not seen fit to block that passage east but it seemed that they had business to do elsewhere because when we got to it the only thing that blocked the way was the stream of fleeing men.

Through some supreme effort the horses kept up their pace and the men jumped aside, the cart bouncing on the cobbles. I hoped to God Rory was still unconscious, and I prayed that my own actions would not lead to his condition worsening, but we had to get home and we had to get home quickly.

The road along the shores of Loch Ness was more empty, most of the men choosing to make for the safety of the cover in the hills and eventually it was open to us. I felt my arms aching, the muscles quivering and my hands were blistered where I held the reins, but still I kept up the relentless pace.

It was well into the night that I began to recognise places, we were still a good way from home but at least I knew that we had covered over half the journey. What had taken us two days was being done in one and I hoped that the horses would not collapse through exhaustion.

It was about three o'clock in the morning when we passed beside the shores of Loch Lochy, we were nearly home, nearly safe. It was the thought of home that kept me going those last miles and as I saw at last the gates of Cameron House I nearly wept, only I found that there were no more tears, I had no more tears left, they had been shed on Drumossie Moor. All I could do was grip the reins and urge the horses on.

I steered us into the courtyard as the sun was rising, the horses whinnied with relief as they finally came to a halt, the noise reverberating around the yard, and I saw the front doors open. I cannot recall exactly what happened then, there were voices, I remember my mother's voice and I remember her holding out her arms to help me down. I recall letting go of the reins and then climbing down with her help but suddenly things started to move of their own accord and the ground seemed to come up to meet me and then I was falling and then everything went black.

75

How long I slept I don't know but my next memory is of waking to find myself cocooned in clean sheets and soft pillows, the smell of the cotton was soothing and for a few brief precious seconds I didn't remember what had happened before, but soon the drug of sleep began to wear off and my memory returned with new ferocity. I sat up in bed, it wasn't my bed, and it wasn't my room. The shutters were closed against the light so everything was in shadow. I saw someone rise from a chair by the fire, I saw as she came near that it was my mother.

"Where's Rory? Where is he?" I almost shouted as I struggled to get my aching limbs out of the bed, my hands had been carefully bandaged and they hurt as I tried to heave myself out.

"It's all right lass, he is sleeping. His mother is with him, we put ye in her bed because ye were exhausted. I will go with ye now, ye can see him lass, if ye can make it that far."

She put her arms around me and helped me out of bed, my legs shook as I stood and put on the robe she gave me, and she had to hold me up as I put on my satin slippers.

I clung on to her and we walked out of the rooms and along the corridor until we were at the door to mine and Rory's rooms. She opened the door and we went in. I saw Elspeth lying on one of the couches, when we entered she jumped up and dropped a curtsy and almost ran into the bedroom. I saw though that her face was tearstained.

The bedroom door was ajar and I began to walk towards it when Rory's mother came out. She closed the door behind her and I stood and waited until she reached me. I saw her exchange a glance with my mother and then she gently took both my hands. "Isabel dearest I need to speak to you before you

see him,” she said, her voice was soft.

She led me to the couch in front of the fire and I remember looking up at my picture as she spoke. “I am so very grateful to you for bringing him home, Margaret told us what happened, she says you were very brave and but for you he would still be on the battlefield.”

I nodded, my mind was wandering somewhere else other than this serene room with its familiar beautiful furnishings. My mind was on Drum Mossie stumbling over those men, their faces upturned as if entreating me to stop, to help them.

She touched my face and I almost jumped.

“I am grateful too that you have given me this precious time with my son, to look after him, I am so very grateful for that.” Then she paused and she took a deep breath. “Isabel my dear, I cannot find an easy way to tell you this...”

I turned to face her. “Dinna tell me his is dead, not while I was sleeping, why did ye not wake me?” My voice was angry, she didn’t deserve it but I suddenly felt desperately angry.

“No my dear, he is not dead,” she said, her voice still gentle. “But he does not have long.”

If I had have had the tears I would have sobbed then, but I couldn’t, I just sat in silence and listened. “He has lost a lot of blood, and I fear he has a fever. There is no physician around to help but we have done the best we can.” She paused and then continued. “He asked me to tell you, he said that he can stand the pain and the thought of dying but he couldn’t stand telling you.”

“Please can I see him?” I said.

“Of course, of course, we will be outside if you need us.”

“Shall I go with you?” My mother asked.

“No Ma, I am not afraid,” I said and I rose and turned and walked alone towards the bedroom.

I pushed the door open and walked in and closed it behind me. Though I loved my mother and Lady Anne dearly I wanted to be alone with him.

I stood for a while, my eyes adjusting again to the darkened room. One set of shutters was slightly open and I saw through them that this was a fine April day. I imagined that the roses would be budding in the gardens and the spring flowers would have started pushing their way through the soil.

Life renewing itself while the love of my own life lay dying.

I walked to the bed, he lay propped up on pillows, the beautiful French lace on his nightshirt framing his pale face, and his black hair lay like a dark

halo on his pillow. As I stood there I saw his eyelids flicker and he opened his eyes.

“Isabel, is that you?”

“Aye it is.” I walked forward to sit on the bed beside him. “How are ye?” It was a ridiculous question.

“Not so good,” he replied. “But better than I would be now had ye not come for me.”

He took my hand in his then, running his fingers gently over the bandages and turned his head on the pillow to face me. “My mother said ye had to be carried in to the house, that ye had driven the horses here in under a day,” he paused. “Ye are a fine woman.”

I stroked his hand with my fingers. “I am nothing compared to ye, I canna imagine what it was like for ye, I dinna want to imagine.”

He closed his eyes again but spoke quietly. “When my eyes are closed I see it again as if it is happening, I can see them all, I can hear the sounds and smell the fear and the gunpowder.” Then he stopped and opened his eyes and closed his fingers around mine. “Will ye come and lie by me? I need ye to hold me,” his voice was soft and faltering. I kicked off the slippers and discarded my robe and climbed, naked, into the bed beside him. He pulled me to him and we kissed. And now I found I could cry and, as if from somewhere within my soul, the tears streamed down my face until I shook, and he held me to him.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just that, it’s just that I want so much for ye...” I couldn’t continue, I regretted even speaking those words. But he stroked my hair as I rested my head on his shoulder. “My mother has told ye then. I’m sorry that I didna have the courage to tell ye myself but I couldna do it.” He stopped and I felt him wince with pain, then when it had passed he continued. “Dinna worry, I am not frightened of death, I have seen enough of it and I couldna live like this Isabel. I canna move at all, I am half a man and to live like that wouldna be life to me. To know that although ye lie beside me that I can never make love to ye, that is not a life I wish to lead.” He moved again but went on. “But I am worried about ye, about what will happen to ye when I’m gone. Ye must go Isabel, Cumberland’s men willna let it rest at this. They have a chance now to destroy the clans, to destroy any possibility of our rising again. I saw it, my father saw it and they willna stop now until they have quelled the Highlands. Ye mustna stay here, ye must go as far north as ye can, or to Ireland or France if ye can get passage. Will ye promise me that ye will?”

“I promise,” I said.

“Good,” he replied with a sigh, now there is something that I must do before I am taken. Something that is my duty.”

“Whatever it is I will help ye,” I said.

“Thank ye, because I will need your help.” He winced with pain again and I waited until his face relaxed before asking him what it was.

“I must gather our remaining people and tell them the same, I must do it soon, very soon, before Cumberland’s men come and before I die.”

“But Rory, ye canna, ye dinna have the strength.”

“Remember I told ye that ye wouldna be able to bring me home? Aye well I was wrong then and ye are wrong now Isabel, I will find the strength because I willna go to my maker until I know that my people are safe.”

I was silent, I felt his heart beating against my body, I heard his breathing and I couldn’t contemplate a life without him. I didn’t want anything to hasten that dreadful day, but I knew him almost as well as I knew myself and I knew that I couldn’t deny him this. So I pushed away my selfish thoughts and answered that if it was his wish then I would help him do this.

He sighed again and then I saw his eyelids flicker. “I am tired Isabel, while I sleep will ye stay with me until I wake, I dinna wish to have those dreams and be alone.”

So I lay with him until he slept and then I slept myself, in his arms, in our own bed, which should have been ours until our old age and should have been the place where our children were to have been born, but it was not to be and it broke my heart to think of it.

76

I woke first, and for an anxious moment I listened for the sound of his breathing, not certain of the fact that he was still alive, but as I listened I heard it, laboured but regular. I stayed silent for as long as I could so as not to wake him, but the call of nature, and of hunger, forced me to slide out of bed and pull my robe on. When I dressed I chose the oldest gown I had, the one my mother had so lovingly sewn for me, the one that was Rory’s favourite, my green velvet dress. It still fitted me perfectly and it was strangely reassuring to wear it again. I brushed my hair free of tangles and then, touching the gold locket at my neck, quietly entered the bedroom.

I stood listening and watching him, he was still asleep, his eyelids fluttering

as he lay, but he didn't show any signs of the dreaded nightmares so I tiptoed towards the door to the other room.

I opened the door and closed it softly behind me then turned round and then I stood motionless. I could not believe my eyes.

Lady Anne stood by the fire talking to my mother and Margaret, but it was the other member of the group that held my gaze, for there with them stood my brother Angus.

He looked like all the men I had seen, his clothes were torn and the filth of the battlefield still clung to him, his red hair was dark with mud and his face was gaunt but it was Angus, it was my brother back from the dead.

I spoke his name, softly to myself as if to prove that this was not some dream, but he must have heard. He strode over to me and suddenly I was in his embrace, and I held on to my brother as if he would vanish if I let go. Eventually we pulled apart.

"I thought ye were dead," I said.

"I thought so myself for a while, I dinna know why I am not, except that I was covered with those that were, and the bastards didna find me. I watched them butcher the wounded Isa, I watched as they went from man to man and bayoneted them as they lay there. I havena seen anything like it."

I remembered the soldier who let us go and what he had said and I shivered at the thought of what might have been.

"Can I see him?" Angus asked next, looking over my shoulder to the door to the room in which Rory lay.

"He is sleeping but I know that he would want to see ye, come with me," I replied and then I stopped and took his hand. "Oh Angus it is so good to see ye."

We walked quietly in to the room, it was stuffy and dark and I walked to the windows and opened two sets of shutters and pushed the window of one up to let the spring air in. Rory stirred and opened his eyes and looked around and then he saw my brother. He pushed himself up on to his elbows and stared incredulously.

"I thought ye were dead," he said.

Angus smiled and walked forward. "I am getting used to being told that, but I am not."

He pulled up one of the chairs and I sat on the bed beside Rory who pulled himself up on the pillows, I saw the pain in his eyes as he did this, but he was smiling too.

Angus told us his own story then, of his flight from the battlefield, and his

journey home on foot, of nearly being discovered. And of hiding from the men with bayonets who were scouring the streets of Inverness and the surrounding lanes, looking for anyone who might have fought for the prince and some who had not, and then finally finding his way home.

“We are not the only ones who have come back Sir,” I noticed Angus used Rory’s military rank automatically. “There are men arriving here who dinna want to give in to the bastards.”

“Isabel told me that my uncle was injured,” Rory said. “Have ye heard anything?”

“Not much, only that he is alive and in hiding, the prince too I hear.”

Rory closed his eyes for a moment then said quietly to himself. “Aye the prince, well I hope he fares better than the men standing waiting for orders under cannon fire. I hope he doesna remember what it is like to see a boy blown apart by grapeshot; I wonder if he sees the same as I do when I close my eyes.” He shook his head then as if to dispel those visions and he smiled again. “I am sorry Angus, I am no much of a companion, but it is good to see ye, I will need ye I think to help me before it is my time.” Angus looked at me then, but Rory must have seen. “I know that I will die soon lad, but I have told Isabel my plans and now ye are here, ye have made it a little easier for me to go knowing my duty is done.”

“What do ye want of me Sir?”

Rory told him what he had told me, and Angus listened intently to every word.

“Is there anything else Sir?” Angus asked, as he got up to leave to set the plan in motion.

“Aye just one thing.”

“What is that?”

Rory pushed himself up as far as he could sit. “Before I die I will make ye laird, ye are the only one who can do it. I have seen ye as a soldier and I know ye have the courage and the tenacity to do what I willna be able to do myself. Will ye agree to it?”

My brother stared at his commanding officer in disbelief.

“Laird? Me? I am not of your line, I wouldna know how,” then he looked at me, almost in panic.

But it was Rory who spoke, his voice strong and clear. “Ye are the one I choose Angus, it is my decision and as laird it is within my power to do so. Anyone who could survive that place and come home has proved they are of sufficient character. And remember I have known ye most of your life and I

know ye well enough to know that ye have the guile and wits about ye to take our people to safety.” Then he paused and looked at me and, his eyes full of emotion, he turned again to my brother. “And as for my line, it is God’s will that your sister and I have not been blessed with children, but if we had they would have been from your line as well, so ye may not be of my own blood, but ye are of my wife’s and above all Angus, ye are a Cameron and ye are the man I choose.”

My brother was silent for a while and then he walked forward and dropped on to one knee before the bed. He took his dirk from his belt and held it in front of him and quietly he made his oath. When he finished he put the knife back and, still kneeling, said. “I will do as ye ask, but I do it not for my own advancement, I do it for the people of our clan and I do it in your honour as our rightful chief and laird.”

He stood, almost to attention, and then turned and marched out of the room.

Rory laid back on the pillows, his forehead showing beads of sweat, he took my hand again and I sat closer to him. “He will do it Isabel, I know this now, all I must do is keep this body alive until I can speak to them all and then my job is done and I can go to my maker knowing it.”

I sat with him in silence until I knew that he had drifted off to sleep and then I quietly left his side to see what could be done.

77

Rory asked that Lachlan and Angus prepare him for his final duty, and when he was ready they carried him out together. He was dressed in his finest, the same clothes he had worn to our wedding. He looked at me as they carried him out, it was a look that said that he didn’t want to be pitied. I knew how he must have hated having to rely on someone to carry him, but I also knew that Angus and Lachlan looked upon it as an honour and I hoped that Rory would know this too.

They carried him down the back stairs, the ones the staff used, to ensure that none of the tenants would see him, these were Rory’s wishes and we didn’t question them. A chair was ready for him on the dais in the ballroom – it was his father’s chair.

He signalled that he was ready and I took my place at his right hand, standing slightly to the side, with his mother and my own and Margaret at the back and Angus on his left.

The doors opened and the people of our clan entered.

They came in, the mothers, the fathers, the old men and the children, some carrying their possessions, others I knew had their belongings loaded on to carts outside. Rory remained expressionless as he saw them, the men bowed to him as they entered. The ones of fighting age who had made it back home from the battle had the same hollow look of defeat.

There were well over one hundred people gathered in that room, but I knew that this was only a small number of the people who should have been there and I hoped that the others were already making for safer places. All of those present fell silent when Rory began speaking, his voice strong, showing no signs of weakness, only I saw how his hands tightened on the arms of the chair as waves of pain overcame him.

"I thank ye for coming," he began. "I willna keep ye long, but I have things I need to say to ye."

He paused and took a breath. "To those of ye present who fought at the place they now call Culloden Moor, and to those of ye who have lost men who fought alongside us, I wish to express my gratitude and my admiration for your courage and your loyalty. There are no words to describe what went on there but I want each and every one here to know that I for one regard ye highly for what ye did."

"For those, and there are many, who didna come home I grieve with ye for their loss, and for those of ye who are left..." he paused and looked around the room.

"It is for those of ye who are left that I have called us together. The men who fought with me will tell ye that this will no be the end of it. That the men who fought for Cumberland, both English and Scots, willna stop now. They will come and they will come soon. They canna chance another Rising, and they know that unless they act now they will lose their opportunity to quell us."

He took a deep breath. "So I am telling ye as your chief to leave your homes and to go, it is the only way to ensure ye survive this."

A man's voice spoke then, his words heard in the silence. "But will ye come with us?"

I saw Rory's hands grip the arms of the chair as he answered. "No I willna be coming with ye I have another place to go. But someone will go in my place with my blessing." He turned his head towards Angus and motioned him forward.

"It is the privilege of my position that I am able to choose a man to take my

place should the need arise, and it is my opinion that the need has arisen now. I therefore have made the decision to choose my brother-in-law Angus Cameron to replace me as chief and laird.” There was murmuring in the crowd and Rory raised his hand to quell any noise.

“I willna lie to ye, I have not long to live and before I die I wish to know that your interests are in safe hands. Many of ye will know Angus, he fought alongside me and I canna think of a better man.” He paused, the room was silent, and then he continued. “So I will ask ye to show fealty to him, and to give him your loyalty and to trust in my judgement and in his ability.”

Rory stopped, his speech over, for a few moments nobody moved and then Lachlan stepped forward and knelt in front of my youngest brother, the only one of our men still alive, and gave him his oath. He was followed by all of the men who were present. Rory sat impassive as they went, I saw that his hands were relaxed and I saw the tension leave his face. As the men moved away I saw that they looked to Rory for his approval of their actions and he nodded as they did so, some gave quiet blessings and some had tears in their eyes as they returned to their places.

After the final oath was given, Angus turned to Rory, who said quietly. “No, it is you they should hear now.”

My brother turned back and squared his shoulders and spoke, his voice showing signs of nerves at first and then becoming more confident.

“I am greatly honoured by this request, I canna find the words to say how much I owe to this man, but if I can be half the man he is I will be satisfied. I will try to follow his example and ye can be sure that your safety is paramount in my heart and my mind.” Then he paused and said. “And now it is time to leave this place to find somewhere where we can be safe and live our life as we wish. I hope and pray that we will be able to return.”

He turned to Rory and he knelt at his feet. “Goodbye Sir, I hope that I will not let ye down and that we meet again, for I have known no finer man.”

Rory moved forward in his chair and placed his hand on my brother’s shoulder and said quietly. “Ye willna let me down I know it.”

78

The courtyard was full of people waiting to leave as we bade our final goodbyes. Rory had insisted that his mother and my own with Margaret and Andrew leave with Angus and he refused to change his mind. I had similarly

insisted that my place was with him until such a time as he didn't need me and he finally relented when I promised that I would leave if there were any signs of danger.

We gathered in the bedroom. First Margaret and Andrew, the boy didn't really understanding what was happening, he had been told that he would be taking a trip and his face betrayed his excitement at the prospect. Margaret kissed Rory on the cheek and then we embraced. "I will pray for him Isabel, I will pray for ye both." I nodded and then we parted. I could hardly speak as Rory's mother said her farewell, her voice faltered and her tearstained face showed the pain she felt. First her daughter, then her husband and now her son, I prayed that she wouldn't have to bear any more sorrow. I held her as she cried in my arms, then she raised her head and I saw the strength of her character again. "When he goes Isabel, ye must leave straight away, come to us, we will be waiting for you, we hope to find Lochiel, but we will wait for you."

I nodded, she embraced me again and she left the room. There was just my mother now, she spoke to Rory quietly for a while and then it was our turn. We held each other. "Oh lass, I should stay with ye," she said, her eyes imploring me to agree, but I answered. "No Ma ye canna because if ye stay they will all stay. Angus needs ye, he needs your counsel, and Margaret and the boy too. I will come when it is time and I will find ye, but my place is here with Rory, I willna let him be alone."

My mother nodded then and she held my hands. "Be careful lass, dinna take any risks, and dinna linger here alone."

"I won't Ma, I promise," I said and I watched my mother leave the room.

Rory held out his hand to me then and I walked over and took it in my own. I sat down beside him, his breathing was even more laboured and his face was very pale. He hadn't eaten since his return and he had only had sips of water to surplant the whisky, which was the only thing we had to stop the pain.

"Ye should have gone Isabel," he said. "I dinna think that I have long and it is dangerous for ye to be here."

"Rory Cameron," I said. "I will not leave ye, I willna go until I have to and ye are wasting your breath if ye tell me otherwise."

He smiled then. "Aye ye always were stubborn."

I sat with him all day as he slipped in and out of sleep, the times when he was awake lessened and I tried to prepare myself for when he would not wake at all. I sat by the window and watched the sun going down over the loch, and I thought back through our life together. I remembered our secret meetings in

the barn, how we had danced together, how angry he had been when I accused him of deceiving me with the MacDonnell girl and how much in love we had been on our wedding night. My life and his own had been intertwined from our earliest years and to think of life without him was impossible. But I knew, sure as the sunrise, that I would have to face this terrible thing and that I would have to find some strength to keep me from my own destruction. So I sat looking out over the beautiful gardens of Cameron House and waited.

It was after midnight that he woke, his forehead covered in beads of sweat, the fever his mother had told me about had mercifully showed little signs until now but as I laid my hand on his skin I could feel that he was burning. I had lit a candle next to the bed and I watched the light cast shadows over his features, I sat there until at last his eyelids flickered and his eyes opened.

“Isabel where are ye?” He whispered.

“I am here Rory,” I replied, taking a damp cloth and wiping his brow.

“It is very dark, I canna see ye.”

“It is just after midnight, the room is dark, do ye want me to light some more candles?”

“No just sit with me and talk to me, I want to hear your voice, I want it to be the last thing I hear and I want ye to be the last thing I see.”

“I will be here,” I said softly.

“Do ye remember when we first saw each other, when ye pushed me in the stream and left me there?”

“Aye I do.”

“Ye havena changed at all, ye still have that fire.” He coughed then and the force of doing so caused his face to contort in pain. “I am tired,” he said. “I wish to be taken now, I canna stand the pain any longer.”

I could do nothing more than run my hand gently down his cheek. His eyes closed and I thought he would drift off again but he opened them and with all the effort he could make he lifted himself up, so that we were face to face.

“I will wait for ye,” he said. “I will wait for ye until we can be together again, ye promise me ye will come back to me.”

“I promise ye Rory and I will keep my promise.”

“And ye will have no other man?”

“I canna love another Rory, ye are the love of my life and ye are the only man that I will ever love.”

“Then will ye kiss me Isabel? I want to hold ye in my arms for one last time and feel your lips on my own.”

I moved towards him and he held me in his arms and we kissed. I felt tears

run down my cheeks and on to his skin and I prayed silently as we kissed for both of us. Then gradually I felt the strength of his embrace fade and his breath come in shorter bursts. And when I pulled slightly away to look at him I saw his eyelids slowly close over those beautiful green eyes for what I knew, instinctively, was to be the last time.

And I knew that he was gone from me and I knew I was alone.

79

I can hardly recall my thoughts that night; my mind was so consumed with sorrow. For a considerable time I just sat staring at Rory's lifeless body, for that was now all that was there. My Rory was no longer a living, thinking human being, he was even now just a memory. The room was quiet, just the ticking of the clock to keep me company, I couldn't bear the thought that I would never hear his voice again or would never feel the touch of his skin or feel the thrill of his love.

As I sat there I wondered what I should do, I had promised that I would leave, but I couldn't abandon him, I couldn't just up and go, and in any case the turmoil of my mind would not have allowed for sane decision making. I remembered Lady Anne when she heard of her husband's death, of the vigil she had kept and I decided that I would do the same. Through the fog of grief I saw that the candle was burning low, casting even more shadows over the room, so I rose from the bed and took the candles from the mantelpiece, lit them from the dying flame and placed them either side of the bed.

Then I pulled a chair over to the bedside and sat down again and bowed my head in prayer.

I sat by his side until the first light of dawn, waves of misery crashing over me until I eventually found the merciful release that is sleep.

Something woke me though, something that I recognised but couldn't identify, I had fallen forward and my head rested on the counterpane, as I straightened up my back my neck ached. My eyes fell upon Rory's face, the colour had drained from his skin leaving a grey tinge, it occurred to me that if I touched him he would probably be cold, I couldn't bare that thought. I rose from the chair and turned my back on the bed, and walked towards the window, still in some kind of stupor, I had absolutely no idea what to do. Then I heard the noise again and suddenly the world outside invaded my grief.

It was the sound of drums, the same sound that I had heard before the battle, the same continuous beat. The sound struck horror into my heart. I made myself move towards the window and then I saw them. A column of soldiers making their way down the side of the loch, their red coats picked out by the April sunshine.

I moved back immediately, bumping into the table behind me and knocking over the ornaments that were on it.

What could I do, I should go now, I had promised Rory, I had promised him faithfully that I would leave. I had promised my mother and Lady Anne and Angus that I would leave immediately. My mother had even packed a small bag for me to take.

But I was drawn back to the bed, how could I leave him? How could I leave him there for those men to do what they had done on Drummosie? I remember the soldier describing some of his comrades as butchers. I couldn't let them do that; I couldn't just leave him there alone.

Then I remembered the room, the secret room where my wedding dress had been hidden, it had remained unopened since then; we hadn't needed to use it for anything, until now that is. I could hide him in there, and then leave, the soldiers would never find him and we could return once they had gone and bury him.

I ran over to the tapestry that covered it and pushed it back. I stared at the wall, where should I push? It had been so long since I had seen Lady Anne open it that I couldn't remember the exact spot. I went to the wall and started pushing the panels; all the time I could hear the sound of the drums, all the time getting nearer. I was getting desperate when at last something gave under my touch and the door swung open. I looked inside, nothing but cobwebs.

I propped the door open with a table and turned to the bed.

"I am sorry," I said out loud. "I canna leave ye here." And with that I pulled the bed-sheets back and climbed on the bed.

I seemed to detach myself from the task in hand, such was my determination to succeed, and I put my arms under his and heaved his body to the end of the bed. I staggered under the weight as I pulled him off and then almost fell backwards as I dragged him towards the opening.

I was almost doubled over as I stepped through the door and the musty smell of the room assailed my nostrils as I manoeuvred his body into place. There was just enough room and when I had finished I stopped for a few seconds to catch my breath. I went in to the bedroom again and pulled two pillows from the bed and one of the blankets. I would not leave him uncovered.

I knelt on the floor and gently lifted his head on to the pillows, I realised then that I was crying, it was a strange feeling, almost as if the tears were falling from someone else's eyes, I stood up and covered him with a blanket. When it came to covering his face my emotions found their way to the surface again. I hated the thought that I was leaving him alone, for some reason I thought of the locket he had given me, it was there around my neck as it always had been. My trembling fingers felt the chain and then for the clasp, I undid it and then knelt down again and drew the blanket back until his hands were exposed. I felt his fingers, they were indeed cold to the touch, I slid the chain around them and closed them over the locket.

“Rory if ye hear me, if what I have prayed for is granted I will wear this again and ye will give it to me, until then my love I carry ye in my heart,” I paused and took my last look at his face. “Goodbye my Love” I said and drew the blanket slowly over him.

80

I withdrew from that dark room and swung the door shut. The latch clicked and it was invisible again, I drew the tapestry back into place over the panel and turned to the bed, I quickly covered it, removing any traces of any previous inhabitant, once I had done so I ran to the window. I saw immediately that it was too late for me now, there were Redcoat soldiers all over the gardens, I could either hide or face them. I decided to face them; I was too exhausted to hide. I took deep breaths, I must be calm I thought, I couldn't show any signs of anguish. I imagined how Lady Anne or my mother would react and, modelling myself on them, I calmed myself, took a look in the mirror at my reflection and straightened my dress and tidied my hair. I would never be ready to face them but there was nothing else for me to do.

I walked slowly across the room and surveyed it for a final time; there was nothing that would lead them to the secret place, only my own actions. So I calmly walked out of the room and closed the door. Once in the sitting room I noticed for the first time that some things were missing, I remembered then that Lady Anne had detailed some of the staff to take the most valuable items in the house and her jewellery and either bury them or load them on to the carts. I noticed immediately that there was a large space over the mantelpiece where my portrait had been, the silk wall covering, which had previously been covered, was brighter than that surrounding it. There was no time to dwell on

this though as I heard a smashing of glass from the main hall and I hurried from the room to the top of the stairs.

The windows by the door had indeed been broken and I heard English voices shouting orders, then there was a huge thump against the wood, I could see splinters already. In the hope of preventing further damage I quickly descended the stairs and went across the entrance hall. There was only the door between them and me and I took one last look around before taking another deep breath and finally opening the door.

The courtyard was full of government soldiers and they fell silent as I stood there. Then their commanding officer stepped forward and marched up the steps until he was standing before me. I thought he must have been in his mid thirties, he took off his hat and bowed slightly and, rather abstractedly, I noticed that his hair was thinning.

“Madame I am Colonel Harrison of Lieutenant General Hawley’s regiment, we have a warrant for the arrest and detention of the self styled, Sir Roderick Cameron, Colonel in Lochiel’s regiment in the Rebel army of the Young Pretender.” He stopped speaking and looked intently at me.

“Sir,” I replied. “I am Lady Cameron,” I emphasised the title and then continued. “Your journey is a wasted one, my husband lies on the moor you refer to as Culloden with the men who fought with him.” My voice was calm; my heart was not, I could feel it thumping in my chest.

He looked round at his men then back at me. “Then you will not object to my men performing the search that is required of them.”

“Do I have any choice in the matter Sir?” I asked, and as I did so I knew the answer because at his signal the men advanced, streaming past me in to the house, I was pushed aside in the rush and could do nothing further.

Colonel Harrison turned then and beckoned one of the ranks forward. “I believe you are already acquainted with Sergeant Roberts.”

The world suddenly went silent, I could hear nothing, not even the sound of my own heart, in fact I was not sure it was still beating, for there in front of me stood the man of my nightmares. The scar on his face was sure evidence, if I had needed it, that this was the man who had held me at knifepoint and terrified me and I could tell by the malevolent glare that he too remembered.

“Roberts, take her somewhere for the meantime until we are done,” Colonel Harrison said, and then, as if I was no longer to be considered, he turned and marched across the hall.

My nemesis gesticulated for two nearby men to follow him and he walked towards me, I backed away until I was up against the wall, he grinned then, showing his decayed teeth. "So you are Lady of the House eh? Well let's see if you have changed any." He grabbed my arm and propelled me forward across the hall. He kicked the door to Sir James' study open and pushed me in, his hand still gripping my arm.

He looked around and gave orders for the desk to be cleared, one of the soldiers started removing the items one by one but Roberts became angry. "Not like that you stupid bastard, like this." He strode forward, still holding on to me and cleared the desk in one swipe with the stick he was carrying. For some reason seeing all of those familiar articles swept on to the floor saddened me greatly.

He shoved me forward so that I was pushed against the end of the desk and then he spoke, his voice was chilling. "Now there is no-one to help you, you are mine for the having, and it has been a long time." Still looking at me, he ordered the men to take my arms, they did so and they pulled me back so that my body from the waist up was pinned to the desk. I could not move, I found also that I could not utter a sound. He leant forward, I could smell his foul breath. "Stay quiet and I might let you live. Make a noise and I will have no qualms about killing you. Now let's see if you have changed." In a swift move he tore the bodice of my green velvet gown in half, I tried to move but he ordered the men to take a firmer hold and I found that I could not struggle. I tried to kick out but he pushed my skirts up to my waist and forced my legs apart and blocked them with his body. I felt his calloused hands on my breasts, squeezing them, grasping them and all the time he was repeating obscenities. Then his hands moved downwards and I felt them move along the insides of my thighs, moving up and up until I heard the tearing of my undergarments. I knew now that for him to rape me was inevitable that no one could help me, that the only person who could lay dead in that secret room behind the panel. My despair was such that I was still unable to make a sound; I could only lie there while I felt him unbuckle his belt. All I could do was send a silent prayer for deliverance.

And then I heard a knock on the door, my aggressor chose to ignore it, but it came again, this time stronger, Roberts let out a string of expletives but I felt him turn his body away from mine. "I told you that I wasn't to be disturbed," he said.

The voice from behind the door replied. "Express orders of Colonel Harrison Sir, you are to report to him immediately."

“Bastard,” was all that Roberts could reply.

I raised my head slightly and saw that he was dressing hurriedly.

“Keep her here,” he said to the men who I noticed had loosened their grip on my arms, and then to me. “I will be back to finish you.”

I watched him leave and slam the door behind him and then the hands that held me released their grip and I slid to the floor.

My own hands were trembling but I managed to pull both sides of my bodice across my bruised breasts. I realised that my whole body was trembling. I found that I couldn't get my breath and I began to gasp for air.

Then I felt a hand resting lightly on my shoulders, I flinched away, moving myself closer to the desk. One of the men who was guarding me crouched down in front of me, he had one of Sir James' best whisky glasses in his hand and it was half full of the golden liquid.

“Please drink this,” he said. “It might help.” His hand moved towards me, I stared at it; I found it difficult to move.

“He is hated Ma'am, he would flog me if he saw me doing this, if I had refused to follow his orders I would be hanged. I am sorry for the wrong he has done you and for the wrong we did you by allowing it.”

I looked up now into his face. His skin was pale and he had blue eyes and fair hair, I saw that he was only young, possibly only sixteen.

“Take a drink Ma'am it might help,” he said.

By some super-human effort I raised my arm and felt my fingers close around the glass, I brought it to my lips and made myself swallow. It did help a little, if only that my throat was less constricted and I felt the whisky's warm comfort flow through my body.

I was beginning to regain some sort of composure when the door opened again. I dropped the glass, immediately spilling the whisky all over my dress.

“You are to come at once,” said the soldier who opened the door. “Bring the prisoner now, we are torching the house.”

81

The soldier who had handed me the whisky helped me to my feet, I could hardly walk such was my shock, not just over what had happened previously but also over what I had just heard. They were going to set fire to Cameron House, to my home, to everything that had been wonderful and worse, oh so much worse than that, they would burn Rory's body. I thought of him lying in

that tiny room hidden behind the wooden panel and I felt sick, so sick I could feel the bile in my throat. I staggered a little and the soldier steadied me as I stumbled across the hallway. My eyes fell upon those treasured surroundings for what I knew now would be the last time. I sank in to the depths of despair but I couldn't cry any more, the tears just would not come, the pain in my heart matched the pain in my body but I couldn't find the strength to summon tears, and as I emerged from our home for the last time I could barely walk.

Then I saw Roberts in the courtyard. Most of the men had left, including their commanding officer, but he had stayed behind, he strode over to me, I flinched as he pushed the young soldier away.

"Well now, we will give you something to watch and then we have unfinished business, come with me," he said grabbing my arm again. He marched me out of the courtyard and through the arch and down towards the loch where the rest of the men were gathered. I looked around for Colonel Harrison in some vague hope that he might help me, but he was standing on the other side of the gardens and I saw him nod at my captor. My fate appeared to be sealed along with that place that I held so dear. I could only watch and wait for the inevitable.

I stood in silence, in the grip of despair and in the vice like grip of Roberts, he had hold of both of my arms now and stood behind me, I could feel his breath upon my neck. The bodice of my dress had dropped open again exposing my breasts to the elements and to the gaze of the men surrounding me; I felt their eyes upon me just as I felt the grip of their sergeant.

After a few minutes, men came running from the house, they carried flaming torches and they were breathless. I heard their Colonel shout. "Is it done?" They assured him that their orders had been performed and soon it became all too evident.

I watched as an orange glow began to creep into the rooms on the ground floor, illuminating them with its strange light, and then there was a loud explosion. The glass in the windows facing the loch shattered and the flames took hold. I heard a crashing noise and saw part of the ceiling come down in the study. I still couldn't speak, I could barely breath, and all the time I felt the foul breath of my captor on my skin.

And then I saw to my horror that the flames had spread to the upper floor and the orange glow had spread into the rooms, in no time I could see that the drapes in our rooms were ablaze.

I felt sick at the thought of what would be bound to happen soon, I thought of Rory's body lying there. I couldn't bear it. I wanted to scream out loud for

them to let me go in, I wanted to die there, I wanted to be with him but my voice would not come. I could only stand and watch as all that was dear to me, all that I had loved and did love still, was destroyed. The glass in the windows shattered and then there was another loud explosion that shook the house to its foundations. I began to struggle to get away, to run into the flames away from the nightmare that was now my life, but Roberts held me, almost lifting me off my feet.

The flames were ever stronger now. I felt the heat from them even from the distance at which I was held. The smoke reached the back of my throat, making me cough and the dreadful smell of burning and all that it implied made me want to retch.

But still I tried to release myself from those hands that held me. I twisted and turned to be away but I felt the fingers dig even deeper into my skin. The blaze had engulfed the building and there was no attempt to extinguish the wicked flames that snatched at the fabric of the place and the air around it. I tried to call out but the smoke had rendered me speechless; in fact the more I tried the harder it was for me. I could not form the words I wanted to shout, I was struck dumb by what I saw and the horror of it all.

Suddenly I heard an almighty roar, one that seemed to shake the very ground on which I stood, and I saw the top part of the building fall, and at last I found that I was able to scream out loud, I called for the man I loved, for the man who had died in my arms and for the man without whom I had no wish to live. I screamed.

“Rory...”

And then everything faded into a deep black nothingness. I felt neither sadness nor terror but just nothingness, it enveloped me, I felt as if I was floating and then I thought I heard a voice in the far distance. I couldn't distinguish it at first but I listened intently and as I listened it grew louder, it was a voice I recognised but I couldn't place from where, and slowly in that strange darkness I began to be able to decipher the words. “As you wake you will feel calm, listen to my voice; ten – nine – eight,” there seemed to be light somewhere ahead. “Seven – six – five – four,” I knew the voice, it was calm and reassuring and it guided me towards its source. “You will wake and you will feel calm and peaceful, three – two – one.”

I opened my eyes slowly, my vision was a little blurred, but there above me was a face I knew, and as I blinked away the darkness I realised that I was looking into the blue eyes of Dr Iain Macallan.

BOOK THREE

82

“Are you all right Helen?” He said quietly.

It seemed strange to hear myself being referred to as such but I nodded, although I wasn’t sure if it was an honest answer.

“I was so worried, you’ve been out so long, it could have been very dangerous but you wouldn’t come round.” He knelt down in front of me, his eyes wide. “It was amazing, I’ve used every one of the tapes in the house.”

I smiled at that, he got up again and walked over to the other side of the room, poured whisky from the decanter into two glasses and carried them both back and knelt down again in front of me and handed me a glass. I took it from him, it reminded me of that other time so many years ago, and yet only minutes ago in my mind, when someone had handed me a whisky to calm my nerves and, trying to banish those thoughts, I took a first sip and then another.

I looked around the room, my eyes taking in the familiar objects from the twenty-first century, the television, the phone on the table, the light fittings, all things that were familiar to me as Helen but that I now looked upon with the eyes of Isabel, the eyes of a young woman who had long since died and who must have died in dreadful circumstances and whose picture hung in that room. I hardly dared think of how that might have been and I was so very grateful that those memories had not returned to me. I continued to look around the room, my gaze straying to the window and to the view across the loch, and I felt a surge of emotion run through me when I saw the ruins of the house across the water. The same feeling I’d felt as I’d watched my previous life fall in ruins, and I could only wait for it to pass.

I sat silently for a while until I felt that I was somewhere near to being composed, just drinking the liquid and trying to pluck up the courage to ask the question that now burned in my mind. At last I found I could say the words. “Did they ever find him?” Iain, who had been patiently sitting on the sofa opposite me, leaned forward his hands on his knees, shook his head. “No, there is nothing in the records to say they did, and there is no grave in the kirkyard. My Gran told me that the local people left the house as it was, as a memorial to him and the men who fought with him.”

“So he is still there?” I said quietly to myself.

The thought hit me like another wave of emotion, somewhere under those stones and that undergrowth lay the remains of the man I loved, the thought was like a knife in my chest the pain was so real. I felt the tears well up in my eyes and I gratefully took the handkerchief that Iain silently handed me and tried my best to wipe them away.

I brought the glass to my lips and took another sip of the drink, and then took a deep breath and said. “Do you know what happened to me, I mean to Isabel?” I spoke instinctively and corrected myself more for his ears than my own sense of identity.

He shook his head, his eyes full of concern. “No there are no records of what happened to her. It’s not unusual because there was no glory in taking a woman prisoner and therefore most of the time these were not recorded.”

“Is there a grave?” I said. The thought that there might be unnerved me greatly but I had to know. I found it difficult to equate what I had just been through to having actually happened over two hundred and sixty years ago but I could not escape the fact that Isabel Cameron would have met her death, in whatever form, long ago.

“No there isn’t, not here anyway,” Iain replied. Then he got up and came over to sit beside me, he put his arm around my shoulder. “How do you feel?” He said.

His was the first touch of affection I had felt since Rory had held me and it made me shiver slightly to think of it, but it was good to be close to someone, it was good to feel that I was not alone and that I had someone to share this with. My voice shook a little as I spoke.

“I honestly don’t know, it’s very strange, everything that happened then is so real now and the pain is as real, but deep down I think I feel as if the jigsaw fits together. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt like that.” Then I paused before adding. “Well as Helen anyway.”

I realised as I said it that this was true, all of my life I had felt that I hadn’t fitted in somehow. Strangely this had never been because of not knowing who my parents were but because I had always felt that I was different, not having a family had almost made it easier to deal with, it had given me a reason for feeling different without having to think any deeper into why I felt this way.

I stared at the glass, almost hoping to find some clarification in the golden liquid it contained.

“Do you have any idea at all who your parents were?” Iain’s voice was almost a whisper, as if he was scared to interrupt my thoughts.

I shook my head. “No I don’t, I was left in the waiting room of the Casualty department at the Royal Free Hospital in London. I remember they told me, when I was old enough to ask questions, that it was a Friday and it was so busy nobody saw who left me. It couldn’t be any more anonymous really could it?” I said with a half smile.

“Have you ever tried to find out?” His voice was still soft.

“Not really, it seemed pointless somehow. To be honest I just accepted it,” I said as took another sip from the glass, I looked at him and saw the look of concern in his eyes. I reached across and touched his hand. “I really am OK with it. Peter thought I should try to find out but somehow I felt I didn’t really need to. I suppose I’ve always been quite self sufficient until,” I paused and then went on. “Until now.”

My eyes turned again to the ruins across the loch and my mind began to clear very gradually as I stared across those dark waters, and then I tried to put in to words the feeling that had crept over me since waking from my voyage of discovery.

“Do you know?” I said. “I feel as though all of this was meant to happen, that it is all about fulfilling my promise to him,” it was difficult for me to say Rory’s name. “I feel as if this was the purpose of my life, to come here again and to learn all of this.” I shrugged. “As Helen I have never believed in anything apart from what I could see with my own eyes, but as Isabel I, well as Isabel I made a vow and I prayed that I could keep it.”

“What will you do now?” Iain asked.

I rose from the chair but Iain remained seated. I could feel him watch me as I walked to the window with the view that now seemed so familiar. It was getting dark and the clouds in the sky covered the moon. But I could still see the ruins of Cameron House, and the ruins of my other life. Was this my chance? Was this mine and Rory’s second chance? I didn’t know but as I stood there staring across the water I knew that it was a chance I wanted to take.

I turned from the window. “I should leave now,” I said. “I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for me.”

“Are you sure you should go?” Iain replied. “You haven’t eaten and you must be very tired. You could stay here, I have a spare room.”

I shook my head. “Thanks but I have to leave tomorrow and I need to go back to the hotel to pack and get some sleep, I feel very tired all of a sudden, and it looks as though it will rain, the clouds always gather like that before a downpour.” I said it without thinking because I knew now that I had

experienced it so many times before. “It really is very kind of you to offer though.”

I hadn't given him my real reason for leaving; I hadn't dared say it in case speaking it would mean that it might not happen. I couldn't tell him how much I hoped that out there across that mysterious loch, and in the ruins of that house, there waited the man who had once been my reason for living.

I hoped Iain understood, he did seem to as he didn't press the point and he walked with me to the front door. Before he opened it he said. “Helen be careful, if you need me you know where I am.” And then. “I hope you find what you're looking for.”

I smiled and said. “Thank you Iain, thank you for everything,” and then I left him on the doorstep.

It had started to rain so I ran down the drive to my car, I gave what I hoped was a cheery wave and got in. He was still there when I put the car into gear and pulled away.

The sound of the windscreen wipers was soothing as I drove the short distance back to the hotel, it was strange that this was the same road I had used to bring Rory home from Culloden, and now I was driving along it in a car. My memories and my present were becoming combined into a strange new world of different perspectives. I could not explain it I could only live in it.

I drove up the driveway to the hotel and pulled to a stop as near to the door as I could. I turned the engine off and sat there listening to the sound of the rain as it beat on the roof. I thought that it seemed not unlike those drums that had twice heralded misery for me and for the man I loved.

As I sat and listened to that sound once again, only this time fully conscious, I travelled back in my mind to that last day. The pounding of the rain drops brought back the feeling of utter panic I felt as I saw the soldiers approaching and I knew that there was no-one there to help me. I felt the bile rise in my throat as I thought of that man holding me and of the fear on the faces of the men with him. My flesh crept at the memory and I shook my head to dispel the pictures that were gathering there.

I focussed again on the familiar and looked at the clock on the dashboard. It was nearly seven o'clock, I had to think ahead and I wondered when I should try and return to the ruins. I decided to go inside first, I felt mentally exhausted and suddenly I wanted a shower to help me dispel that feeling of being tainted by the hands of that man so very long ago. I also hoped that it might help me feel more awake, I hadn't lied to Iain when I said that I had felt very tired but I couldn't sleep now, I knew somehow that this was my only

chance and before I took it I needed some time alone to try and make sense of the thoughts in my head.

I took the car keys out of the ignition and, after grabbing my bag and shutting the door, I quickly locked the car and ran to the hotel. I pushed the door open and was welcomed by the smell of wood fires and comfort. I stood there for a couple of seconds and then the twenty-first century part of me decided that if I paid for my stay now it would save me time in the morning. I wondered then what the morning would bring but decided that thinking too far ahead was not advisable. So I waited, watching Iain Macallan's niece assisting an elderly couple who had obviously just arrived.

As I waited I looked around the grand hall and then a picture of a man drew my eyes, it was not a large picture but it held my gaze. I felt my heart quicken as I moved closer. I knew as Helen that he wore the clothes of a late eighteenth century gentleman but as Isabel I knew his face well.

I felt tears prick at my eyes. His red hair was streaked with grey and his face showed the lines of age and experience but his eyes hadn't changed at all and I knew that I was looking at a picture of my brother Angus.

I stared at the picture, this was the second time an image of the past had left me speechless, but this time I knew who it was. I knew the contours of his face, the sparkle of his eyes and I could almost hear his laugh.

I also remembered the boy who had gone to fight for his prince and his clan and had returned a man who had seen sights only those who had shared that journey could comprehend.

And there he was before me, only he wasn't real he was just an image created by the expert brush strokes of an artist of whom I knew nothing and I longed to know what his life had been after we had parted.

I looked again at the picture, at his clothes, the velvet jacket, the lace cuffs and the jewelled pin in the stock at his throat and I knew that somehow he had been able to prosper, and deep inside me I knew that Rory had chosen well.

"Can I help you?" the voice of Iain's niece floated into my consciousness.

"Oh sorry," I said, fumbling with my handbag and turning from the picture. "Can I settle the bill please."

"Of course," she replied and then as she keyed figures into the computer she gestured to the picture that had held my gaze. "That's an ancestor of Rory Cameron who owns this place." At the mention of that name my mouth dropped open, and the bag in my hand very nearly dropped to the floor but fortunately as she was still looking at the screen in front of her she didn't notice.

“Rory Cameron?” I said, trying not to let my voice shake.

“Oh aye, it’s a family tradition, Uncle Iain will tell you. The first-born boy is always called Rory; I’m told it’s from the forty-five, something to do with Culloden. Anyway that’s what I’ve been told.”

I nodded and I saw that my hands shook as I handed her my credit card.

So somewhere there was someone who knew all about Rory and about me and about all the things that had happened and somewhere there were some people who cared enough about those things to continue his memory. It struck me then that although they would find it difficult to comprehend those people were my family.

83

I somehow managed to continue with my transactions and then said a hasty, and somewhat faltering, goodnight to Iain’s niece and headed for the sanctuary of my room.

Once there I walked to the window, the room was in darkness and it appeared that the rain was easing off. I stared out over the water, the clouds were moving quickly and occasionally the ripples on the surface were illuminated by the moonlight.

I could see the old ruins through the trees and I hardly dared to wonder if he was there, if he somehow sensed that I would come to him, I hoped with all my heart that he knew. That whatever link there was that had brought me here, that had formed the thread of my life as Helen, was strong enough now to bring us together. To consider the possibility that I would see him again was almost beyond the realms of fantasy but to consider the possibility that I would not was more than I could bear.

After one last look I turned on the table lamp and closed the drapes.

I showered, letting the water jet splash on my face and shoulders, easing the knots of tension that were there. Then I towelled myself down and went in to the bedroom. I dried my hair and then opened the wardrobe.

It all seemed surreal, I was getting ready to meet a man whom as Helen I had never met, who had died hundreds of years ago but I was acting like someone who was going on a date. But suddenly it was so very important to me that, if what I hoped for would happen, he should see me at my best and I suspended reality once more as I reached into the wardrobe for something to wear.

I took out a green silk suit, the skirt was long and flared and I had brought

it with me with the sole intention of wearing it for a special occasion, the fact that it was the same colour as the velvet gown struck me as more than a coincidence. I dressed, pulling on a black blouse and my black leather boots and then I was ready.

My heart, by this time, was pounding. I stared at my reflection, what if this went wrong? What if I stood there and no one came? What would I do? How could I leave knowing all that I knew? I turned away and as I did so the light caught the gems in my locket, in Rory's locket, I had placed it in his hand on that dreadful day and I hoped that this was a sign to tell me to have faith in his promise, that he had waited and that he would be there again.

I took a deep breath and walked to the door, I left the table lamp on for when I returned and closed the door behind me.

I didn't leave the building through the entrance hall but went in to the library and to the french windows. I hoped that these wouldn't be locked; I tried the handle and I was relieved to find them open. Luckily the room had been empty and I was able to leave the hotel unnoticed to begin my walk to the ruins.

I closed the door behind me and for a moment looked back at that warm and lovely room, I wondered what I would find in the place outside it.

The rain had stopped and the moon was high in the sky but the path was slippery underfoot and I trod carefully. I also realised that my clothes were not at all suitable for the temperature and I was cold, I shivered, but it was too late to go back now. So I went on towards the loch and took the path through the trees towards the clearing in which stood forlornly the last traces of my old life.

I walked on in trepidation, my boots slipping as I trod the old stone path. There was hardly any light except for that of the moon, which cast a soft white glow over the path ahead. The wind rustled the leaves in the trees making their own moving shadows over the ground in front of me and I could hear the lapping of the water against the shore of the loch. But I wasn't frightened. All this felt somehow familiar but very poignant, because gone were the roses and the manicured lawns and the arbours that I remembered; these had been taken back by Mother Nature who seemed to have created her own memorial to what had been before.

I walked for some time, shivering against the cold, but at last I reached the clearing and stopped, I held my breath, there wasn't a sound except for the wind in the trees and I wasn't sure what to do so I took a step forward and looked around me. I was alone. The stones of the old house lay before me covered in dark moss and I remembered vividly the last sight of it as the fire

licked through the windows and what had seemed so solid and so proud had crumbled and fallen in front of my eyes. Again I felt a huge surge of emotion well up inside as the dreadful thought came in to my head that these stones were Rory's tomb, his last resting place and the thought evoked another surge of conflicting emotions. This should never have been, we should have grown old together, but inside I knew as surely as I knew that he had loved me, that he could never have considered any other option than to fight for our heritage and our way of life and I held on to that thought as I tried to calm myself.

It occurred to me then that I had followed my heart this far but my head was telling me that I had no idea what to do next. I hadn't really thought what I would do when I had reached the clearing. I supposed that I had hoped that he would be there waiting for me but he wasn't, and I was alone in the dark.

There was nothing else to do so I coughed nervously and then I called out softly, feeling slightly self-conscious that I was calling out. "Rory, are you there?" Then I plucked up more courage and said in a faltering voice. "I have come back Rory, can you hear me?" my words were choked with emotion. As I spoke his name I realised that this was real, that this was the most important moment of my life, of both my lives, that the part of me that was Helen wanted this as much as the part of me that was Isabel. I felt my heart thumping in my chest.

I called again, this time louder and with a hint of despair. "Rory, are you here? Please it's me Isabel, I have kept my promise, please hear me."

Then I heard a noise, and for one wonderful moment I thought that when I turned that he would be standing there. But when I looked round there was no one, just the sound of voices that I didn't recognise coming my way. I didn't know where to go so I headed for the thick bushes that surrounded the clearing, my skirt catching on the leaves as I went through them to find somewhere to hide.

And then I fell.

There must have been a landslide due to the rain because the ground gave way under my feet and I toppled backwards, the last thing I remembered was my head hitting one of the hidden stones and then nothing.

I don't know how long I was unconscious but when I came round there was no sign of anyone.

I lay there for a while, until my breath slowed down, and I thought that it reminded me of the day of the battle as Margaret and I had lain listening to the cannon and the guns and it brought back the reason I was there and suddenly I felt desperate.

I scrambled to get up; my skirt was torn and covered with mud. I had no idea of the time; my watch was still on the dressing table of my room. I was scared that I was too late, that it was nearly morning and I had missed my precious chance, so I clambered up the bank as quickly as I could. I forced my way back to the clearing through the bushes and stood taking deep breaths. I brushed down my clothes and ran my fingers through my hair scattering twigs and bits of grass as I did so.

But the stones and the moss and the bushes and trees were as before and I was still alone.

I looked around, there was no-one and there was nothing I could do but wait, so I waited and slowly my breathing calmed, but still he didn't come, I began to feel more desperate as time went on. I was tired and bruised and I ached where I had fallen and I began to fear that I would have to accept that there would be no reunion; that my chance had been missed and the feeling of despair threatened to overwhelm me again when something seemed to change.

The light in the clearing was somehow different, perhaps it was just the cloud moving across the moon, but it seemed to become more intense somehow. The air in the clearing seemed more still and I realised I could no longer hear the sound of the wind in the trees. I felt the hairs on the back of neck stand on end when a cold breeze blew gently across my face, and slowly I turned around and then I saw him.

He stood across the clearing, by the trees, almost in darkness, he didn't move at first, and I found that I couldn't either. Then as I stood frozen to the spot he began hesitantly to walk towards me. As my eyes followed his progress I saw that he wore the same clothes that he had worn for our wedding, the same as he wore when he bade farewell to our people and the same clothes he had been wearing when I left him alone in that room. His hair hung loose about his shoulders, as black as it had ever been and framing his face, a face with which I was so very familiar and which I had never thought possible to set eyes on again. I found that I still couldn't move, my heart was pounding and my lips were dry and I wondered if I would faint again.

But I didn't and he carried on walking slowly towards me, when he was a few feet away he stopped. I held my breath, unable to believe my eyes.

And then he spoke, his voice soft and laden with emotion. "Isabel, I didna dare to hope that ye would come again."

At the sound of his voice I felt tears roll down my cheeks, I could barely

speak, but I summoned the strength from somewhere. “Yes Rory, it is me, it is me I – I have come home.”

He stepped forward, he moved his hand to touch me and then he stopped, as if he were afraid. “I dinna know if it is possible that I can touch ye,” he said softly.

“I don’t know b- but if you can please try,” I replied stammering. I closed my eyes, scared that his hand might pass through me. I waited for what must only have been a moment but which seemed a life-time and to my immense relief, and absolute joy, I felt the light warm touch of his fingers on my face as he traced my features and then I dared to open my eyes.

We were inches apart and I found that I was looking once more into those green eyes, those eyes that I had seen close before me all those years ago. Neither of us spoke and then slowly he leaned forward and our lips met. His kiss was like a catalyst and I seemed to come to life and suddenly I was in his arms and he was holding me tightly to him. He was murmuring my name over and over again and then he kissed me, this time with total passion, taking my breath away, and when our lips parted and I looked up at him I saw the tears glistening on his eyelashes.

“I have longed for this day,” he said, his words coming quickly. “All those years I have longed to hold ye like this. There have been times when I thought it was ye but it wasna and then when I saw ye and ye didn’t seem to know me I couldna believe that it could be.” He touched the locket around my neck tentatively. “I couldna think of anything else, and I didna even know if I could do it, but I had to try Isabel, I had to try.”

“I didn’t know Rory, until, until today, who I was, but I came back, I was scared you wouldn’t be here. I was scared I would be too late.”

“Ye would never be too late lass, I would have waited through eternity to hold ye again.”

I buried my face in the plaid that he wore and, as the familiar feel of the fabric warmed my cheek, I gave in to my emotions and sobbed. He held me to him without saying a word, there was no need, just being there together was enough. He stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head and then I dared to raise my tearstained face from the fabric and look up at him. He looked down at me and then he blinked as a droplet of rain fell on his face.

He looked up at the sky, and as he did so I felt raindrops on my own face joining the traces of my tears.

“Come,” he said taking my hand. “I know somewhere we can go, ye may remember it.”

As we left the clearing we kept hold of each other’s hand, almost as if we

were scared that if we let go we would lose each other again. He led me through the trees and up into the hills overlooking the loch, and I remembered. We were going to the cave, the one we had visited in the first week of our marriage, the one in which we had made love in those heady days.

We walked along the twisting track that led up the hill, he walked a little ahead of me but we remained hand in hand, the boots I wore were not suitable for hill walking and I stumbled over rocks and roots along the way. But, despite this, we were soon by the boulder that concealed the entrance. It too was overgrown and Rory took out the dagger from his belt and slashed a way through in to the dark recess of the cave.

Once inside he went about the business of making a fire, I sat silently, content just to see him, just to be in the same place as him, it had been so long. I watched as the flames took hold of the pile of sticks and dried moss he had so carefully put together and then he stood up and brushed his hands on his kilt and walked back and sat down next to me. "I'd have used the pistol, it would have been quicker," he said as at last the flames took hold. "But it would have been too loud in here. And it is not a sound that I care to hear much of." He paused and went on, as if dismissing those memories that I could never share. "But we shall be warm soon." Smiling shyly, he extended his hand to me. I moved towards him and he pulled me on to his knee, my head resting on his chest. I could feel and hear his heart beating and the warmth of his body against mine, and I wondered what strange sort of magic this was.

"I'm sorry I left you," I said, breaking the silence between us, at last voicing the guilt that I harboured for leaving him to the flames.

"Ye had no choice," he replied. "But ye should have left earlier."

His voice was soft, but the implications of what he had said were not lost on me and they hung on the air until I spoke.

"You know what happened?"

"Aye."

I could hardly bear to ask the next question. "Did you see what he did?"

"Aye," he replied again.

"Oh Rory I am so sorry," I was crying again and suddenly the pain was as raw as it had been then.

He pulled me to him, enfolding me in the warmth of his embrace and the folds of his plaid.

"I once told ye that what that man did was not your fault, and that ye should never think it was, do ye remember?"

I nodded.

“Well it holds now Isabel, ye could do nothing and to my shame neither could I, I could only watch and grieve for ye and the pain he caused ye.”

He placed a finger under my chin and tipped it up so that I was looking into his eyes again. “Dear God but ye are beautiful. Ye havena changed, but ye must have, I want to know all about ye, about what ye have done, about how life has been for ye. Will ye tell me?”

I nodded and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. I still found it almost impossible to believe that all of this was happening, except that it was and we were both proof of it.

He watched me and softly said. “My first question is what year is it?”

I told him, he was quiet for a long time. The only sound was the rain outside our shelter.

“It has been a long time my love,” he said, then he continued. “Will ye tell me now?”

So I did, I told him all about my life as Helen, about being abandoned as a baby and foster homes and children’s homes and about making a life for myself.

“Did ye ever try to find them?” He asked. It had been the second time that this question had been asked of me and I gave him the answer that I had given Iain Macallan.

I began to go on to tell him about university then I stopped. To tell him about that would mean telling him about Peter and my marriage and that would mean that he would know that I had broken the vow I made. How would he feel? What would he think of me? I had betrayed my promise and my mind was suddenly in torment. Would he go and all of this wonderful magic fade with him? How could I tell him?

I had forgotten how well Rory knew me; he spoke gently. “Ye canna have spent your life alone, will ye tell me who ye share it with?” I could hear the tension in his voice and my own voice shook as I spoke.

“I met him at University,” I said. “It was like having a family, I needed someone to share things with, to feel that I belonged, I married him to have a real home.” I was silent then, it was Rory who broke the silence.

“What is his name?” He asked, his voice still soft.

“Peter,” I replied.

“Is he a good man?”

“Yes.”

“Then I canna dishonour him, and neither can ye.”

I turned, his face betrayed nothing of the emotion he was feeling but I could feel that his heart too was racing.

“We are no longer married,” I said. “He is in love with someone else, our divorce was final just before I came here.”

“Ye are divorced?” Rory asked, somewhat shocked.

“Yes it’s much more common now than it was when we, when we were – well – then,” I replied.

He shook his head, and then he smiled and the tension had left his voice when he said. “Aye well it’s probably just as well.”

I smiled back, then I ventured. “But I didn’t keep my promise, and I’m sorry for it.”

“Did ye love him?” Rory said – the smile was gone.

“No, I didn’t love him, I was just lonely and just needed to belong to someone.”

“Well then in my eyes ye kept your promise.”

“How?”

“Well as I remember ye promised me that ye wouldna love another man, and ye have told me that ye didna love him, so ye have kept your promise.”

I looked up at him then, into those eyes that I adored. “You remembered every word.”

“Aye, I remembered everything about ye, I have had a lot of time to do so.”

Then he bent his head and kissed me. “I remembered lots of other things about ye too, the way you kiss, the touch of your hand and the way your skin feels.” He ran his fingers down my neck and into that of my blouse, and then he slowly undid the buttons, all the time looking directly into my eyes.

He kissed me again, long and hard, inviting me to respond, and I did. I had never felt anything like this physical longing before. How the touch of his hand made every nerve in my body respond and how my own body seemed to be moving as a separate entity. I wanted him more than I had wanted anybody. Ever.

He slipped my jacket from me and undid my blouse and I lay in his arms as the warmth from the fire that was still blazing reached me. He watched over me as I lay there, tracing his fingers across my breasts, circling my nipples until they reacted to his touch.

“Please now Rory, I cannot wait any longer,” I said.

He didn’t reply, he took my hand and placed it under his shirt, I felt his skin warm to the touch, I ran my fingers across his body and he let out a moan of pleasure, he took off his shirt and lowered himself gently on to me. I felt his

hands moving my skirt upwards and then I felt his hands on my thighs. "Please Rory now, please."

He moved slightly and then he gathered me in his arms and we were face to face, my legs either side of him, his back against the cold stone of the cave.

"Do ye want me Isabel?" He asked, his voice deep.

"Oh God, I want you more now than I have ever wanted you," I replied, and I knew it to be true.

And then with a slight move he lifted me and I felt him hard inside me, my body nearly exploded, and we moved together as one, all the time he was looking at me, his eyes following every facial expression. And as we reached the climax of our lovemaking and I threw my head back in absolute ecstasy he murmured. "Ye are mine, Isabel Cameron, and ye always will be, and I am yours forever."

We fell asleep in each other's arms, Rory's plaid covering us against the cold; the fire was now just burning embers. And before I finally slept I knew that I was happier than I had ever been.

When I woke I couldn't tell whether dawn had broken, I lay in blissful half sleep, my mind free of thoughts, only memories of the night before and the knowledge that I was in his arms. I felt his heart beating and I rubbed my eyes and blinked as I turned around to look again on the man that was my whole life. I was surprised to find he was awake, he looked at me and I saw that he seemed very serious.

"I have something I must say to ye," he said.

I propped myself up on one elbow. "What is it?"

I felt the feeling of happiness ebb away as I looked in to his eyes, I had seen that look before.

"What I have to say is very difficult but I know it to be right." he went on and my heart filled with dread, it was exactly the way it had been when he told me that he was to go into England and that I was to return home.

"What is it?" I said.

"Isabel ye will have to go back."

I sat bolt upright, I could hardly believe my own ears. "What do you mean, go back?"

He sighed and then he continued. "Ye have a life as Helen. Ye are alive lass, and whether I feel it or no I am not. It isna your time, ye canna stay with me when I dinna know myself how long I will be here. I hoped that I could wait for ye and now ye are here, I dinna know how long I can stay, in any case ye

canna give up your life for..." he paused, not knowing what words to use next and settled for. "Well for a ghost. I am dead for God's sake and ye canna spend your life, this new life, with a dead man."

I was shocked, I stared at him, I was suddenly very angry.

I wanted to shake him, to shake this notion from his mind, this notion that stood to part us again after so short a reunion. I grabbed hold of his arms and moved to face him.

"Don't you understand Rory, don't you understand anything? My life as Helen was miserable, it was lonely, it was lacking in everything that is important, I didn't realise until this time with you. I want to stay with you, I want to stay here, and you can't make me go, you can't, because I won't go. I refuse." The thought of losing him again, so soon after finding him, seemed more than I could bear.

He shook his head and raised his eyebrows slightly. "Aye well nearly three centuries havena changed your stubborn nature I see." He sighed and loosened my hand that still gripped his arms and ran his hand through his hair. "Isabel I dinna want ye to go, I want to spend every moment with ye, holding ye, loving ye and talking with ye, but it is not your time. I willna deny ye your life and it is not your own to give up."

He looked at me, and I knew, despite the fact that I could shout and argue as much as I wanted, that his mind was made up and that there was truth in what he said.

The feeling of being safe had left me and I suddenly felt very very vulnerable.

I lowered my head and realised that I was shivering with cold, I felt his arms lay the plaid around my shoulders and he moved towards me so that my head rested on his shoulder.

"Isabel I will take this night and I will keep it dear to me until it is your time, until we can be together for always. But I want ye to live your life and to live it well, ye have had the gift of life twice, and it is a rare gift and ye canna waste it."

He held me close to him then and he rocked me in his arms as I sobbed.

"When must I go?" I said choking back the tears.

"I will take ye back when it is fully light, and see that ye are safe."

"Will you hold me until then?" I asked.

"Aye I will, I willna let ye go I promise, and Isabel I know we are to be together so dinna be scared for that. Do ye remember that last time before Drummoissie when ye watched over me when I slept? Well I will do the same

for ye now my love.” He kissed me and brushed away a tendril of hair that had fallen across my eyes and then he pulled me to him.

So I lay in his arms trying not to give in to sleep just like I had so many times before, trying to stop time in its tracks. But eventually sheer fatigue took over and I slept.

84

When I woke I was alone.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness but I could just see the rays of the sun penetrating into the cave. I lay for a second while my mind recalled what had happened and then I was fully awake and I panicked, surely he couldn't have gone already? Surely he couldn't have left me there? But perhaps he had been right. Perhaps he could no longer stay. Perhaps he'd had no choice but to leave me, and whatever force that had allowed him to stay had dictated that he must go; that he must leave me before I woke. I looked around, the fire was dead and there was no other trace of his presence.

What would I do now? My mind was in turmoil, the thought of going back to the hotel and picking up the threads of ordinariness after this was difficult to cope with. How could I, knowing what I did, go back to that house in London, to that life that was no longer relevant? I didn't know how I could do it but there seemed to be no alternative.

A feeling of abject despair crept over me and I wanted to curl up in a ball and cry until it all went away but somewhere I found the strength to fight that black malady, the same strength that had come to me in the past, in both my pasts, in times of sorrow and I was grateful for it. Slowly I rose from my resting place and picked my way across the floor of the cave and moved towards the entrance, and then I stopped, because in front of me I saw Rory standing staring into the distance. I couldn't believe my eyes as a feeling of absolute relief spread through me. Once again I was rooted to the spot and it took some time until I could move. My first steps were slow but my pace quickened until I was almost tripping over my own feet in my hurry to get to him.

“Oh Rory, I thought ye had left me,” I said.

He didn't answer, but just pointed down towards the loch. “I dinna know what has happened, I canna explain it.”

I looked in the same direction and I too was rendered speechless. Because beside the sparkling waters of Loch Lochy, amidst well manicured gardens,

stood Cameron House. Not the hotel in which Helen Taylor's clothes still hung in the wardrobe but the Cameron House that was built by Sir James Cameron for his beautiful bride Anne. The same house that I had seen burn down before my eyes.

I stood silently next to him.

"I dinna understand it, I canna understand it, it is as if everything has turned back to how it was. Isabel how is this possible?"

I stared ahead speechless and then he turned to face me and his expression was that of disbelief when he said. "Isabel your dress..."

I looked down and once more I thought my eyes were deceiving me.

For this time I noticed what I was wearing. It was not the twenty-first century attire in which I had left the hotel but a dress that I knew to have been lovingly sewn by my mother, the mother I had known and had loved, and I saw that the dress was whole again. I slowly let my fingers run over the fabric, the dark green velvet was soft to the touch.

I looked at him and spoke slowly, in wonderment, because when I did so I realised that I spoke once again in the tongue of the Highlands, in the voice that had been mine all those years ago.

"Rory, I dinna think that I have to leave ye..."

So I stand overlooking that beautiful glen face to face with the man who, minutes before, I had thought would be lost to me again and through my confusion and to my great joy I think I begin to understand it. I don't know what, but I know that something has happened that will allow us to have what we have longed for, prayed for and lived for.

And I know, as I take his hand and he draws me to him, that there will be no more longing or waiting. That there will only be Rory and I and that we will be together for always, just as he had promised.

Epilogue

Dr Iain Macallan walked into his hallway; he threw his raincoat over the chair and went into the lounge. He always felt exhausted after funerals, it didn't matter who had died he always felt emotionally drained. And this one had been particularly draining.

He and his niece had been the only mourners present, apart from some of the hotel staff, 'there to show that people cared' his niece had said, and a few curious people from the village who had heard about the story in the paper.

He had received the call from the hotel the following morning after her visit wanting to know if he knew where Helen Taylor was. She had not left her room and the maid had found her clothes still there and her car was still in the car park. As he was heard to be the only person in the village she had visited, the police wondered if she was with him. He had been worried and he had tried to call her mobile, but there had been no answer, and there was no voice-mail on which to leave a message.

Then later, as he was leaving to go to the hotel to see if he could help locate her, there was another call. His niece's voice faltered as she told him how Helen's body had been found by the old ruins, it looked as though she had fallen and hit her head and had been knocked unconscious by the fall.

The coroner's verdict at the inquest had been that the actual cause of death had been acute hypothermia. She had lain there undiscovered all through the night, and it had been one of the coldest they had had for that time of year.

He had called her ex-husband, who had sounded genuinely upset but couldn't make the journey to Scotland due to business commitments, he had sent a wreath though. 'Rest in Peace – Peter and family' it had said. Those flowers and his own posey of heather had been the only tributes on the grave.

He had spoken to the undertaker and had commissioned a headstone, it seemed wrong to leave her grave unmarked.

He had chosen the wording himself, he hoped she would approve. It gave her name and the years of her birth and of her death and then four words.

‘She has come home.’

He poured himself a whisky; he noticed that the one he had given her was still in the place where she had left it by the pile of tapes that told her story and he ran his fingers over the rim of the glass before looking at the picture on the wall, the facsimile of the one that had brought her to him. He raised his own glass and said. “To you Isabel Cameron,” and then he turned to face the loch, and the ruins which stood as a testimony to those years gone by and he said softly.

“To you both.”

THE END

Acknowledgements

I fell in love Scotland for many reasons. Not least of them is that within its borders are some of most beautiful and awe inspiring landscapes one could ever hope to see. But in particular I have the greatest admiration that the Scots have kept their distinct identity and pride. With that comes their continuing reality of nationhood across centuries of hardship and change, even when they were forced to leave their own shores. The final Jacobite rebellion in 1745 has played a significant part in that continuing reality of nationhood. Bonnie Prince's Highland army so very nearly succeeded against almost impossible odds.

I have read widely in researching this story, both contemporary authors and some from a more modern perspective. All agree that what those Highlanders achieved in the name of King James VIII and the Prince was remarkable. But for the fateful decision taken at Derby the history of Britain might well have been very different indeed.

Perhaps the darkest aspect of the rebellion was the appalling treatment meted out to the men who lay dying on the battlefield of Culloden and the vengeance visited upon the people of the Highlands afterwards by Cumberland's forces. In modern parlance it was ethnic cleansing at its very worst level and it is not surprising that no British regiment recalls the defeat of the forces of Prince Charles Edward Stuart at Culloden in its battle colours.

I have paid several visits to Culloden, or Drummoissie Moor to give it the old name, and have had the opportunity to stand alone on the field of battle and to try to imagine what it must have been like. How those men and boys felt with sleet lashing their faces under a barrage of cannon and grapeshot with no food inside them, exhausted by the hours of their overnight marching. I never cease to marvel at their bravery because, despite all of this, they charged against an enemy whom they knew outnumbered them, were better trained and had superior artillery.

This book is my tribute to them and is the reason I was compelled to write it.

There are others too without whom it would never have seen the light of day and I take this opportunity to give them the recognition they deserve. A particular gratitude goes to Adam Watters and Gordon Prestoungrange at the Battle of Prestonpans [1745] Heritage Trust for their faith in me as a novice author.

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