1780, Scottish Highlands. In every glass of whisky is an act of rebellion.

The WHISKY WIDOW



Karen Brooks

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE GOOD WIFE OF BATH*

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—Better Reading

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—Theresa Smith Writes on *The Darkest Shore*

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—Book’d Out on *The Darkest Shore*

‘… a completely absorbing historical novel.’

—Other Dreams Other Lives on *The Darkest Shore*

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'Karen Brooks's writing is simply superb, thrusting you immediately into Anneke's world with her use of all the elements of a good historical fiction novel, such as significant period detail, authentic settings, characterisation and tone, rendering a colourful portrait of a heroine bound by the politics of her time and showing us the real difficulties that woman of that era experienced and the dangers they faced.'

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KAREN BROOKS is the author of sixteen books, an academic of more than twenty years' experience, a newspaper columnist and social commentator, and has appeared regularly on national TV and radio. Before turning to academia, she was an army officer for five years, and prior to that dabbled in acting.

She lives in Hobart, Tasmania, in a beautiful stone house with its own marvellous history. When she's not writing, she's helping her husband Stephen in his brewstillery, Captain Bligh's, or cooking for family and friends, travelling, cuddling and walking her dogs, or curled up with a great book and dreaming of more stories.

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The Locksmith's Daughter
The Chocolate Maker's Wife
The Darkest Shore
The Good Wife of Bath
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CONTENTS

Part One: Fores *Montrose and the Central Highlands, Scotland, late summer to early autumn 1780*

Part Two: The Cut *Glasglen, Central Highlands, autumn 1780*

Part Three: Heart *Glasglen, Central Highlands, winter 1780 to 1781*

Part Four: Second Cut *Glasglen, the Central Highlands, spring 1781*

Part Five: Feints *Glasglen, Aberdeen and Inverness, spring to early summer 1781*

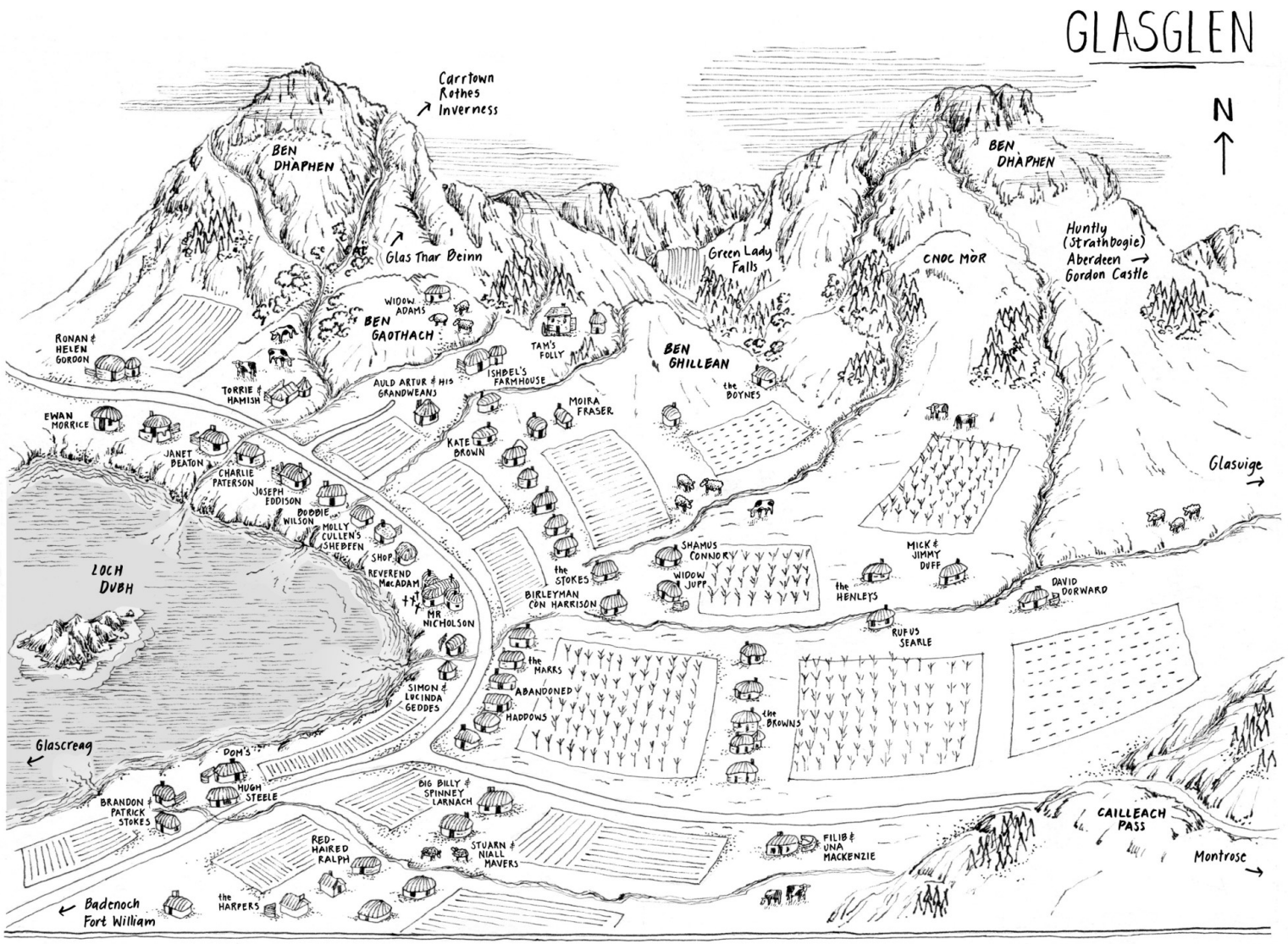
Epilogue *Glasglen, late summer 1781 to spring 1784*

Author's Note
Glossary
Acknowledgements

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GLASGLEN
N
Carrtown
Rothes
Inverness
BEN DHAPHEN
Glas Thar Beinn
BEN GAOTHACH
WIDOW ADAMS
BEN DHAPHEN
Huntly
(Strathbogie)
Aberdeen
Gordon Castle
Green Lady Falls
CNOC MÒR
BEN GHILLEAN
the BOYNES
TAM'S FOLLY
ISHBEL'S FARMHOUSE
AULD ARTUR & HIS GRANDWEANS
RONAN & HELEN GORDON
TORRIE & HAMISH
EWAN MORRICE
JANET BEATON
CHARLIE PATERSON
JOSEPH EDDISON
BOBBIE WILSON
MOLLY CULLEN'S SHEBEEN
KATE BROWN
MOIRA FRASER
Glasvige
LOCH DUBH
SHOP
REVEREND MacADAM
MR NICHOLSON
the STOKES
BIRLEYMAN CON HARRISON
SHAMUS CONNORY
WIDOW JUPP
the HENLEYS
MICK & JIMMY DUFF
DAVID DORWARD
RUFUS SEARLE
SIMON & LUCINDA GEDDES
the MARRS
ABANDONED
HADDOWS
the BROWNS
Glascreag
DOM'S
HUGH STEELE
BRANDON & PATRICK STOKES
BIG BILLY & SPINNEY LARNACH
RED-HAIRED RALPH
STUARN & NIALL MAVERS
FILIB & UNA MACKENZIE
CAILLEACH PASS
Montrose
Badenoch
Fort William
the HARPERS

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PART ONE

Fores

Montrose and the Central Highlands, Scotland
Late summer to early autumn 1780

The hope of evading … taxes by smuggling gives frequent occasion to forfeitures and other penalties, which entirely ruin the smuggler; a person who, though no doubt highly blameable for violating the laws of his country, is frequently incapable of violating those of natural justice, and would have been in every respect, an excellent citizen had not the laws of his country made that a crime which nature never meant to be so.

Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776

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CHAPTER ONE



*R*emorse and Trepidation, unwelcome companions at the best of times, shadowed me as I strode down the main street of the port town of Montrose attracting, as incomers are wont to do, curious looks and whispers. My daughter Fen and I had arrived the day before. It was the first time either of us had left Edinburgh, and now I was a stranger in what I was swiftly beginning to understand may as well have been a foreign land. Not only did people speak Gaelic – a language impossible to comprehend at the best of times – but dressed distinctively. Defiantly, I thought, spying yet another lad sporting a kilt. No-one dared style themselves that way in the Lowlands, that mode of dress having been banned since Culloden. Not that it being illegal made a whit of difference around here.

Hadn't everyone warned me Highlanders were a law unto themselves? A bunch of savages with no respect for authority and more likely to draw a dirk (which every lad seemed to carry) than offer a helping hand.

Edinburgh may affectionately be known by its inhabitants as Auld Reekie, but by God, this place was just as malodorous. It was also crowded. Stalls, carts and trestle tables had been set up along each side of the road, forcing everyone else into the middle. A break in the weather had coincided with the local market day, and farmers and tinkers had swarmed down from the surrounding hills to sell their wares. Dogs barked joyously, tails wagging, chickens clucked and fluffed their feathers, horses jangled their harnesses and shook their manes as vendors shouted and cajoled, luring folk

to examine their hides, eggs, fish, ribbons, combs, and the tastiest of neeps. Promises and lies were chanted thick and fast.

I weaved my way through the crowds, careful to avoid bumping into anyone, and continued down the hill towards the water.

Small compared to Edinburgh with its high mouldy walls, moss-ridden castle and many alehouses and kirks, Montrose was bordered by a dark green loch on the land side and the singing sea on the other. The houses, with red pantile roofs and window boxes, were tidy and quite large. There was a school, a fine-looking kirk, a sinister-looking tolbooth, shops aplenty, and taverns, too. Above me, clouds drifted like dreamy sheep. Gulls cawed and bickered, vying for a chance to steal the salmon being prepared for export down by the docks. Part of the River South Esk formed a natural harbour that provided shelter from the wild autumn seas for the cutters of the excise men. Where it joined the ocean, larger sloops weighed anchor. Fishing boats bobbed between them.

Fen and I had come down to the river the evening before to stretch our legs after being squeezed in a coach for days, and to locate the Customs House. Men repairing nets and creels had watched with interest as we wandered the sands in the fading light. A friendly dog had scampered over, enjoying a quick pat before answering his master's whistle. It was the first time in days I'd seen Fen smile.

A hefty reminder of the king's laws and the long arm of authority, the Customs House squatted on the banks of the river at the end of a cobbled road called Pier Wynd. Weathered by rain, wind and sea-salt, the building dominated its surroundings. I'd paused at a distance to regard it and note the entrance, still busy even late in the day.

Is that where Da worked? asked Fen, tapping my arm to gain my attention.

Startled she'd addressed me after stubbornly pretending I didn't exist, I nodded and waited to see if she'd more questions.

She gave the Customs House a lingering look then, without so much as a glance in my direction, walked away.

I'd repressed a sigh and followed.

Fen hadn't wanted to accompany me today, choosing instead to remain in our room, reading. I was relieved. Not only because she'd be spared any details about her father's death, but because of the way things were between us ever since I announced we were leaving Edinburgh.

It was like living with a thunderstorm garbed in my daughter's clothes – unpredictable and likely to cause destruction. Naught I said or did made a whit of difference. Such a contrast to how she'd taken the news of her da's death, delivered only weeks earlier by Captain Neville of His Majesty's navy. I may as well have been telling her a tree had fallen near Grass Market for all the impact it had. But when I told her we were leaving the city for good, she first flew into a rage, followed by tears and sulking and, later, begging. Once she understood naught could change my mind, she churned with fury, then fell into a deep melancholy.

I hate you, she told me, not once, but many times.

'Well,' I'd reply, swallowing hurt, 'I'm sorry you feel that way, chick, 'cause I love the very bones of you.'

And I did. What I regretted was the effect my actions had upon her. I was taking her away from everything and everyone she'd known in her short life: friends, the little remaining family we had, and most of all, her beloved school.

I suffered Fen's silence, her cruel words followed by stubborn indifference, her attempts to extract a bargain from me ('If we stay, I promise to practise my exercises every day'; 'I'll always do what you tell me'; 'I'll never go beyond the markets on my own again'). I wore her efforts like a flagellant of old, whipping myself periodically, because a part of me (and no small part) was relieved to be going, despite the circumstances and the dread of leaving behind the familiar.

Truth was, I could have stayed if I'd really wanted. Why, I could have moved to another part of the city, married again (Captain Neville had made his intentions clear), lived out my life to a ripe old age. But I knew if I didn't leave now, use William's death as the public reason, I never would. I'd be like a rat who'd swallowed poison. I'd die a few streets away from where I'd been born, never having gone anywhere or experienced anything.

So, I uprooted myself and Fen and went to find fresh soil to plant us in.

And for my hasty plan to succeed, I needed one final thing from my late (un)lamented husband …

A group of men deep in conversation were gathered near the entry to the Customs House, several barrels at their feet. All except one were swathed in long plaids, belted at the waist. The exception, who wore trews and a dark green coat, had his back to me, blocking my passage.

I cleared my throat. 'Excuse me, sir.'

The man turned and looked directly at me. He had a wide, sun-kissed mien, with a broad forehead that was only partially concealed by his bonnet. Dark hair laced with silver was pulled back into a neat queue. His beard didn't quite disguise full lips, nor the scar that cleft the upper one and ran across his left cheek. But it was his eyes that deserved the most attention. A clear grey-green, they were like a rockpool reflecting a stormy sky, a contrast to his black lashes. Yet, within their crystal depths I saw sadness and something else … For a moment, I forgot where I was, imagining this tall, solid man reaching inside my head and gathering my thoughts. I glanced away before he could access any more.

'Forgive me, lass,' he said. His words were English, educated, but his voice had the deep melodic burr of the Highlands. 'I didn't see you there.' With a slow half-bow, he stepped aside, directing me to precede him through the large double-doors. The other men snickered, whether at his fine manners or me, I couldn't be sure. My face burned and I wanted to level some tart words, unleash my tavern wench. Only, I didn't want to leave the gentleman – for that's what he was – with a poor impression. Instead, I muttered a thanks and, ignoring the other lads, scurried inside, my heart beating erratically.

The heady buzz of business and the hum of voices greeted me as I entered the Customs House. Divided in two, its front faced the river and was reserved mainly for officialdom. There were rows of desks piled with papers, lanterns and unlit candlesticks dumped atop stacks of pages to prevent them flying away in the breeze that blew up from the water. The light was dim – what reached the desks coming only from the open doors and the high barred windows. There was a clerk with a pinched face and beetling brows bent over a large ledger, his finger tracking columns. Two merchants were in heated discussion over his head. Behind them, where the light didn't quite reach, was the warehouse. Men, mainly tidewaiters who boarded ships to check the cargo, were busy hauling sacks and piling them against a tower of barrels. Some lads in the blue uniforms of the excise were untying the sacks and inspecting the contents.

I waited for the clerk to acknowledge me. The gentleman from the entrance swept past, heading for a desk where a rather pillowy-looking man was squeezed into a chair behind it. A book was propped open before him. He was pretending to read, but even from where I stood I could see that his eyes were shut, and his mouth had fallen wetly open. How he could sleep

with all the racket going on was a wonder. The fact no-one disciplined him suggested he was the most senior man present, and thus the one I needed to face.

‘Can I help you, madam?’ asked the clerk, finally lifting his head. His voice was high, very English.

‘I’m not sure,’ I began, looking past his shoulder. ‘I wish to see the collector. Mr Warburton?’ I pointed just as the gentleman reached over and gave the sleeping man a shake.

‘Wakey wakey, George,’ he said.

The collector’s arms shot out, the book landing on the floor. ‘How dare you—’ he began. Then his eyes widened. ‘Oh, Mr Gordon, it’s you.’ Mr Warburton sat up, brushing his arms, smoothing his jacket. ‘I wasn’t expecting you until the morrow.’

‘Aye,’ drawled Mr Gordon, bending to retrieve the book. He glanced at the cover before placing it on the desk. ‘That was what we agreed upon … yesterday.’

‘What?’ said Mr Warburton, blinking. ‘Is it Tuesday already?’

‘Was when I woke this morning.’

‘Thought you’d be in court.’

‘There’s been a delay. The procurator arrives from Banff on Thursday.’

‘Banff? Then you can be confident of the outcome.’ The collector glanced about, eyes narrowing. ‘Have you brought the goods?’

Mr Gordon sighed. ‘Why else would I be here – and with a judgement hanging over my head?’ He gestured to where the men waited near the barrels outside.

‘What? You brought them *here*!’ Mr Warburton squeaked and leapt out of his seat. ‘For godsakes, man, I’ll not allow you to drag me into your …’ His next words were lost to me. He jerked his chin towards the doors. ‘Get them out of sight.’

Mr Gordon gave a wry smile and crossed his arms. ‘When I’ve got what I came for.’

Mr Warburton fixed Mr Gordon with a look, grumbling as he stood and lumbered deeper into the Customs House. Shocked at what I felt sure was an illicit transaction occurring so openly, I was also afraid I was going to lose my chance. Without waiting for permission, I brushed past the clerk.

‘Madam. You can’t go back there—’

‘Mr Warburton?’ I called, squeezing between two desks, ignoring objections. ‘Mr Warburton!’ I repeated more loudly.

The collector spun around. ‘Do I know you?’

‘No, Mr Warburton.’ I bobbed a small curtsey. ‘But I’ve come a long way to see you.’

Mr Warburton released a weary sigh, flapping his hands so I was forced to return the way I’d come. When we reached his desk, I moved to the other side.

‘Mr Warburton. I’m Mrs Reed. And I need a word with you about a private matter.’ I tightened the hold on my burlap and resisted the urge to adjust the kertch on my head, tidy my hair. I must look a sight, all windblown and thought-tossed.

The collector regarded me with annoyance. ‘Private matter?’ He rolled his eyes towards Mr Gordon who, much to my chagrin, had followed and was only a matter of feet away. ‘Do you have an appointment?’

‘No. But the commissioners in Edinburgh said—’

Mr Warburton made a disparaging noise. ‘I’m afraid I can’t see you without one. You Gaelic-sort never respect the rules. As you can see, I’m a busy man. Speak to Collins over there.’ He waved a careless hand. ‘I may have something in a few days. Now,’ he said officiously, turning back to Mr Gordon. ‘Before I part with *anything*, Gordon, I must ensure the quality of the goods. How about we retreat somewhere more conducive to that?’ He cuffed Mr Gordon on the shoulder, as if they were friends. I could tell they weren’t.

Gaelic-sort, hey? Well, I’d been called worse and by better than this overweening Englishman.

‘Mr Warburton,’ I said loudly, striding around the desk and gripping his forearm, forcing him to heed me. ‘I do not have a few days. I’ve travelled far to speak with you on a matter of some urgency.’

Mr Warburton shook my hand off. ‘Listen here, woman, I don’t know who you—’

‘Look after Mrs Reed, Warburton,’ said Mr Gordon firmly. ‘Our business can wait. *I* can wait.’ As if to demonstrate, he pulled up a stool and sat upon it, crossing one leg over the other.

Mr Warburton’s face grew red. There was a brief stand-off between the two, then Mr Warburton relented. He all but slumped into his chair.

I didn’t want to be grateful to this stranger, but I was. I flashed him a half-smile and without waiting to be asked, sat down as well.

Up close, I could see crumbs littered not only the surface of the desk, but the front of Mr Warburton’s uniform. A rather large mustard-coloured stain decorated his cravat, and a half-eaten pie lay in ruins on top of a cracked saucer. The book he’d fallen asleep reading was by Adam Smith. With a shaking hand he picked up a mug, swirled it briefly and downed the contents. ‘Well, what’s so important?’ That wasn’t tea he’d just swallowed. I almost keeled over from the fumes.

Ignoring the fact Mr Gordon was listening, I told him. ‘Just over a month ago,’ I began, pleased my voice remained even, ‘word came to Edinburgh – from here – that excise officer William Reed had died.’

Mr Warburton’s eyes narrowed. ‘Edinburgh? I’m not sure what business the fate of the former deputy comptroller is of yours.’

‘Deputy comptroller?’ That gave me pause. William had been promoted. I never knew. My stomach clenched with – what? Hurt? Choler? It quite unsettled me. ‘Let me explain, sir.’ Now came the difficult bit. The bit I’d rehearsed in my mind ever since the commissioners in Edinburgh told me that as William’s wife I was entitled to his outstanding wages, but there was some confusion. To receive them, I needed to speak to the collector in Montrose. He had to sign the necessary paperwork before the monies could be released.

Aware Mr Warburton’s patience was wearing thin, I nevertheless had to ask the question that had been plaguing me ever since Captain Neville delivered the news.

‘I must ask, sir. How did Mr Reed die?’ For all that we’d lived apart for many years, William was still my husband. Still Fen’s da. A part of me hoped he hadn’t suffered.

Too much.

I chided myself for such an uncharitable thought.

With a click of exasperation, the collector slid a pair of spectacles onto the bridge of his nose and reached for a thick ledger. ‘He was before my appointment, so I’ll have to check.’

While the collector searched through the ledger, I did what I could to avoid looking at Mr Gordon, all too aware that the entire time I’d been talking, his gaze had barely left me. In a shadowy corner, I could discern some rusty pot stills and worms, illicit distilling equipment no doubt seized

by zealous excisemen. William was oft finding similar pieces around Edinburgh, but when a raid was unsuccessful …

I buried the memories deeper.

Valuable contraband would be stored behind the door with the huge padlock at the rear. Three keys were required to open it: the comptroller's and his two surveyors'. William had come to Montrose to take up the post of key-holder, a junior surveyor.

'Ah,' said the collector, stabbing a page with his finger. 'Here it is. William Reed was washed overboard during a storm en route to—' He squinted. 'Sorlandet – Norway. Officials weren't notified for some weeks, not until the ship returned.'

So, that was how William met his end. In the North Sea. Born in Middlesex, William once told me he didn't like the ocean.

'His body was never recovered.' The collector shut the ledger with a snap. 'He's drint, as you Gaelic-lot say.' He flicked a piece of crust from his coat. 'He fair drowned. Lies in a watery grave.'

Gaelic-lot. Gaelic-sort. Is that how this man thought of all Scots, whether Lowlanders or Highlanders? One great collective. Was he uncaring about the many contradictions, the hostility among us, the lingering resentment between Jacobites and Hanoverians? Between those who benefited from the Union of Crowns and those who loathed the merger? Or was he just wilfully ignorant? It was hard not to feel piqued as he showed his clueless colours, a bold or foolish move considering he was a Sassenach working in the heart of Scotland. Then again, as a collector, a representative of the king, he wielded a great deal of authority. Maybe not so stupid after all. Just bold. Just self-important.

Like William.

'If that be all.' Mr Warburton rose and pushed back his chair. 'Time to get on with *our* business, Gordon. Lord knows, I've waited long enough. I've the, er … *means* to satisfy our arrangement.'

Means. The word was sharp, cruel, a dirk-thrust that drew blood and pain. I quietly hissed. Means was what I lacked. It was also what brought me here.

Mr Gordon was watching me. A look passed between us. He gave the slightest nod of encouragement.

'Excuse me, Mr Warburton.' I stood, determined, firm. 'That's *not* all.'

Mr Warburton fixed his pebble eyes upon me. ‘I can’t think what other business you have with me, madam. I’ve told you all I know or can.’

The fuse of my anger, ever primed these days, began to smoulder.

‘Because Mr Reed lost his life in performance of duties for the Crown, I believe I’m entitled to any outstanding wages he accrued.’

‘Oh, you do, do you?’ Mr Warburton snorted.

I tried to stay calm, swallow my desperation. ‘The authorities in Edinburgh assured me there were monies to be collected, only there’d been some confusion.’

Mr Warburton harrumphed. ‘On the contrary, there was no confusion. Mr Reed was owed a considerable sum.’

My heart fluttered as a little bird of hope took flight. ‘Then, Mr Warburton,’ a small smile of triumph escaped, ‘I wish to formally apply for it.’

There was a beat. ‘You can’t.’

The little bird gave one last flutter.

‘I’m well within my rights.’ I reached into my burlap, scrabbling through the contents. ‘I’ve the correct papers.’ On the advice of a sympathetic commissioner, I’d brought all the required documents and signatures, proof of my status.

Stumpy, hairy fingers rested against mine, stilling my foraging.

Slowly, as I stared hot coals, Mr Warburton removed his hand. ‘Rights aside, you can’t apply for what’s no longer there.’ His voice had become brittle, his slate eyes colder than the dreich day.

Mr Gordon slid off the stool and stood.

‘But you said there was *a considerable sum*.’ It was hard not to sound haughty or wretched.

‘Oh, and there was. There was. It’s just that it’s already been claimed.’

‘It has?’ As far as I knew, William had no other family. His parents were long dead, his brother as well, may God rest their souls. ‘By whom?’

‘By his wife.’

Ice-water struck me full in the face. ‘His *what*?’

‘I said,’ the collector enunciated each word, as if speaking to a numpty, ‘his *wife* claimed them. She came here a few days after his memorial service and was paid in full. I issued the monies myself – to Mrs William Reed.’

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CHAPTER TWO



A bark of disbelieving laughter escaped. ‘That’s impossible,’ I said. ‘*I’m* Mrs Reed.’

A contemptuous smile twisted the collector’s face. ‘*That’s* impossible.’

My tangled thoughts started to unspool around me. ‘Look,’ I began, trying to gather them, trying not to sound frantic. With a wrench, I freed the papers I’d brought and thrust them beneath Mr Warburton’s nose. ‘Here’s proof.’ I slammed my marriage certificate on the desk and pinned it with a finger. ‘See. There’s his name. William Reed and there’s me, Greer MacAlister.’

I waited until Mr Warburton begrudgingly peered.

‘We were married, thirteen years ago. There’s the date, the kirk. The name and seal of the minister. We have a daughter, Fenella.’ I spun around, including Mr Gordon, who wasn’t even pretending he wasn’t listening anymore, lifting the certificate so he might witness the names. ‘William left me, his wife, *Mrs William Reed*, and Fen in Edinburgh when he was posted here. I haven’t … *we* haven’t seen him for … for a long time. Years. We were … estranged.’ My cheeks flooded with colour. ‘When I learned he died, I decided to come north. Look, I’ve some letters …’

I reached into the bag again, reluctantly withdrawing them. They were a last measure. I was embarrassed by what he’d written. The brevity. The apparent coldness. What was said … and not. How much time had passed since we last corresponded.

‘I came here to … collect his wages … his dues … *my* dues. What I’m owed.’ My voice began to break.

Mr Warburton glanced at the certificate, then shoved it aside as if I’d offered a mouldy biscuit. He shrugged in the direction of Mr Gordon, picked up his mug, saw it was empty and pulled a face. ‘Well, ah … err, Mrs …’ He cleared his throat and twirled his wrist mid-air banishing my name, my past, as if they were of no consequence. ‘All I can say is the … erm … Mrs Reed, the one who received payment, also had papers. Furthermore, most of the men who work here know her.’ He jerked his chins towards the clerk who’d turned towards us, drinking in every word. ‘After Mr Reed’s death was confirmed, *she’s* mourning him. *She* collected his wages. Isn’t that right, James?’

‘Och, indeed, sir,’ said the clerk who had an unfortunate growth on his nose. ‘Ava Tailyour. The Borrowfield merchant’s youngest. Married Mr Reed ’bout six years ago. They’ve two bonny sons.’

I clutched the back of the chair. Everything went black, as if a curtain was being drawn over this farce. This couldn’t be right. William had only left Edinburgh, left me and Fen, seven years ago. Clearly a lot had happened. *Six years. Six bloody years*. And that was before I considered the endless recriminations I’d levelled at him, at myself; the mire of self-doubt I’d wallowed in, the despair punctuated by relief I didn’t have to consider him, deal with his … attentions any longer. And that was before I even accounted for Fen and her needs.

And now it turns out there’d been a brand-new woman.

Another marriage. Another wife.

Let’s not forget the two sons.

Was this some callous cosmic joke played by a vengeful God? I was an empty chaff bag, weightless yet so damn heavy. My past and present rushed towards each other and collided in a great spray of words, bitterness, pain. Oh, God, I ached – with fury, disbelief, and shame.

William had fathered *two* bairns? With Ava Tailyour of Borrowfield? Who the fook was she to take what was rightfully mine? Mine and Fen’s? How dare she snatch away our last chance of a future? I’d pinned so much hope on those monies, William’s final gift to me, to us.

Truth be told, his only gift. Only, he’d another wrapped and waiting to be delivered.

My body deflated. I no longer had the strength to be sad, to be angry. To scream defiance at the heavens. An ocean roared in my ears, swirled about my shaking knees, trying to draw me under.

‘So,’ continued Mr Warburton when I didn’t move or speak, ‘even if you’re who you claim, which I very much doubt, I can’t pay you what I no longer have.’ He waited for me to dispute his words. ‘If you’ve a problem,’ he said impatiently, pushing his chair against the desk, ‘I suggest you take it up with the authorities in Edinburgh. As far as I’m concerned, the matter is concluded.’ The collector tugged at his jacket. ‘Good day.’

Stunned, I remained where I was. The tears I’d shed when first told of William’s death threatened again. Back then, they’d been mistaken for grief. They wouldn’t be this time.

For years I’d made excuses for him, mainly so the gossip would cease, the cruel assumptions. I had his name, status as his wife. Together, these offered respectability, protection from unwanted advances and a degree of liberty denied an unmarried woman alone. Until they didn’t. I’d also foolishly believed (feared?) he’d return. That, Odysseus-like, he’d come back, and I’d be awaiting, his loyal Penelope.

How could I have been so stupid? How could I *not* have known about this other … *family*? I’d known something was wrong, hadn’t I? When the letters began arriving months apart before ceasing altogether, the pitiful payments as well … I’d wondered. Then, relieved to be rid of him, I’d pushed aside the whys and dealt with the wherefores. But *this*? Never in my most fanciful, catastrophic imaginings could I have considered such an outcome.

If there was another wife, if there were indeed two bonny lads as that warty-toad Warburton claimed, what did that make me? Make Fen? What did it make the other Mrs Reed and her children?

Scorned women. Spurned daughter. Bastard sons. All of us. Used.

By fooking William Reed.

And now, after burning the last bridge my parents had spent a lifetime building, I didn’t even have the means to cross another. William had denied me that as well, reaching out beyond the grave to control my fate.

I’d travelled all this way for naught. Dragged angry, sad Fen and our meagre possessions, spent the last of my savings to escape the problem Edinburgh had become, intending to create a new life – here, if I could – using William’s wages.

Not anymore.

I worked hard to keep my back straight, chin up, face expressionless. I wouldn't break, especially not before this Sassenach and his big-eared clerks, or that unabashed hearkener, Mr Gordon.

I'd my pride. I'd also another person I was responsible for. I needed coin for food, for shelter; to allow me time to consider what to do next. I'd no use for spleen, for the humiliation that even now was lapping at my ribs. My heart was thundering, a war-drum. A call to battle. I'd fought for me and Fen before. Time to take up arms again.

With as much dignity as I could muster, praying the quiver in my hands, the tremble in my legs weren't visible, I took a step towards where Mr Warburton was talking quietly to Mr Gordon.

'Excuse me, collector, if I might ask one last thing?'

Mr Warburton turned so fast, his chops wobbled. 'What now?'

Spit struck me on the face. I wiped it away as casually as I could, cheeks hot, fury tightening my throat.

'Do you happen to know of any work hereabouts? It appears my circumstances have undergone a sudden alteration.'

The collector stared at me coldly.

Refusing to be discommoded, I continued. 'I can read and write, my daughter too. I know my way around a household. A brewhouse. A taproom …' My voice caught. 'I've supervised maids and men. I can keep accounts and possess other skills. I'm a quick study.' I felt sweaty, prickly. I wasn't accustomed to spruiking my credentials. It sounded arrogant, boastful. 'I've a fine reference from Dr Braidwood of Braidwood's School for the Deaf and Dumb.'

Mr Warburton's brows shot up and he sneered. 'Deaf and Dumb? I don't think that's much to swagger about. As for work, I don't know of any, missy. I'm a collector of customs, not some agent able to place you in employment. But—' He shook a finger in my face. Dear God, but I wanted to bite it. 'I'll offer you some advice for naught.'

He made a show of drawing himself up to appear taller. It was a poor effort. 'What I do know is the people of Montrose are like those in any other place in this cursed country, they don't take kindly to incomers, whether they be English or Lowlanders, no matter what they claim they can and cannot do, or who they state they are, especially when they're trying to

impugn the good reputation of another.' His gaze raked me top to toe. 'If I were you, I'd either consider changing your name, Miss …'

A painful reminder my status had been reduced.

'Or get away from this town altogether. Once word escapes – and trust me, it will – this place is a hotbed of gossip and what isn't said isn't worth knowing.' He looked at the clerk and tidewaiters for confirmation. 'Your presence will be viewed … let's say, unfavourably. You'll be a marked woman. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you're hounded out of town before you're able to invent another reason as to why you're here.'

Mortified, I was afraid if I opened my mouth, pieces of my shattered hopes, my unknown future, would tumble to the floor. I gave Mr Warburton the smallest of curtseys, nodded towards Mr Gordon, who wore the deepest of frowns, and the keen-eared clerk, then with a flaming face, head held higher than a flag atop a mast, strode out of the Customs House and past Mr Gordon's men, who watched in silence.

It occurred to me as I stood dazed and empty by the riverside and stared at the grey harbour, ignoring the curious looks of the crate-carriers, the other tidewaiters crawling out of their boats and onto the docks, that in a matter of weeks I'd gone from being the wife of an English excise officer, William Reed, responsible for operating a busy tavern, an assistant teacher and mother, to someone without a husband or a name. I was also without a job, a home or prospects.

Now I didn't know where to go and had no means to get anywhere. I was stuck in a potentially hostile and unfamiliar land, a stranger whose name and past had been dismissed as naught but an enormous lie.

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CHAPTER THREE



I needed time to regain some composure before I faced Fen. Faced anyone, really.

I trudged up a nearby hill and sat upon the wind-blown grass, knees drawn to my chest, ignoring the damp that seeped through my skirts, the teasing wind that pulled at my hair, tugged at my shawl. I thought of all the years I'd wasted, not so much *with* William as *on* him.

Every thought began with 'if only'. If only I'd never met him; if only I'd never allowed my head to be turned by his sweet words; if only Fen had never fallen ill …

When I met William, I'd been young, giddy, caught up in feelings I mistook for love, blithely pushing away the inner voice that tolled a warning. When I finally plucked up the courage to tell Ma I was with child, I thought she'd order me from home. What she did was worse.

Ma's disappointment had been so damn raw – and that was before we learned what William was really like.

'Thank God your da's not alive to see this. You know what he would have said, don't you? "Ye jink them bastart gaugers, ye dinnae lose ye maidenhead to 'em".' She lowered her head into her apron, her tears soaked up by the flimsy fabric. 'You have to marry him now, chick. You've no choice.' She'd stared at me with her chocolate eyes. My eyes. 'How can I show my face to the good people around here with a bloody Sassenach excise officer in the family? Who'll want to drink here then? That'll be the end of us, the end of the Coo's Horn.'

It wasn’t. But thank God neither Ma nor Da were alive to learn what else the bloody Sassenach gauger had done. He’d well and truly jinked me. And thank God they weren’t alive to learn what Uncle Duncan, Da’s brother, my very own blood, had done, either.

I raised my head to stare at the louring sky. The ragged sunshine of earlier had been replaced by a convoy of grey clouds. The air was salty with the tang of iron. The unseasonal warmth of the morning had been swallowed by a chill that burrowed into my flesh.

How could I tell Fen that the man she scarce remembered but was still her lawful, God-given father, had a secret family? And that here in Montrose, *they* were considered the legitimate ones?

Me and Fen … we were the bastarts. The tricksters, the cheatry ones.

God. God. God.

I thought back to the early days of my marriage. Before we’d even wed, William tried to flee his responsibilities. It was only due to the threats of his superior that he turned up at the kirk for our union. Afterwards, he spent as much time away as he could, volunteering to ride along the borders with the redcoats, sailing north, south, west, it didn’t matter so long as it was away from his swollen-bellied wife.

There’d been a short time after William returned from Ireland and beheld his bonny wee daughter when he’d been attentive, loving almost. Not to me, but to Fen. He paraded her around the taproom, his face aglow as he accepted congratulatory slaps on the back, the many drams that followed. As I looked on his shining face, his proud eyes, I’d thought maybe I could tolerate him.

But William showed one mien to the world and another to me. A face that was mostly twisted in a sneer and, when we were alone, levelled such cutting words, I still bore the scars. It was worse if a proposed raid failed or the profits from a seizure were less than he’d calculated. Before Fen was even a year old, William ceased to hide his discontent, flaunting his other women, daring me to react.

At first, I’d catter-batter too. I could always quarrel with the best. Gradually, I learned this was what he wanted. Once I knew, I refused to let him see my humiliation, my simmering rage, my sorrow. It gave him excuses I refused to provide. I acted as if his debauchery, his cruelty, meant naught. But it did. It slowly ate away at my confidence, my sense of worth. I hated him for that more than anything; that my English husband had that

kind of power over me. If it hadn’t been for Fen, for Ma and my responsibilities at the tavern, I might have dissolved altogether, become like the ale that leaked from the barrels in the storeroom below. Nothing but a great puddle that gradually dried leaving no trace.

And then, when William was away on a blessedly long voyage to the colonies over the vast, churning ocean, Fen fell ill. It was no ordinary illness, but a terrible brain fever that, when she recovered, forever altered her. For wee Fen, only five years old, lost her hearing. Even her ability to chitter away like a wee birdy diminished. Her once nimble tongue struggled to form the shapes that made her easy to understand. Her words slurred, became plodding, like the men who’d stagger out of the tavern late at night. At first, she’d try and sound out her words. Ma and I would urge her, trying hard not to speak on her behalf, and eventually they’d emerge. But she grew so frustrated with her slowness, with the difficulty of it all. Endlessly mocked and imitated by the bairns in the neighbourhood and throughout Canongate, Fen gradually ceased speaking altogether. Her world, and thus the one between us, grew silent.

It was hard to watch Fen toil each day, to see her despair as those who were once friends turned away lest they too be taunted and outcast, and it changed her. I dried her tears, held her close, tried to show her in myriad ways how loved she was, how clever and kind. Didn’t matter, not when as soon as I was out of sight, she was tormented, shoved, called dreadful names by those more cunning. The worst were the children who’d been singled out for persecution themselves – those with a stumpy leg, fingers missing, a cleft palate, a stutter, holes in their clothes, a drunken sot for a da. They preyed on Fen with the urgency of those who knew what it was to be a victim. The awareness that she’d be forever marked for being deaf and mute, not her other fine attributes, cracked my heart wide open. I wanted to take away all her sadness, all her pain. I wanted to ease her path, but it was nigh-on impossible. Boundless, aching love was not enough to muffle the tyranny of the rowdies, old and young. Chants of ‘dumbie’ and ‘sowf’ would follow her. I’d overhear even those I thought friends describing my daughter, my sweet, smart one, as sappie-headed.

Friends no more.

Like any bairn, all Fen wanted was to be like everyone else. The wretched knowledge she never would be was the hardest to bear.

Then, Ma took charge. Years earlier, before I was born, before she even met Da, she'd been housekeeper for Dr Thomas Braidwood near the Corn Market. Ma always remained on good terms with the doctor after she left his household to marry the learned deacon turned tavern-keeper. Unbeknownst to me, after Fen's illness Ma sought out her old employer, who had opened a special school some years earlier and immediately offered Fen classes for a fraction of what he charged regular pupils.

At first, I was horrified Ma had taken such a step. God, weren't things bad enough for Fen without her being enrolled in school where she would be at the mercy of the pupils all day? Didn't matter that Ma knew the head teacher. What good would it do? How was Fen to learn anything when she couldn't hear? Wouldn't speak?

But this was no ordinary school. It was the Braidwood Academy for the Deaf and Dumb. There, Fen not only met about a dozen other children like her but was able to continue the education she'd only just begun when she fell ill.

Fen worked so hard at her lessons, I was beyond proud. Within months, my wee bairn not only improved her writing, but could glean many words from the way people's mouths moved when they spoke; how they were shaped according to accent, age and ability. She didn't always get it right, but she became adept at understanding something as minor as a raised brow, a widening of the eyes, a twist of the lips.

Best of all, Fen learned to talk using her hands. Dr Braidwood had developed a way for deaf people to communicate using their fingers and hands like words, phrases and even sentences. It was a miracle. I needed to learn this 'language' as well so I might 'speak' to my daughter. When Dr Braidwood found out Fen was teaching me what she'd learned each day, he encouraged me to assist in the classroom and acquire finger-talking with Fen. Whenever Ma could spare me from the tavern, I would.

The day William returned from the American colonies is one I wish I could erase. He'd strutted into the tavern with a heavy frown and curled lip. Fen, now six, ran to welcome him, her face alight with joy, her golden curls bouncing, her chestnut eyes dancing. He dropped to his knees and held out his arms. She flew into them. I watched their reunion, heartsick with anticipation.

'Look how much you've grown!' he exclaimed, kissing Fen's forehead. He held her at arm's length, scanning her head to toe. 'Why, I'd hardly

recognise you, Fenella. You're quite the young lady now.'

She stood before her kneeling father, staring at him as he fired questions at her. 'Did you miss me? What's your ma been up to while I've been gone? Have you been learning the king's English? Going to church?' When Fen didn't immediately respond, he laughed uneasily, looking accusingly in my direction as I watched from the doorway. Ma sidled closer, looping her arm through mine.

William ruffled Fen's hair, prodded her with a gentle finger. His smile slowly collapsed into a scowl.

'Well, come on,' he said impatiently. 'I've been gone almost a year. Surely, you've something to say to your father?'

Fen bit her lip, threw mouse-shy glances at me and her gran. I stepped forward intending to protect her, answer for her, but Ma stopped me.

William gave me a suspicious look, his thought as clear as if he'd spoken: *You've turned her against me, haven't you?*

'William,' I said quietly, patting Ma's hand to reassure her. 'I told you; she's been very ill. Much has happened in your absence.'

It was so important William see firsthand what Fen had endured; but also what she'd accomplished. I was so proud of my lassie. *Our lassie*, I reminded myself. Surely, he'd be proud too.

Never had a daughter so needed her father's love. Never had a wife so needed her husband's support. Together, regardless of what lay between us, we'd help Fen surmount every obstacle.

With a tremulous smile, Fen opened her mouth wide to allow sound to escape, as she'd been taught.

'Good momow, Daaaa.' She looked to me for approval. I smiled, eyes aswim. 'It's good you be hame. I've … *we've*—' Ever the diplomat, Fen made sure to include me. Damn if my heart didn't swell. 'Missed yeow so very march.'

Before Fen could enjoy another embrace, her da shoved her away and leapt to his feet. He stared at her in undisguised horror.

'*What?* What was *that*?' William blinked at Fen. 'Why are you talking like … like a loon?' He gave a dramatic shudder and spun towards me. 'You said she was better? What's *wrong* with her?'

As gently as I could, I told him the truth.

Fen watched as we spoke above her, urgently, angrily, then she tugged my skirts. Using her hands, the gestures small, basic, a cutting of air, a

sweeping of palms, as if the words were drawn from her breast, Fen asked a question. I bit my lip then shook my head, stroked her face, then answered.

William staggered in goggle-eyed shock.

'What's this?' He flapped his hands before my face, waggled his fingers in an overblown manner, mocking us. 'What's she doing that for? Why are *you*? What's it mean?'

I willed him to school his face; to not shout. To at least pretend he wasn't disturbed. Couldn't he see how much his reaction was upsetting Fen? But he was incapable. This was something he didn't want to understand. Thank God he didn't know what Fen had asked.

I pulled Fen to me. 'It's how she talks now, William. When she does. She still has much to learn. We all do.' I bit my lip. 'In time, you'll understand what she's saying. It's not that hard, if only you—'

'No. *No,*' William roared, flinging out his arms. Fen and I flinched.

He looked upon his daughter as one might a creature from myth; a monster. 'That's *not* my child.' Without another look at either Fen or me, he stormed from the tavern.

The following day, he went to the Customs House and demanded a posting north. For a few days he maintained the pretence we were to accompany him.

A week later, he was gone, promising to send for us when he was settled.

It was the last we ever saw of him.

Fen had scarce spoken of William since. I waited and waited for her to ask when her da was coming back, wondering how I'd answer, but she never did. She never spoke again. I didn't talk about him. Fen had enough to cope with, but when she sometimes tossed and turned in the bed beside me at night, I wondered if she was recalling his terrible rejection. I oft did. That was when I started to wish him dead.

Well, my wish had come true.

A fat drop of rain fell. I stared skywards. God in fooking heaven. What was I to tell Fen?

Listen, chick, your father's a bigamist who never gave a damn about you or me. He found someone else and made a new family here in Montrose. One with two perfect boy bairns.

Was that what drove him? A need to father children without an affliction? As if Fen's deafness was evidence of a deficiency in him. That

was at the heart of it. It was always about William. Too late, I understood he'd been looking for a reason to desert me. His daughter had provided it. The thought made me sick.

Had he been forced to the altar again, having put a bairn in Ava Tailyour? Or had he truly loved her? Had not admitting his marital status been a matter of self-preservation rather than selfish denial? Had he beaten her too?

My mind was afire.

Below where I sat, children with buckets laden with seaweed raced across the sands towards shelter. Heavy rain was coming in from the west – that raindrop was just a warning.

I stood, brushing my skirts, retying my kertch, which had loosened. I watched the children a moment longer, their bare feet, their ragged breeks. Their laughter was refreshing. All children deserved happiness, didn't they? Fen hadn't had much in her brief life.

Not wanting to walk by the Customs House, I decided to use the path behind the houses and shops on the high street. I made my way past a small croft and a row of barns. Lasses were pulling washing from where it had been draped over bushes. They cast casual looks in my direction, nudging each other, pausing in their task. My clothes marked me as an outsider well before I opened my mouth.

Mr Warburton's words returned to taunt me.

The people of Montrose are like those in any other place in this cursed country, they don't take kindly to incomers … wouldn't be at all surprised if you're hounded out of town …

I shivered and drew my rather thin shawl closer.

The clocktower struck twelve, each chime a rebuke. I'd been gone hours! Picking up my skirts, I half-ran down a narrow lane. The walls of the houses were close, making the passage rather gloomy. At least the wind didn't bite so hard. Two well-dressed merchants I recognised from the Customs House strode past, one touching his cap. He muttered something to the man beside him. They both slowed then halted, looking over their shoulders.

'Excuse me,' I said, trying to squeeze past a woman taking up a great deal of space.

The woman threw up an arm, forcing me to stop. 'I'll nae excuse the likes of a hizzie bitch like ye. Who do y'think ye are, eh? Making up

wicked stories.’

Older than me by some years, the woman had pale eyes and rich auburn hair streaked with white. She wore a blue woollen dress with lace cuffs and had a red and umber plaid draped elegantly over her shoulders, falling down her back.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, finally. ‘Do I know you?’

‘Nae,’ said the woman, shoving her face into mine. ‘But I ken ye. Ye be the one calling yerself Mrs Reed.’

One of the two merchants piped up. ‘That’s her, Gairi.’ He shuffled closer. I could smell wet wool, tobacco and whisky.

‘Heard her with our own ears,’ said the other. Would be hard not to with the pair he possessed. Why, the man resembled a quaich.

The woman called Gairi poked me with a firm finger. ‘If y’think ye can come here from the big city and trammel ma lassie’s and grandweans’ names in the fooking mud—’

Dear God. This was Ava Tailyour’s ma.

‘Try and take what’s rightfully theirs, then I tell ye for naught, ye nae welcome here. Nae. Welcome. Here.’

With each word, she gave me a mighty shove. I staggered into the wall, my shoulder striking the harled stone so hard, I cried out.

‘Wait, please, Mrs Tailyour. You don’t understand—’ I lifted a hand in appeal.

Mrs Tailyour slapped it aside and gave a loud mocking laugh. Summoned by the raised voices, others entered the wynd. They gathered around Gairi and the merchants like city folk a preacher. Ahead, the entrance to the main street became clogged with more people. Warburton hadn’t been exaggerating when he said word would spread. Why, I hadn’t had time to sort out my own head and here were these folk wanting it on a platter. They stood shoulder to shoulder, frowning their disapproval, mouths full of whispers, eyes filled with disdain.

Fear pricked and pinched my skin, made my heart slam against my ribs. My shoulder burned, tears of rage and helplessness began to gather. I blinked them back. I would not be intimidated.

‘You have it wrong.’ My voice was steady, firm. Unlike my legs.

‘Och, do we now?’ scoffed Mrs Tailyour. ‘I dinnae think so. William Reed may have been a Sassenach, and a gauger—’ There were some noises of disapproval. ‘But he was a good father to his wee laddies.’ Mrs Tailyour

leaned into me. ‘His death was a terrible thing for ma lass and her bairns. The last thing she needs while she’s grieving is a trallop like ye spreading ye poison. So just get yerself and that cripple daughter of yers away from here. Yer not welcome, ye ken?’

While I could endure whatever insults were levelled at me, what I couldn’t, wouldn’t abide, were people calling Fen names.

‘Now you listen to me,’ I began, forcing Mrs Tailyour to take a step back. Anger overrode the pain in my shoulder, the ache in my soul. ‘You don’t get to call my daughter anything, do *you* hear? And I’ll not be told what—’

‘There you are,’ said a loud voice. ‘Did you manage to get the stores we need?’

Pushing his way through the by now rather large crowd was Mr Gordon from the Customs House. Head and shoulders above everyone, he was regarding me with a peculiar intensity. He stepped into the space between me and Mrs Tailyour.

‘Stores?’ What was this man blethering about? Then it struck me. He’d come to the rescue. A mixture of indignation and gratitude warred. The last time I felt anything remotely resembling thankfulness towards a man was when Uncle Duncan descended upon us when Ma sickened to help with the tavern. Look how short-lived that had been. In my experience, men only stepped in when they wanted something, or it was to their advantage.

‘Good morning, Mrs Tailyour,’ continued Mr Gordon, sweeping off his bonnet. It struck the quaich-eared merchant. ‘I see you’ve met my new housekeeper.’

‘Ye can keep ye big nose out of this one,’ began Mrs Tailyour, wagging a crooked finger at him. ‘This has naught to do with ye.’

‘Och, but I’m afraid it does,’ he said. ‘Mrs MacAlister here *is* my responsibility.’

I started. *MacAlister?* Then I remembered, he’d seen the marriage certificate.

Mrs Tailyour’s eyebrows shot up. ‘MacAlister, is it? That’s not what I heard she’s a-calling herself.’

‘If you’d bothered to ask,’ I began, ‘you’d have—’

‘New housekeeper?’ continued Mrs Tailyour, turning her back to me. ‘We heard yer last one disappeared.’

Mr Gordon frowned. ‘She left. Of her own accord.’

Mrs Tailyour pulled a face. ‘So how many’s that now then? Two? Three?’

Mr Gordon ignored her.

‘Anyone’d think yer murthering ’em.’ There was uncomfortable laughter.

The rain began to fall fast and hard. Understanding there wasn’t going to be a barney, people began to disperse, casting looks of disappointment at each other and suspicion at me. If only Mrs Tailyour would vanish as fast as the damp townsfolk. I prayed for it to rain harder. The heavens opened.

Now, He answers my prayers.

Mrs Tailyour drew her plaid over her head. ‘Housekeeper, is she? Sooner this devil-sent slut’s away, the better for all.’ She began to leave, paused, and swung back. ‘If I see ye face after today, I swear I’ll clyte it. And I’ll have to stand in line.’ She swept an arm towards the few still lingering.

Chin held high, she marched towards the high street, a gaggle in her wake.

Soon, only Mr Gordon remained. ‘You alright, lass?’ he asked.

‘Thanks to you.’

‘Warburton might be a pompous auld git, but he was right about the Tailyour family and the townsfolk.’ Mr Gordon shook his head sorrowfully. ‘I wasn’t the only one to hear what was said between you.’

‘Yes, well,’ I said resignedly, ‘it wasn’t as if it was a private conversation.’

‘Come,’ said Mr Gordon, holding out an arm. ‘Allow me to escort you to your lodging. If naught else, it might deter more threats.’

Reluctant to accept his courtesy, but knowing I owed this man more than a humble thanks, I acquiesced.

We entered the main street and, despite the squalls, there were some people about, most gathered in doorways or beneath awnings. Condemnatory eyes followed our progress, mutters, too, as we walked up the hill towards the marketplace. The name Reed was repeated, sharply, furiously. To distract me, Mr Gordon pointed out buildings, a drookit cat, some late summer flowers in a window box. His words washed over me as unfamiliar eyes screamed judgement. I bowed my head, my mind full of sharp thorns, raging storms and thick bogs.

Mr Warburton was right. I couldn’t stay here, let alone find work.

‘This is as far as I go, Mr Gordon,’ I said. The rain had become a mizzle; the wind stronger. I nodded towards a grey three-storey building.

Curtains in the ground-floor window moved. Fen.

If only Mr Gordon’s offer was genuine; if only I *was* his new housekeeper, then I’d have a place to go and a wage.

We stood awkwardly side by side in the street. ‘Thank you once again. I’m very grateful for what you did back there – and in the Customs House. But you don’t want to be seen chittering with me.’

Mr Gordon gave a slow smile. It transformed this face. ‘Talking to you can only enhance my reputation, lass, don’t concern yourself.’ He hesitated. ‘Is there anything else I can assist you with while I’m in town?’

‘You’re not from Montrose?’ I asked.

‘I call a wee place, Glasglen, home. It lies days west, above the River Don, deep in the mountains.’ He looked up and down the street. ‘Are you sure there’s no more I can do for you?’

‘Saving me from a fire-breathing dragon wasn’t enough?’ We shared a smile.

‘Well,’ said Mr Gordon, breaking eye contact, ‘I’d best be going. I really do need to purchase stores. May God be with you – and your lassie.’ He touched his bonnet, swung around, and retraced his steps.

As I watched him head back towards the water, the front door to the lodging opened. The landlady, Mrs Cook, stood there. Beside her was Fen. Her cheeks were flushed, her head lowered. Arranged behind her was our trunk and Fen’s burlap.

Before I could ask a single question, Mrs Cook spoke.

‘I’m afraid yer no longer welcome here,’ she said loudly.

At the same time, Fen’s fingers danced. *She’s tossing us out. Like we’re vagabonds. Says we’re naught but cheatry women.* Fen paused. *What have ye done this time, Ma?*

I shut my eyes briefly. I wanted to scream.

‘So, if ye’ll retrieve yer things and yer lassie,’ continued the landlady, unaware of the silent message being relayed beside her, ‘ye can be on yer way. I’ve a reputation to uphold.’ Mrs Cook shoved our trunk onto the street. She cast one last look in my direction, pushed Fen forward, then shut the door with a bang.

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CHAPTER FOUR



The sight of Fen and our baggage abandoned on Mrs Cook's doorstep sent me hurtling down the hill after the one person in Montrose to have shown me kindness.

Accosting Mr Gordon in the street wasn't the wisest thing I've ever done, but nor was it the most foolhardy either. At first, he refused to even consider employing me, but the longer I spoke (I could be very persistent), my beseeching attracting the attention of passers-by, resulting in more invective and threats, along with suggestions I 'git out of Montrose', the more sense it made for him to take me on as his housekeeper.

At least, to me.

When I finished pleading my case, Mr Gordon regarded me thoughtfully. I forced myself to meet his steadfast gaze, even as I began to grow warm under it. It was so clear, so intense. Up close, Mr Gordon was quite handsome, if you ignored the mighty scar. Not even bristles grew there. What had caused it? A claymore? A deadly *sgian-dubh*? God knew, the Highland clans were renowned for their bloody feuds. Not even English efforts to wipe out the last of the Jacobite resistance had stopped those. According to the newspapers in Edinburgh, if folk weren't murdering each other in these parts, they were raiding – or smuggling. My guess was Mr Gordon knew a thing or two about the latter. Hadn't there been mention of a procurator? I'd no doubt whatsoever his business with the collector involved those barrels his men had been guarding outside the Customs House, and even less doubt what they contained. If he was due in court,

then it wasn't Mr Gordon's first time dealing with illicit spirit nor, I'd hazard, his last.

Not only had I been married to an excise officer and seen and heard firsthand from William – and his peers who frequented our tavern – the dangers they faced when hunting down and confronting those who dared to make and sell illegal booze across the country, I'd also heard over and over how these same men not only defied the king's laws but avoided taxes the rest of us had to pay. Considered felons in the Lowlands, in these parts they were heroes. Songs and poems were written about them. William had loathed smugglers with a passion only a Sassenach official could muster. When he seized a cargo or discovered an illegitimate operation, the celebrations were loud and long. When he failed to do either – when the smugglers 'jinked the gauger' – I paid the price.

There was a time I blamed the smugglers for William's actions until I understood there was only one person at fault. Later, I quietly applauded the moon-cursers (as they were called), wishing I'd the courage to subvert his intentions too.

All this raced through my mind as Mr Gordon considered his response.

'I'm not promising anything,' he began cautiously. 'But, *if* you came to work for me, you need to understand you'd be living in a small village, far from any town.' Little did he know this made working for him more appealing than ever. 'Then there's my family to consider and … well.' A distant look swept across his face. 'The bairns lost their ma a few years back.'

The poor man was a widower. That explained the sadness behind that clear gaze. He must have loved his wife very much to wear his pain so overtly. My heart swelled. 'Oh, I'm so sorry.'

Mr Gordon lowered his head in acknowledgement. 'As I am for your … situation.'

Embarrassed he'd raised the subject of William's bigamy, he continued hurriedly. 'The bairns live with their minnie, their gran. She looks to them when I'm away.'

'You're away often then?'

'Aye. Too often. More than I'd like of late.' He rubbed his brow. 'Their minnie is auld now and not as able as she used to be. I promised her help. But the last lasses I hired didn't stay. It's been hard on everyone, all the coming and going.' He paused. 'Especially Pol.'

‘Pol? Your son?’

Mr Gordon’s eyes travelled to where Fen stood glowering. ‘He’s younger than your lassie.’ He smiled. ‘She’s an attery wee thing, isn’t she?’

I followed the direction of his gaze. Attery – grim, fretful – it was a good description. ‘Fen’s had a lot to deal with, and not just the … loss of her da.’ I inhaled. Best to get things out in the open. ‘She’s deaf.’

‘*Bodhar*, is she? Well, that explains why you made mention of the Deaf and Dumb School, the chitter about her. There be fools that think because one has lost the ability to hear or speak, they’ve also lost their minds. Not your Fen, I be thinking.’

‘Not my Fen.’ Was it possible this great hulk of a man in fine woollen trews, a sword strapped to his hip, who in all likelihood was a smuggler, understood?

Mr Gordon fixed on me again. ‘Look, all my instincts are telling me I’d be a right begowk to employ you.’

My stomach began to sink. Och, well, it had been worth a try.

‘But I’m also thinking I’d be a bigger one not to.’

I resisted the urge to throw my arms around him. Instead, I smoothed my skirts and counted to three. ‘I’m thinking the same. Oh!’ My hand flew to my mouth. ‘Not that you’re a begowk, Mr Gordon. You’re not, of course.’ I patted his arm. He stiffened. I withdrew as if burned.

‘If I take you on, and I say *if*,’ he repeated, holding a finger up to prevent me interrupting, ‘there’ll be conditions.’

‘Conditions?’

Mr Gordon raised a brow. ‘Aye. Conditions.’

My cheeks grew warm as my mind began to flame. I took a step back just as we both spoke at the same time.

‘I didn’t leave Edinburgh just to warm some—’

‘You’d have to promise me at least twelve months.’

There was silence. Nearby, a dog began to bark. A man shouted something, a shrill voice answered his summons. I snuck a glimpse at Mr Gordon. Heat raced through my body. God, I’d only just avoided a terrible faux pas. Misjudged him based on my last experience with a man. Twelve months, he said. After the almost seven years I’d wasted on William, what was twelve months? If nothing else, it would give me time to plan what to do next, accrue savings, decide where to go. Give the people of Montrose time to forget I ever existed.

Give Fen time to forgive me.

Mr Gordon was the first to speak. ‘You said your daughter can read and write? That you can too?’

‘Aye, we can,’ I said. ‘Read, write. It’s one of the ways Fen communicates.’

Mr Gordon nodded slowly. ‘You’ve supervised men?’

I nodded. ‘I have.’ Mostly blootered ones, but he didn’t need to know that.

‘And, did I hear aright? Run a business?’

‘A tavern.’

He scratched his face. ‘What I’ve in mind for you won’t be easy. And the house, well, it won’t be what you’re accustomed to.’

‘Providing we have a bed and food, I won’t complain.’

Mr Gordon’s grey-green eyes twinkled. ‘Well, you’ll be a rare one then.’ He glanced past my shoulder, towards Mrs Cook’s. ‘It’s also best you lose your English name – for good. Call yourself MacAlister from hereon in.’

‘Best for whom?’

He regarded me a moment, then let out a long sigh. ‘If you’re to work for me, both of us.’ He held out his hand. ‘Shall we make words said in haste earlier a reality, *Mrs MacAlister*?’

I placed my hand in his large firm one. An involuntary shiver ran down my spine. ‘I promise twelve months.’ I sent a silent prayer to God that I hadn’t just committed a huge error of judgement. An image of William beside me at the altar loomed. Of welcoming Uncle Duncan to the Coo’s Horn. *Another one.*

We walked back towards Fen, discussing pay. At the very least, there’d be a roof over our heads, meals, a fair wage. Better still, no hostile villagers ready to run me through.

But, I told myself, as yet another person shouted, making a mime out of hanging me, this wasn’t a rescue. Oh no, it was not. It sounded as if this man, this widower and his bairns, needed me as much as I needed him.

That’s what I told myself.

‘What can you tell me about your family, Mr Gordon?’

Mr Gordon’s stride slowed. ‘Don’t worry about my family, Mrs MacAlister. You’ll meet them soon enough.’

I would. I'd the journey to prepare myself for, and Fen, I thought, taking in her thunderous face.

I quickly explained to her what was happening, that we were going with Mr Gordon, who was watching us communicate in amazement. I also spoke aloud for his benefit. He added he'd send lads to fetch our trunk. With a heavy frown and downturned mouth, Fen grudgingly rearranged her burlap over a shoulder and dragged her feet, remaining as far behind as she could as we followed him back to his lodgings.

The message was clear: *I might have to do this, Ma, but I don't have to like it*.

Her and me both.



The following day, as ghostly mist swirled and dawn frost crackled, Fen and I left Montrose on a cart pulled by two round-bellied garrons. Six men, attired in dun-coloured kilts and plaids and openly armed with pistols and dirks, accompanied us on sturdy ponies. Auld Artur, our driver, assured us the weaponry was more for show.

'Where we're going can be dangerous, but the lads are wearing Gordon tokens.' He slapped his right shoulder where a piece of ivy was pinned. Sprays of the plant were attached to the outriders' plaids as well. 'Only a fool would risk the ire of the Gordons by attacking us.'

Pushing aside thoughts of marauding hordes and all the dire warnings I'd heard about travelling through the Highlands, I prayed Auld Artur was right. A wiry man, he had a mop of grey hair beneath a woollen bonnet and skin like leather; his hands, which held the reins tightly, were gnarled but strong. He was a retainer of Mr Gordon's, as was the leader of the small company, Dominic Grant. Mr Gordon himself had to remain a little longer in Montrose and would travel a different route. I tried not to think too deeply about what I'd overheard at the Customs House. There was also a man known as Big Billy (who was as short as he was wide), two brothers, Rory-With-A-Story and Gap-Toothed Rupert – surname Marr – as well as Red-Haired Ralph and a tall lad called Niall Mavers. Together, they were entrusted with delivering Fen and me safely to Glasglen.

Glasglen. Green Valley.

Despite Mr Gordon's warnings of hardship and remoteness, the name had a lovely ring, practically Arcadian. Mind you, anywhere that wasn't either Edinburgh or Montrose appealed. It was a different matter for Fen. Seated between me and Auld Artur, she kept her head bowed, a shawl pulled low over her face.

I wondered what she was thinking, then castigated myself. What else but about her father and his new family? As soon as we'd been shown to the small attic-room in the lodgings Mr Gordon arranged, I'd told her. I wrote on her ever-present slate and finger-talked, trying not to inflect the telling with emotions, but knew I hadn't succeeded. Every time I considered what William had done, it was like a great hand reached inside me and scooped out my innards. I wanted to howl like a *caoineag*, a Highland banshee, rage, laugh at the absurdity of the situation, hide away in shame and never show my face again. I could do none of those things. I had to bury my feelings, push aside what William's actions were costing us and get on with the business of living – for both our sakes.

I was becoming good at that.

Yet, as I explained about Ava Tailyour, her laddies, and how the people of Montrose saw me (us), Fen remained stony-faced.

Would you still have left Edinburgh if you'd known about that woman and her bairns? she asked finally, her pen scritch-scratching.

My heart seized. *Her bairns*.

I tried to stroke Fen's cheek, but she pulled away. Leaving Edinburgh was still my greatest crime.

'Aye, chick. I would have. I may not have come *here* …' Curiosity may have lured me. 'But we still would have left.'

She glared at me, then shrugged. *So whatever Da did makes no difference*. She threw her slate aside.

I only wished that were true.

After that, she scarce said a word, though I saw her watching when I spoke to Mr Gordon and noted her look of concentration now as she tried to catch what Auld Artur and the outriders were saying to each other.

'It's Gaelic, chick,' I told her.

She tapped her fingers against her cheek so hard she left a red mark. *I know. I'm not stupid.* She folded her arms, turned her back to me and remained in that position. I inwardly sighed and prayed that once we reached Glasglen and settled in with the Gordon family, our relations would

improve and that Fen, at least, would be happy, even as she determined not to be.

Before we left Montrose, I'd learned that Mr Gordon was the youngest of three sons and a distant cousin to the current Duke of Gordon, the fourth, Alexander. Though he was related to the nobility, Mr Gordon was but a poor relation and thus a tacksman, someone who was granted a lease over parts of the duke's vast estates.

I was still thinking about Mr Gordon hours later as we left behind General Wade's English roads, built decades ago to give the militia access into the wild interior and bring the barbaric Highlanders to heel. Their construction had left vivid scars across the countryside. Looking at the men accompanying me and the raggle-taggle of carters and merchants heading in the opposite direction towards the coast, I wasn't sure it had been successful. Kilted and plaided men and women, many with matted hair, bare feet or in rough-looking boots, some armed, most not, called out to each other, stopping to exchange news, hailing Auld Artur and the outriders, clearly quizzing them about me and Fen. There was much laughter; some mocking, some disbelieving, and pointed fingers. I raised my chin. Fen pulled the shawl further over her face. I refrained from placing a protective arm around her shoulders. I knew it would be rebuffed.

Gradually, the traffic reduced to a trickle and finally ceased. We were alone in the vast countryside. Mr Gordon said it would take a few days to reach Glasglen, depending on the rain and excise men. If the weather was going to be like today, sunshine and a cool breeze, I didn't mind how long the journey took. There were earthenware jugs lashed together in the back of the cart, along with dozens of bulky sacks of grain, a bag of letters, books and some bolts of fabric, as well as our trunk and burlaps. The ponies had ankers, small wooden barrels, strapped to their sides. I was curious what they contained, but suspected I already knew.

I'd been hoping to press Auld Artur about what to expect when we reached Glasglen, and about Mr Gordon. But apart from a few instructions when we started, he either didn't hear or didn't comprehend, though his grasp of English seemed fine. Perhaps he was like most men I knew and thought women's talk frivolous blether and so ignored it. None of the other men seemed to understand me, occasionally talking to each other in their sing-song Gaelic. I began to think I'd have to learn it, unless the folk of Glasglen were proficient in the king's English. I hoped Mr Gordon's family

were. If it was going to be hard for me to make myself understood, it would be a hundred times worse for Fen.

My efforts to distract her, to make her at least acknowledge me as we rocked and swayed on the overgrown byways past endless moorland, all but failed. Sunk into melancholy as any hope of returning to Edinburgh faded into the desolate hills, she chose to ignore everyone and everything. How long was she going to be like this? What if taking her away from Edinburgh, and now deeper into the Highlands, forever altered our once loving relations? I couldn't bear the thought.

We stopped briefly around noon, Auld Artur taking the horses to a nearby burn. The men sat on a rocky outcrop, passing around a jug. A couple smoked pipes, clouds of tobacco floating about them. After finding a lone tree at the edge of the road and accepting a bannock and a bit of cold hare the innkeeper in Montrose had provided, Fen buried her nose in a book. They were ever her solace and mine, and I'd made sure to bring a few with me. Currently, she was reading the first volume of *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* by Tobias Smollett. I sat beside her, wondering for the umpteenth time if I really wanted her reading a book about a young man who was disliked by his parents and erred towards cruelty, but she'd insisted. At least he was somewhat redeemed by the end.

I joined Fen, resting my head against the trunk, wriggling to get comfortable. I gazed into the canopy, at the russet, vermillion and emerald leaves, watching a couple spiral to the ground before shutting my eyes. God, I was tired. I could scarce remember the last time I'd slept through the night. I'd drift off, only to wake with images of sorrow, death and loss haunting me, predicting the most terrible outcomes for those I loved and any plans I made. Everything became a catastrophe. It had been so many years since I felt secure. Since I could trust my heart. My judgement.

It had been that way ever since William …

What if I'd somehow brought out the worst in him? After all, he'd married again and fathered two boys. Had it been a happy union? I wondered how Ava and her bairns remembered him. Did Ava feel release upon his death? Or was she a grieving widow, garbed in sombre black, puffy-eyed and heart-sick? At the very least, my presence in Montrose must have challenged her recollections of the man she called husband.

It didn't matter whether people believed I was his wife or not, I'd sown the seeds of doubt. Stories would now be told of William Reed and the

Lowlander lass who declared she was wed to him first; of our daughter. They would outlast anything else William had ever done, and the love others bore him. Wasn't that how we all lived beyond the grave? In other people's stories? Everyone had their own truths. William had broken hearts, minds too. Ava's must feel shattered.

I cast a sidelong glance at Fen. She was staring towards the horizon where a majestic stag stood atop a rock, his branches cutting the sky, her book neglected on her lap. How did she feel? For years, our lives had been defined by William's absence.

I reached for her fingers, wanting to hold them, squeeze them, to let her feel my love, even when she chose to punish me the only way she knew how.

Before I could, there was a shout. The men were stirring again, the garrons were being hitched. I rose and offered to help her rise.

Fen pretended not to see my hand, using the tree to lever herself upright, tucking her book under one arm and striding back to the cart.

I watched her leave, her slim body straight, chin defiant.

Dear God, it was going to be a long trip.

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CHAPTER FIVE



*E*ight days after we set out from Montrose, as the sun began its final descent between twin peaks capped with little periwigs of snow, we crested a rocky ridge. The cold wind lashed my face, whipped my hair, and tore at my clothes. Auld Artur brought the cart to a stop. The leader, Dom, a barrel-chested man of few words, and the outriders halted a little further down the slope, their ponies tossing their heads at the delay, imagining warm stables and full nosebags.

‘There be Glasglen,’ said Auld Artur.

The men twisted in the saddle and looked at me and Fen, waiting for a reaction. Their desire for our approval was obvious, as was the barely repressed readiness to defend any criticism.

Swathed in shadows and fading sunlight, the village was all muted colours and textures. Tilled and fallow fields spread out before us, including tracts of barley. In the centre of the glen, lying languidly amidst the green and brown mountainsides, was a tranquil loch with a brambly islet in its centre. Rivulets of white water gushed down the mountains, leaping over rocks and vanishing under long grass and copses before reaching the loch. Clusters of thatch-roofed houses with columns of smoke ascending into the heavens, and runrigs, raised gardens of what looked like barley and oats, sat either side of a wide dirt road that ran parallel to the loch before disappearing around the mountain. My eyes swept the steep slopes. Scattered houses were nestled across them, most with a cow or sheep nearby. Human shapes ambled along the main track, a couple pulling small

carts. Others worked the fields. Dogs gambolled, while high above, birds winged their way west. On the ground, chickens scratched.

The men were waiting for me to say something.

Apart from the obviously planted fields and domestic animals, the people going about their business, the dark, humble houses, it was so wild. Untamed.

Empty.

It was as if the mountains were simply waiting to reclaim the land, swallow the few houses and gardens, the oblivious folk.

'It's … it's … very different to Edinburgh,' I said. 'To Montrose, too.'

The men stared a moment longer before big grins split their faces.

'That it is, lassie, that it is,' said Dom, nodding approvingly.

'Praise be to God,' said Auld Artur.

For perhaps the first time in a long time, I'd said the right thing.

What do you think? I asked Fen, then baulked at her expression. Her eyes were burning even as her fingers worked swiftly. *I hate you.* She folded her arms and pouted, swinging her body away from mine. Again.

Auld Artur witnessed the entire exchange. He met my eyes and shook his head sympathetically.

As we began our descent, Glasglen was gradually engulfed by the encroaching evening, the slopes of the mountains darkening by the second. The boulders, smatterings of rocks, sprays of wildflowers and bedraggled sheep and goats, even the houses, were slowly rendered shapeless, melting into one another. The landscape was so unforgiving, yet amidst all this were people, their homes, their crops. It was shocking, even after what we'd journeyed through, how people could choose to live here, barely eking out an existence, and remain for generations.

It was … What was it? Dangerously beautiful, beautifully dangerous? There was something so utterly ordinary about it as well – the runrigs, the unkempt gardens, the large barns, smoking roofs and leaning sheds. It was nothing like I expected. But then, ever since I'd left Edinburgh, what had been?

Auld Artur cleared his throat. 'Ye lassie might not like it now,' he said without turning his head, 'but that be ma home.' There was a quaver in his voice, a shine in his eyes as he nodded towards the far end of the village. I couldn't help but be moved. Remote, Mr Gordon had called it. Aye, well, it was that. But to these men, to Mr Gordon, it was home.

It was *dùthchas*.

Auld Artur had explained the word to me a few days earlier. We'd not long left a wee place called Fordeen when we passed a series of abandoned villages.

The cottages were on the verge of collapse, doors falling off hinges, wood splintered, thatch full of holes. A strange, musty smell hovered that spoke of peat fires long cooled, cooking pots and human and animal refuse left to moulder. Corbies, wood pigeons and blackbirds occupied the ruined roofs and chimneys. I imagined owls and other creatures roosting inside. Nature had conquered these homes. The runrigs were overgrown, the woodlands encroaching.

There was almost a hushed reverence as we travelled by, as if these places were graveyards or kirks. The past swirled around us like fog and mist, teasing, beckoning us back, or urging us forward.

'Why would a whole village up and leave?' I whispered to Auld Artur after we passed three in a row. Reading about this kind of thing, hearing talk in the smoky warmth of a city tavern, was very different to bearing witness. It seemed incredible that fifty or more people who'd dwelled in one place for lifetimes had up and left, not just their homes, but their heritage. Then again, looking at the barren land, the hardship I'd seen on the faces of the folk we encountered, maybe it wasn't so surprising.

Auld Art grunted. 'Because they'd no choice if they didn't want to starve.' He nodded towards the distant braes. The tower of a huge stone house, almost a castle, could be discerned. 'The laird here raised the rents. Then, the bastart gave over the best land to sheep.' He pointed to the small animals salting a hill. 'The folk could no longer afford to pay him. So, they went. They're nae the first and won't be the last either.'

'Where have they gone?' I asked.

Auld Artur shrugged. 'America. Though with the war there, not so much now. Nova Scotia, Ireland, London, Glasgow and Edinburgh; anywhere that isn't *here*. Some lairds moved entire clachans to the coast.'

'That's kind of them,' I said, momentarily pleased. Not all lairds were villains then.

Auld Artur made a scoffing noise. 'Kind? Nowt when it's done to appease guilt. Daft buggers think if they put a farmer by the ocean, he'll ken how to sow and reap the water and draw a living from the sea.' He

shook his head in disgust. ‘The poor folk just exchanged one form of poverty for another.’

I didn’t say anything at first. ‘Surely, not all the lairds are so … so grasping, so avaricious?’

‘Nae. Not all.’ He gave a bitter laugh. ‘Some haven’t forgotten their obligation to their clans, to those who’ve looked to them for succour and guidance for hundreds of years. But too many lairds have forgotten *dùthchas* – ye ken what that means, lass?’

I gestured for him to explain.

‘It means many things. From belonging to the land, our clans, and how this shapes who we were before, now, and in the future. But it’s also about mutual obligation, the responsibilities this entails. That’s what some lairds have forgotten. What they’ve forsaken.’

The entire time he was talking, I was relaying what he said to Fen, who stared about in dismay.

‘Was a time a laird cared about his land, his clan, his people.’ Auld Artur had shaken his head sorrowfully. ‘Now, that’s left to the tacksmen – the good ones at least.’

‘Like Mr Gordon?’

‘Aye,’ said Auld Artur and the other lads had murmured agreement.

It was Auld Artur’s voice that interrupted my recollection as I gazed over the place that would be my home and Fen’s for at least twelve months. ‘Tam Gordon understands *dùthchas*,’ said Auld Artur quietly. ‘If not for him, well, Glasglen would resemble those forgotten places we passed through on the way here, ye ken.’

I did.

In an effort to look on the bright side and include Fen, I signed the word *home* to her: closed fingers moving from my mouth to the corner of my eye.

She stared at me as if I’d grown antlers. *Not mine*.

My fingers withdrew into a ball.

We rolled down the steep incline, dislodging small rocks, the garrons sure-footed, the cart creaking and protesting, just like my thoughts. Smoke curled from hidden places, rising above scraggy bushes, from behind huge grey stones, hovering about like hoarfrost. The rich earthy smell of peat hung in the air. The gurgle of water was a faint welcoming chorus.

The entire descent, Auld Artur pointed to various features, as if it was daylight. My heart was in my mouth every time he slackened his hold on

the reins or put them in one hand. ‘That be Ben Dhàphen over yonder – the mountain with two heads.’ He indicated the gleaming pinnacles in the distance. ‘The river that curls beyond that range, miles west, be the mighty Spey. Behind us is the Dee. The water ye see before ye is Loch Dubh. It means Black Lake in your tongue. The burns feed it.’ There were names for every peak, every crag, even some rocks and gullies. Hollows, caves and springs were blessed with appellations and though I couldn’t remember every single one as I tried to repeat what Auld Artur was telling me to an uninterested Fen, I thought of all the places we’d have to explore, all the stories we’d be told. I’d no doubt this was a place of mystic tales and ancient lore. Already, I felt surrounded by it, an otherworldliness I’d only ever felt in dreams.

Or nightmares.

As we came off the higher slopes and the road began to level, the wind dropped, and the moon began its ascent. Stars punctured the velvet sky. The closer we drew to the village, the faster the ponies went. Gap-Toothed Rupert and Rory-With-A-Story were all but flying. I felt sure they’d plunge off the track or cause themselves an injury. Jolted about, I bit my tongue, my mouth filling with blood. Christ Almighty, please let that not be an omen.

When we reached the first of the houses, Big Billy, Rupert and Rory bade us farewell, Billy ducking down a vennel while Rory and Rupert sped ahead. Dom, Niall and Ralph parted ways not long after. Soon, it was just me, Auld Artur and Fen. We passed a few empty cottages where doors and shutters hung off hinges, untended gardens had climbed the outer walls, slipping through gaps in the stones and entering the roofs. These places hadn’t been occupied for a long time. Even here in Glasglen people had been leaving. I wondered why some folk prospered when others didn’t. Glasglen wasn’t a wealthy village, not even the night’s shadows could disguise that, but it wasn’t as forlorn or desperate as many of the others we’d passed through – or didn’t appear to be – and yet houses had been deserted.

I could see the outline of diggings, and stacks of fresh hewn stone resting in a paddock. Beams of wood as well, and coils of rope and piles of kindling. I asked Auld Artur what they signified.

‘Tam’s got it into his head to improve the place. Those who don’t go to the shielings in summer or to the trysts – the cattle fairs in Pitmain, Creik or

Falkirk – he sets to digging ditches and drains, repairing fences, roofs and walls. He's wanting to fix those houses ye saw back there, even before any repairs to his own.'

Before I had the chance to ask any more questions, a brindled hound capered over, barking joyously at Auld Artur, tail wagging, tongue lolling. Fen tapped Auld Artur and pointed.

'Ah, that be The Bruce,' said Auld Artur. The dog happily lolloped alongside, raising its nose proudly. 'He belongs to our birleyman, Con Harrison.'

'Birleyman?' The term was unfamiliar.

'He's like a judge, settles disputes between villagers.'

I was about to inquire if there were many of those when another dog howled; its plaintive cry somewhere behind us. The Bruce froze, then bolted back in the direction he'd come.

There was the occasional snatch of conversation, a loud laugh, a wean's wail. Before we were even halfway through the village, we passed a kirk. Its cross was a dark silhouette rising against the mountain backdrop. Lights glowed from within as well as in the small house next to it.

'That's the *Eaglais ri toabh an locha* – the kirk by the loch,' explained Auld Artur. 'The minister be a good man for an incomer. Came to us from the duke's own parish after our last one died twenty odd years ago.'

'What's his name?' I asked.

'Adam MacAdam. But we call him Father Son.'

I bit back a laugh. 'I see.'

'Ye can expect a visit.'

'I hope so.' Still, Father Son (what a name) had been in Glasglen over twenty years and was still considered an outsider.

I gazed towards the loch that gave the kirk its name. It was an onyx platter, a silver ribbon of moonlight splicing the surface like a faerie road. As if to enhance the impression, pipes began to play.

'Where are all the folk, Artur?' I asked, almost whispering, peering about. 'I saw people before from atop the ridge, and now it's as if they've vanished. Is there a curfew or something?'

He chuckled. 'Nae curfew, lass. Just escaping the chill of evening.'

It had grown icy. There was a real frost in the air. Since leaving Montrose, we'd journeyed into autumn and the change of season was evident. The garrons' breath was plumes of white. I drew my shawl tighter,

snuggled Fen closer. She didn't object. 'I quite like this time of day,' continued Auld Artur. 'Oft enjoy an ale or dram at Molly's shebeen. She be a fine brewer, distiller too.' He indicated a cottage further along. Light and blether spilled from within. 'That's where most be. Downing a dram before they return to hearth and home. You enjoy a dram, lass?'

'Do I? You can take the wench out of the tavern …' I began, smiling.

Auld Artur chuckled.

A brazier burst to life, revealing a group of men huddled in the doorway, all wrapped in plaids, bonnets askew, quaichs and wooden cups in their hands. They fell silent as we rolled past.

'Lads,' called Auld Artur.

There were mumbled replies, a few raised arms.

Fen's fingers danced furiously in front of my face. She was tired. Cold and hungry too. It had been a long journey and, as it drew to a close, so did tolerance for any discomfort.

'Fen wants to know—' My voice was loud in the gloaming. Even the cart's wheels were almost soundless on the sandy dirt. 'Are we there yet?'

Auld Artur chuckled. 'Tell her, it's just 'round yon corner.'

I snorted. He'd been saying that for days.

'This time, I mean it,' he said, laughing. ''Round yon corner and up that hill a-ways.'

My spirits lifted. I conveyed his answer to Fen, who appeared doubtful but sat up straighter, narrowing her eyes as if to pierce the growing gloom. A thin mist drifted across the loch. I watched it approach, imagining water sprites and their sable mounts emerging, curious about the new folk.

Up ahead there was a junction. One track led away from the loch and into the darkness of the mountain. In the foothills, dots of light twinkled welcomingly. After rolling past houses and the scent of cooked meat, hot bannocks and malt, not to mention that shebeen shaking with drinks and blether, I was looking forward to solid ground, a real bed to sleep in and some hot food. A dram wouldn't hurt either. I was also looking forward to sitting on something other than a hard wooden seat, albeit one I'd padded with blankets and a cushion from our trunk.

We finally came to a halt outside a long low house with a byre attached. I'd seen many of these blackhouses on the journey but was surprised to find Mr Gordon, with his fine dress and men at his command, had such a humble dwelling. It looked well kept, and even had two windows with

shutters either side of an open door from which faint light shone. There was the low buzz of human activity, roosting noises and the grunt of a sow. The rich odour of peat wafted around us. Peat, piss and shit. Not far from the house, the shadowy outline of stakes and a decent size garden could also be seen. Higher up the hill was the impression of another, much bigger house, like a sentinel standing guard. I wondered who lived there.

A hay barn, peat stack and stables sat to the right of the main house, just visible in the fading light. Fields of barley extended down to the road. Smaller huts were dotted further up the slopes. Just as I was about to inquire who they belonged to, Auld Artur leapt off the cart.

‘I need to unload and see to the beasties.’ He took my hand and helped me down before lifting Fen and placing her gently on the ground. ‘Well,’ he said, a little awkwardly, ‘it’s been a treat travelling with ye, lassies.’

‘You too, Artur. We both thank you.’ Before he could resist, I folded him into a hug. He stiffened, then with a little grunt of pleasure, returned my embrace.

‘’Twas nae bother.’ To cover his awkwardness, he ruffled Fen’s hair.

Her fingers quickly posed a question. Auld Artur looked at me.

‘She wants to know if we’ll see ye again,’ I explained.

‘Aye, lassie. On the morrow, like. And the one after and the one after that. Soon, ye’ll be like my wife, God rest her soul.’ He nodded in the direction of one of the huts. Ah. Workers’ cottages. His home. ‘Sick of the sight of me.’ He tousled Fen’s hair again, his hand lingering for just a moment atop her curls. ‘Now, where are the lads?’ He glanced towards the stables and gave a long, loud whistle.

There were answering barks. If our arrival had been missed, it wouldn’t be for long.

The little knot of anxiety in my stomach tightened and a tick in my throat began to pulse. I hid my concern by helping unload the last of the sacks. They had to be taken off to reach our belongings.

We’d almost finished when two lads came ambling around the side of the main house. Two huge mutts followed.

‘Where’ve ye been?’ scolded Auld Artur and, as the dogs bounded towards him, said something sharp. They immediately sat, tails swishing the dirt. Auld Artur reached over and gave them both an affectionate pat.

Fen dropped to her knees, rubbing their chests, their ears. The dogs inched closer to her and began to lick her face.

‘That’s Bran,’ said Auld Artur, chuckling as a wide tongue lathed Fen. ‘And his dam, Sceólang. Tam’s hounds.’

I passed their names to Fen and she smiled. Maybe she wouldn’t hate it here as much as she thought.

When the lads spied us, they drew up short, staring open-mouthed at first Fen, then me. They asked something in unison. Of a height, which was middling, their hair was dark, their limbs rangy. Dressed in stained shirts with trews rolled up to expose skinny ankles, they had raggedy scarves tied around their necks and bare heads.

Auld Artur gave the larger of the dogs a final stroke and flung a hand in the boys’ direction. ‘Mrs MacAlister, these are my grandweans, Michael and Charlie. Lads, this be Mrs MacAlister. She’s here to …’ Auld Artur looked at me, one brow raised. ‘What’s it ye be here for, exactly?’

‘Can the lads understand English?’ I asked.

‘Enough,’ said Auld Artur. ‘Mr Gordon insists we learn.’

‘To keep Mr Gordon’s house,’ I finished, addressing the lads.

The boys raised their brows at each other before bursting out laughing.

Swifter than a seabird, Auld Artur cuffed them both on the side of the head.

The laughter stopped. The lads rubbed their temples, staring at their feet.

‘Um,’ I began, wanting to fill the sudden silence. ‘Nice to meet you. This is my daughter, Fen.’

Michael and Charlie – I couldn’t tell who was who in the semi-darkness, exchanged a long, puzzled look, then bowed. They began talking quickly in Gaelic, and there was no mistaking the subjects of their conversation.

‘Cease the blether, the pair of ye,’ said Auld Artur sternly. ‘Michael, unhitch the garrons and see to watering and feeding ’em. Charlie, ye finish unloading the cart.’ He spoke in English for our benefit, but the lads understood.

I started to offer our help when there was a shout. A woman with unruly sable hair, a fierce scowl and a very swollen belly emerged from the house. She carried a wee bairn against one hip, two more clung to her skirts. Behind her came two halfins, a lass and a lad, as well as another older lassie of about sixteen. A slender wee laddie with barley-coloured hair sidled out after them. Last of all an old woman appeared, leaning heavily on a stick.

My heart began to hammer. This must be the Gordon family, or maybe more workers – though, apart from the pregnant woman and her bairns, they were well-dressed. Where was Mr Gordon? The agreement was he'd finish his business in Montrose then take another, shorter route to Glasglen and prepare his family for my arrival. Where was he?

The children and elderly woman gathered around the doorway. The pregnant lass carrying the babe detached the two wee ones from her skirts and pushed them towards the old woman. Then she smoothed her apron and marched towards the cart, transferring the wean to her other arm on the way. Dark shadows ringed her eyes, her cheeks were hollow. This was either a sick woman, or a very tired one. Maybe both.

Fen watched her approach with growing unease. She rose from the dogs, who skulked away, moving closer to me.

'God give you good—' I began, wearing what I hoped was a friendly smile.

The lass put up her hand to stop me speaking. It was such a rude gesture, so unexpected, I did. She halted and gave me a stare colder than witch's breath.

She tucked her hair behind one ear and looked me up and down ever so slowly, a deliberate flensing of my person. How she could make me feel as if I'd been insulted or even violated with just a look was something I could almost admire; that is, if I wasn't on the receiving end.

Instead, my tongue began to ready itself.

Her eyes narrowed, her lips curled. She took in the cart, Charlie pushing our trunk to the edge for his grandpa and brother to heft, the two dogs watching from the barn, then glanced at Fen before resting that cat-prey gaze upon me again.

'Who the hell are you?' she asked.

'I'm Greer Ree— MacAlister.'

'And who's she in the morning?'

There was a snort of laughter quickly stifled.

Inventive curses rushed into my mouth. I bit them back.

'Greer MacAlister?' The lass drawled my name like an insult. 'Is that supposed to mean something?' She bounced the wean who'd begun to grizzle. I knew how the babe felt.

'Didn't Mr Gordon tell you?' I tried to sound cheerful; let her know her attempts to throw me off kilter wouldn't succeed. 'I'm here to keep his

house. I've come from Montrose, originally Edinburgh. Me and my daughter.' I gestured to Fen.

'Keep his house!' spat the woman before I could give Fen's name. 'Ha! That's rich, that is. As for *Mr Gordon* …' Her voice dripped sarcasm. 'We haven't seen him for weeks. He wouldn't know his arse from his elbow let alone what he needs and doesn't. But *I* do and let me tell you, you've been misled.' I could smell sour milk upon her, feel the tiredness she wore like a plaid.

Ma always used to say, *When in doubt, heart be stout.* Simple to say when you weren't facing a Fury from the olden tales. I drew a deep breath. 'My understanding was the last housekeepers … erm … didn't work out. But Mr Gordon felt I could do the work. I've experience, you see, with bairns, with a household. In a tavern, too.' I looked past the lass with the fire eyes and trebuchet mouth at the bairns and the old woman. They simply stared, a choir without a voice.

The black-haired woman scoffed. '*My understanding was*?' she said, putting on a hoity-toity voice and swinging her hips. Surely, I didn't sound like that? The bairns on the steps giggled openly. 'Who do you think you are, Miss High and Mighty *Lowlander*?' she all but snarled, then slammed a fist against her breast. '*I* keep house.'

I took in the stains on her shirt, the engorged belly, the snivelling wean, the other bairns. *She* was Mr Gordon's housekeeper? Good God. No wonder I was able to convince him to take me on. If anyone needed help (and not just with her temper), it was this lass.

This was worse than I ever could have imagined.

Much to my astonishment, she brought her face so close to mine I could feel the warmth of her breath, smell the whisky. 'Listen here, Mrs whatever-your-face-is, you and your numpty bairn can just fook off. Go back to the Lowlands from whence you came. You're not needed, and you sure as hell aren't wanted, you hear?'

I silently counted to three. 'Och, I hear alright. But it isn't up to you to welcome me or not. It's up to Mr Gordon. He's employed *me* to keep his house.'

'Is that right, kittie?' the termagant continued. God I loathed being called kittie, as if I was a giddy fool. Maybe she was right. The lass's dark eyes narrowed, then she began to laugh. 'Well, let me tell you, you've wasted a journey.'

‘I beg your pardon?’

Her upper lip curled. ‘You can beg all you like; it doesn’t change the facts.’

‘And what are they, pray?’ I asked.

She gave a vicious smile. ‘This isn’t Mr Gordon’s house.’

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PART TWO

The Cut

Glasglen, Central Highlands
Autumn 1780

No two nations ever were more distinct, or differed more completely from each other than the Highlanders and Lowlanders; and the sentiments with which they regarded each other, was at best a kind of smothered animosity … Much of this hatred, however, proceeded from ignorance of each other's characters and manners.

Anne MacVicar Grant, *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland*, 1811

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CHAPTER SIX



I was standing by the shores of a small loch, surrounded by weeping trees of iridescent green and moss-speckled rocks. It was so still, so very quiet. The light was pale, diffused, making everything look slightly smudged, like a painting. I took a step towards the water's edge and peered at the calm surface. Suddenly, it began to bubble and froth. I tried to back away, but my feet sank into the soft soil, trapping me. Before I could cry out, a huge fountain of water erupted, and I fell on my arse. Rising out of the loch, like a monster from legends, was a man with bloated grey-blue flesh, colourless eyes, and a ravaged mouth. Draped in kelp, he opened his violet lips and began to wail.

William.

I woke with a start, confused, staring at the unfamiliar surroundings. I was in a box bed. Faded curtains had been pulled across to keep in the warmth, but through a gap, I could see the pearly light of dawn streaming through a window.

Then I remembered. I was in Mr Gordon's house. In Glasglen. Only, the snarling woman had been telling the truth. This wasn't Mr Gordon's house.

I fell back against the pillow as memories of last night, of the anger levelled at me, and the feelings it aroused, swirled in my mind. To think I'd brought Fen to this wretched place.

Beside me, she slumbered undisturbed. Poor bairn. She'd been exhausted. Exhausted and frightened by the outlandishness, the staring, the

endless nudging, the state of the house, the undertow of hostility that kept threatening to swamp us.

The old woman, introduced as Ishbel Fraser, told us – through Auld Artur – to ignore the angry lass (‘That be Torrie,’ he said, whoever she was), who’d stormed off with her bairns, and to come away inside and have something to eat.

Left with no choice, and after an encouraging nod from Auld Artur (‘Ishbel be a good ’un,’ he whispered), Fen and I reluctantly followed Mrs Fraser and the other bairns.

Once past the front door, which I had to duck to enter, we stood in a high-ceilinged chamber. Large, it smelled strongly of peat, pine and the musky smell of humans and animals. Lit by metal cruisie lamps, in the first half of the room there was a long wooden bench, a chest and a large press pushed against the walls. A table scattered with writing implements and an open book sat in the centre. A besom, a couple of strangely headed shovels and implements I didn’t recognise were stacked in a corner. The other half of the room was taken up entirely by curtained box beds arranged in a u-shape. One set of curtains was open, and I caught a glimpse of pillows, blankets and a shelf above the head of the bed holding a few personal items. Counting quickly, I worked out there were at least seven of these compartments. The walls dividing them didn’t even reach the ceiling.

There were hooks driven into the stone walls from which hung jackets, a blunderbuss, a tool belt of some description and a sorry-looking plaid. Below, a few more pairs of boots reclined. To the right of the doorway was a screen and from the ripe smell drifting from behind it, I imagined it concealed the jordan.

We were ushered through another door to our immediate left. Straight away, my eyes began to water. The room was filled with thick, pungent smoke. It took a moment for my sight to adjust. When it did, the source was revealed – a large fire burning in the centre of the room. Contained only by a circle of stones, an enormous steaming cauldron was suspended over it by long chains hanging from the rafters. A freckle-faced maid with big dark eyes rose from tending the pot, wiping her hands on her apron and offering a small smile. The bairns, who’d followed us, fanned out; one peered into the pot and said something to the maid who pointed towards a table at the rear of the room. The others draped themselves over the few chairs or stools, maintaining their scrutiny of me and Fen, while the youngest held

his hands out towards the burning peat and pine. Smoke curled and floated everywhere like a winter haar, blackening walls that may or may not have once been lime-washed, and rising to hover around the rafters. I tried hard not to cough, clearing my throat again and again, glad Mrs Fraser was saying something loudly in Gaelic.

At once, a lad and lass dragged very low chairs closer to the fire and indicated for us to sit. Another, with cushions and a striped plaid, was brought closer and Mrs Fraser lowered herself into it, issuing instructions to the maid and the oldest girl. The floor, which was a mixture of compact dirt and stones, was damp; one of the chair legs left a rut. Aware of Fen trying to catch my eye, I worked hard to school my face and haul my heart back from where it had sunk into my boots. This was not what I expected. Not at all.

Upon learning Mr Gordon was one of the Duke of Gordon's tacksmen, I'd imagined a gentleman's house, not this pauper's dwelling, even though he'd warned that the house would be humble. I was reminded of the other blackhouses we'd stayed in on our journey, where a central fire dominated a single room that was at once kitchen, living and sleeping space. At least this one wasn't shared with barn animals.

The angry lass had said this wasn't Mr Gordon's house. His would have to be better, wouldn't it? Where was it? And if this wasn't his house, whose was it?

I was about to ask a question, hoping someone could speak English and answer me, when the grubby-faced maid (it wasn't freckles), brought over a tray of bowls and a steaming pot. Drinks were carefully ladled, and I took the opportunity to study the rest of the room, at the same time appreciating why my chair was so close to the floor – it kept my head below the thick smoke.

Nevertheless, everything I observed was through a miasma of peat. There was a large dresser displaying wooden and silver utensils, as well as a couple of nicely decorated porcelain plates. The walls carried a few paintings, and a tapestry hung next to the window. There was a trio of heavy-lidded chests and a tall press, as well as a long table under the window with wooden benches either side. At the other end of the room was a solitary box bed. No doubt the maid's. There were threadbare chairs endowed with prettily sewn cushions and at least half a dozen stools. A real effort had been made to make the place cosy. Despite its shabbiness, it was reasonably clean. I was pleased to see a tower of books on a side table. A

spinning wheel, small stool and basket of wool was near the door, and I wondered who we'd interrupted mid-task. It could be any of the lasses, I supposed, or Mrs Fraser herself. There were a couple of distaffs and spindles nearby. Altogether, even with a window cut through the stone, the room was dark. Though there were plenty of sconces, only three had rushlights flickering. More cruisie lamps burned on the walls and one sat on the table. Cooking implements were neatly stacked either side of the hearth next to a bucket filled with cloudy water.

Only once we'd taken some of the thick drink, atholl brose, generously laced with whisky (it was delicious), we sat in silence, staring at each other. Perhaps sensing my unease, Mrs Fraser flashed a reassuring smile. I tried to return it, but Fen was looking at me sullenly, hand on her chest, her eyes watering from the pungent fumes. This wouldn't do.

'Thank you for your hospitality,' I said, addressing Mrs Fraser but including everyone. 'As I said outside, my name is Greer MacAlister, and this is my daughter Fenella. Fen.'

Silence. The fire crackled. A series of noises came from outside where the men were still unloading. I wished Auld Artur was here.

'Can any of you speak English?' I asked slowly.

There was a snort. 'Aye.' It was the oldest lass. 'Just because we're Highlanders doesn't mean we're eejits.'

Relief flooded me. 'I didn't mean to imply …' I began.

'I be Peigi,' she said. 'This be Elspet and Fionn, and the laddie over there be Pol. We're Tamhas Gordon's bairns. We can all speak English. Only minnie can't.' She gestured to Mrs Fraser.

'*Won't*, more like,' said Fionn, earning a sharp crack on the skull with a walking stick from his minnie.

She understood alright then.

Small, wizened, with a hump that forced her head forward, Mrs Fraser had white hair pulled back tightly from her face. High cheekbones were covered by skin so mapped with lines, it was as if she'd been inscribed by a faerie's dirk. The corners of her hooded eyes were crinkled, the creases radiating across her face, drawing down generous lips. Her forehead was furrowed, as were her ear lobes, which were pendulous. Long fingers wrapped around the head of her stick, the nails cracked and limned with dirt. Her eyes were pale and cold. Ancient she might be, but there was nothing frail about her. She was like a closed fist, ready to strike. Then she

smiled again, revealing more gums than teeth, and her face folded into an altogether friendlier, if worn, countenance.

I took a deep breath. This was the Gordon family. I tried to be inconspicuous as I examined the others, noting that Fen was doing the same.

Peigi, the self-appointed spokeswoman, was a pretty lass with sable curls, a fine straight nose and the full mouth of her grandmother. Fionn and Elspet were a bit younger. Both had dark hair and the same eyes as their father, but there the resemblance ended. Elspet was taller than her brother, very slender, and had a freckled countenance. Fionn was broad in the shoulder, had huge hands and a complexion that would be the envy of every lass.

Since Mr Gordon had already spoken of Pol, I studied him more closely. Also tall for his age, which I'd guess to be around seven, he looked nothing like his siblings. For a start, his hair was fine and a rich golden colour. His large eyes were like coals. I wondered at first if it was because the room was so dark that they appeared black. But when the fire flared and I caught him staring and offered a smile, I saw I wasn't mistaken. From the looks he kept casting towards the pile of books on the side table, it was evident what he'd rather be doing. Peigi too.

'Nice to meet you all,' I said. 'May I ask, who was the woman outside?'

Peigi gave a dry smile. 'That's our eldest sister, Torrie. She's married to Hamish Dorward. They live further down the hill.' She flapped her hand to the right. 'They've three bairns – the twins, Marcus and Daniel, and Aoife – and another wean on the way.'

Mrs Fraser muttered something. Peigi reached for the distaff and a spindle and passed them to Mrs Fraser, drawing up a stool and basket of wool. 'Our eldest brother, Ciaran, is in America, fighting the war.'

As I relayed what she said to Fen, using the slate she always had with her as well as finger-talking, the children ceased their whispering and Mrs Fraser her spinning. The maid paused stirring the pot. They stared at us then each other in bewilderment.

Mrs Fraser said something.

'What's all this?' asked Peigi finally, looking from me to Fen and wriggling her fingers. The other bairns spluttered. I bristled and put a protective arm around Fen, who tried to shrug me off. 'I saw you doing it out there as well.' Peigi jerked her thumb towards the door. 'Why doesn't

she speak?' She pointed at Fen and then turned to Mrs Fraser and said something in Gaelic.

Mrs Fraser replied.

Elspet pointed at Fen. 'She a numpty or something?'

Shocked at her directness, I was relieved when Mrs Fraser gave Elspet a sharp slap on the arm. I was about to add my own rebuke when, just as quickly as anger shaped my response, reason cooled it. The last thing I needed was to upset this family further. For the time being, I was reliant upon them. I took a deep breath.

'Please,' I said to Peigi, 'tell your grandmother my daughter is deaf.'

'*Bodhar?*' asked Mrs Fraser rather loudly, cupping an ear.

I nodded. '*Bodhar*.' I addressed the room. 'Fen cannot hear, and what you're referring to,' I flexed my fingers, 'is how we speak to each other. It's a language of its own called finger-talking. Just as you speak Gaelic, which is strange to my ears, we speak the language of Dr Braidwood of Edinburgh, which is alien to your eyes.'

What Peigi didn't know, and I prayed she never would, was that at the same time I was speaking to her, I was saying something entirely different to Fen. She might not know exactly what Elspet said, but she was no fool and would understand the pointing, the folded arms, the curiosity tinged with mockery.

We'll have to be very patient with these Highlanders, chick. They're ignorant.

Fen looked at me uncertainly, then Peigi. *Does that mean we're staying, Ma? Even though this isn't Mr Gordon's house?*

So, Fen had understood that. I gave a terse nod. *Until I speak to Mr Gordon and get to the bottom of this, I don't think we have a choice.*

Not unless we fancied sleeping under the slate-cold sky.

Fen gave a deep sigh and folded her arms. *Where is he?*

I shrugged. It was the question I was asking myself and wanted to ask his family.

Peigi watched my interaction with Fen, pulling a face at Elspet. Then, she wandered over to the table, plucking what appeared to be an oatcake from a platter. Elspet and Fionn did the same.

Mrs Fraser waved a hand at the maid who, as the bairns protested, swept up the platter and offered the golden rounds to Fen and me.

'I'm Mabelle,' she said, in a thick accent.

‘Nice to meet you, Mabelle,’ I said.

‘Please, help yerself, I just made them.’

We nibbled on them gratefully. They were very good, lathered in butter.

‘Can anyone tell me where Mr Gordon is?’

‘Nae,’ said Peigi. The others shrugged or shook their heads. ‘Left about three weeks ago to attend to business.’

Fionn snorted. ‘That’s one way of putting it.’ Elspet elbowed him and he gave her a push. ‘Had to face circuit court.’

‘Again,’ added Elspet.

‘We never know when he’s coming back,’ said Pol, colour flooding his face. His voice was sweet. Sweet and soft.

‘*If* he’s coming back,’ said Peigi wistfully.

Mrs Fraser beckoned Mabelle closer, whispering. Mabelle approached with the platter again.

‘Dinnae look so worried, Mrs MacAlister. Mrs Fraser said for me to tell ye, yer welcome to stay till Mr Gordon returns and sorts this mess out.’ She glanced towards the old woman. ‘What she really means is, sort Torrie out. That lass has a worse temper than her ma ever did.’

At the mention of the bairns’ mother, uneasy looks were exchanged.

‘Tell her, thank you,’ I began.

‘Dinnae thank anyone yet,’ said Mabelle. She glanced at the children. They’d begun to bicker over the last of the atholl brose. Elspet was pulling Fionn’s hair. He was twisting his sister’s arm mercilessly. In the meantime, Peigi ladled the last of the creamy drink into her own cup, which was promptly kicked out of her hand by Elspet, the contents striking the floor. Quick as a flash, a ginger cat sprang down from the rafters and began lapping it up. Peigi squealed and slapped Elspet, who howled and hit her brother.

‘*Dùn do chab!*’ Mrs Fraser shouted, rapping her cane against the leg of the chair and glowering. The bairns froze.

I didn’t need a translator. The old woman said more, shaking a finger and gesturing to me and Fen. Somewhat sheepishly, the children sank back into their seats, heads bowed, arguments forgotten.

Not long after that, we were shown to a box bed. Fen and I crawled into the quite cosy interior and drew the curtains. In silence, we slipped off our boots, removed our stays, shirts and skirts and slid under the blankets. The entire time, Fen pointedly ignored me.

I could hardly blame her. But despite her anger, confusion, and no doubt fear, her breathing gradually deepened. Gentle snores and sleep-induced groans wafted from the other beds. I heard Mabelle smooring the fire in the other room and the creak of her climbing onto her mattress.

I released a long, quiet sigh and began a silent prayer, asking God for both forgiveness and guidance. It was my fault we were here and, as much as despair threatened to overwhelm me, I wouldn't let it. Not until I'd spoken to Mr Gordon and found out what the hell I'd come to.

For twelve fooking months.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



The sun was trying to rouse itself as I walked through the gap in the stone wall surrounding the house and strode away. I'd woken Fen sufficiently for her to understand I was going for a walk and ask if she wished to join me. She declined and buried her head beneath the blankets again. Reassuring her I wouldn't be long, I left her to sleep. The sky was a deep mauve, the air cold and brisk. Tufts of grass crackled under my heels. The gentle cluck of chickens and the muffled lowing of a cow came from the byre. I heard a bucket clang and a curse. I wasn't the only creature astir after all.

In the distance I saw a couple of men and a woman crossing the fields. I glanced behind to see the loch shimmering like a jewel as it trapped the growing light. Around me, the mountains were still black shadows, their crags making the silhouette of an old woman's face. A beaked nose there, a jutting chin there. I was reminded of Ishbel Fraser. The front door opened with a groan. Someone else had awoken. I increased my pace, not wanting to be seen just yet, climbed over another drystone wall, and scurried down a nearby gully, startling a couple of skinny sheep. Soon, the house was hidden from view. I slowed.

Forced to watch where I put my feet as the ground was uneven, studded with jutting rocks, when I looked up I saw a finger of smoke rising from a farmhouse nestled not far from the road. Was that where Torrie lived? I thought about Torrie's fury the night before, the effort it took to sustain it. What exactly had I done to earn such hostility? Such unjust words. It had never happened to me before, this instantaneous objection, not just to why I

was here, but to *me*. Much to my surprise, I was pained by her evident dislike. But I was also offended. I didn't deserve it.

The more I considered her attitude, the more it seemed likely that Torrie was mad at her father rather than some Lowland incomer he'd foisted on the family. If I had to guess, I'd say her anger towards her da was in place well before I arrived.

I tried to shake off my doubts. I wasn't usually one to dwell on such things, not for long, at any rate. Careful to steer away from any cottages, barns, peat shelters and the track, I changed direction and, following the edge of a large runrig boasting a crop of oats, headed up the slope towards the big house I'd spied last night. I could just see it rising out of the low-lying brume. It looked half-ruined in the early morning light. It wasn't too far away and, if Fen should come looking for me, I'd be able to see her.

I wrapped my shawl more securely about my shoulders, dodging cow shit, stepping over puddles and jumping from rock to rock to cross a fast-flowing burn.

After a few minutes, I raised my head to get my bearings again and was shocked to discover that while I was busy watching my feet, a haar had begun to envelop the entire glen in its ghostly breath.

I could no longer see where I was going or the house I'd been aiming for. I could make out the dull green and brown undergrowth, a few large rocks protruding from the soil, but the landmarks I'd been using to orientate myself had completely vanished. It was as if I was ensnared in a cage with white undulating walls. I stopped and turned slowly.

Whenever a fog descended in Edinburgh, filling the streets with its spectral curtains, I'd always known what to do: walk close to the houses and shops and simply follow familiar buildings and sounds. There was always someone about to help. Out here, I was not only by myself, but I had no idea where I was anymore. I walked in what I thought was the right direction, but the ground continued to slope steeply upwards. With each passing minute, the fog grew thicker, swirling and collecting in pockets. It drifted like a forlorn lover, caressing my skin.

How far had I walked? I'd reached the slopes of the adjacent hill, hadn't I? I'd crossed a gully, forded a chuckling burn. The ruin was ahead of me. The farmhouse behind. There'd been sheep, a hare or two. Creatures in the undergrowth. I listened. I couldn't hear the water any longer. Silence had fallen upon the world.

I felt utterly alone.

‘Hello?’ I called.

My voice was curiously flat, as if I’d spoken into my hand. The sound was as intimate as a whisper and yet also bounced, coming from any and every direction.

‘Hello?’ I cried again. ‘Is anyone there?’

I took a few cautious paces. My foot struck a large rock and I fell forward, grazing my hands.

‘Fook!’ I sat back on my heels and blew on my palms, shaking the hurt away. It was dangerous moving about when you could barely see a foot in front of your face. Maybe I should just sit and wait for the mist to disperse. Then again, fogs had been known to wrap themselves around Edinburgh for days. I blundered around and found the rock again. Moss-covered, it had a flat top. I perched upon it, a lone bird in a sea of haze. At least if I didn’t come home, Fen could alert the others … Only how? No-one understood her. But she could write down anything she needed to communicate. God, could the bairns here read and write? There’d been books, they must.

Would they help her? The likelihood of that happening rapidly dimmed as I recalled their bickering, their readiness to use their fists and feet. The way they sneered at our finger-talking.

How long I sat there, I couldn’t tell. Time seemed to stand still. My senses, too. That didn’t stop me growing colder and colder. God, if this haar didn’t lift soon, I’d freeze to death.

I rose and began to slap my arms, stamp my feet. And then I heard it: the rise and fall of voices.

‘Is someone there?’ My words were flung back at me.

The low murmuring continued. I wondered if what I was hearing was something not of this world. If, somehow, I’d been transported to the realm of the fae and it was the clatter of the sìth trying to lure me into their demesne so they could replace me with a changeling. Or maybe it was the heather pixies playing cruel tricks.

Just when I decided I’d have to sit back down and be bleeding patient, I heard it again. Faint at first, when I advanced a few steps, I could not only hear a male voice, but catch the unmistakable odour of burning peat.

I followed my nose.

The ground was vertiginous. I had to brace myself against the walls of a gully so I didn’t lose my footing. The peat smell grew stronger the lower I

went. The sound of rushing water grew. Just when I began to think I was following something created by wicked magic, the mist parted slightly and, not far ahead, half-buried beneath an overhang in the hill and poorly concealed by screens of woven heather, was a small cave.

I drew closer, the voice becoming clearer. With great caution, I approached, keeping out of sight. A man with a drab plaid twined around his body was hunched over a smouldering fire, his back to me. He was scratching his neck and singing softly.

Above the smoky fire sat a small copper pot with a rounded head. A long pipe, like an elongated nose, extended from it, angling down into a wooden tub, out of which a smaller pipe protruded. A steady trickle of clear liquid streamed from that into a bucket. Several other buckets and jugs were lined up nearby, some of the latter already sealed. I'd seen something very similar, if not quite as primitive or dented, before – in widow Margaret Watt's distillery in Canongate. I'd also seen the same equipment in the Customs House in Edinburgh and in Montrose.

Whoever was in that cave was making whisky – the illegal kind.

I'd heard illicit whisky was the currency in the Highlands and that there were more bothies and caves with hissing fires and burbling stills than anywhere else in Scotland. They were the bane of the excise men; of tax-paying citizens, too.

Against the far wall of the cave, a younger man lay curled asleep upon a bed of heather. I wondered how long these lads had been there, how much spirit they'd made. From the look of all the buckets, jars and jugs lying about, the half-eaten food, the rancid smell of unwashed bodies and refuse, quite a while.

And yet, apart from the haar, it wasn't as if they'd made much of an attempt to conceal their operation. On the contrary, anyone wandering the hills could easily stumble upon it. Or could they? I'd found it by unlucky accident.

According to William and the other excise officers I knew, smugglers would do anything to protect their activities. What would they do if they saw me?

Well, I was no gauger. It wasn't my place to either scold or judge. Anyway, as someone employed by Mr Gordon, wasn't I part of his clan now? And these were Gordon lands I was crouching upon; presumably, these were Gordon men.

Still singing, the man lifted a bucket of water from the floor, sloshing the liquid over the sides, and poured the contents into the washtub. There was a hiss and more steam.

The steam cleared quickly. It was only then I noticed the haar that had ushered me here was thinning. I had to leave – and fast. Only, I didn't know which way to go.

God dammit. I'd just have to guess.

I secured my shawl, which was damp and clinging, and began to crawl backwards out of the gully, praying the men didn't hear or see me.

Finally, after what seemed an age, I was back in open space. I could stand and take my bearings. I'd come much further than I realised, and the entire village was laid out far below me. The sun was overhead, workers were dotted all over the fields, their voices carrying as they loudly conversed. The loch glimmered invitingly, two vessels bobbed upon its waters, men casting nets over the sides. I could discern sheep on an adjacent slope.

I swiftly brushed off the worst of the mud and muck, then wasted no more time, striding down the hill, my heart beating fast. I couldn't help but look over my shoulder a few times, relieved no-one had followed me.

I supposed I should be shocked by what I'd seen, but I wasn't. On the contrary, it confirmed what I suspected the moment I saw Mr Gordon and his men in Montrose. They were smugglers, makers of illicit spirits.

What did that make me, then?

As I drew closer to the farmhouse, I saw a familiar figure frantically pacing by the gate, clearly in great distress.

With a small cry, I broke into a run.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



I hadn’t even reached the farmhouse yard before that figure bolted across the dirt and with a strangled sob, threw herself against me. I pulled Fen into my arms, murmuring against her hair, kissing the top of her head repeatedly.

‘It’s alright, chick. I’m here, I’m here.’

She drew away slightly, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Then, she began to finger-talk.

I thought you’d left me.

I stared at her in horror. *Left you? Here?*

She pressed her lips together.

I told you I was going for a walk.

Fen nodded. *I know. But when you didn’t come back, I thought you’d gone. For good.*

I reached for her, but she shook her head, warned me away with a raised palm.

I need to tell you … I’ve been so angry, so awful to you for so long … Her chest heaved and she dashed her cheeks with the back of her hand. *I’m sorry, Ma. I’m so sorry*. She began to weep.

I held her until her crying eased, then, drawing her away slightly, placed my hands on her shoulders and bent until our eyes met and she could see my lips.

‘I will never leave you. *Never*. Och, chick. When are you going to understand? It’s you and me. Always.’

Arms woven around each other, we approached the house. Mrs Fraser sat at her spinning wheel in the weak sunshine near the stone wall that divided the byre yard from the residence, pausing as I approached. Beside her was Pol, who'd begun to rise until words from his gran made him sink back onto his haunches. A basket at her feet held the baby Aoife, fast asleep. Mabelle ceased her sweeping and gave me a wry smile. With her face scrubbed, she was older than I'd initially thought, the gloom of last night banishing the lines that scored her face, making her gauntness appear the slenderness of youth.

'Mrs Fraser told ye bairn she'd naught to worry about,' she said smiling sympathetically at Fen. 'That ye'd be back.'

'Of course I was coming back,' I said trying not to let frustration inflect my tone. What kind of ma did they think I was? Did they really believe I'd abandoned Fen? Brought her all this way to leave her – with *them*? This coarse, catter-battering lot? God forbid.

'What possessed you to go wandering in a haar?' Mabelle asked. 'Ye ken there's folk out searching for ye? Pol,' she turned to the lad, 'go and fetch 'em back. Tell 'em the incomer's safe.'

Pol put down his knife and the pieces of wood he'd been whittling and tore off up the hill.

I was about to explain there'd not been a fog when I started out (I wasn't completely daft), when raised voices from inside the house stopped me.

'She's not even here a day and she's already causing fookin' trouble.'

Torrie. That explained the sweet, slumbering wean.

Someone replied. My flesh goosed and heart quickened. Mr Gordon. *Thank God.*

I went to enter the house, but Mrs Fraser placed a warning hand on my forearm and shook her head.

Torn between wanting to follow my instincts and respect for Mrs Fraser (it was her house, after all), I hesitated.

'And now you tell me she was married to a *gauger*. A *Sassenach* gauger. I don't know what you were thinking when you hired her, Da.' The words were as sharp as glass. 'Or maybe I do.' There was a mocking laugh. 'A bonnie wee widow with a mammie-keekie lassie who happens to be gaupit as well. You always were a saftie.'

My cheeks filled with heat. Fen was many things, but she wasn't spoilt, nor stupid. *How dare she*. I couldn't help but wonder if Torrie spoke in English for my benefit. She knew I'd returned.

'We just rid ourselves of one potential informer,' continued Torrie, 'and now you hire another. You say she needed money. Well, she'd know all the gaugers' ways, their tricks—'

I'd heard enough. Mrs Fraser tried to prevent me going inside again, but when she saw the determination on my face, threw up her hands in surrender.

Tamhas Gordon sat with his back to the window, rubbing his temples. He looked tired and harried, and not just because his eldest daughter was wagging a finger in his face.

His expression altered when he saw me. Torrie spun around and sucked in her breath. Her hair was in disarray, her cheeks pinched. Heavy shadows sat under her eyes. Where the plaid fell away from her shirt, I could see dark stains. The poor woman needed to clean and tidy herself. She needed help. Not that I think she'd ever admit that.

'You!' Her eyes narrowed. 'Didn't I tell you to be gone?'

'You did,' I said calmly.

Torrie looked from me to her da, her face twisted. 'You listen to me, you —'

'That, Mrs Dorward,' I began sharply, 'is why I'm here. If you've something to say, then at least have the courage to say it to me, rather than shout so the entire glen hears you.' Without waiting for an invitation, I pulled up a stool and sat down.

'Very well then,' harrumphed Torrie, taken aback. 'I will. What were you doing out in the hills this morning, eh?' She didn't give me time to reply. 'Admit it. You've been sent here to find out where—'

'Torrie,' growled Mr Gordon.

She continued, '—our stills are hidden. It'd mean naught to the likes of you to expose us, take the Judas coin of the excise, would it? You're practically one of them and not just because you wed one. You're a Low—'

Mr Gordon slammed a hand on the table. I jumped.

'I said *enough*.'

Torrie gave a great huff and folded her arms.

'Sit down,' ordered Mr Gordon.

Torrie remained standing.

Mr Gordon gave a weary sigh. ‘I’ll deal with you later, Torrie. As for you, Mrs MacAlister, I’m sorry you had to hear that. I’m also sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived.’

So was I.

‘Matters in Montrose took longer than expected.’ He paused. ‘As you can see, your … wee adventure this morning has tongues wagging. There’s been reports of redcoats about – English soldiers. They’re no friends of ours. As for explaining yourself, there’s no need.’

‘There’s every need, Da, and it’s not just me that thinks so. Why Hamish said—’

There was a commotion outside. Auld Art barged into the room. Trailing in behind him came Peigi, Elspet, Fionn, Pol (very red-cheeked) and Mrs Fraser, carrying Aoife, followed by a subdued Fen. Mabelle and another lass I hadn’t seen before squeezed past them and began to tend the fire. They weren’t going to miss a word.

The family assembled in an arc around the table, like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Was this how Antigone felt when brought before Creon? Or Orestes being tried by the Furies? God knew, Torrie could easily pass for one.

‘Tam,’ said Auld Artur.

‘Art.’

‘Good to see ye, lad,’ said Auld Art. ‘So, ye were given a fine like we expected?’

‘Aye,’ said Mr Gordon. ‘The judge, Mr Steele, was *very*understanding. So understanding, he paid it on my behalf.’

‘What can I say? He has good taste in peatreek,’ said Auld Artur.

The men shared a conspiratorial grin.

‘I gather you’re not here to discuss Steele’s verdict.’ Mr Gordon waited.

‘Came to tell ye, redcoats were spotted this morning. They were up on Ben Gaothach and, according to the Boynes, had been since first light. Searching. Aye, they were close, closer than ever before. Mick and Jimmy swear someone was snooping around their bothy earlier.’ He jerked his thumb in the direction I’d come from.

My face grew warm.

‘Redcoats?’ began Mr Gordon, half-rising. ‘Then we need to—’

‘It was me.’

There were gasps. Heads spun in my direction.

‘What do you mean it was *you*?’ asked Mr Gordon, sinking back on the bench.

‘Told you, Da!’ exclaimed Torrie triumphantly.

I ignored her and instead focused on Mr Gordon. ‘Up near that bothy.’ My face was positively burning now. ‘I saw two men making whisky in a poorly concealed cave and I hid—’

‘My brother and nephew,’ explained Auld Artur, rolling his eyes. ‘I warned ’em to take more care.’

‘How did you know where to look?’ frowned Mr Gordon. His tone altered. It was all thistles and thorns.

‘How do ye think, Da?’ said Torrie, waving her arms about. ‘She’s been sent here, I tell ye. Before ye know it, she’ll be running back to Fort William, clattering to that bastart gauger, Gillespie—’

‘I didn’t know it was there,’ I said indignantly, standing. ‘I could barely see for the haar. I came upon it by sheer accident. I smelled the peat.’

Torrie scoffed. Even Mr Gordon looked doubtful.

‘For godsakes,’ I said. ‘You were lucky it *was* me saw them and not soldiers, let alone a gauger.’

‘Why didn’t you reveal yourself?’ asked Mr Gordon quietly. ‘Explain who you were?’

‘Really? You think that’s what I should have done? Announce my presence? Someone they didn’t know stumbling upon them while they’re making illicit spirit.’ It was my turn to scoff. ‘I may be a woman, Mr Gordon, and an incomer, but I’m not a complete eejit.’

The expression on Mr Gordon’s face told me I’d overstepped. Furious I was being accused of something I hadn’t done, but also aware I had to placate my employer – and his family – I sighed. ‘Truth is, sir, I was frightened. I’ve heard what smugglers do to those they see as a threat. As soon as I realised what was going on, what I’d seen, and the fog had thinned enough, I made my way back here as fast as I could.’

Fen shouldered her way past the other bairns to stand beside me, slipping her hand into mine. I squeezed it tightly and felt a reassuring pressure in return. She may not have understood all that was going on, but she knew when I was being attacked.

Torrie gave me a lethal stare, then turned to her father. ‘Don’t tell me you believe that gobshite. The woman’s an informant. No doubt her bairn, too. Sooner they’re gone from here, the better. For all of us.’

There was murmuring behind me.

‘I’m no informant,’ I said quickly. I faced the others, then swung back to Mr Gordon. ‘I don’t know what I can do to prove it, but I’ve naught to do with the authorities.’

‘And you call yourself a gauger’s wife,’ said Torrie.

‘Nae. That was *you*. I’m actually a gauger’s widow.’

There was more mumbling.

Torrie bit back a laugh. ‘She’s just like Alice MacIntosh, Da. You wait, she’ll be running to the gaugers first chance she gets.’

I’d had enough. ‘Who’s Alice MacIntosh?’ I asked.

Eyes locked, but no-one spoke.

Before I could repeat the question, Peigi answered. ‘She was the incomer hired before you.’

Torrie glared at her. Peigi looked abashed.

‘That’s what else I came to tell ye,’ said Auld Artur, breaking the uncomfortable hush. ‘Seems that redcoat officer who was here a while back … what was his name?’

‘Lieutenant Jacobs,’ supplied Mr Gordon.

‘Aye, him. He’s been ’round the neighbouring clachans, asking ’bout Alice.’

Mr Gordon rested a weary head in his hands a moment. ‘Is that right? What exactly has he been asking?’

‘According to Ewan Morrice, who heard it from Rufus Searle and those over Glascreag way,’ said Auld Artur, ‘he’s asking her whereabouts. Been telling people she never came home and her family’s worried.’

‘That’s naught to do with us,’ said Torrie dismissively. ‘She just up and left a few weeks ago without saying farewell or anything else for that matter.’

‘We searched for her,’ added Peigi. ‘Until Patrick said there was no point. That she’d gone home.’ The sorrowful inflection Peigi gave the name Patrick caught my attention. Who was he to her?

Mr Gordon stroked his beard a few times then regarded me steadily. ‘Do you happen to know a redcoat lieutenant named Jacobs, Mrs MacAlister?’

I bristled at the question, at its implication, but knew why he had to ask. I looked straight at him and took a deep breath. ‘I do not.’

Without diverting his gaze from mine, he nodded slowly. ‘It seems all we have here, Torrie, is an unfortunate coincidence.’

Torrie made a strangled noise deep in her throat.

‘Dinnae matter Mrs MacAlister happened upon Mick and Jimmy,’ continued Mr Gordon. ‘She was going to learn what we do sooner or later. Far better it’s sooner.’

Torrie crossed her arms again and huffed.

‘As for redcoats, they’re always lurking about. If they’d found anything, well, we’d be having a very different conversation right ’bout now. All we can do is what we always do: assign more lookouts and be extra vigilant.’

‘Rufus reckons Jacobs’ll be in the village within the next few weeks,’ added Auld Artur.

‘You’d better have a word with your brother then, Art,’ said Mr Gordon. ‘Tell him he needs to disguise his bothy better.’ He thumped the table. ‘In the meantime, we’d best get about the day.’ He looked pointedly at Torrie. ‘Time the bairns finished their chores and the rest of us returned to work.’

There was a beat, then Ishbel passed the baby to Torrie and began to issue orders. Auld Artur secured his bonnet on his head and, with a salute to Mr Gordon and a reassuring smile for me and Fen, headed to the door.

‘Really? That’s it?’ said Torrie, clutching her daughter, looking from her da to Auld Artur’s retreating form. ‘Why am I the only one who sees the problem here?’

When no-one would meet her furious gaze or reply to her question, the belligerence in her face slowly transformed into something that was painful to see.

She made a deep guttural sound, a whimper of abandonment. With as much dignity as she could muster, she followed Auld Artur to the door. ‘First Alice, now *her*.’

The word landed with the force of a blow. A bruise upon my soul.

‘I warned you about that lass, Da, and you didn’t listen. I warned you, too, Peigi.’ She dared her sibling to contradict her. ‘I’ll have naught to do with her.’ She flapped a hand towards me. ‘Or her … her … gilly-gawkie lassie.’

I gave a low growl and tried to advance. Fen held me back.

‘Then ye be a fool, Torrie Dorward,’ said Mr Gordon sadly. ‘We need allies, not more enemies. Now more than ever.’

‘We’ll see who the fool be, Da,’ said Torrie, her voice breaking slightly. ‘And who be an enemy.’ She narrowed her eyes at me and left. A moment later the front door slammed. Aiofe let out a wail.

There were whispers. A cough. Then Mabelle dropped a pot and its clang broke the tension. Pol went to stand beside his minnie. Elspet and Fionn, who'd watched Torrie leave with dismay, were poised to follow until a look from their da gave them pause. Peigi was deep in thought, giving me sideways glances.

'Well, that's sorted then.' Mr Gordon half-rose. 'You bairns will make Mrs MacAlister and Fen welcome, you hear? There'll be no more talk of informers. For now, I'd like to speak to Mrs MacAlister … in private.' There were nods and murmurs. 'Fen, you may remain.'

Mr Gordon's children glanced at Fen with a mixture of concern and resentment. He said something in Gaelic. Mrs Fraser released a sigh of exasperation, then, using her cane, she began to usher Mabelle, the other maid, and the children out the door.

Soon, it was just me, Fen and Mr Gordon.

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CHAPTER NINE



I was about to speak when Mr Gordon held up a finger. Initially affronted, I watched in bemusement as he went to the window and leaned out.

‘What is it about the word *private* you pair fail to understand?’ He reached down and swung his arm. ‘Off, before I set the hounds on you. Or worse, fetch Father Son.’

There was a squeal, a giggle and then the sound of bairns scampering.

With a chuckle and a shake of his head, Mr Gordon resumed his seat. ‘Couple of smatchers, Torrie’s twins. Is it any wonder my hair’s turning grey?’

I looked at that hair now. It was a thick shiny sable with threads of silver. Shaken loose from its binding, it fell about his shoulders, highlighting the angles of his face, the beard that limned his jaw, bordered his mouth. I wondered what it would feel like to stroke those long locks, cup his unshorn cheek, trace the line of that scar …

Where were these thoughts coming from? My face began to flame. To distract myself, I found a stool for Fen and resumed my own seat. The room had grown suddenly very warm.

While I fussed, Mr Gordon reached for a jug and, grabbing three quaichs, sloshed some liquid into them. Whisky. He pushed one towards me, urging me to drink.

‘*Slàinte*.’

I didn’t have to be asked twice; I was more than curious to try it. ‘*Slàinte mhath*,’ I replied and drank.

Dear God. This illicit Highland whisky was far superior to the legal spirit we'd sold at the Coo's Horn. I was beginning to understand why so many inn-keeps and lairds defied authority, risked fines and punishment, to purchase from smugglers. The quality spoke for itself.

The other quaich he offered to Fen, who regarded me questioningly.

I nodded. She'd had whisky before, albeit not as fine. She took a sip and pulled a face, then held out her quaich for me to take, just as I knew she would. I saw her look longingly at the pile of books on the table.

'Mr Gordon, would it be alright if Fen reads while we have that word?'

'Of course,' said Mr Gordon.

He invited Fen to choose a book. She picked up a battered edition of *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. Mr Gordon nodded encouragingly and gestured for her to move near him under the window, where the light was better.

Shyly, Fen sat on the end of the bench and then, as was her wont, buried her nose in the pages.

We both watched her a moment, before Mr Gordon broke the quiet.

'Well,' he said. 'It's over a week since I saw you last, Mrs MacAlister, and already much has changed.'

I grew even warmer under his scrutiny but determined not to look away. After all, I'd naught to hide.

'Changed?'

'The last we met, you were very much the gauger's wronged widow, a Lowlander and, as far as I knew, a law-abiding citizen. And here you are, among Highland smugglers, and already accused of being an informant.'

We studied each other, brown eyes meeting glass-green ones.

'Accusations do not make a person guilty.' I loathed that before I'd been here a day, I was already tarred with suspicion. I would work hard to reassure him I could be trusted.

'No. They do not.' He huffed. 'It's a big step, and some might even consider it irredeemable, to change from being on the right side of the law … to the wrong.'

'I don't think *might* enters into it, do you?'

He smiled. His cheeks dimpled. My heart lightened. 'You're right. It does not.'

At least he was honest. An honest criminal. I would have laughed had it not been so richly ironic. I'd been married to a man who was a government

appointed official, meant to uphold the law. In the most dramatic and unforeseen of ways, he'd broken it. He'd lied, cheated, and abandoned me and his daughter; committed bigamy. Then there was Uncle Duncan, once hailed as selfless for rushing to help me and Ma. Yet, here was a man being honest with me about his dishonest activities.

I'd broken God's law, having relations with William before I was wed. Did that make me a dishonest woman? It certainly made me a fool. Only, I didn't feel that way, not when I had Fen. I glanced at her now. Golden curls swirled about her forehead; a forehead furrowed in concentration. Och, I'd be dishonourable all over again if it meant I had Fen.

But I had changed. Ever since Montrose, something within me had begun to shift. Change necessitated by circumstances. I may not have been able to control those, but I could control how I responded to them.

Aware of Mr Gordon's eyes upon me, I lifted my chin.

'Is that why Alice MacIntosh left your employ?'

Mr Gordon hesitated, his lips firming briefly. 'She came from a military family – Hanoverians from the start. Gordons haven't always been so loyal to the British throne. There was even a time when we were firmly Jacobite. These days, King George is our liege. Why, there's even a regiment named after us.' He gazed thoughtfully past my shoulder. 'But it's true that Alice didn't always approve of our illegal activities. Having said that, I don't think she was an informer. Something else, God knows what, made her leave.'

'I see. Just so we're clear then, I might be working for a smuggler.'

Mr Gordon arched a thick brow and his lips quirked, pulling the scar on the top one.

'I don't think *might* enters into it, do you, madam?'

I didn't hide my grin.

I leaned on the table. 'Am I right in thinking that not only is a smuggler someone who conveys goods in secret to avoid paying taxes, it's also what someone who distils illicit whisky is called?'

'That's correct.'

'And which do you do, sir?'

'Both, though I prefer the term free-trader.'

'Free-trader?' A bark of laughter escaped. 'I've heard that before. Just before the noose tightens around a neck, or someone is shoved into the

stinking hull of a transport ship. *I'm not a smuggler, your honour! I'm a free-trader*.'

'Free-trader more accurately describes what we do.'

'Oh?'

'We balance very uneven odds; tip the scales towards more equitable conditions. After all,' Mr Gordon continued, ignoring my dubious expression, 'the conditions under which we operate have changed considerably over the years. But never in our favour.'

I knew something of this. How various laws governing excise had been passed resulting in everything from riots and deaths to passionate arguments for them to be overturned or relaxed. Many blatantly refused to accept them.

'Not only have taxes on everything risen disproportionately for the average merchant,' explained Mr Gordon, 'especially Scottish ones, but even our right to *make* peatreek, a right every Scotsman has enjoyed since the damn stuff was invented, has been severely curtailed.'

He paused and took a drink. The sun chose that moment to enter the room, striking Fen's head and making her look like an angel fallen to earth. Mr Gordon must have noticed too for he beamed at her. Good Lord, my heart was an acrobat today. What a kindly smile he had, and all for my lassie.

'There was a time,' he continued, 'when a household like this could make a decent quantity of spirit on our wee home still and sell to others what wasn't consumed. As you can imagine, the profits helped pay rent, purchase food and other necessities. The English didn't like that, so they reduced the size of a legal still from ten to two measly bloody gallons. Ishbel Fraser could drink that in a day and ask for more.' As if to prove his point he drained his quaich and refilled it, tipping some more into mine as well.

'Can't you set up a legal distillery? Buy a licence?'

'We might if the government would consider issuing one, which they won't, even if we could afford it. The price is outrageous. But then we'd be competing with the likes of fooking Ferintosh. You know about it?'

'Only that we sold their spirit in our tavern.'

Mr Gordon nodded grimly. 'Aye, you and every other law-abiding establishment. Ferintosh is a big distillery not too far from here run by the Forbes family. Decades ago, because of their loyalty to the Crown, the

Forbes were granted the right to distil without the burden of excise. They pay nae tax. Not a penny. All they pay is a piddling annual licence fee to the government and, consequently, dominate the *legal* market. In turn, we're forced to hide our stills, smuggle goods over mountains and into cities, towns and to the coast, and keep forever alert for excise men and soldiers while we trade.'

'And informants,' I added cheekily. The delicious whisky was going straight to my head.

'Them too,' agreed Mr Gordon with the flicker of a smile. 'Call it smuggling if you will, Mrs MacAlister, but to us, we trade free of the injustice of English excise. Not to roll in money like the rich leeches east and south of here, but simply to get by.' He shrugged. 'It's all that stands between us and starvation; between remaining here in Glasglen and leaving. And until something changes, or I'm flung in prison or worse—' he spread his hands, 'we'll keep smuggling. We've nae choice.'

Outside, a distant bellow sounded. Closer, there was the blether of men followed by an incomprehensible shout and much laughter. The sunlight was briefly swallowed before reappearing, brighter, lighter.

'I didn't know—'

'Which leads me to—'

We both started speaking at the same time. We laughed. Sensing the change of mood, Fen glanced up, flashing a coy smile before returning to her book. I hadn't seen her so relaxed, so comfortable, in what seemed like weeks. For that at least, I was very grateful.

'Please, Mr Gordon.' I gestured for him to go first.

'Since you didn't know you'd be working for a …'

'Free-trader?' I supplied.

He snorted.

'Actually, Mr Gordon, I think I knew what you were the moment I heard you talking to the collector. It wasn't difficult to guess what was in those barrels outside the Customs House.'

Mr Gordon tilted his head. 'And yet, even suspecting what I was doing might not be lawful, you asked me for work.'

'I did. But I *was* desperate.' Why couldn't I stop smiling?

'Och, I could tell.'

Neither could Mr Gordon.

‘So, you took advantage?’ I asked playfully, only to see the light behind Mr Gordon’s eyes dim.

‘Nae, lass,’ he said gruffly. The moment was lost. ‘But if you feel that’s what’s happened, I’ll arrange for you and Fen to be taken back to the coast as soon as possible.’

What had I said?

I began to trip over my words. ‘That’s not what I meant. I don’t want to —’ I stopped. What did I want? I didn’t *really* want to break the law. But neither did I want to return to Montrose or Edinburgh or go anywhere else for that matter. Why, I’d just arrived.

‘Leave?’ he asked.

‘I might be many things, Mr Gordon,’ I said quietly, Torrie’s insults echoing in my mind, ‘but I’m a woman of my word.’ I took a deep breath. ‘I promised you twelve months and that’s what I’ll give you.’ I glanced at Fen. ‘We both will.’

Mr Gordon released a long sigh. ‘I’m glad. Because on my way home, I became quite resolved to the idea of having a housekeeper.’

‘Like Alice?’ I asked hesitantly.

‘Nae,’ said Mr Gordon. ‘Naught like her.’

For some reason, I felt relieved. This Alice had left under a cloud.

Mrs Fraser could be heard berating someone. There were footsteps in the other room followed by the sound of something being dragged outside.

‘But, I’m a tad confused, sir,’ I said. ‘Torrie said this isn’t your house.’ I gazed at the blackened thatch above, the dark splotches where soot had dripped through the roof, inhaled the pungent odours of peat, cooking, unwashed bodies, dung and damp which not even the open doors and window could quite expel. Why, even the floor was a mixture of shit and mud in places.

‘Aye. It’s not.’

Oh, thank God.

My shoulders, stiff and sore, immediately loosened. My ribs, which had been tight bands about my chest ever since I arrived, expanded and I was able to breathe. I should have known that as a tacksman, Mr Gordon, with his fine trews and well-woven plaid, wouldn’t live in conditions like this, that he would have a grander abode. I tried to catch Fen’s eye, assure her we weren’t remaining here.

I clasped my hands. ‘And where is your house?’

‘Come this way,’ said Mr Gordon, rising from behind the table, indicating for Fen to remain where she was.

I emptied my quaich and followed him outside. He paused briefly to converse with Mrs Fraser, who turned to consider me. He tousled Fionn’s hair and scooped up a dropped skein of wool and passed it to Elspet. He watched Pol as he earnestly whittled a fir candle, and when the boy gazed up at his da, Mr Gordon brushed his cheek.

He halted where a faint track began, heading up the hillside. I stood beside him, taking in the outfields, the runrigs, the few scattered blackhouses stark against autumn hues.

‘There it is,’ he said, pointing.

‘Where?’ I looked around. ‘Past the ruin up there? I went in that direction this morning before the haar made it impossible. It’s quite the wreck, isn’t it?’

‘*Ruin? Wreck?*’ He sounded amused. ‘Why, Mrs MacAlister, that’s nae way to talk about the house I’ve hired you to keep.’

I didn’t know my mouth had fallen open until his finger reached over and gently closed it.

‘*That’s* your house, Mr Gordon?’ My voice sounded peculiar to me, all gurgly and wee.

‘Aye, lass, it is. And while you remain in Glasglen, that ruin’s yours as well.’

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CHAPTER TEN



It was difficult to keep up with Mr Gordon who, first waiting while I told Fen where I was going, strode ahead as if gaugers were at his back. When he saw how far I was lagging behind him, he stopped and waited for me to catch up.

‘Forgive me, Mrs MacAlister. Not only have I conveniently forgotten that your own morning adventures have likely exhausted you, but I’ve been on horseback for so long, I was selfishly thinking how nice it was to stretch my legs.’

I glanced at those legs, hidden beneath trews. They were long and shapely. Boots encased his ankles, scuffed at the toe and muddy at the heel. We resumed walking at a much more leisurely pace.

I was just enjoying the sun upon my back, when deep barks startled me. The two enormous hounds I’d met the night before bounded up the track, ears flopping, their huge maws open, revealing long white teeth. I started.

‘Bran! Sceólang!’ Mr Gordon shouted, followed by sharp instructions in Gaelic. Whatever he said, the dogs kept coming. Mr Gordon flung out an arm and pushed me behind him. ‘Don’t make any sudden moves. The dogs can sometimes – oof!’

They collided with us, yelping madly, almost knocking us both off our feet. I waited for jaws to close around my legs, my arms, my throat. Instead, the biggest of the two bumped me hard in the thigh with his wet nose, flopped to the ground and rolled onto his back.

I glanced at Mr Gordon, who was trying to keep his balance as the other hound rested her paws against his shoulders, her body stretched, and licked his face. Claws scratched at my skirt as the other dog vied for attention. Tentatively, I squatted and began to rub his belly. His legs wheeled and his tongue lolled. Why, he was adorable. They both were.

'You were saying?' I glanced up at Mr Gordon who was fondling the other dog's ears, eyes wide, shaking his head in disbelief.

'They're usually cautious, if not threatening, around strangers.'

'Actually, I met them last night. They were as lambs – especially with Fen. But if I'd suspected they'd be ferocious …' I laughed as the female pushed away from Mr Gordon and began to lap my cheek.

He muttered something that sounded like a curse. The dogs' ears pricked but their tails wagged more furiously.

Bran was a huge wiry boy, a dusky brown; Sceólang had long limbs and a fine grey coat. From the look of her, she'd borne a litter. I gave them as much attention as I could. 'They're bonnie,' I said, laughing as Sceólang pawed at me, so I kept up the stroking. They were also very, very big. I was glad they seemed to like me.

'They'll take that all day, if you let them,' said Mr Gordon, chuckling.

We continued walking, the dogs eventually falling in beside us before spying something in the undergrowth and taking off down the hill.

'They live up here?' I asked. I hadn't seen them this morning.

'Mostly. When I can't take them with me, Torrie and Hamish keep them at theirs.' He gestured towards the house closer to the main road that I'd spied that morning. 'So,' he continued after a moment, 'you thought you were being asked to keep Ishbel's house?'

'What else was I to think?' I said a tad indignantly. 'You did ask me to be your housekeeper and—'

'Did I? If memory serves me correctly, you *begged* to be taken on.' He dared me to bite with a sideways glance.

'Begged?' I huffed, pretending an offence I didn't feel. 'I'd hardly call what I did begging, sir.'

'What would you call it then?'

I gave a wry smile. '*Suggesting.* I merely *suggested* I might be a worthy addition to your household.'

He appeared about to say something, then changed his mind. 'I told Art to take you to Ishbel's.'

It wasn't his fault Torrie was the first person I met. 'How long do you think it will take to make your house … habitable?'

'Months, I imagine.'

'Only months? There's a wall missing, as is half the roof. It looks like a pile of rubble from here.'

'Ouch,' said Mr Gordon. 'Rubble, ruin, wreck, how many more unkind epithets will you bestow, madam?'

'Depends what I find,' I said. 'But I should warn you, I've an excellent vocabulary.'

Mr Gordon laughed. 'I've called the place a few names in my time, as have my kin.' He looked back towards the farm. Fen had come outside and was perched on the stone bench, head turned towards us. On the ground next to her was Elspet, working a quern. Mrs Fraser had resumed her spinning. Of Peigi, there was no sign. No doubt getting on with other chores. From what I heard last night, they were never-ending. Once I learned what needed to be done, I'd make sure Fen and I did our share.

'I would have liked to have introduced you to my bairns,' said Mr Gordon wistfully.

'I would have liked that too.' Torrie's fury washed over me again.

'She's not a bad lass, you ken,' said Mr Gordon, as if reading my mind. 'She's just protective. With me away so much and Ishbel getting older, and what happened with first Dorinda and then Alice …' He paused. 'Anyhow, she sees it as her role to look after her minnie, her siblings. Keep them safe.'

'From incomers, like myself.'

'And redcoats. Gaugers. Disgruntled tenants. Dishonest tinkers. Cattle thieves. Unreliable workers. Informants.' He counted them off on his fingers, his sword striking his hip in a rhythmic thump. I glanced down at the elaborate hilt. A stag head upon a crown. Was that the Gordon crest? I stumbled and Mr Gordon caught my elbow. My body tingled where he touched it. God, I was all doolally with this man. Embarrassed by my clumsiness, I mumbled a thanks and made sure to watch my feet. The track was riddled with stones and holes. I wasn't a tall woman, but neither was I small, yet I felt positively dwarfed by Mr Gordon. Dwarfed and, I thought, as my elbow still burned from his fingers, surprisingly secure.

'Tell me, Mr Gordon,' I asked to break the silence that had fallen, 'how much of this land is yours?' My arm described an arc, taking in the glen, the

loch, the surrounding mountains.

He stopped and came around behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders and turning me towards the water. His breath was warm against my cheek. For just a moment his body brushed mine and I could scarce think as liquid heat shot through my centre and spread to every other part of my body.

Dear Lord.

‘Over there,’ he said, pointing as his words melted against my ear, ‘lies Glascreag, which means grey rock in your tongue. It’s a clachan between here and the large village of Badenoch, over the other side of the loch.’ He gestured south-west and then towards the east. ‘That way lies Glas-uisge – green water. That’s all it is, really. A body of emerald-green water, with some rickety bothies and a couple of abandoned houses. The land over there is rocky and very barren. Home to deer, hare and wolves, mainly. And if you look up there,’ he said, indicating the steep slopes directly behind the house, ‘on the other side of Ben Gaothach is a vast stretch of moor and Glas Thar Beinn, a village about the size of Glasglen. Its name means over the mountain.’ He withdrew his arm, his hand, and the cold wind struck my back.

‘That’s a lot of land you have.’

‘None of it’s mine, lass. It belongs to the Duke of Gordon. I simply lease it from him and the villagers in turn lease it from me. That’s how a tack works, you know.’

‘You’re a landlord then.’

‘That’s one way of considering it.’

‘Are you rapacious?’ I asked, thinking of what Auld Art and Dom had said, not meaning it seriously.

Mr Gordon exhaled sharply. ‘Not as rapacious as some.’ He strode away. When would I learn to school my tongue? I remained quiet until we reached the house.

Up close, it was bigger than it appeared from below and in a worse state.

The exterior stone was red, grey and a rich dark brown. Piles of shapeless rock sat on the western side where the walls were unfinished. Those enclosing the northern and eastern sides of the house appeared quite solid. Unlike the blackhouses with their roped thatch, this roof was made of dark slate – well, the completed part was. Almost one third of the house

lacked anything other than rafters open to the elements. As we viewed it, there was a loud bang from within and birds took flight, flapping and screeching, winging over the green and brindled slopes.

‘We’ve disturbed the tenants,’ said Mr Gordon dryly.

Moss covered many of the stones like a moth-eaten coat. Small yellow and violet flowers sprouted around the foundations; a creeper climbed the walls and threaded its way around the window frames. Like Mrs Fraser’s cottage, a stone seat had been carved to the left of the front door and I imagined how nice it would be to sit there and look over the glen. Large chimneys rose at each of the gabled ends, the one to the left standing forlorn, rising out of a half-built wall.

I turned to say something, only to swallow my words. Where did Mr Gordon go when he looked without seeing like that? As if his gaze had turned inwards on a different scene, a different time. Dare I ask?

‘I began to build this for her, you ken. For Bríde, my wife.’ His voice was barely a whisper. ‘For our growing family. I wanted her to live in something better than the house she grew up in; prove to her that I could give her what other men could not.’ He gave a brittle laugh. ‘I should have known that something like this would mean little to her. She never wanted much, my Bríde. Not that I could give her, at least.’

His pained eyes swept the building. I wanted to reach out, offer words of consolation, but I didn’t know how.

‘As it was,’ continued Mr Gordon, ‘Bríde never did live here. After she was gone, I swore I wouldn’t either. Not until I had nae choice.’

‘No choice?’

Mr Gordon looked uncomfortable, then shook himself. ‘Let’s say, Torrie gave me nae choice.’

Ah.

‘As it is,’ he continued, ‘I’ll be glad when it’s complete. It will be a new beginning.’

Strange, I’d used almost the same words about coming to Glasglen.

Noises from inside a large barn, replete with fine-looking doors, distracted us. A cart and horses were being unloaded by a group of men. Upon seeing Mr Gordon, the lads called out. I spied many of those I’d travelled with – Auld Art, Dom, Big Billy, the Marr lads, Niall – and was pleased when they waved to me.

‘Be with you shortly,’ called Mr Gordon. ‘Come away in, Mrs MacAlister. Let me show you what’s been done so far.’ He opened the door of the house and waited for me to precede him. ‘And what’s still to do.’

Inside was far more derelict than outside, even if it was spacious. A damp, musty smell permeated. There was a large entrance hall with a narrow staircase leading to the upper floor. Daylight shone through the opening in the roof and years of detritus – mud, dirt, leaves, animal scat and birds’ nests – littered the floor and stairs. Droppings stained the wood. A persistent drip echoed.

‘This way,’ said Mr Gordon.

He led me through at least half a dozen rooms, explaining what they’d be when completed. At the rear was a kitchen with a flagstone floor, a roof, stone walls, and an enormous fireplace with a brick firebox and hearthstone. A huge hook at the end of a metal chain hung from a beam above. Barely used utensils rested against the lightly blackened stone. In the middle of the room there was a long, pitted table with a bench either side. A half-eaten bannock that had shrivelled into an unappetising lump and some dried cheese sat decaying upon a plate. An empty wine bottle and grimy cup next to them. Pebbles of rat shit formed a trail from the food to the end of the table. Mr Gordon quickly removed the plate and put the cup in a nearby bucket. ‘Left in a hurry,’ he said by way of apology.

Shelves with pots, bottles, a mortar and pestle, and all manner of instruments sat ready to take preserved food, dried fish, sacks of grain, herbs and so much more. A small room off the kitchen had shelves and hooks for drying meat, fish and hides, and for storing cheese. A bag of flour, some sugar and tea rested there, and a barely used milk churn. While the house was naught extraordinary, not compared to those I walked past every day in Edinburgh, any lass would be delighted with a kitchen like this and with such space and implements at their disposal. I said so.

‘Glad to hear it,’ said Mr Gordon and continued his tour.

There were two bedchambers on this floor and Mr Gordon said there’d be at least that many again once the house was roofed and finished. Enough for all his bairns and Ishbel to share.

Scattered about the rooms, at least those secure from the weather, were random pieces of furniture. Old chairs, many broken, with seats that needed recovering or patching, chests with bent locks and swollen wood, and presses with uneven shelves. It reminded me of the used furniture and odds

and ends sold in the High Street markets back home. Tucked against an interior wall in one room – open to the skies and to become a parlour – was a sideboard that needed sanding and polishing, but nevertheless held some porcelain and silver plate, surprisingly undamaged, on its shelves. There was even a privy under the staircase.

As I wandered about, with Mr Gordon explaining the purpose of the various rooms, including the maids' rooms upstairs, a wave of sadness engulfed me. He'd commenced building this house for his beloved wife, for his family, and here it stood, unfinished, mostly neglected.

Just when I couldn't stand the dashed hopes the place represented any longer, Mr Gordon led me into the last room. To the right of the entrance, its door was closed. He opened it carefully and unlike the others, it didn't come off its hinges or creak like a grannie-mutchie's bones.

Daylight spilled through the curtained window to reveal a whitewashed room with elegant sconces, pictures hanging on one wall, while another was covered with books. I ignored the impulse to rush over and inspect the spines. There was a large tapestry depicting a king, his army and tent of gold cloth. Beneath the window was an oak table scattered with papers, books and inkhorns. Behind it, with its back to the window, was a large chair; two smaller chairs sat on the other side of the table. A working room, an office.

At Mr Gordon's urging, I stepped further in, eyes wide. My boots were soundless on the rug covering the wooden floor. Directly across from the entry, a fireplace was softly glowing; a prod or two with the poker that rested against the mantel would no doubt spark it back to life.

To the left of the fireplace were two padded chairs, a couple of stools, a small table with a jug and some cups upon it. The smell of peat dominated, but with undertones of whisky, ale and men. I could also smell dogs.

Bran and Sceólang chose that moment to bolt into the room and throw themselves on an animal hide in front of the fire, panting.

'This is where I work and we sleep,' said Mr Gordon, nodding towards the dogs. They raised their heads, as if they knew they were being spoken about. He went to tend the fire, nudging the hounds aside so he could put some more peat atop the embers. A makeshift mattress and some blankets lay on the floor on the other side of the hearth, pushed against the far wall. Beneath some more shelves of books and personal items was a huge sea-chest, atop which lay a couple of shirts, a pair of trews and a kilt.

‘You live *here*? In this room?’ My face grew hot. My body twitched. He’d brought me to what was effectively his bedroom. I felt like I was spying on something intimate, forbidden.

Satisfied with the fire, Mr Gordon passed me a wooden cup. ‘I do … for now. Live, sleep *and* work. These days, mostly the latter and mostly away from here. Forgive the state of the place. I only returned late last night. Allow me to offer you a dram to welcome you properly to *my* house, Mrs MacAlister. To Glasglen.’

My hand shook slightly as I took the cup. I couldn’t stop staring, thinking about all the rooms we’d walked through, the state of the place. Its decrepitude; its emptiness. Surely, the man couldn’t expect me to keep this … *relic*? It didn’t require a housekeeper. It needed a builder. A builder, stonemason, glazier, slater and a host of other trades I knew nothing about.

Or it could be torn down.

Either way, there was naught to do here – naught I wanted to do – in this half-house, or in Ishbel Fraser’s either. Whichever way I looked at it, I was back where I started: no home, no prospect of employment and therefore no wage.

Perhaps I could build a bothy in the mountains and make illicit spirit? I began to imagine me and Fen, dressed in the skins of animals we’d killed, hair matted with filth, faces grubby, nails like talons, eking out an existence in a cave or heather-clad lean-to, peat burning, still bubbling, rain dripping ceaselessly on us when it wasn’t snowing or blowing a gale. Hiding from gaugers, from soldiers, sleeping on bracken and heather, sharing our vittles with wolves and deer.

Dear God, I had changed!

It was all I could do not to sink my head into my hands and weep.

Not that much after all.

‘*Slàinte*,’ said Mr Gordon, unaware of my spiralling thoughts, my darkening mood. He invited me to sit in what was clearly his chair beside the hearth. I sank into it gratefully. The dogs glanced up at their master, then lowered their heads onto their paws.

‘So, what do you think?’ he asked, bringing over a stool.

What I thought was not for sharing. I took a moment. ‘About the house?’

He looked at me as if I was a right muckle sumph. I was. I’d promised this man twelve months. Not once, but twice. Twelve bloody months. I was

committed. Like an inmate of Bedlam.

I straightened and gazed around, determined to be generous. ‘While the building is in a parlous state now, I can see what you intended.’ That at least was true. This could have been a beautiful house. Grand for Glasglen, but without being imposing. It sat in the hillside as if it belonged. And the inside was well-proportioned, designed to house a large family … Only – how? And more importantly, when? Of his own admission, Mr Gordon said he was rarely here. How did he propose to finish something in his absence?

‘I asked you a question, lass,’ said Mr Gordon impatiently, his clear eyes on my face as I searched for words. ‘What do you think?’

I drew myself up. ‘I …’ I swallowed. ‘I wonder how I can possibly be your housekeeper when there’s no house—’ I held up a finger to indicate I wasn’t finished, ‘*yet*, to keep.’ I looked around. ‘I understand I pressured you, that it was an act of kindness to bring me and Fen all this way, that I promised you twelve months. But, now that I’m here, I must ask: to do what exactly? All you have is a room, sir. *One* room. You don’t need a *house*keeper to maintain this. You need a … a …’ I couldn’t find the right word.

Mr Gordon drained his cup swiftly, then carefully placed it on the small side table near the hearth and released a long, long sigh. He stood, rubbed his hands up and down his thighs a few times.

‘Aye, lass,’ he sighed. ‘You’re quite right. What was I thinking?’ He gazed about the room. ‘You cannot be my housekeeper.’

How do I describe the frost that entered my veins just as my cheeks began to burn with indignation, nae, with fury. For the second time in ten days, I was being misled by a man. A free-trader who thought naught of meddling with my feelings, my hopes, my future.

And Fen’s.

I rose on unsteady feet, eyes flashing bolts of molten rage, hands curled into tight fists, my mouth preparing to launch a verbal attack, the likes of which would have made Torrie Dorward cower like a laird’s lackey.

Before I could, Mr Gordon spoke again.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN



‘*K*eeper is the wrong word,’ continued Mr Gordon, unaware of the storm raging inside my head. ‘What I should have said was house-*maker.*’

‘*House-maker?*’ I regarded him with utter disbelief then, incapable of speech, fell back in the chair. All the anger fled my body.

‘Aye, that’s the word,’ he said, pleased with himself, nodding. ‘House-maker.’

I finally found my voice. ‘What *are* you talking about, Mr Gordon? I could no more *make* a house than I could …’ I waved a hand towards the outdoors, ‘build a mountain.’

‘I’m not asking you to build the damn thing, lass,’ he chuckled. ‘That’s all but done, despite how it appears. Nae. What I want you to do, what I *need* you to do, come winter, when the work in the fields ceases, is supervise those who can turn their hands to it, to finish the building, the repairs. Watch over them while what was started years ago is completed.’

‘*Supervise?*’ I was beginning to sound like one of those parrots I’d sometimes see outside shops on Castle Hill. Either that, or the house had an uncanny echo.

‘That’s what I said.’ He took in my dubious expression. ‘Mrs MacAlister, the moment I set eyes on you, I saw you were a resourceful lass. If you can run a tavern and control all the blootered lads that must have filled it daily, set off into the unknown with wee Fen, and instead of rolling up like a hedgehog when you learned what that runagate husband of yours did, *beg* me, a stranger, for work—’

‘I told you, I didn’t *beg*.’

‘—travel with a bunch of rascals and rogues through the dreaded Highlands, survive a haar, avoid being seen by smugglers in their bothy, persuade me and my family you’re no informant, you can make this into a house. If anyone’s up to the task, it’s you. It will be as easy as pouring ale.’

‘Clearly, you’ve never poured ale …’

Mr Gordon laughed.

‘Why me? Why can’t *you* do it?’ I asked. I imagined how well these Highlanders would take to having a Lowland lass telling them what to do.

‘I would if I could. I’ve even tried. I’ve left lists of tasks, but as soon as I’m out of sight, the work grinds to a halt. My duties to my tack, which, as I showed you, extends over yon mountains and down to the Spey, mean I’m away often, at least until the winter snows close the passes. But if I have someone on site, *paid* to speak with my voice and my authority, then the lads will have nae choice but to listen, won’t they? They’ll finally do the work they owe me.’

‘In case you haven’t noticed, Mr Gordon,’ I said with great deliberation, ‘I’m a woman.’

‘I’m not blind, Mrs MacAlister.’

I took a moment to compose myself. ‘What makes you think they’ll listen to me?’

Mr Gordon put his hands on his knees and leaned towards me. ‘Because if you can make my Torrie listen, you’re a match for any lad.’

What could I say to that? Was the man a loon? Or was he simply stating faith in me? Or was this a test? I wasn’t sure.

Nevertheless, Mr Gordon wanted me to see to it his house was completed. For that he would pay me. The question was, did I want to? It was a very different arrangement to what I initially agreed and a very different kind of house. Then again, considering the farmhouse … Maybe, if Fen *could* settle, make friends, keep up her education, and I could make the men obey instructions, save some money, maybe twelve months wouldn’t be quite so terrible.

Maybe.

‘I’ll delegate the tasks,’ continued Mr Gordon. ‘And you’ll make sure they’re done. Not half-arsed or not at all, as some are wont to do. I want you to record the hours the lads put in and deduct them from the debts they owe me.’

‘They repay debts in labour?’

‘Mostly. It’s called stent.’

Thoughts crowded my head.

‘How will I know if a job is done properly? I’m no builder or …’

Something struck the roof and a light shower of dust fell. ‘Slater.’

‘Once the slates are in place, if they don’t leak, they’re fine. If a wall doesn’t collapse, then it’s solid. But there are many other jobs that need doing and they’ll be nae bother.’

‘Such as?’

Mr Gordon shrugged. ‘Carting away rocks and soil, ensuring the peat’s cut, establishing a garden, planting vegetables, removing rubbish, patching walls, painting, hammering, sawing, and generally making the place watertight. Liveable. Once the roof’s sealed, I want the broken chairs and other bits of furniture fixed and moved into rooms. You can choose where they go.’ He twisted on the stool and took in his room, the laird surveying his wee, unfinished territory. ‘The place can do with a lass’s touch. Don’t look so worried, Mrs MacAlister.’ He gave his crooked grin. ‘Once the house is finished, *then* you can start keeping it for me. Depends how long the first part takes.’ A sudden rattle followed by a loud thump in the hallway made him frown and me despair. The drip I heard earlier was noticeable even in this room.

Could I do this? Oversee the completion of an entire house? Doubt, never too far away, began to nibble at my confidence. What if the lads *didn’t* listen? What if they laughed at the very idea of a lass – an incomer – being in charge, *supervising* them? Even if it was done with Mr Gordon’s authority, if he was not here what was to stop them ignoring me or skiving off as they had before?

Naught.

And that was before I took Torrie into consideration. What was to prevent her striding up the hill and countermanding all my decisions? Undermining me with men she’d known her whole life? Ordering them to down tools and scarper home? Or up to the stills in their bothies?

I plucked my lower lip, thinking, thinking. Then again, Mr Gordon felt confident I could do this, going so far as to describe my actions in terms I’d never considered. I hadn’t ever tallied up my successes before. Only my failures. Maybe because they were so often pointed out.

But I *had* quit my home in Edinburgh, travelled, suffered a terrible setback but found work nevertheless. It may not be the type of work I had imagined, but in so many ways, it was better, wasn't it? Certainly, Mr Gordon was placing a great deal of trust in me, just as Ma and Da once did.

Was I simply allowing those brief years with William to undermine my confidence? Once it became apparent William was never coming back, I'd sworn not only to repair the damage he'd inflicted, but to never again allow anyone to have that kind of power over me, leading me to second-guess my judgement, doubt my skills, my very mind. It was one of the reasons I'd left Edinburgh, Uncle Duncan aside. I wanted to leave that version of myself behind for good.

This man not only believed I could do what I claimed, he was giving me a chance to prove it.

A quiet swell of pride lapped at my ribs. I could do this. *I could.* Moreover, I suddenly realised, I wanted to.

'Mrs MacAlister,' said Mr Gordon softly when I didn't speak. 'I haven't known you for long, but I can already tell you underestimate yourself. It's a mistake I'll not make – nor should you. And I reckon anyone who does is a begowk.' He waited until I returned his gaze.

I confess, his faith fed something hungry within me; something I didn't know was starved. I felt both warm and exhilarated; eager and yet so damn terrified, as if my blood alternately froze then burned as it raced through my veins. Since when had this man's opinion mattered so much? Or was it just that he made me see myself differently?

I tried to calm my errant thoughts, cool the hot coals in my chest. Then I thought of Fen. What would she say? She was keen to please me now, having thought I'd abandoned her (God, that chilled me to the marrow), but what about the morrow or the next day or the one after? What about when she resented me again? What about the Gordon bairns? What about those in Glasglen itself? How would they treat her? It couldn't be worse than the way she was before she went to Dr Braidwood's. Could it?

'Is there a school here?' I asked. 'Somewhere Fen would feel … wouldn't be …' How did I explain the level of torment she'd endured? How hurtful it was.

'There's an excellent school here with a fine schoolmaster, Marcus Nicholson. I'll introduce you.'

'You think he'd accept Fen?'

Mr Gordon began to laugh. ‘Accept? Once he learns she’s here, if Fen doesn’t attend, he’ll come fetch her himself. Rest assured, Mrs MacAlister, he’s an excellent teacher. I found him in Aberdeen, where he was wasted.’ He hesitated. ‘Look. If you or Fen are unhappy with the school, if this arrangement between you and me—’ he pointed to me then himself, ‘doesn’t work out, I promise you this: I’ll take you to wherever you choose myself.’

‘After twelve months.’

‘I give you *my* word.’

I sighed.

‘So,’ he said, rising to his feet, holding out his hand. ‘What do you say?’

I looked at his large hand, noted the calluses, the cuts. They were a worker’s hands, not a real gentleman’s, yet this man had been that and more. His reassurance about the school, the schoolmaster, the fact he understood my concern for Fen; that counted for something, didn’t it? *It was more than William ever did*.

And here he was entrusting me with something so big, so important – to him, to his family, to Glasglen. This was the chance to prove I *was* trustworthy.

I slowly placed my hand in his and allowed him to draw me to my feet. We stood so close, I could smell the whisky on his breath, the hint of cloves and peat smoke in his clothes. I wanted to shut my eyes and inhale the very maleness of him. Was that what was happening here? I was being seduced by a ruggedly handsome man who flattered me by expressing faith, not in my appearance or womanly attributes, but in *me*. This man acknowledged my mind, my abilities, was considerate of my daughter and, damn it, I found that so very gratifying. That, and the twist of a warm mouth, the sparkle in those rain-pure grey-green eyes, the warmth of the hand that ever-so-gently held mine. The livid scar that bisected his cheek. The sadness that pulled his brow into a permanent furrow that I wanted more than anything to banish.

‘Mr Gordon,’ I began, releasing his fingers and raising the cup. I took a step to one side to put distance between us. I wanted no distractions. ‘I agree to *try* and be your house-*maker*, whatever you want to call it. I agree to try my very, very best.’

Mr Gordon gave a grin that made a little piece of me pirouette inside. Then, he closed the space between us. For a fleeting moment, I thought he

was going to kiss me. I forgot to breathe.

‘Well,’ he said softly, touching the lip of his cup to mine. ‘I couldn’t ask nor want for more.’ He held my gaze, then knocked back his drink. I did the same, trying desperately not to cough.

Abruptly he swung about and went to the table. The room felt suddenly cold.

‘Come,’ he beckoned. ‘I’ll show you what’s been planned and what’s yet to be done. Who owes work and how much. It’s all here in the ledgers. You’ll have to familiarise yourself with them. Document what’s done. You said you could read and write.’

‘I can.’

‘Good. Look.’ He began to flick through the pages. ‘While I’m about it, I’ll find someone to help you talk to the workers. Not all have English. You’ll need a translator.’ He then proceeded to discuss introducing me to the villagers, and something about a cow, hens and a horse.

I pressed a hand against my stomach. As I did, a sudden thought occurred.

‘Excuse me, Mr Gordon, but, if this is your house and I’m to keep … *make* it, where do I sleep?’

Mr Gordon looked at me like I was a simpleton and blinked. ‘Why, right here of course.’ He gestured broadly.

My eyes lit upon his makeshift bed. Scorching liquid sped through my body, nestling in parts of me that hadn’t felt alive for years. Before I could protest, he began to laugh.

‘You look like the stunned coney who threw a rock at itself.’ He shook his head, turning away to search for ink and a pen.

It gave me time to regain control.

‘The first order will be to fix up a room for you and Fen. The one next to this, near the kitchen, is in the best condition.’ He nodded towards the far wall. ‘It means you’ll be staying at Ishbel’s a wee bit longer yet. And don’t worry about Torrie. I’ll have a word with her.’

‘Thank you. And I’ll do my best to stay out of her way.’

Mr Gordon frowned. ‘Once you’re living here, you’ll need a chaperone. The last thing we want is for more rumours to fly.’

More? What was being said? What *had* been said?

‘I’ll not ruin your reputation, lass. Don’t you fear.’ He tapped the end of the quill against his cheek. ‘I’ll ask Mary Todd. She comes to the farmhouse

to help Mabelle sometimes. In fact, I'll offer her a position. She's a fine cook and you'll need a maid to help you. Now, let's examine the ledger.'

Uneasy and restless, I joined him, looking over his shoulder as he pointed out names and the work they owed, not really taking it in. All I could think about, as his arm occasionally brushed mine while he explained what was to be done and by whom, was how noble it was that he wanted to protect my reputation.

And how strangely disappointed this made me feel.

My eyes sidled to the bed. As I tried to shut out the tumbled bedclothes, I wondered what other ways my already tattered and undeserved reputation as a Lowland liar and deceiver could be further diminished.



Later that night, long after Fen and the Gordon family were abed, and Mabelle was smooring the fire, I wrapped myself in an old plaid Mrs Fraser had loaned me and slipped outside. The moon was occluded by clouds that occasionally parted to allow a lambent shine. A cold wind blew, carrying with it notes of peat, animal ordure and hay. The pungent tang of urine wafted from the barrel stationed at the side of the house, collected to mature for the waulking, the setting of woven cloth. A flurry of feathers followed by a loud snort came from the byre next door. Horses snickered over in the barn. There was a scurry near the garden beds – a fox or hare perhaps. A low laugh and shushing sounds came from an adjacent field. Auld Artur's grandweans up to mischief, perhaps. I glanced towards the workers' cottages. They were in darkness. Torrie's place, too. Below, the village slumbered while the loch captured the scant light on its surface. Apart from the beasties, I could have been alone in the world.

I thought back over the day, my first full one in Glasglen. So much had happened – being swallowed by the haar, encountering the lads distilling, slipping away undetected. The peppery fear of being caught remained with me. Then there was Fen's worry I'd deserted her. Torrie's bitter accusations and desire to have me gone. Speaking up in my own defence and, finally, Mr Gordon.

I glanced up at his ruin. The window in the study (bedroom?) glowed. I wondered what he was doing. Just as I began to imagine him bent over

documents or resting by the fire, his hounds by his side, a dram in hand, the front door opened. A beam of light sliced the darkness. I knew that silhouette and the ever-present dogs.

Like me, was Mr Gordon restless and enjoying the solitude of nightfall? Or was something else afoot? Something that needed the night. Something that no-one else, certainly not me, was meant to know about. A frisson of guilt raced through me. I shouldn't be out here. I should be abed, not worrying about a man I barely knew and his activities. Illicit activities that I was already complicit in.

A quiet thrill shivered through my body and I took one last look towards the ruin, towards Mr Gordon.

Just as I turned to go indoors, I saw it.

A figure was climbing over the drystone wall that separated Mrs Fraser's land from Mr Gordon's. Half-bent, the fluid shadow moved up the hillside, confident, assured, skirting the runrigs, drifting across the burn. Who was abroad so late at night? Why were they being so covert? Were they going to Mr Gordon's? Returning from a bothy? Or heading to one? Throughout the day, I'd seen men and some women venturing up and down the slopes, jugs and bladders in hand, ankers, too.

My gaze travelled to Mr Gordon's barn. Earlier, he'd taken me inside to see what the lads were unloading. Sacks of good quality barley that he'd brought back from the duke's vast estates outside Strathbogie. I'd been surprised by the sheer number of them. They were piled against the walls and across the floor. Over the next few days, they'd be distributed among the villagers and used not only to make whisky (the spent grain would then feed the kine and other farm animals), but to feed folk as well.

'Much of this will be transformed into peatreek over the winter,' he'd explained, his arm sweeping the barn. 'Come spring, when the passes open again, we'll take what we've made to our buyers.'

'Where are they?' I'd asked, not really expecting him to answer.

He'd smiled. 'Everywhere, Mrs MacAlister. They're everywhere.'

The men had laughed.

He'd also explained that the most dangerous time for smugglers was when the peatreek was about to be moved and thus stored in one place, or when they were on the road. 'When we're close to the towns and cities, away from the mountains, we're at our most vulnerable. It's also where the

excise is most vigilant.’ His eyes had narrowed then and something sinister reshaped his features. He rubbed the scar on his face.

Auld Art said something in Gaelic, causing the other men to nod furiously and add their own comments.

Was it possible the figure I saw was a member of the excise or even a redcoat? Could it be the gauger, this Mr Gillespie I’d heard mentioned, searching for illicit whisky or the grain stores? Why? What could one man possibly do? Could it be Lieutenant Jacobs looking for Alice MacIntosh?

I tried to see where the man was going (I couldn’t conceive of a woman roaming the hills at night) but it was as if, like a Satanic creature, he’d merged with the darkness. He’d completely disappeared, swallowed by the land.

I stifled a dry laugh. This heathen, untamed place was playing tricks with my mind. There was nothing there.

With a rapidly beating heart, I slipped back inside, closed the door and latched it, just in case I was wrong and the devil himself was ranging the mountain, looking for lost souls.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



It was because of the bairns that I waited over a week to act on Mr Gordon's advice and take Fen to meet the schoolmaster, Mr Nicholson. I was concerned how the village children would treat her, especially since Elspet and Fionn had been so unkind.

They stared openly when she finger-talked, imitating the actions when her back was turned, defying me to say something. I'd learned from experience that ignoring such antics was best. Alas, they didn't seem to tire of their mockery. If Mrs Fraser or Mabelle caught them, they'd get a scolding or a slap. There were threats to tell their da as well. It made not a whit of difference.

'The bairns mean no harm,' defended Mabelle.

Easy to say when it's not you being attacked.

Peigi, too old for such mimicry, simply behaved as though Fen didn't exist. In fairness, she did the same with Fionn and Elspet. She ignored me most of the time, except when I assisted with chores. Then, she'd quietly thank me before disappearing to her older sister's house to help with the bairns, a book tucked under her arm.

I kept Fen beside me each day, working between the farmhouse and Mr Gordon's place. While I began to prepare what would become Fen's and my bedchamber, I insisted she practise her reading and writing. She would sit in Mr Gordon's study (he was oft away, visiting tenants, advising on improvements to the lands, readying for harvest), one of his many books on her lap, and read.

The look on Fen's face each morning as she watched the twins and Pol rush about, donning satchels and washing their hands and faces after their chores were completed before heading down the hill to the schoolhouse finally made me relent. She missed learning; I think she also missed the company of other children. Keeping her with me may have kept her safe, but it also kept her apart.

It couldn't hurt to at least meet the schoolmaster, could it? When I asked Fen, she was eager.

With my expectations low, we set off for the schoolhouse. The day was grey and mizzling. The track down to the main road was muddy and deep ruts filled with water made it slippery and unpleasant.

Workers were busy in the fields, pausing in their labours as we passed, their sharp whispers drifting. By now, I'd met a few of the villagers, mainly the women, curiosity bringing them to Mrs Fraser's door before I'd left for Mr Gordon's house, widely known as Tam's Folly. They always arrived in twos and threes, and would huddle near the stone bench, blethering away to Mrs Fraser, who would eventually summon me outside.

Most would examine me as if I was kine at the market, pass comments to each other, then disregard me. But some, like Big Billy's wife, Spinney, and a lovely lass, Molly, who ran the shebeen I'd seen the evening we arrived, were far more welcoming. Spinney was older than me by some years, with fine silver hair and deep blue eyes, and strode everywhere with purpose. Molly was big-hearted and quick to laugh, tossing her burnished curls when she did. They spoke good English and offered to show me about the village and introduce me. I promised I would take them up on their generous offer soon.

As Fen and I tromped towards the schoolhouse, I was beginning to regret I hadn't already.

Conscious of being observed, I quickened our pace. A couple of old women huddled in a doorway, distaff and spindles humming, stared open-mouthed as we passed. Much to my surprise, one waved.

'*Madainn mhath*,' she called, lifting her head. I knew this was good morning, so called out the same. She was one of those who'd come to the farmhouse. I remembered her because she had long white hair worn in a thick plait. Helen Gordon (a fourth cousin or such) was her name. The smile she gave me in return was radiant, despite the lack of teeth. Her companion

said something and nudged her friend who chuckled wickedly. Maybe it was my pronunciation.

When we reached the main road, it was deserted, apart from a man pulling a small cart and a wee goat. Everyone was at work or inside. Amidst the runrigs, folk laboured, most scattering dung with their bare hands, while others dug out small rocks and other detritus; wee bairns gadded about. The air was ripe. Chickens pecked at the edge of the road. The dappled dog, The Bruce, ran up to us, tail wagging, nose raised in curiosity. Fen joyfully stroked his damp coat and fondled his ears before a sharp whistle had him scooting off towards the loch. Birds wheeled above, some gracefully alighting on a stretch of sand where a coracle had just been beached and a fisherwoman unloaded a small creel.

The rain became heavier the closer we drew to the schoolhouse. My boots were coated with mud, Fen's too. I'd have to get used to this; the constant drizzle and mud, the aroma of shit and peat.

We passed what must have been the local shop, owned by the Todds. I wondered if their lass, Mary, was working there. Mr Gordon had spoken with her, and she'd agreed to come and work for him and live in the Folly (as I'd also come to call it). She would move in the same day as Fen and me, which was drawing close. Should I stop and introduce myself?

People crowded in the doorway, falling silent as we walked by. I heard 'incomer', 'Lowlander' and a few other words I wished I hadn't. I felt my face grow warm. On second thoughts, I'd wait until Spinney and Molly were with me. Sensing my discomfort, Fen reached for my hand. I held it tightly and began to swing it.

I called out, '*Madainn mhath*.' No-one replied, instead shaking their heads before disappearing back into the shop.

Friendly lot.

We crossed a rickety wooden bridge over a swift-flowing burn and passed a cemetery and the white-washed kirk. Mr Gordon said the reverend would have called in to see me but was away north for a few days. After the other encounters I'd had, I was in no hurry to make the acquaintance of this Father Son. May God forgive me.

Finally, we reached the schoolhouse.

Mr Nicholson was standing in the doorway, waiting. Of middling age, he was a large man with a mop of grey curly hair, a button nose and

twinkling blue eyes. According to Mr Gordon, he was proficient in English, Gaelic (of course), as well as Latin and French.

‘You must be Mrs MacAlister,’ he said, stepping forward. ‘And you must be Fen.’ He flashed his teeth, which were large and crowded his mouth, giving him a rather predatory appearance.

I murmured a greeting.

‘How old are you, Fen?’ he asked, cocking his head to study her. ‘Eleven? Twelve?’

‘She’s twelve,’ I said.

Mr Nicholson frowned. ‘Then why aren’t you in school this very moment, lassie?’ He was clearly annoyed I answered for my daughter.

‘I’m afraid Fen is deaf, sir,’ I said.

‘Aye, I heard,’ he replied, without a hint of irony.

‘As I explained to Mr Gordon, I’m concerned she’ll struggle at a regular school.’

‘Would she now? You’ve decided that, have you?’ Mr Nicholson looked me up and down and then bestowed a warm smile. Dimples appeared in his cheeks, turning him from wolf to puppy in one fell swoop. ‘I’m told she can read.’

‘And write,’ I said proudly, pointing to the wee quire and pen Fen carried, the hornbook dangling from her waist.

‘Well, then,’ said Mr Nicholson, clapping his large hands together. ‘There’s no reason she can’t learn. And the best place for that is right here, with me.’ He stepped aside and, before Fen or I could object, ushered us inside the schoolroom.

Next door to the kirk, the Glasglen school was a single frigid room with a large chalkboard at one end covered in Mr Nicholson’s scrawl. Rows of long wooden tables and benches took up the remaining space. There were slates for the children and even some paper. A set of badly made shelves contained an assortment of well-thumbed books and old newspapers.

Heads swivelled to regard us, several with interest, all with whispers attached. A few offered cautious smiles, others frowns. Fionn and Elspet rolled their eyes and began frantically murmuring to whomever sat near them. Pol looked as if he’d drunk a sunbeam. Torrie’s bairns nodded a stiff greeting. Given seats at the rear of the classroom, Fen and I watched as Mr Nicholson continued the lesson our arrival had interrupted. He was reading

an excerpt from Homer's *Iliad*, the part where Patroclus dons Achilles' armour to join the battle outside the gates of Troy.

After shutting the book and setting the children sums to do, Mr Nicholson gave Fen a chapter of Homer to read and asked her to write down the answers to an accompanying list of questions.

'You're not to help her, Mrs MacAlister,' he said, waving an admonishing finger.

'I won't.' I signed what Mr Nicholson said to Fen.

'What's that you're doing?' he asked, eyes glued to my hands. The other bairns twisted to look.

I heard Elspet whisper loudly, 'It's called finger-talking.'

There were exclamations of wonder, some sniggering, as well as a few attempts to emulate me followed by repressed laughter.

Mr Nicholson bade the children hush and return to their work. Without a murmur, they obeyed. He spun back to us. 'I would very much like you to teach me that, Fen.'

Fen didn't need me to translate.

The pupils snuck looks at Fen again, this time with surprise and undisguised curiosity.

Mr Nicholson returned to the front of the classroom, checking slates along the way, admonishing here, praising there.

During a brief break, when the bairns were encouraged to run about outside, Mr Nicholson rejoined us. He'd already checked the answers Fen had given him.

'Very impressive, young Fen. You may not have the power of your ears or voice, but you have the greatest power of all.'

Fen waited expectantly.

He tapped a long finger gently against the side of his head. 'The power of your mind, lassie. The power of your mind. And it's a fine one you have.' He regarded me solemnly, then Fen. 'I'd be delighted if you'd join us here at the school, Fen. Not that I'll be giving you a choice if you remain in Glasglen.'

He went on to explain he made no distinction between his pupils, whether male or female, wee bairns or older lassies and lads: all the children in Glasglen, and even some from the other villages, were expected to attend six days a week – at least until the snow made it too cold and too difficult or it was harvest or peat-cutting time when every pair of hands was

required. Or they'd gone to the shielings. If students failed to turn up, Mr Nicholson would set the others work and then search for the absentee, often dragging a reluctant child from hearth or field.

'I pray I won't ever have to do that to you, wee Fen.'

Fen shook her head, eyes wide. She hadn't stopped smiling since she sat down. The longer we were there, the more confident I felt this was the right thing. When two of the lassies, along with Pol, Fionn *and* Elspet dragged Fen outside to play, I wanted to weep.

And that was it. From the morrow onwards, Fen would attend Glasglen school with the Gordon bairns.

The relief I felt was enormous. It had been my greatest guilt, that I'd taken my daughter away from the security of Dr Braidwood's special school.

From the ledgers, which Mr Gordon had encouraged me to familiarise myself with before the workers began on the house, I saw that Mr Gordon paid Mr Nicholson's salary, even though it was a cost meant to be shared among the villagers. When I asked him about it, he gave a sad smile.

'They can scarce afford to put food in their bairns' bellies let alone knowledge in their heads. If Glasglen is to thrive, then it needs people who can read and write and better still, think. In Gaelic *and* English. Mr Nicholson will see to that.'

The ledger also revealed that Mr Nicholson's salary was part-paid in *uisge-beatha*, yet another name for whisky or peatreek. *Uisge-beatha* – water of life. Had any drink ever carried such responsibilities?

Like it or not, whisky was the lifeblood of this village in more ways than one.



Night caressed the house as I sat with Mrs Fraser and Mr Gordon, who had swept in unexpectedly with his hounds. He joined us at the central hearth, which smoked and coughed. After receiving obligatory pats, the dogs lay at his feet, eyes half-closed, ears twitching. The bairns were all abed. The fire had banked low, the veil of constant smoke hovering about the room lending it a dream-like quality. Atop the sideboard and in little holders on the walls, rushlights and a couple of cruisie lamps flickered and cast long

shadows. Mabelle dragged a lamp nearer so she could attend to some mending.

The shutters were closed, but an icy draught would occasionally steal through the cracks. A hound barked in the distance, and Bran and Sceólang issued quiet growls in response. There was the skitter of an owl-light creature across the stones outside; above us, the cat stalked a rat among the thatch. It was altogether cosy and I was so very tired. I kept imagining curling up beside Fen in our box bed. But Mr Gordon said he needed to speak to me, so I resisted.

A quaich of whisky was poured and I took it gratefully.

‘I hear you paid a visit to the school today,’ began Mr Gordon.

‘Does anything get past you, sir?’ I asked.

Mabelle snorted.

Mr Gordon grinned. ‘Not if I can help it. Mr Nicholson told me he was very impressed.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me. Fen’s an impressive wee lass.’

‘With both of you,’ finished Mr Gordon with a steady gaze.

Flustered, I didn’t know how to respond, so drank.

‘And she starts on the morrow?’ he asked.

‘She does.’

Mr Gordon nodded approvingly. ‘Excellent, because the slaters, Jon Boyne and his son, and Con Harrison, the stonemason, commence at the big house. I want to introduce you to them. You ken Con’s the birleyman?’

I nodded. ‘Artur made mention, but I didn’t really understand what that meant.’

‘Ah. The birleyman’s appointed by the village to oversee any disputes regarding stent, the work performed in lieu of money owed. He also settles any other issues that arise between the villagers.’ He let me ponder that a moment. ‘Don’t be daunted by his appearance,’ he added.

‘Why?’

Mabelle gave a quiet giggle. ‘He’s got an unfortunate squint, so ye never ken which eye be gogglin’ at ye or which one to look at either. And he’s hairier than Bran there.’ She thrust her chin towards the dog.

Mr Gordon buried a grin. ‘He’s gruff but honest. Born and bred in the glen, his family have lived here for generations. If you have any difficulty with the stent workers, Con’s your man. He’ll make sure he’s there when

the first lot of lads come up to the house next week, when I make it clear to them you're in charge; that I endorse everything you say.'

'I heard there were some objections to my appointment.'

'Does anything get past *you*, madam?' asked Mr Gordon, flashing an accusatory look in Mabelle's direction. She bent to her sewing.

I laughed. 'Not if I can help it.'

We shared a long slow smile, broken only when Mrs Fraser hawked and spat. I tried not to shudder.

'It'll be useful for you to put a face to the names in the ledgers. You'll know who to chase up when I'm away.'

'You're leaving soon?' For some reason, the thought made me feel heavy, or perhaps it was just the whisky. I gladly accepted a refill from Mr Gordon. Mrs Fraser did as well, her hand shooting out faster than a seabird catching fish.

'Aye,' said Mr Gordon. 'Some of the lads and I will head to Inverness after Samhain to purchase supplies, mainly more grain. Crops were poor this year and while the lads will be winding down their distilling operations during harvest—' he inclined his head towards the mountains, 'breaking up or disguising their bothies until we're certain excise and redcoats aren't in the area, they'll start distilling again as soon as it's safe. In the meantime, they can commence working off their debts before they get any larger.'

Mrs Fraser said something sharp.

Mr Gordon drew in his breath and replied before explaining. 'Ishbel said I'm not to forget they have to work their own land.' He looked directly at me. 'I told her I *never* forget.'

Again, his gaze lingered. I had the strong impression it wasn't what Ishbel said that he was thinking about. What was it about this man that made my thoughts cloud, my heart toss itself against my ribs? Every beat was painful. Deliciously so.

It was either him or the whisky.

Before I could sort out which, Mr Gordon rose.

'Well, I'd best be off.' He bent and gave Mrs Fraser a kiss on her furrowed cheek. I saw the smile before she could quite repress it.

To my surprise he gave one to Mabelle as well. She grinned like a bairn who finds the pudding penny. When he swung in my direction, I tensed, only to have Sceólang leap to her feet and lick my chin. It was swiftly followed by a swipe from Bran's tongue against my cheek.

‘They like you,’ said Mr Gordon, that intense, sad gaze fixed on me. ‘Very much.’

The glow from the hearth reflected in his eyes. ‘And I like them. Very much.’

Was he bending towards me or was that damn wishful thinking?

If Mrs Fraser hadn’t hoiked again, I might have learned which. Instead, Mr Gordon donned his bonnet, tightened his plaid and with ‘God give you good night’, clicked his fingers at the hounds and departed.

Mabelle waggled her brows at me, hands paused over the pair of trews she was patching. Mrs Fraser’s expression was impossible to read, swallowed in shadows and smoke.

Paying no heed to Mabelle, I rose, drained my quaich, and began to bid them goodnight when Mrs Fraser spoke.

‘Ye ken our Tam’s heart was my Bríde’s, dinnae ye?’

I froze. Her words were raspy, but clear. They were also English.

‘Ye’ll not take it easy, mind, just like the last lass who thought she could steal it.’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Mrs Fraser,’ I said somewhat snippily. ‘I don’t steal anything. That’s against God’s law.’

Mrs Fraser gave a crooked smile. ‘It is. And God punished the lass for trying.’

‘How?’ I asked, unable to resist.

‘Made her disappear.’

I stared at Mrs Fraser in disbelief. Was she threatening me? Or was it a genuine warning about her son-in-law? Was she being loyal or disloyal? I couldn’t make arse nor elbow out of Mrs Fraser – or any of the Gordons. One minute they were cold and cruel, the next, warm and inviting.

All except Tam Gordon. He at least seemed constant. Or was he as capricious as the rest and I just hadn’t seen it? Then again, Torrie was constant as well. Constant in her evident loathing.

I wasted no time getting into bed, drawing a slumbering Fen into my arms, and holding her tight.

It’s you and me, chick. Always.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Attending kirk for the first time was a strange affair. The church was clean and warm, mainly because so many bodies were squeezed into the tiny, somewhat austere space. The smells of wet wool, animals, peat and the ever-present stench of dung hovered. Mr Gordon didn't attend. Neither did Torrie nor her husband Hamish, who I was yet to meet properly. Their bairns were there, brought by Peigi and Ishbel. They were mostly well behaved, though Aoife began to scream when a chicken that was walking between pews and over boots, clucking and fluffing its feathers, pecked her leg. Peigi hoisted her up and took her outside.

Reverend MacAdam, a tall, thin man with bright ginger hair and a wide, gap-toothed smile, was a good speaker. He delivered his sermon in Gaelic, and I found my mind wandering – recalling with chagrin the wariness of the Boynes, the slaters and Con Harrison when I met them earlier in the week – until one word, oft-repeated, jolted me back to the present. Initially, I thought I'd misheard. When I heard it again, then again, I knew I hadn't. No-one else seemed to notice. They certainly didn't seem to care. I wasn't sure what to think, except, after it had been said over a dozen times, laughter began to build inside me. Fen sensed this and gave me a warning look. How could I explain to her that Reverend MacAdam, Father Son, swore like an Edinburgh docker?

Ironically, it wasn't the numerous 'fooks' peppering his sermon that drew complaints from the parishioners, it was that he delivered part of it in English.

‘What’s the point of coming to hear God’s word if ye cannae fooking understand it?’ he grizzled, gesturing to me as, instead of waiting to speak to him at the kirk door, folk surged around the pulpit after the service, bellyaching and bickering.

I appreciated the passage he chose to read in English. It was from Hebrews: *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels.* He must have repeated it in Gaelic because everyone in the kirk fastened onto me and Fen.

It was a blessedly brief service, the heavy rain and rumbling thunder interrupting regularly. Instead of loitering outside, people fled home before the next downpour. The reverend took the opportunity to invite me to his house the following day.

‘Come early so ye can bring yer wee lassie afore school commences,’ he said, smiling at Fen.

Not one to ignore a summons from a man of the cloth, Fen and I would do as we were bid.



It was another dreich cold morning when, along with Pol, we set off down the muddy track, the misty rain collecting atop our shawls until the collective weight of constant droplets made the material cling. The men already in the fields were naught but vague outlines in the grey morning. A few miserable-looking sheep stared dolefully as we passed, standing as close to the stone walls as they could. The ring of hammers from the Folly echoed. Con Harrison was already at work. I caught a glimpse of the hounds snuffling near the barn. Mr Gordon must be there. Peigi had taken a basket of oatcakes and cheese in that direction.

Cheery as always, Pol escorted us to the reverend’s before going next door to school. Fen gave him a shy wave in return.

Reverend MacAdam’s house was very small, even for Glasglen, comprising just two wee rooms. The front door opened straight into the sitting room with its central hearth. The great difference between the reverend’s place and Mrs Fraser’s was the whitewashed walls, which lent the house a luminosity I hadn’t expected. Gone was the dingy, dim feeling, as the light flowing through the front door and the small window beside it

bounced and echoed, throwing the few pieces of dark furniture into stark relief. Shelves had been built into the walls, brimming with books. There were two sturdy sideboards, upon which sat eating utensils and more books. So many books. They also covered the surface of the long table beneath the window. Inkwells, paper and quills were scattered across it. It appeared the reverend was in the middle of writing a letter; a page weighted down by pebbles and positioned near a glowing cruisie lamp was half-covered in neat script.

Paintings adorned the walls. Two were religious in nature, but one featured a woman with a full creamy breast exposed. She was twined about a tree or transforming into one. Standing over her was a youthful man draped in a white robe, a look of anguish on his face. This wasn't God, nor was the woman Mary. It seemed an unlikely picture for a clergyman to have in his house.

Noting it had attracted my attention, Reverend MacAdam smiled. 'Apollo and Daphne. You know the tale?'

Of course. Struck by Cupid's arrow, Apollo fell helplessly in love with the nymph Daphne. Daunted by his relentless pursuit, Daphne appealed to her father, the river god, who turned his daughter into a laurel tree. Thereafter Apollo embraced the laurel as his own emblem.

'It's a sad tale of love unrequited. Of love cursed.' The reverend looked at me intently, as if he was trying to tell me something.

'I always felt Apollo was as much a victim of Cupid's caprices as Daphne was of Apollo's ardour.'

'Indeed,' said the reverend. 'Love is oft used to excuse sin.'

Ignoring my astonishment (who would expect to be discussing such matters with a reverend?), he invited us to sit, bringing over a chair for Fen. He pulled out the table to make room for me to sit upon the bench, my back against the wall.

'How do ye like ye tea?' he began, pouring boiling water into a pot that sat at the edge of the central hearth and talking loudly as many were wont to do in Fen's presence. As if raising one's voice cured her deafness. Upon seeing me wince, Fen tried not to laugh.

'Och, forgive me,' he said, lowering his voice. 'Habit. Widow Jupp be a bit hard of hearing, and I find if I raise my voice, it helps.' He ruffled Fen's hair. 'It's nae fooking use here, is it?'

Pleased by his frankness, I translated for Fen (minus the expletive).

‘Do you always use such … erm … interesting language, reverend?’ I asked.

‘Interesting? Ah. You mean my tendency to curse? Aye. Always. What’s the point of having words if you don’t use them, lass?’

‘I would have thought that as a man of God you could choose many others.’ I kept my tone light.

The reverend blinked. ‘Is that so?’ He chuckled. ‘Tam warned me you be a plain-talker. I could – choose others. But the good Lord bestowed choice upon man for a reason. And I fooking choose to say *fook* whenever I please. Believe it or not, Mrs MacAlister, it doesn’t make me less godly.’

I bit my tongue. Not because I objected to his use of the word. Good God, I’d been known to deploy it myself. I’d just have to grow accustomed to hearing the word spill regularly out of a pastor’s mouth. It was his use of the word *choice* that disarmed me. Easy for a man to say. If I, or any other woman, openly peppered my language with the same kind of profanity, judgement would fall heavily upon me. I’d be cast out from society of any kind. My reputation would be in tatters.

Woe betide any woman who dared exercise choice – in anything. We were condemned to accept what men selected on our behalf: opinions, company, husbands, occupations, even words. On rare occasions, we were permitted the illusion of having choice; but that’s all it was, an illusion. What we were really given were boundaries. If we objected, dared to push against restrictions, deviate from the life-script we were issued and make our own choices, we were pariahs, feared, shunned and ultimately forgotten. As I’d already learned to my detriment.

Dear Lord, I was quite the ray of sunshine this morning.

Fooking hell.

‘How are you finding Glasglen, Mrs MacAlister?’ said the reverend, reaching over and closing the Bible open beside me with one hand and picking up a plate and offering oatcakes to Fen with the other. We’d missed breaking fast, so she took one gratefully and began to nibble. I declined. My stomach was roiling from his question.

How did I answer? Tell him a part of me regretted ever coming and if it hadn’t been for my promise to Mr Gordon, along with the rather pathetic fact I didn’t have anywhere else to go, I’d be out of here faster than a Jacobite King George’s throne room? That though I’d had to leave Edinburgh and what it had become, I now yearned for the familiar? To

smell the scents I'd grown up with, hear the noises, voices and language I understood; to taste food I knew, to see faces that weren't strange or forbidding and, better still, who recognised mine.

'Because,' drawled Reverend MacAdam, when I didn't immediately respond, 'I'll be blunt with you, Mrs MacAlister, there's a few of us wondering what on earth possessed you to come all this way. Montrose, I understand, after all you had to reconcile matters there. But after what fooking happened – aye, Tam told me – I cannot believe you came *here*. Why didn't you go to Glasgow, Aberdeen or even Inverness?'

Turns out, I wasn't the only plain-talker in the room.

I took a sip of the tea. It was good. Wherever the reverend sourced it (and I could only imagine) it was excellent quality. 'Why not? It was time for a change,' I responded rather glibly, earning a deep frown.

Reverend MacAdam put his drink down untouched. 'Look. I asked you here in good faith, to have a proper talk with you, Mrs MacAlister. The villagers have some concerns and, frankly, so do I. With Tam placing you in charge of his house and thus his stent workers, I thought I'd get to know you myself, allay worries. But I can see you're in nae fooking mood for this type of conversation. So, how about we meet another time.' He made to rise.

Fen looked from me to the reverend in astonishment, putting down the half-eaten oatcake. I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

'Reverend.' I rested my fingers on his forearm. He stared at them, then me. I withdrew my hand. 'Please. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you by being so … cavalier.' I bit my lip. 'It's just that everyone has been so … so …'

'Cautious?' he supplied and lowered himself back onto his seat.

I had been going to say rude, unkind, but nodded. '*Cautious* will do.' I released a long slow sigh. 'Truth is, I'm not sure what to say or when to say it. Why, my language, let alone my presence, seems to cause such offence – not to everyone; a few have been very nice.' I did a roll call in my head. It didn't take long. 'But so many are unhappy and not just that I'm here, but with *me*. You saw it for yourself in kirk yesterday.' I rested my forehead against my fingers. 'I came here to work, reverend, to escape my past and hopefully build a different future, but even that prospect is causing grief. I've never encountered anything like it before. I don't know what to do …' I raised my head.

He didn’t say anything, just looked at me. Fen as well.

‘I was warned,’ I continued slowly. ‘When folk learned I was leaving Edinburgh and heading north, they told me Highlanders were—’

‘Savage, uncouth, wild, dangerous,’ the reverend supplied without a trace of irony or rancour.

I stifled my surprise. ‘All that. One cannot open a newspaper or periodical without reading something negative about the Highlands and its people.’

‘And yet, you came.’

‘Aye,’ I said, drawling the word and turning it into a lopsided grin. ‘I did.’

‘Why, if all you knew of us was negative?’

‘A few reasons. Firstly, if I wanted to collect my husband’s wages, I had to venture north. Secondly, the tavern where I grew up, the business, it became … untenable.’ I studied my hands. ‘For me.’ I paused. ‘Lastly, I came because my da, Fen’s grandpa—’ I brushed a strand of hair from her face, ‘always spoke of the Highlands, and Highlanders, with such fondness.’

I quickly explained to Fen what I was saying. She nodded vigorously.

The reverend watched us curiously.

‘He always said that in his experience, Highlanders were the most hospitable people. He felt that among both Lowlanders and the English, there was a tendency to look upon our Gaelic neighbours with jaundiced eyes, eyes that saw difference before anything else. He always said there was a generosity and stateliness in Highlanders, even among the meanest of them.’

‘Did he now?’ said the reverend.

I felt my cheeks colour. ‘I didn’t—’

‘Och, lass, I’m joshing. Your da be right. But tell me, how did he know us? Did he travel hereabouts? Or did a battle bring him north?’

‘Both. Da was Edinburgh born.’ I hesitated. ‘Actually, he trained as a minister.’

‘*That*, I didn’t expect.’

How did I explain my father? The sad, complicated but benevolent man I remembered. A man broken by life, and only half-repaired. Quick with a story, slow to anger, determined his daughter received a good education and shared his love of books. His downfall was the drink.

‘Where’s his parish?’ asked the reverend.

‘Da never had a parish. Not in the traditional sense. When the Jacobite armies rose up against the English, he was a chaplain with government forces – the Duke of Cumberland’s men. What he saw, first at Falkirk Muir and later at Culloden … and even worse, after … All the death, the bloodshed, the cruelty and horror … Well, it changed him. He forswore the church, the army, the Duke of Cumberland, and returned to Edinburgh. He met my ma and, after Grandpa died, they took over his tavern, the Coo’s Horn in Castle Gate.’

I didn’t add that Da also forswore the Lord. ‘How can I believe in a God that allows men to do to each other what I witnessed and call it a victory? Who makes a hero of a butcher?’ Repeated regularly when he was blootered, which was often. ‘I cannot. I won’t.’

As far back as I could remember, Da didn’t attend kirk. Being a former minister, he was never held to account for profaning the Lord’s Day. He didn’t object to Ma participating each Sunday or taking me. When he’d put me to bed, instead of listening to prayers, he’d share a magical myth or a stirring tale from history. He’d always leave one of his many books by my bed with a lamp so I could read long after I was meant to be asleep. To the accompaniment of muffled voices, laughter, arguments, off-key songs and even the occasional brawl in the tavern below, I’d visit Camelot, Ithaca, Lilliput, Verona and many other places. I’d sail with Odysseus, lament the loss of Dido with Aeneas, take up oars with the crew of the *Argo*. Perhaps it was Da’s stories that instilled a restlessness in me, the yearning for other places, to meet different people.

Look where that landed me. William. Montrose. The Highlands. Glasglen.

‘From minister to soldier to tavern-keeper,’ said Reverend MacAdam, swirling his tea. ‘I can see how the first two jobs would have made him excellent at his third.’

‘Most of the time he was.’

‘Was?’

‘Da died many years ago. Ma this past year.’

‘God rest their souls.’

I’d struggled with Da’s death. Ma’s was easier. At least she wasn’t suffering anymore. ‘Men were always pouring out their hearts to Da.’ I smiled in memory. ‘Ma said she married a minister who held service daily,

whose communion wine was ale and whisky and who ran the smallest but busiest parish in the country. When we were alone, he'd sometimes speak of his time in the north and the people he encountered with fondness.'

And great sadness. I didn't add that.

I wondered what Da would think – of Glasglen, of my decision to come to the Highlands. Of Mr Gordon. I like to think he would have approved.

'Who has the right of it then – of us – do you think?' asked the reverend. 'The newspapers or your da?'

I thought for a moment. 'Apart from what happened back in Montrose, the Highlanders I met on the journey here were very friendly. Kind, generous too. Mr Gordon, Auld Artur, and the others as well. I began to look forward to reaching here. To being somewhere different from what I was accustomed to.'

I hesitated.

'I think I also wanted to be somewhere *I* could be different.' I'd never articulated that before. It was true. Shuck off the old me. The abandoned wife who simply waited. The orphan who didn't belong. The lass who refused to be at the mercy of men – any man. A woman who wanted to forget her past.

But that would be a mistake. If you forgot the past, you ran the risk of repeating it.

'And yet, I arrive, and suddenly, everything I'd been warned about Highlanders …' I didn't finish. 'Not all of you, of course. Just …'

'Most of us,' finished Reverend MacAdam. There was such compassion in his voice, in those azure eyes, dammit if mine didn't start to well.

I nodded miserably. I didn't realise how much I'd missed having someone to talk to. Someone that wasn't Fen, who I had to protect, who I had to help see the good in this place and its people.

Someone I could be plat and plain with.

I could, couldn't I? After all, Reverend MacAdam might be used to confessions, but he was a Highlander too. What if, once again, my honesty was my undoing?

The reverend reached inside his cassock, pulled out an enormous kerchief and passed it to me. I wiped my eyes and, at his encouragement, blew my nose. Loudly. Fen hadn't taken her eyes off me.

Ma?

I gave her a watery smile.

I’m alright, chick.

‘Och, lassie,’ said the reverend. ‘For all you’ve been told and heard terrible fooking things about us, did it ever occur to you that most Highlanders have only ever heard dreadful things about Lowlanders?’

I blinked. ‘You have? *What* dreadful things?’

‘Why, how you eat ye fooking babbies for starters. How you think naught of stealing a lass’s lad or vice-a-versa. How you’ll draw swords sooner than pay for a drink. How you’ll snatch whatever isn’t nailed down if we let you into our homes. How you dance around fires at midnight and worship Beelzebub.’

I regarded the reverend steadily. ‘That’s codswallop.’

‘Fooking Satan’s hairy staines it is!’ He slapped his leg and laughed heartily. ‘But I had you going for a moment, didn’t I?’

I gave a head-shaking grin. ‘Maybe just a little.’

‘Thing is, it’s nae worse than what you think of us. You believe we’re all uncivilised, barbaric fooking warmongers. Equally, we think you Lowlanders are a fooking bunch of Sassenach-loving sooks without a mind between you. You’d sell yer ma if it made you a penny. Your neighbour’s ma as well. You’ve used and abused us for your own ends, just like the fooking English. You think you’re better than us. Most of us believe you should just up and go to England – you’re halfway there anyway. Then, maybe, we’d make enough from the land to stay.’

A rush of heat followed by freezing cold raced through my body. It never occurred to me that Highlanders might think just as poorly of us as we did of them. The very notion rocked me to my core.

‘But most Lowlanders I know,’ I was careful not to say all – I’d known some cowards, brutes and sycophants in my time, ‘are naught like that.’

‘Exactly,’ said Reverend MacAdam. ‘Just as most Highlanders are naught like you’ve been taught to think either.’ He took my hand, which was clenched into a fist atop the table. ‘My advice to you, lassie, is let the Highlanders you meet, the folk of Glasglen, see what *this* Lowlander’s like.’ He squeezed my fingers, encouraging them apart and threading his through them. ‘Give them a chance to know you, and your fine wee lassie. It’s nae good hiding up the hill day after day – not even Tam would insist upon that. I mean, how much can you do to the Folly before the other workers start? And about that. If you have any fooking troubles when Tam’s away on business, you just let me or Mr Nicholson know, you hear? I know

Con Harrison's there. Between us, we'll put the lads straight. But in the meantime, get yourself down into the village. Molly and Spinney tell me they've offered to bring you. Take them up on it. Seek folk out. Caragh Boyne – Jon's wife – she's a good 'un; Simon and Lucinda Geddes too. I believe you met Auld Artur's brother, Mick Duff, and his son, Jimmy?'

The two men I witnessed distilling my first morning here. Artur had made a point of introducing us.

'They're decent sorts too. And don't be so quick to go to bed of an evening. Och, aye, Ishbel and Pol tell me you're barely in the door 'fore you're abed. Now, don't look at me like that. Here in Glasglen, someone doesn't take a shit without someone else smelling it. You should sit with the family. Talk with them. If they speak Gaelic, ask them to translate. They're all good English speakers – even Ishbel, for all she pretends not to be.'

He released my hand and stood.

'Think of it this way, Mrs MacAlister. There's only one, well, two, of you, to change the impression we have of fooking Lowlanders. Why not make it a favourable one, eh? Prove *us* wrong.'

A little nub of anger tried to grow. Why was it up to *me* to fit in? I was the stranger here, the incomer. Surely, it was up to the others to make me feel at home, especially when I'd left mine behind.

But for that, I'd only myself to blame.

'Who's going to prove *me* wrong?' I asked, rather more forcefully than I intended.

Much to my surprise, he reached over and held my cheek. 'All of us, lass. If you just let us.'

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The following week Fen and I not only shifted into the Folly, the delightful, clatter-filled Mary Todd joining us, but I met the first of the workers. When they understood from Mr Gordon that I was to oversee their labours, there was an uproar.

As birleyman, Con Harrison heard their complaints (‘Fooked if I’ll take orders from a lass’, ‘No incomer’s going to be in charge of me’, and so on) and reached a decision. Fortunately, he saw the protests for what they mostly were: a convenient excuse to avoid the work. The men were told in no uncertain terms if they didn’t meet their obligations then they either had to repay their debts to their tacksman in some other way, or ‘grow a pair of staines’ and obey the Lowlander lassie.

Most of the objections came from young lads with cocky grins and a swagger that would have done a city lordling proud. They turned up at the Folly together. The ringleader was a short, stocky fellow, Shamus Connor, a crofter’s son. There were also the Dorward cousins, Dave and Duncan, and the village drunkard, Brandon Stokes, a widower who would rouse the lads to defiance. It was tiresome.

Then there was Patrick Stokes, Brandon’s son. Such a contrast to his father, Patrick was quiet, serious, with a tendency to lower his head whenever I spoke. It was his da did all the talking. Brandon was a barrel-chested man of middling age with muscled arms and hands like shovels. He might have been handsome except for the broken veins riddling his cheeks and nose. He also reeked of drink. I’d encountered his kind before. By all

accounts he'd never stopped grieving for his wife, who'd died three years ago. He preferred to live in a state of intoxication, neglecting his land, his house, his duties, uncaring of the effect on his son or his neighbours.

Mr Gordon's tone when he addressed him revealed much.

'Thought you said Patrick was going to labour on your behalf, Brandon?' said Mr Gordon. 'That you were too busy modifying your barn for sheep and kine to spend time here?'

'Aye,' slurred Mr Stokes, swaying slightly. 'I did. But I wanted to lay my peepers on the incomer, dinnae I? See who my lad'd be working for.' He pushed out his chest and folded his arms, trying to fix his gaze on me.

'He'll be working for me, Brandon, repaying what's owed,' said Mr Gordon. 'Lest you're willing to pick up a trowel and help Con Harrison?'

It wasn't the last I saw of Brandon Stokes.

Some were cooperative, including Torrie's husband, Hamish, who appeared keen to befriend me. There was also a charming lad, Filib Mackenzie. Filib went out of his way to address me courteously and engage in conversation. He also told Hamish to pull his brash Dorward cousins into line, which Hamish amicably tried to do. I couldn't help but wonder what Torrie would say if she knew how accommodating her husband was.

Filib didn't seem to care what others thought or whispered about me, and for that, I was grateful. If only the hounds would tolerate his presence, I would have had him commence work inside the Folly, but the one time I tried, the dogs growled and slavered, hackles raised. I was unable to settle them until Filib retreated out the door.

> 'Must smell the sheep on me,' he'd said nervously, keeping his distance. I scolded Bran and Sceólang that day. I should have trusted them.



A few mornings later, I was in the doorway, ledger in hand, greeting the lads as they arrived, checking off names. The mountains were wreathed in mist and the loch was obscured by a fine veil of rain. Pushing his way through the workers was Brandon Stokes, leading an unhappy Patrick by

the wrist. He must have heard that Mr Gordon and some of the men had gone to Kildrummie to see the cooper there.

Determined to interrupt me as I issued tasks for the day, Brandon Stokes took it upon himself to explain everything I said and mock it as well, using a mixture of Gaelic and English. The lads began nudging each other, sneering and muttering. Patrick's cheeks were infused with colour and his efforts to dissuade his da only made matters worse. I allowed Brandon Stokes a few more minutes and then stopped reading from my list. I tucked it into the ledger I was carrying and walked over to him.

Astonished, he fell silent.

'Mr Stokes,' I began, loudly, hoping my voice carried to the barn where Con Harrison was talking to the Marr brothers. 'It's evident you know more about this project, the debts accrued and work involved than I do, so how about you take over?' I held out the ledger.

The hammering on the roof ceased. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Con Harrison peering out of the barn, brows raised.

'Mr Gordon's instructions are very clear,' I continued. 'They're all there, in writing. You can relay them to the lads yourself. Save me the trouble.' I knew full well the man could neither read nor write.

A flash of panic crossed his face before he took a step back, palms up. 'That's no job for me, lassie. I be no lackey.'

'And neither am I, Mr Stokes. I'm paid to do this – paid by *your* tacksman.' Didn't do any harm to remind them all. 'I'm simply trying to do my job.'

Mr Stokes chuckled as if I'd said something humorous, only he looked confused, then angry.

'You're very welcome to check.' Again, I thrust the ledger towards him.

'Ye ken who ye remind me of, kittie?' Mr Stokes drawled so all present heard. 'That Alice lassie. Dinnae she, lads? She liked to remind folk who she worked for as well. *Work*.' Mr Stokes snickered, then added an aside in Gaelic, nudging Ewan Morrice, another older troublemaker, in the ribs. 'Well, I'm not one to stand in the way of a lassie doin' her *work*.' He glared as if the power of his unfocused gaze alone would fell me.

When I remained unmoved, he gave his son a sharp clyte around the ears. 'And dinnae ye ever try and silence me again, lad, ye hear?' He staggered off down the hill, never once looking back.

The hammering above recommenced. With a nod of approval, Con Harrison withdrew. The lads dispersed quickly, but not before Ewan Morrice made a scoffing noise. Patrick gave me an apologetic smile, before heading into the garden.

Hamish loitered nearby, waiting until I gave him a reassuring wave before gathering his tools. Filib also hung back.

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Thank you.'

He lingered briefly, nodded, then joined the lads in the barn.

Brandon Stokes never appeared at Tam's Folly again, not then, but I heard from Mary, who had it from her da, that he still had plenty to say about me each night in Molly's shebeen.

As the days went by and I delegated tasks each morning, the sneers and complaints (all in Gaelic) slowly lost their vehemence. Ewan Morrice was the exception, as if he felt obliged to maintain the rage at this usurping of the natural order. Whether his ire was directed against me, Lowlanders, women or life – in no particular order – I couldn't be sure. I just refused to be the object of it.

As difficult and frustrating as it was, I made it my mission to win the lads over – Ewan Morrice included. Reverend MacAdam told me I had something to prove to these Highlanders, so I decided I'd start with the stent workers.

I did what any lass in my position would do: resorted to unabashed bribery. I brought them all freshly cooked bannocks or oatcakes mid-morning. Before and after school, Pol would gad about with a bladder of peatreek and a horn cup. I'd ensure each and every worker was poured a generous gill of whisky – over and above their allotted measure. Mary provided the midday ration.

Before long, they forgot to complain about their work and at the end of the day, with sustenance and whisky in their bellies, began to bid me good evening – in English.

Rarely did the same lads appear more than three days in a row, as they also had responsibilities to their own land, and spirit to make. In their place, others came, and I'd have to start all over again, using food, smiles, praise and, above all, bloody whisky.

When they weren't travelling about the countryside, Rory-With-A-Story, Red Ralph, Gap-Toothed Rupert and Niall Mavers made very

welcome appearances. Their obvious friendship with me helped bring around the last of the more recalcitrant lads.

At the end of each day, I would tally up the figures, deducting and adding, unable to help looking back over the pages, sometimes pulling out the older ledgers shelved neatly in Mr Gordon's office to double-check I was reading them aright. They told their own story.

Most of Glasglen owed Mr Gordon stent or boon work – and not just because he was tacksman and held the villagers under certain agreements, but because, over and over, he'd paid for their equipment, their animals, waived lease money, covered the services of a doctor, medicines from an apothecary, grain for stills, the skills of the midwife, fines. On it went, columns and columns of expenses over the years that all added up. And that was before I took into consideration the wages of Reverend MacAdam and Mr Nicholson. As far as I could see neither the kirk nor the Society in Scotland for the Propagating of Christian Knowledge – responsible for the schools – had paid a penny. No wonder the peatreek was so important; it maintained the village and everyone in it. The money earned from its sale ensured they survived. The proof was all there, in Mr Gordon's ledgers. I began to see illicit distilling in a new light. A very forgiving one.

After a few weeks of humouring and herding the men, getting to know them, and getting them accustomed to me, it was time to take up Spinney and Molly's offer, swallow my incomer pride, and come down from the Folly.

See if I could placate the rest of the village.



One morning, as soon as the lads commenced work, I put on a clean shift, tidied my hair, washed my face and hands and, with Molly and Spinney beside me, headed into the village. Mary offered to accompany us as well, bless her, but I declined. We couldn't both be absent.

Mary gave me a shopping list, some wool to deliver for dyeing, eggs to exchange for fish, nails for the smith to straighten. I had the reverend's kerchief to return. I thought I might also call in at the schoolhouse.

The chill as we headed down the track made my bones ache, and I could scarce see for the tears filling my eyes. It was mid-October and already so

damn cold. I thought of Edinburgh in far fonder terms than I ever had when I lived there and began to wonder if the villagers Molly said were placing bets on how long I'd remain were right, and I'd fail to last the winter.

A pearly brume hovered above the loch; the spindly trees upon the islet, hungry fingers yearning skywards. Men were adrift in their boats, including the oldest man in the village, fisherman Bobbie Wilson. I caught sight of Torrie on my way down the hill, Aoife strapped to her back, her two wee laddies chasing chickens. She saw me and turned aside abruptly, saying something sharp to the twins. They stopped in their tracks, shoulders slumping, and returned to her side. Her belly was growing larger by the day. She knelt by a wee patch of dirt outside her house and began to prod and poke the sorry plants with a tool. Hamish was already working up at the Folly.

It hadn't occurred to me that Hamish's stent work would mean more responsibilities for Torrie. The bairns, the wean, the endless domestic tasks plus whatever the farm demanded. I began to wonder how I could mitigate that.

As we drew closer to the village, I spotted men and women labouring in their runrigs, working the infields and outfields. The soil was unforgiving in these parts. The winter vegetables that showed so much promise only weeks before were failing under the sudden bitter cold snap. A few cows and sheep shivered and shook while searching for anything edible in the ground. In a few weeks they'd be moved indoors.

When asked about the lack of livestock, Molly and Spinney explained that before Fen and I arrived, there'd been a number of kine roaming the slopes. In the summer most of the village women and bairns relocated with the herd to the shielings, the lush pastures high in the mountains. They lived in bothies or slept beneath the stars, milked the cows, made cheese, spun and weaved as the kine grew fatter. Then, all but a few would be driven by the men down to the trysts, the cattle fairs held at Falkirk, Crieff and Pitmain, to be sold. The money earned went a long way towards paying lease and providing the necessities to survive the interminable cold winter, including the grain Mr Gordon had brought back from Strathbogie.

To hear the women speak of wintertide, as they did with a mixture of dread and resignation for the short dark days and endless snowbound nights, it sounded almost apocalyptic.

‘A few years ago,’ began Molly, pointing to a row of houses, ‘we lost four souls. Och, that winter was a cruel one, wasn’t it, Spinney?’

‘Half the cattle died,’ nodded Spinney grimly.

Kept either in adjoining byres or inside the blackhouses alongside the humans, the beasts provided extra warmth, but often went hungry. Fed what could be spared, it was never enough, and the cattle became very thin and weak. But when folk are starving and forced to bleed the cows (adding the blood to their oats and broths) to survive, and when the little hay or neeps the cows were given barely sustained them, it wasn’t surprising so many perished.

‘We have to carry them out of the byres come spring and into the sunshine,’ said Molly sadly. ‘They’re so frail, they cannae walk. Many dinnae make it, but keel over and die right there. It’s a sorrowful sight, Mrs MacAlister. Especially when there be folk just as ill and hungry.’

‘It was Tam who worked out how to prevent more losses, wasn’t it, Molly?’ said Spinney, gesturing towards some building works.

The year after losing people and livestock to winter’s ravages, Mr Gordon, fresh from a trip south where he’d been introduced to innovative ways of farming, made the decision to implement new practices – practices that required money, labour and an entirely fresh way of thinking about the land, the beasts, and how they were maintained. Instead of housing them with families throughout the cold months, which led to unsanitary conditions, illness and poor air, he ordered folk to build walls or barns to separate and protect the animals. He then insisted the beasts’ food be supplemented, if not by hay stored over autumn, and neeps and scraps, then by the draff left over from a still run. The sodden barley was usually dried then made into oatcakes. What couldn’t be used was scattered for deer. Mr Gordon ordered the men to bring it back to the glen for their kine and sheep.

‘Good God, did the lads complain,’ said Molly. ‘But the first year, those of us who listened to him and made changes dinnae lose a single animal – nor did we have to blood them. None of the villagers died either. Some called it God’s work, but the rest of us ken it was Mr Gordon.’

He also encouraged the villagers to plant a new crop: potatoes.

‘Ye’d be accustomed to that strange vegetable, I imagine, Mrs MacAlister?’ asked Spinney, indicating a nearby runrig.

I was.

‘For us, it was extraordinary,’ said Molly. ‘I mean, who’d think such a wee scrap of hard shite with all its sprouts and lumps could taste so good? Tam Gordon did. It’s made the difference between hunger and a sated belly.’

‘Not just for the kine either, ye ken,’ added Spinney, rubbing her stomach. ‘But for everyone. Though I be getting mighty sick of them come winter’s end.’

Perhaps I would too.

Unless the villagers taking bets on my endurance were right, and I didn’t last in Glasglen that long.



It didn’t matter how hard Molly and Spinney tried to include me in conversations, how often I smiled, or how hard I tried to use the few Gaelic phrases I’d painstakingly learned, I was given the cold-shoulder by just about everyone I encountered in the village. Och, they served me alright, but usually without a word being exchanged, or with many said over my head and pointedly addressed to Molly and Spinney or whoever else was there – in Gaelic. When we passed by, some spat, most uttering the same word over and over. After Mr Wilson, who showed some kindness, giving me fish in exchange for half a dozen eggs and addressing me (even though I couldn’t understand him), I asked to return to the Folly.

It was telling the lasses didn’t argue.

As we bade farewell, they folded me in their arms and gave me a warm hug.

‘It’ll be better next week,’ Molly whispered in my hair. ‘You’ll see.’

Spinney patted my cheek. ‘They’re a suspicious lot. But they’ll get used to ye, lass, dinnae worry.’

Would they? I wondered silently.

‘How was it, missus?’ asked Mary when I brought the purchases into the kitchen.

‘What does *neach-brathaidh* mean?’ I placed the fish on the table and waited.

Mary’s eyes flashed. ‘Traitor,’ she finally admitted.

‘*Traitor?*’ I sank onto the bench, the wind knocked out of me. ‘Why would they call me that?’

Mary wiped her hands on her apron and sat heavily on the opposite bench. ‘Because they fear yer another Alice, informing on Mr Gordon and the rest of us to the excise.’

I rubbed my face wearily. ‘Did she?’

Mary shrugged. ‘Maybe. It was after she came that real troubles with the excise started. First, all the ankers were seized by that gauger, Gillespie. Then, Mr Gordon was injured trying to defend the lads—’ her finger drew a line across her cheek, ‘and arrested as well.’

I regarded her steadily. ‘Do *you* think Alice was a traitor?’

What I really wanted to ask was, *Do you think I am?*

Mary sighed and stared thoughtfully towards the back door, which was open to let the smoke from the kitchen hearth escape.

‘As far as I ken,’ she began, her voice distant, ‘Alice only left the village to go and see her folk. So, unless she was up to nae good on those trips, I dinnae see how she could have betrayed anyone. Anyhow, she loved the Gordons, Mr Gordon especially. Saw him like a da, despite what some say.’ Clicking her tongue softly, she patted my arm. ‘Dinnae worry, Mrs MacAlister. Folk just need time.’

Aye, but how much? I imagined myself an old bent crone, shuffling through the village, still being whispered about and ignored. I didn’t need time and neither did they.

What I needed was a fooking miracle.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN



‘Open up! Open up in the name of the king!’

There was a dull pounding on the door. Mary and I exchanged a fretful look.

‘That’s an English voice, Mrs,’ hissed Mary, throwing down the potato she was peeling and wiping her hands.

I’d already gleaned the accent. It’s what it signified that made me dash out of the kitchen and through the hallway. I pulled open the front door to find a redcoat standing on the step, another behind him. I swallowed my dismay.

The redcoat gave a half-bow. ‘Lieutenant Reynaud Jacobs, Mrs—?’

‘MacAlister,’ I said, opting for calm. ‘I’m Mr Gordon’s housekeeper.’

‘Mrs MacAlister,’ the lieutenant said gravely. ‘We require your assistance.’

What was a redcoat officer doing here? What possible assistance could I render? I willed my heart to steady. I tried to pay attention to him while also scanning the fields to see who would witness this unwelcome visit, imagining the gossip that would spread; how the worst ideas about me would be confirmed.

The lieutenant’s uniform was filthy. His hair was a dishevelled mess beneath his dusty tricorn, strands sticking to the sides of his blotchy face. The collar of his coat was unbuttoned, exposing a stained linen shirt beneath. The usually creamy lapels were a dull brown. His cuffs were torn,

and his breeks marked by God knew what. His boots were so badly scuffed, a hole was forming at the toe. And he reeked. Of sweat, dirt and weariness.

He looked as if he hadn't slept for some time. The sergeant beside him didn't look much better.

'Are you quite well, sir?' I asked.

He leaned heavily against the doorframe. 'That's a question for the time, isn't it? Truth is, I've been better, Mrs MacAlister.'

Was this it? Was the village about to be raided by the authorities? All their hard-made spirit seized? I tried not to glance at the barn where some had been stored in preparation for the trip north when lease was due on the old Martinmas.

Aware of Mary standing behind me, Con Harrison peering cautiously around the corner of the house, and the Boynes' hammering above having ceased, eyes and ears were upon these redcoats and me. The incomer. The *neach-brathaidh*. I swiftly searched the track and yard for evidence of yet more soldiers or worse, gaugers. There were none. But I did catch a glimpse of Fen and Pol skipping towards the Folly. I had to think, fast.

'I'm sorry to hear that, sir. What is it you think I can assist you with?' I asked evenly, though my mouth was dry, my knees beginning to quake.

The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. He tugged on his coat, took a deep breath, and tucked a fallen fringe beneath the brim of his hat. 'I need to talk to the villagers,' he said. 'About Alice MacIntosh.'

I slowly released the breath I'd been holding. This wasn't about whisky or stills. Nor was it a raid. 'I see.'

The lieutenant swung towards the sergeant. 'I told you this wasn't a waste of time, Manners. They said at the farmhouse there was a woman here who's married to an excise officer—' He turned back to me. 'That's you, isn't it? Mrs MacAlister.'

'My late husband,' I replied, twisting the ring on my finger.

The lieutenant glanced at it. 'So you understand the law, Mrs MacAlister. The authority of the Crown. I need you to persuade them to talk to me. More than that, I need you to help *me* talk to them.'

Mary gave a sharp intake of breath. God, did this man understand what his presence, what asking *me* for aid would do to my fragile reputation? By coming to the door and making such a request, he was undoing any small gains I'd made.

By now, some of the workers in nearby fields were heading over, most with tools clutched firmly in fists. At the edge of my vision, I saw one of the lads bolt across the outfield and head up the slopes of Ben Ghillean.

‘*Me*, sir?’ I replied eventually.

‘Yes. You.’

I sucked in my breath. God help me.

‘You’re the only one who understands what’s at stake. They all speak in fucking tongues, gurgling and choking. They make no sense whatsoever. And because these ignorant savages cannot speak the king’s English, I make no sense to them. I need to ask if they know anything about Alice.’

He took a step back and, shielding his eyes with a hand, took in the Folly. ‘What are you doing here anyway? Housekeeper? It’s a bloody ruin.’

And here I was thinking how much improved it was.

Before I could explain, Fen, recognising the uniform, broke into a run, Pol on her heels. She threw herself against me, wrapping an arm about my waist, staring at the lieutenant.

Mary grabbed Pol by the arm and pulled him to her. Confused, looking from me to Mary and the officer and back again, he kept quiet. I hugged Fen close and tapped on her back.

It’s alright. Hold me tight, chick. I have a task for you.

My mind was working swiftly. No matter what happened next, I needed to get a warning to Mr Gordon, to the lads. They’d gone into the mountains to inspect their stills.

‘Forgive the interruption, Lieutenant Jacobs, this is my daughter, Fen. Say hello to the nice officer.’ Fen continued to stare. ‘My daughter is deaf, sir, and cannot speak.’

‘Hello, Fen. Aren’t you a lovely young lady?’ said Lieutenant Jacobs, bending slightly and talking loud enough for all Glasglen to hear.

The men from the fields began to form a semicircle behind the lieutenant and sergeant. The sergeant’s hand tightened on his weapon, which wasn’t yet drawn. I needed to tread very carefully.

‘Who’s the laddie?’ asked Lieutenant Jacobs, ignoring the gathering men, their grim mutterings. The air became thick with tension.

I don’t know what sense of preservation took over, but instead of saying Pol was Mr Gordon’s son, I said, ‘He lives down at the farmhouse.’

The lieutenant lost interest.

‘Before I do anything, sir,’ I said, ‘I need to make sure my daughter and the farm boy attend to their chores. Idle hands, you understand.’

The lieutenant graciously waved his permission and turned slightly. Upon seeing all the workers, he began to frown. ‘What’s this? A welcoming party? Or something else?’ He covered the hilt of his sword with his palm.

‘Want I should give them a fright, sir?’ asked the sergeant, unhooking his pistol. ‘Let the savages know who’s in charge?’

The workers surged, reducing the distance between them and the redcoats.

‘Please, gentlemen,’ I said in my sternest voice, raising my hands. I caught sight of Molly Cullen *and* the reverend racing up the hill. ‘There are children present. Women too. Allow me to send the bairns away and then let us talk in a civilised fashion.’

The sergeant had the grace to look ashamed. The lieutenant pinched the bridge of his nose, sighed, then held up his hands in mock surrender. ‘My apologies, madam. I’m overwrought. Continue, please.’

The workers took a step back.

‘Now, Fen,’ I began, momentarily relieved, bringing my face level with hers. ‘I want you to go and fetch some water from the burn. Pol can help.’ I sent a warning look to the lad. ‘Once you’ve done that, and it may take a few trips, I want you to collect the eggs from the barn.’

The entire time I was talking, I was also giving Fen a completely different set of instructions with my fingers. I waved them in front of my face, by my side, touching my shoulder, my arms, my chest.

Go find Mr Gordon, Fen. He’s with Mick Duff, at his bothy. Take Pol. He’ll know where to go and if he doesn’t, fetch Peigi. Tell Mr Gordon soldiers are here. Maybe excise. He’ll know what to do.

‘If she’s deaf,’ said the lieutenant suddenly, ‘how can she understand you?’ He’d been watching closely.

‘She reads my lips,’ I said, and gave Fen an encouraging nod.

Fen didn’t wait to be told twice; she took Pol’s hand and they scooted past the sergeant and the gathered men and ran across the fields and up the slope.

I forced myself to focus on the lieutenant.

‘Now, let me see if I understand. You want me to translate your questions about Alice MacIntosh to the villagers? Be your interpreter.’

‘You have it exactly, dear lady.’

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you, sir. But I’m no more versed in Gaelic than you. I cannot understand a word these people say either.’ I indicated the restless men. As if on cue, they all began to speak loudly, roughly, in tongues. I had to bite back a laugh.

The lieutenant’s face fell. ‘Then, how do I get the information I need? How do *you* make yourself understood?’ He frowned at the growing racket. Honestly, the men were having far too good a time with this. ‘Sergeant,’ he growled, clearly becoming angry. ‘I think you might be right. A lesson is in order—’

‘Perhaps I can be of assistance?’ A red-faced Reverend MacAdam pushed his way forward to stand before the officer.

‘You can speak the king’s English?’ said the lieutenant, looking him up and down, hand still atop his sword.

‘I can, sir.’ Reverend MacAdam was unctuous, inclining his head, smiling broadly. ‘And if ye want to ask the villagers about Alice MacIntosh, I’d be very happy to help. We’re all concerned about the lass’s whereabouts. We’ve been saying prayers for her safe return ever since she disappeared.’

This seemed to appease the lieutenant somewhat. He nodded sternly, then gazed up at hills, towards the loch, screwing up his eyes. He released a long sigh. ‘Very well, reverend, I’ll gladly take up your offer. I’d like to start immediately, with these folk here.’

I looked in consternation at the dozen or so men who, forgetting for a minute they weren’t meant to understand, fell quiet then began to mumble. Over their heads, I caught Molly’s eye. I half-expected her to shoot me a look of contempt – after all, these soldiers were here because of me. Well, me and Alice MacIntosh. Instead, she gave a great big grin followed by a wink.

She walked straight through the workers and joined the reverend, saying something to him in Gaelic, swinging her wide hips and tossing her curls. She really was a very attractive woman. Both the sergeant and the lieutenant noticed.

‘What did she say?’ asked the lieutenant.

The reverend gave a slow smile. ‘This here be Mrs Molly Cullen who owns the finest establishment in these mountains.’ The only one. ‘She suggests that rather than ask your questions out here in the open, where it’s mighty dreich and cold, that you come to her shebeen and ask them there beside the fire over a dram or two.’

The lieutenant looked suspiciously at Molly, but she met his gaze with a wide-eyed one of her own. He glanced at the sputtering sky, the heavy clouds lumbering over the mountains from the north. The wind chose that moment to gust, almost sending his hat flying. ‘What do you say, Manners?’

‘A mighty fine idea,’ said the sergeant, one eye on Molly.

‘Well, let’s be about it then, shall we?’ said the lieutenant. ‘After you, madam, reverend.’

The reverend gestured for the lieutenant to precede him down the hill, then paused. ‘I’ve an idea, sir. How about I leave you at the shebeen with Molly, who has some English—’ He stared at her fixedly.

‘A wee bit,’ Molly obliged, holding her fingers apart to demonstrate.

‘—and while she gets you settled, I’ll spread word that anyone who knows anything about Alice join you there. That way, you’re not wasting time talking to those who ken naught. Ye look like ye could do with a wee dram. What say ye?’

Clearly, the reverend’s suggestion was most agreeable. The lieutenant swung to me and gave a formal bow. ‘Thank you, Mrs MacAlister.’

‘I did naught, sir.’

‘On the contrary …’ disagreed the lieutenant, indicating the reverend. ‘But I do beg another favour. If you hear anything, anything at all that gives any clue as to Alice’s whereabouts, where she went from here, you’ll let me know, won’t you?’

God, did that mean he was remaining in Glasglen?

‘A note to Fort William will suffice,’ he added. ‘Address it to Lieutenant Reynaud Jacobs.’ He tipped his tricorn, then, with a sad smile, accompanied the reverend down the hill. At that moment, I saw a flutter. A huge white sheet was draped over bushes on the next hill. Caragh Boyne had raised the signal warning soldiers or excise were near. Across the glen, on the large peat stack at the base of Cailleach Pass, the same sign appeared and likewise on the slopes that guarded the roads west and south. Fen had done well. Pol, too.

For now, Mr Gordon, his smugglers and their damn whisky were safe. Which meant Glasglen was as well.

I’d naught to feel guilty about, but as I watched the redcoats striding away, and recalled the earnest face of Lieutenant Jacobs and his concern for young Alice MacIntosh, I wondered, who was I protecting? Highlanders

fighting for their survival? Or a bunch of cutthroats responsible for the disappearance of a lass they were convinced was an informer?



I was about to return indoors when I noticed a slender young woman loitering at the edge of the fields. Though we'd not been introduced, I knew who she was. Una Mackenzie, Filib's wife. Unable to labour the last week because he'd been harvesting, but desperate to work off debt, Una had taken her husband's place. Each time I'd tried to introduce myself, the lass had scurried away, head down, plaid over her head. Believing her shy, I'd not forced the issue.

After the lieutenant's visit, I felt it was important to reassure her, she looked so very anxious. I crossed the fields intending to explain, hoping she spoke English.

She was so focused on watching the redcoats depart, she didn't hear me. I gently touched her shoulder.

She cried out, spinning to face me, hands raised defensively.

'Una! It's me, Mrs MacAlis …' My voice died.

Una's left eye was swollen and half-closed. A livid bruise surrounded it, matching the one across her mouth. Her bottom lip was badly split, dried blood crusted along it. There was a deep cut above her right brow. Taken aback, I simply stared. Then I saw her wrists, her arms.

Bands of blue and violet circled them. Parts were rubbed raw, as if she'd been bound tightly.

'Una,' I whispered. 'What happened? Who's done this to you?'

The injuries appeared fresh. Why had no-one told me she was grievously hurt? I would have sought help. Filib must have known the state she was in. How could he expect her to toil with such dreadful wounds?

In a blinding flash, I knew.

I recalled something I'd witnessed last month. Unaware he was being observed, Filib had punched a curious ewe so hard, the poor creature had collapsed senseless. When I came running over, convinced it had died and demanding an explanation, Filib had coolly told me the beastie had simply dropped before him.

He'd told a bare-faced lie, and he knew I knew. He simply didn't care.

As we confronted each other – me in disbelief and growing anger, he with stony indifferent eyes, eyes I'd once thought warm and inquiring – the sheep rose on unsteady feet and shook itself. I led it away to join the rest of the flock, my mind filled with buzzing bees and raging ants. I remembered how Bran and Sceólang had responded to him. Filib was not the man I thought he was. He was something altogether different but also sickeningly familiar.

'Did Filib do this to you?' I asked Una softly, careful not to stand too close.

She shot me a wild look, horror filling her eyes. Before I could prevent it, she began to run, favouring one leg, desperately checking over her shoulder lest I followed.

'Wait, Una!' I called and began to chase after her until I realised that was the worst thing I could do. I slowed and stopped.

I watched until I could no longer see her, my heart heavy, fury rising. To think, the lad I had thought so courteous and hardworking was doing that to his sweet, fine-boned wife.

But what if I was wrong? What if it wasn't Filib? Remembering the sheep, the hounds, I knew I was not. I turned to someone who could confirm what I feared: Mary Todd. I hadn't even finished asking when I saw the truth in her face.

'Filib wasn't always like that,' she said. 'He's a good man, really. Ask anyone. He just can't help himself when the temper takes him. Da and the other lads reckon Una's to blame. She drives him to it.'

I made a scoffing noise. 'A good man doesn't harm a woman, Mary, no matter how angry he gets, no matter what she does. The fault does not lie with Una,' I said firmly. 'There's no excuse. Not for that.'

I'd heard the same rationale trip out of William's mouth in the early days. 'I've the spleen', 'It's the drink', 'This is your fault', 'You made me do it'. Later, he didn't even bother with excuses.

I went to Mr Gordon and told him what I'd seen. Who I believed was responsible. He acted immediately.

Filib didn't even deny it when Mr Gordon challenged him. Instead, he began to weep, and quietly apologised for what he'd done, said he was horribly ashamed and that he truly loved Una. I didn't believe it for a moment, and it was evident Mr Gordon wasn't fooled either. Filib was told that from that day forth, Una would be coming to live and work at the Folly.

He wasn’t to try and see her or persuade her to return to him. If he broke his word, he’d be exiled from the glen. He didn’t argue. Instead, under the watchful eyes of Mr Gordon and Auld Artur, he packed some belongings and disappeared into the hills to his bothy.

There was talk in the village, of course there was. But men like Filib charmed the very birds from the trees and hid their true selves. There were those who blamed Una for his actions. They also blamed me and Mr Gordon, said we should have minded our own business, that couples always catter-battered, and that a husband was entitled to discipline his wife.

This wasn’t a matter of disagreements or retribution. Filib was naught but a bully-boy and coward who, the moment he was confronted by Mr Gordon, retreated with his tail between his legs. I just prayed Una and, over time, the villagers, would see that too.

Una turned out to be a sweet wee lass with an unassuming disposition. Possessed of a freckled countenance that was revealed as the bruises faded and her torn lip healed, she had a timid smile and wide blue eyes. Her hair, once washed and brushed, shone like the copper still in the barn, even on the dullest days. Seventeen years old, she’d been married to Filib for two. After her ma and da died weeks apart, he’d courted her swiftly and, once they wed, had moved into her parents’ old cottage and taken over the croft.

Una’s story was heartbreakingly familiar. Filib hadn’t always been a monster. He’d been kind and loving, until one day he wasn’t. By then, friends and even the reverend and Mr Nicholson had been discouraged from calling. Una was always sick or busy. When she lost two babies in two years, folk started to believe she was cursed. That’s what Filib would say over a dram in Molly’s shebeen. Certainly, she began to look as if she was: pale, withdrawn, and thinner than the reeds that lined the loch. Anyway, people had enough to worry about what with their own children, illnesses, harvest, whether there was enough grain for peatreek, how much their cattle would sell for, mounting debt, and avoiding the gaugers.

And so folk quashed their innate sense something wasn’t right, and left Una to Filib’s care. She was his responsibility after all, poor lad. Orphaned when he was but a mite, he’d been raised by his minnie who, in a shocking tragedy, died in a fire that consumed her cottage just days before the wedding. Aye, Filib deserved better than a sickly wife who couldn’t keep a wean.

After Filib left, Una remained skittish for weeks, looking over her shoulder, leaping at strange sounds, sleeping poorly. I'd hear her crying sometimes, but when I asked why, she'd just shake her head miserably.

I understood. For all that she was free of the violence, she wasn't free of Filib. Like a warlock, he'd cast a spell, and it would take more than distance to break it.

It was hard to credit that no-one had intervened to put a stop to Filib's cruelty. Perhaps that's why Una came to regard me as some kind of saviour, cleaving to me in a way I initially found disconcerting. I didn't deserve it. She could scarce speak to Mr Gordon, though I saw her shining eyes following him as he strode about the house and glen. Fen adored Una. Mary tried to resist her affability, but even she was eventually won over. As the days passed and I watched Una's confidence grow, heard her soft giggles and enjoyed her dimpled smile, I marvelled that anyone could hurt such a gentle and obliging creature. She was like a fawn learning to trust the world and I was determined she would never again have cause to feel it had failed her.

I never told Mr Gordon, but there were times I imagined Filib watching from a mountain perch like a golden eagle waiting to pounce and tear its prey limb from bloody limb.

But who was his prey? Una, me or Mr Gordon?

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Following the redcoats' visit, which was blessedly brief (they remained long enough to get blootered and then were helped onto their horses and escorted to the edge of the village with a jug of whisky each), and Una's rescue (as I'd come to think of it), I rose one morning to find my daughter gone.

Unsettled by a nightmare in which the villagers held me captive while they threw stones and chanted cruel words at Fen and Una, I swiftly dressed, swinging my plaid over my shoulders and pulling on boots.

For all the Gordon bairns appeared to have accepted Fen, there were still days they could be spiteful. They'd come to the Folly and pretend to converse with their fingers, their actions nonsensical. They'd invite her to join them at the farmhouse, then exclude her, or jump up and tear away, leaving her alone and confused. They'd head off to school without her, or to the loch, or even for a walk in the mountains to gather berries. One time, they abandoned her by a tarn, leaving her to find her own way home. Just when I thought I'd have to intervene, despite Fen insisting I must not, they'd show great consideration and include her. It drove me to distraction.

Pol never joined in with their meanness. Accustomed to being spurned if not ignored by Fionn and Elspet, he stood by Fen, risking the wrath of his siblings.

'If you let them see it upsets you, they just become worse,' I overheard him telling Fen one day, writing his words in the mud with a stick.

I know, signed Fen.

The crack in my heart widened.

As I stepped into the cold, grey dawn, it was to find Mr Gordon, Auld Artur, Mick, Big Billy and Dom standing in the yard. Much to my relief, Fen was with them.

‘Fen!’ I exclaimed, working hard to hide my concern.

‘There you are.’ ‘There’s naught to worry about, Mrs MacAlister,’ said Mr Gordon, putting a gentle hand on Fen’s shoulder. My daughter smiled up at him and my heart somersaulted.

‘Good morrow, Mrs MacAlister,’ said the men in unison, beaming at me.

‘*Madainn mhath*, lads.’ I tried to catch Fen’s eye.

What are you doing out here? Why didn’t you wake me?

The hounds woke me, she answered. *I followed them outside and saw Mr Gordon.* Fen’s face was alight. *Guess what? The men want me to teach them. Mr Gordon too.*

Teach them what? I looked at Fen in puzzlement. ‘You want to learn finger-talk?’ My question was addressed to Mr Gordon, but he gestured for the lads to answer.

Auld Artur gave Dom a nudge. ‘Aye, lass. More to the point we want ye lassie to teach us. We heard Mr Nicholson has her instructing the bairns at the school. Since we cannae go to school anymore—’

‘Would nae fit betwixt bench and desk,’ said Big Billy, rubbing his stomach.

‘—we were hoping it can come to us.’ Dom grinned.

Mr Gordon took over. ‘If you could spare Fen for an hour or two now and then, the lads and I would like her to teach us, and anyone else inclined.’

I was so taken aback, it wasn’t until Fen tugged my skirts, I remembered to translate, though it was evident she understood most of it. ‘Why do you want to learn it?’ I asked them. ‘It’s meant for deaf people.’

‘Aye, we ken,’ said Auld Artur. ‘But ye use it and yer not *bodhar*. It had me thinking.’

‘Careful, Art,’ said Mick. ‘Ye might hurt yerself.’

Art shot him a pained look. ‘None of us can understand what ye and Fen be saying to each other. The reverend and Molly told us how ye said one thing to the redcoat while telling Fen something else entirely. That’s a mighty handy skill.’ He hesitated.

It was Mr Gordon who finished. ‘Art here thought it could be very useful in our … line of work.’ He gave a meaningful look.

Ah.

Big Billy squeezed Fen’s shoulder. ‘We remembered how you and Fen were able to blether in front of us the entire journey here and we didn’t ken what ye were saying.’

I bit my tongue. I knew exactly how that felt.

‘Imagine if we could do that – and not just with gaugers, but tinkers and traders.’

‘It’s a secret language,’ said Mr Gordon.

Auld Artur nodded enthusiastically. ‘The excise forbid us to speak Gaelic because, with few exceptions, they dinnae understand a word,’ he jeered.

‘But they cannae stop us moving our hands, can they?’ said Big Billy.

‘Unless they shackle ’em again,’ said Dom dourly.

I regarded the men thoughtfully, trying to shut out Fen’s eager face, her busy fingers, begging, pleading with me to allow her to do this. Behind me, Mary appeared, nodding a greeting to the men. Una loitered in the hallway, too wary to come forward, hanging on every word. I flashed her a reassuring smile even as my mind ticked and whirred.

These men wanted my daughter to train them in her language so they might use it to break the law. Dear God in heaven. It was one thing for me to become complicit in illegal activities, but it was quite another to embroil my daughter.

Fen looked at me so hopefully. I saw Pol heading up towards the Folly to collect Fen for school. Elspet and Fionn were on his heels, no doubt curious about what the lads were discussing with us and not wanting to be left out. Fen noticed them too. Her hands became more incessant. *Ma. Please. Think of the difference it will make*.

I knew then she didn’t mean to the men.

Mr Gordon was regarding me intently; the look on his face made my breath catch. His eyes slid to Fen, then back to me. There were other ways of communicating that didn’t involve speaking.

I closed my hand gently over Fen’s, stilling her busy fingers.

‘Very well,’ I said.

She inhaled sharply, her eyes sparkling.

‘But,’ I said, looking at the men but speaking to Fen, ‘the lessons have to be here or, if Mrs Fraser gives permission, at the farmhouse, and after school.’

The lads exchanged grins. Mr Gordon nodded.

‘Aye, aye, of course,’ said Auld Artur.

‘There be no problem with that, lass,’ said Big Billy. ‘Tell me, how do I say, *Are you happy to teach us* to wee Fen?’

It was Fen who showed him, then she answered his question by bobbing her head and forming a fist. *Yes*, *aye*.

The men began to chuckle and slapped each other’s backs.

Mr Gordon ever so gently touched her head. ‘Thank you.’ He spoke and signed the words.

The men nodded enthusiastically. Damn, if my eyes didn’t begin to swim. Fen’s cheeks pinkened, but before she could respond, Pol, who’d reached us, piped up.

‘Can I learn too?’

‘Learn what?’ panted Fionn, skidding to a halt beside his younger brother.

‘What’s she going to teach them? This?’ Elspet reached Pol’s other side, waving her hands back and forth as if parting a storm of midges.

‘She is, Elspet,’ I said, hands on Fen’s shoulders. ‘As I told you, it’s a special language and, just as she teaches Mr Nicholson and the pupils who want to learn at school, Fen is going to teach your da, the lads here, and some others how to speak it.’

‘But how can she be a teacher? She’s just a bairn,’ objected Elspet. ‘She’s not even as old as me.’

‘And ye dinnae *speak* it,’ added Fionn cockily. ‘Hands cannae talk.’

‘Och, lad, that’s where ye be wrong. They can,’ added Big Billy, and to prove his point, made a very rude gesture with his fingers.

Fen covered her mouth. I bit back a laugh. Pol wasn’t so successful nor Mary and Auld Artur.

The bairns looked at their da, waiting for him to rebuke Big Billy.

‘That’ll teach ye for giving back-jaw,’ laughed Mr Gordon.

‘She might be younger,’ said Auld Artur, grinning, ‘but she’s a darn sight cleverer than ye pair.’ He angled two fingers at the siblings. ‘Ye’d do well to take a leaf out of Mr Nicholson’s book and learn from her too.’

Afraid Auld Artur’s words would stir up more trouble, I was about to suggest we go indoors, when Elspet elbowed Fionn in the ribs and together, they approached Fen.

‘Do ye think ye could teach us as well?’ asked Elspet.

I would have laughed, if I also hadn’t wanted to cry – not with sadness, but with release, with the ridiculousness of it all. Was this what it took? For the endorsement of their da and other folk the bairns respected to truly appreciate what my lassie could do?

Well, I thought as we headed back inside for warm milk and the morning gills of whisky before attending chores, I wouldn’t hold my breath just yet; after all, the Gordon bairns, like the folk of Glasglen, were as mercurial as the autumn skies. And just to prove my point, it began to rain.

Again.



When Caragh Boyne, the slater’s wife, Spinney Larnach and Molly Cullen, who ran the shebeen, learned Fen was teaching the men a secret language, they insisted on learning it too. Led by Molly, who said she’d seen the power of this language in action, the three of them came to the house the day after Fen held her first lesson. Worried it would take up too much of Fen’s time, I offered to teach them in her stead.

While Fen taught the lads in the barn, the women gathered in the kitchen. There were five altogether, including Mary and Una, who both begged to be included.

It was some time before we settled to a lesson – the women first insisting on a tour of the Folly – but once we did, they were quick learners. They came trice a week, after they’d finished their morning tasks and before the bairns finished school. Over tea, bannocks, oatcakes, peatreek and whatever food they chose to share or could spare, they slowly learned to use their fingers and faces in lieu of words. Even though they were native Gaelic speakers learning English signs, it worked. Consequently, I was able to add to my limited Gaelic as well.

Of course, being women, we also blethered, and on the days they came (sometimes a new face would appear), I’m not sure who learned more – the women of Glasglen, or me, the incomer who was slowly proving that not all

Lowlanders were ‘a fooking bunch of Sassenach-loving cowards without a mind between them’. Equally, I learned that not all Highlanders were ignorant, warmongering savages either.

At night, Fen and I would lie abed and marvel at the differences in what our finger-talking pupils desired to learn, the words and expressions they thought important. Of course, there were phrases to be memorised lest an excise officer or redcoat appeared, warnings to give, actions to take. But while the men were content with those, the women wanted more. They were also passing on what they were learning to some other lasses in the village, women who weren’t yet comfortable enough or capable of learning from me. They wanted to be able to ask after each other without the men knowing. And so, they mastered how to ask if a lass was happy, content, in need of supplies (their men being too proud to ask) or company.

They also asked me to show them how they could tell each other if they were feeling ill or, more importantly, ill-used.

Seems the women weren’t as upset about my interference in Una’s affairs as I’d thought.

Mr Gordon was delighted with what was happening, and not just the lessons. The Folly roof was almost complete, the outer walls nearly finished. Soon it would be watertight, and the real work could begin, work that would test just how accepted I really was in this tight-knit community that thought naught of breaking the law.

Ishbel hirpled up the hill some days. She’d quiz me on the house and even joined a couple of the finger-talking lessons. When I slid fresh oatcakes from the griddle onto a plate and placed a small dish of freshly churned butter I’d made beside it, Ishbel raised her brows in approval. Una had shown me how to perfect the heat of the griddle so I didn’t burn the oatcakes, and I was fast becoming a dab hand at bannocks as well. Damn if my chest didn’t swell with pride.

Much to my surprise, Molly, Caragh and Spinney became regular visitors beyond any lessons. They’d sit and chat, or roll up their sleeves and help me, Mary and Una scrub a wall, sop up a puddle or wash plate. While we worked, they’d share stories of Glasglen, of the people who’d lived and died there, stories lodged deep in the mountains, in the dying heather, under the jagged rocks, and within the watery depths of the tarns. I shared these with Fen each night, and Mary and Una too. Mary would oft reciprocate. While she spoke, her face glowing in the flame of the cruisie lamp, I’d

translate for Fen, who sat cross-legged on our straw mattress, eyes glued to my hands and face, captivated.

Twice, I caught Mr Gordon dallying in the hallway outside our bedroom cosy with the four of us, en route to the kitchen, watching, listening, a quaich between his fingers. When he saw me watching him, he'd peel himself away from the wall with a nod, a wistful smile upon his lips before sauntering on his way. It was all I could do not to summon him back and demand a tale from him.

At least, that's what I told myself I wanted.



It was a rare sunshiny day, and I was busy distributing the midday gill to the workers when Molly and Caragh came upon me. They helped themselves to a drink and complimented me on the peatreek.

'I didn't make it,' I said, laughing at the very idea. 'I wouldn't know where to start.'

Almost every house in Glasglen had their own small still – in barns, byres, the kitchen or near the house, close to a burn. Called sma' stills, operating them was another of a woman's never-ending tasks. The whisky made in these was legal as it was considered a household requirement; not that any household, or lass, adhered to that. Therefore, they were very busy pieces of apparatus, running constantly, always making surplus, which was naturally sold or traded.

Horrified I didn't know how to operate a still let alone a wee one, Molly and Caragh, along with Spinney ('Best distiller in Glasglen,' said Molly. 'Just dinnae tell the lads,' added Caragh), took it upon themselves to try and teach me how to operate the one in the Folly's barn. They showed me how to measure the correct amount of grain and water, keep the heat underneath it even, and so much more.

My first batch of peatreek was a disaster that left everyone coughing and spluttering. I had let the still run too long and too hot.

'Ye cannae rush these things, lass,' scolded Spinney. 'Ye need patience.'

The women taught me to let the still drip then flow and to cut the run of liquid before it reached its end. I enjoyed the steady trickle, the smell and the steam that floated like a summer mist and drifted out the barn doors.

When I finally had a batch that didn’t make the lasses choke, Spinney slapped me across the shoulders. ‘We’ll make a Highlander of ye yet, lass.’

Aye, and sheep would become distillers.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Samhain, or All Hallow's Eve, dawned bright and frosty. The sky was a cerulean blue, turning the mountains and reaped fields into a palette of viridian, sage, rich browns and golds. This was the day the border between the living and the dead was at its thinnest. The time when spirits would walk the earth again.

I awoke wondering if William might pay a visit. Or would he go to his other wife and bairns?

Seated between Fen and Mr Gordon in the half-empty kirk, I dismissed thoughts of William and tried to focus on Reverend MacAdam's sermon. This was impossible as the press of a firm shoulder and the occasional brush of a knee proved very distracting. Every time Mr Gordon made contact, I held my breath as heat flushed my body. Fen squeezed my hand, tapping out a message into my palm.

You alright, Ma?

The mischievous look in her eyes suggested she knew very well what ailed me. I merely squeezed her fingers back. Hard. Her shoulders shook with laughter. Little kit.

All too soon, we tumbled out of the kirk into what remained of the day and preparations for tonight's celebration – a ceilidh by the loch.

Two huge bonfires had been built on the shore. For the last couple of days, Fen, Pol, Mary, Una, Mabelle and Fionn and Elspet had been painstakingly carving faces into the neeps, which now sat in varying stages of decay atop the kitchen table, ready to be placed around the Folly and the

farmhouse. Costumes had been assembled; masks were crafted. It was important to disguise ourselves from the evil spirits set to roam, and trick them into revealing themselves so we were safe from harm.

Apples for dooking and peeling (the peel to reveal the name of a future lover) had been gathered and stored in a basket by the kitchen door. Oats, whisky, cream, butter and eggs had been squirrelled away. The fishing families ventured beyond the loch into the larger waterways to ensure a good catch, while some of the lads had waded into the burns. A deer had been culled and that very morning was mounted on a huge spit. Already, some of the men were taking turns to ensure the flesh didn't char.

The rich scents of baking, broiling, griddling and roasting wafted as we walked past the busy farmhouse and up the hill. I was surprised to learn that a portion of what was being prepared would be put aside for the fairies, an offering to ensure the livestock didn't starve over winter. I couldn't help but think the oats, neeps and other grains portioned for the fae would be better served feeding hungry kine and sheep.

By the time Fen and I reached the Folly, we'd lost Mr Gordon and the hounds to Auld Artur, but gained Pol. Mary and Una had finished all the cooking and had doused not only the kitchen hearth, but the one in Mr Gordon's study as well. These would be relit later with a torch brought from the bonfires, symbolising the end of one year and a fresh start to a new one. In the meantime, the Folly was colder than Satan's heart.

When I went to the nearby burn to fetch water so I could wash my hair, I paused briefly to watch Fen and Pol helping Fionn, Elspet and Peigi gather twigs and whatever greenery they could to finish decorating their masks. The way they worked together with a growing ease and familiarity filled me with a warmth the sunshine couldn't match. Even Peigi, who was oft aloof, appeared to be enjoying herself.

I'd had very little do with Peigi since moving to the Folly. On the rare nights I'd been in the farmhouse, she'd not gone out of her way to talk to me or interact with Fen, but she hadn't been rude either – not like the others. I would study her sometimes, usually when she sang or played the pipe. Such a pretty young thing, almost a woman yet still child-like and vulnerable. Both proud and partly ashamed of her charms, her changing body, she drew eyes and comments. One moment she was a gangly fawn, the next an elegant swan. I'd seen the way the lads behaved when she passed, following her with longing and admiration in their eyes. I oft saw

Patrick Stokes gazing after her with a wistful expression. Mary told me that not more than a year ago, she'd been running about with him, climbing the large rocks atop Ben Ghillean, combing the forest that ringed Ben Gaothach, skinning her knees and coming home bedraggled and windblown. Barely a day passed when, after completing their chores, the bairns didn't get up to mischief. Then Alice had arrived, and Patrick's head had been turned. It had broken Peigi's heart and overnight she'd altered. Since then, she'd eschewed games and the company of all but Torrie's bairns and her siblings, ignoring the other lads and their yearning looks, dismissing Patrick altogether.

Och, lass, enjoy it while you can, I thought. A woman had such a brief time, if she was blessed, to wield any power. The moment she tied herself to one man, like her virginity, that power was lost forever. We became little more than unpaid servants, good only for bedding and babies, cleaning and cooking; at the mercy of the man's temperament.

I thought of Una. Of William.

Until we were exchanged for a more youthful or preferable version.

I wondered what was in store for Fen. I prayed she'd remain a child a wee bit longer, that the world would stay at arm's length. But I could see the signs of womanhood upon her, and I wasn't the only one. She would be a beauty, aye, a beauty with a strong mind. Was that an advantage or disadvantage? Try as I might to ensure her deafness didn't hold her back, the truth was, it wouldn't be her disability but other people who would do that. People who chose only to see what she couldn't do or did differently and underestimated her as a result.

Or worse, rejected her. Like her father.

At least Peigi had a decent da. Glasglen had its share of tyrant fathers. Everywhere did, I supposed. One had only to listen to Mary for half a day to know there were daughters in the village treated as little more than property. Or wives who may not have been beaten with fists but were downtrodden. Why, some lads cared for their kine and peatreek better than their lasses.

If ever I found a man deserving of my love, it would be one who valued me, saw my worth. Och, listen to me – *found a man* – as if he was a missing shoe. Perhaps that was apt. If I'd learned anything over the years, it was that I wanted someone who fitted me, someone with whom I was comfortable. Like a pair of reliable shoes, we'd tread life's path together.

Lost in thought, I was urging the back door of the Folly open with my bottom when I collided with two masked men in the kitchen. I let out a sharp squeal and almost dropped the bucket I'd just filled.

'It's alright, Mrs MacAlister, it's alright.' Mary appeared and took the bucket. 'It's just Rory-With-A-Story and Gap-Toothed Rupert cleansin' the house. We dinnae want any bogles trapped when the new day dawns, do we? Get to it, lads.'

Rupert and Rory leapt about wildly, swathed in cloaks made of feathers and masks assembled from foliage and God knows what. They waved smoking stalks of what appeared to be cabbage, chuckling like loons.

I flapped my hands to disperse the stinking smoke, coughing and sputtering.

'Go and cleanse the other rooms, you overgrown brownies,' I begged.

With loud yelps and chuckles, the lads obeyed. A slightly nervous Una giggled.

I slumped on a bench, half-laughing and shaking my head. I'd warned Fen something of what to expect. She was more excited by a Highland Samhain than I was.

'Do ye want some help washin' that lovely hair of yers?' Mary tilted her head. She was fascinated by my hair, its length. 'The tub in our room is ready. If ye climb in, I'll get this water heating and come to ye. Una can finish up here, can't ye, chick?' Una nodded. 'When ye done, I'll fetch Fen so she can have a wash as well.'

'And you can enjoy one after Fen,' I added.

I liked Mary immensely, but she had a strange aversion to water and soap, let alone getting in a tub.

She mumbled something dismissive and added the water I'd fetched to the large pot suspended over the hearth. There was a sizzle as some of it struck the hearthstone and steam rose, mingling with the smoke from the lads' cabbage stalks. At least, I thought, it disguised the odour of the neeps. God, what a stench.

As I removed my clothes and the warm water in the old wooden tub closed around me, I washed away the taint of the cleansing smoke, the irony not lost on me. It wouldn't purify an angel.

Mary knelt beside the tub, sleeves rolled over her freckled arms, and lathered the soap I'd bought from her parents' shop, a fragrant bar they claimed had come from Spain (Mary rolled her eyes when I told her), and

for a few moments, as I rested my head against the lip and shut my eyes, lost myself in the blissful sensation of having my hair scrubbed and scalp massaged. Mary quietly blethered about Samhains past, how Auld Art once fell in the bonfire he was so blootered. He didn't even remember being saved and rolled in the loch. Then, there was the tale about young Molly Priestley who, years ago, when an apple peel foretold that her suitor would be someone whose name began with B, married Roibeard Bruce, a man forty years her senior with a wheeze a blacksmith's bellows would envy. Not long after he died, less than a year later, leaving her a house and croft, she married the man whose height and build was revealed when she pulled a kale stalk out of the ground the following Samhain – another tradition. The dimensions matched Connal Cullen, the bow-legged fisherman with one eye. A strange match, they'd loved and fought in equal measure and Molly had given birth to three bonnie lads (none with bowlegs) until, after a raging argument, Connal took his boat into a storm and was never seen alive again. His body washed up on the shores of Loch Ness, miles away, two weeks later. Folk said despite being in the water so long, he looked as if he'd just passed – and with a smile on his face. After that, everyone believed he'd been carried beneath the waves by a kelpie and kept in the watery realm until he'd sired a child. From that day forward, though she lived close to the loch, Molly never ventured there.

'She forbids her lads to go near, lest their half-brother or sister tries to claim them and drag them into its depths,' whispered Mary.

'Remind me to stay away from kale and cabbage stalks as well as apple peels,' I said, twisting my neck to try and look at her.

'And the loch,' added Mary with a wink.

'What other strange customs should I know about?' I settled back down in the tub. 'I thought I'd heard them all.'

Mary gave a sly smile. Neither she nor Una could believe I knew so little about Samhain; in the city, though we acknowledged the day, few traditions had survived.

'Och, Mrs MacAlister, I dinnae want to spoil it for ye,' she said, wringing the water out of my hair. 'Like the rest of us, just enjoy the mischief. And the tales. After all, it's the last time before the darkness and bitter cold lock us inside.' The playfulness was stripped from her and the shadows crawling over the walls suddenly lengthened. An involuntary shudder racked my body.

‘Better get ye out of there. Here, take the drying sheet and I’ll fetch Fen.’

I stood, water sluicing down my body, and took the sheet from her outstretched hand. Absentmindedly, I stepped out of the tub and began to dry myself. I heard Mary exchanging words with Mr Gordon, who must have returned.

As I ran the fabric over my breasts, across my stomach and down my thighs, I caught a glimpse of myself in the small mirror balanced atop the dresser. I didn’t often see myself naked. I moved the drying sheet aside. I wondered what a man would think. There was a brief time when William lusted after me, pressing himself against me urgently, showering me with kisses, whispering sweet and naughty words in my ears. While I didn’t have the taut body of my youth, and my breasts were heavy from having nursed Fen, my stomach stretched and loose, my thighs were full and tight, and my skin soft and creamy. I lifted one breast, then the other, traced an imaginary line between them and over my navel to the coils of dark hair between my legs. I tugged at them gently. Would someone ever touch me, look at me, with love? With desire?

Heat rushed through me, followed by a wave of such yearning. Had my time been and gone?

I turned away from my reflection and swiftly finished dressing, trying to ignore the ache in my middle, my hard nipples. I could still hear Mr Gordon’s voice, deep and resonant, his ready chuckle, a chuckle that didn’t quite reach his eyes. I wondered about the strange hold he had over me, how my mind would spin whenever he was near. I had to stop this madness. It could never be, me and him. He’d offered me and Fen sanctuary when we most needed it. Given us the protection of his name, his clan. I felt obligated, that was all. But my inability to think clearly, to lock him out of my treacherous head (and heart) signalled something I was too afraid to name. Which could only lead to trouble.

Thank goodness on the morrow Mr Gordon and the other lads would be gone. Off to Strathbogie to pay rent, then on to Inverness. They’d be away at least a couple of weeks, depending on the roads and who they encountered. Thoughts of gaugers in their blue uniforms plagued me. By the time Mr Gordon returned, the work on the exterior of the house would be finished and those workers not busy in their bothies could start on the interior.

By the time Mr Gordon returned, I would have my errant thoughts under control.

Once he was back in Glasglen for winter, Mr Gordon would also take his turn at a still, making the liquid currency that would stave off debt and keep folk on the land. According to Mary, the men could be away in the hills for weeks at a time.

The very thought made my heart crumble at the edges like a stale bannock.

I sat on a stool combing my long, tangled tresses, keeping the ends off the floor, chiding myself. Mr Gordon would never be interested in the likes of me. A widow with a daughter. I was here to do a job and naught else. I had twelve months. He'd made that very clear.

So had his family – especially the naught else bit. Mr Gordon's heart belonged to his dead wife – Bríde. The woman who haunted the glen, haunted Mr Gordon. Curious about her, about their marriage, but reluctant to ask, I held out hope that one day someone would tell me what I longed to know.

Fen was ushered into the room by a smiling Mary and began divesting herself of her filthy shift, which smelled of something over-sweet and mouldy, all while trying to tell me about the monstrous face she'd carved into a huge neep (pulling hers in all sorts of directions to demonstrate). I watched her fluttering hands with bemusement, hoping I understood her correctly.

You should see my disguise, Ma, and Pol's. Elspet looks like the Callieach in hers. Fionn says he's just going to rub soot all over his face. She lowered herself into the water. *We're meeting at the loch at sunset. We're bobbing for apples and all sorts. And there's this delicious dish called* – she paused. *I'll have to write it down for you*. She took the soap from Mary and dropped it in the water. *But buried in it are all these trinkets and depending what you find, you're either going to get married, be showered with riches, or end up an old spinster.* She looked at me pointedly.

I reached into the tub and splashed her.

'I'm already a widow, so I can't be a spinster,' I said, speaking and finger-talking.

I meant the old part, added Fen, then dived beneath the water before I could dunk her.



I should have refused the second dish of atholl brose or maybe it was the fourth quaich of whisky. Regardless which was at fault, my head was spinning, my body too, as I danced around and between the roaring bonfires, holding hands with Molly on one side and Niall Mavers on the other. In a wider ring around us stood dozens of figures in their Samhain masks and costumes, their voices raised in song as drums resounded, fiddles twanged, and a pipe tried to keep the tune. Further back a few cows snuffled on the sward. They'd just been led between the two bonfires, the bairns fore and aft holding burning sticks of fir aloft. Another cleansing ritual that bid the long days adieu. Nearby sat the elders of Glasglen, Ishbel in their midst. Without her spindle and distaff, it was her distinctive walking stick that gave her away. She thumped it on the ground in time with the music.

Torrie was there with her bairns, distinguishable because of her swollen belly. Hamish, the top half of his face hidden behind a mask of brown feathers, remained by her side, attentive when needed, sizing up the other lasses when Torrie was distracted. He beamed when he saw me, giving a nod of approval. Torrie all but snarled; not even her elaborate mask hid the way her lip curled, and I could feel her eyes boring holes into me. Deep ones. It took all my self-control not to clutch my chest and fall to the ground as if I'd just been stabbed.

The village bairns, many with faces darkened with soot to conceal them from the spirits, were sitting by a smaller fire, the younger ones watching the adults through half-closed, sleepy or slightly blootered eyes. The older children were whispering macabre tales to frighten each other. Worried Fen would be excluded, I was pleased to see not only Pol, Elspet, Fionn and Auld Art's grandweans, but the Boynes' lass, the Eddisons' children and even the birleyman's youngest, finger-talking with her, the occasional burst of laughter making me wonder what they were discussing. Their hair was plastered to their faces from dooking apples. Far from being left out, Fen was in the thick of it, and it made my heart full.

When I'd first arrived with Mary and Una, Fen having gone ahead with the Gordon bairns, celebrations were in full swing. A great deal of whisky had been consumed; the evening was clabbered with its rich scent.

We joined a group gathered near the first bonfire. The blether ceased. I smiled and nodded, my heart becoming heavier than the mask Mary insisted I wear, a confection of pretty flowers, owl feathers and beads. A person in a mask made from shells leaned towards someone wearing a deer's skull tied to their face and whispered.

Uncertain what to do or say, I was disappointed my elaborate mask, let alone the voluminous cloak that all but hid the green dress beneath, hadn't quite concealed my identity. God knew, I could hardly tell who anyone was.

It was Mary who broke the silence, hefting a jug she'd snatched from a table and pouring whisky into the cups she'd brought for us. Some splashed to the ground, causing protests to erupt, then laughter.

'*Oidhche Shamhna shona dhut!*' cried Mary, raising her cup high.

Happy Halloween.

'*Oidhche Shamhna shona dhut!*' shouted those about us.

Conversation resumed. Someone sidled up to Mary, pulling her aside. All too soon, Una was encouraged away. Unwilling at first to leave me, I urged her to join in. Filib wasn't here; Mr Gordon had made sure of that. With a grateful smile, she ran off.

I gazed about, trying to guess who was beneath the metal mask, or the one with great tree limbs carved to look like stag horns that must have been weighty. I could have sworn it was Reverend MacAdam. There were masks made of feathers, grass, moss, dried heather, staves of wood, pieces of seaweed, shells, scraps of fabric. It really was hard to identify who was who and the fact they were all speaking Gaelic didn't make it any easier.

I was just content, or so I told myself, to watch. And so I did. Watched for a friendly face – one in particular.

A space formed around me, a gulf as wide and long as the loch, and I wished hard for someone, anyone, to close it. I was like the islet in the middle of the lake, adrift in dark waters. I wondered if any of the women to whom I taught finger-talking were here. What about Molly? Caragh? Spinney? Surely, they'd acknowledge me. No-one broke away to join me. Gusts of wind blew down from the mountains, parting the billowing smoke, revealing a scattering of glorious stars. I wished I too was up there, surrounded by companions. I felt more alone here, in the midst of the carousing crowd, than I had anywhere in a long, long time.

God, I wasn't drowning my sorrows with drink; I was creating them.

Food was passed around; people wandering over to neighbours to have a blether and laugh. A lone fiddle plucked a plaintive tune and I recognised Peigi's sweet voice. Apple dooking, this time for the older folk, took place. Only then, as those taking part removed their masks, did I see familiar faces. The reverend, Mr Nicholson, Simon and Luci Geddes, even Caragh and Spinney. They waved and beckoned me over.

Grateful, I went, and my cup was filled, once, twice, thrice.

After a while, I began to feel better, warmer too, even swaying to the music. Before I knew it, I was taken by the hand and dragged towards a trestle table that had been set up on the shore. Upon it was a dish of what looked like unappetising sludge.

'Here, have some.' It was Elspet. Beside her were Fen, Con Harrison's daughters and Fionn.

When I hesitated, Fen gave me an encouraging shove in the back.

Peigi appeared. 'Take a big spoonful, Mrs MacAlister,' she urged. 'It's delicious, I promise.'

The *fuarag*, a creamy-grey morass customary at Samhain (Fen had written down the name and explained it to me), began to slide off the huge spoon. A bit like atholl brose, but without the whisky (more's the pity), it was sweet and cloying. I was about to swallow the rest when I felt something hard against my lip. It was a wooden ring. I sucked the *fuarag* from it slowly and held it up to the light.

Elspet squealed. Fionn yelled something in Gaelic.

Peigi's eyes narrowed. 'So, there's to be a marriage.' She looked at it with a mixture of longing and something else.

A ring for marriage, a button for a bachelor and a thimble for a spinster. I'd retrieved the wrong object.

I tried to give it to Peigi. 'Here, you have it.'

Before she could take it, my hand was grabbed. It was Niall. He led me into a dance, Molly (I could tell by her large bosoms) taking my other hand as we wheeled and weaved between the bonfires, ignoring the sparks that flew into the air and landed on our arms, our skirts, leaping over burning brands and even one reclining body.

As we danced, stomped and clapped, I kept seeking Mr Gordon. Was he here? It was impossible to tell. After what seemed an age, the music slowed. No-one else came to claim me. I stood aside and allowed others to take my

place, mostly couples who held hands and in solemn and sensual moves, began to weave around the fire.

Sadness welled and threatened to engulf me. My stomach began to heave. I'd drunk too much. Afraid I was going to disgrace myself, I moved away from the bonfire, towards the grassy verge. The cows had been taken back to their byres. I glanced at the cottages, aglow with candlelit neeps and relit hearth fires. Maybe it was time I went home too.

I needed to get Fen.

I was heading towards where the bairns sat, when a hand grabbed my wrist. 'Leave her, Mrs MacAlister.' It was Mary. 'She's having such a good time. Go if ye must. I'll keep watch and bring her home soon.'

Fen and the bairns sat hunched over a patch of ground, their heads together, studying an apple peel and forecasting future beaus. I remembered when I used to do that too. I touched the outline of the ring in my pocket. Well, marriage apparently awaited me now.

One marriage was enough, as my own ring reminded me. Peigi was welcome to the wooden one. In fact, I'd insist she take it on the morrow.

'That's kind of you, Mary. I'll just tell her then make a discreet exit.'

When I explained to Fen I was returning to the Folly but she could remain, pointing towards Mary, Fen's face lit up.

Thank you, Ma.

I kissed the top of her head, rose and slowly made my way back through the heaving dancers, the joy and squeals of laughter, the storytelling and feasting, hearing Una's lilting laugh, Molly's guffaw, and squeezing Mary's hand as I passed.

The sounds of merriment accompanied me as I headed up the hill to the Folly.

Alone.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I drew level with Ishbel's farmhouse, slowing to admire the way the carved neeps propped along the fence and squatting in the windows appeared both gruesome and comical as the light danced within them. The bright moon revealed a lone chair and a small table replete with a plate of food next to the stone bench. These solitary seats and tables were everywhere, more placatory offerings for the spirits.

The sounds of revelry continued below, the music growing slightly discordant, the laughter raucous. These Highlanders knew how to celebrate – I might shake my head at the superstitions, but I did enjoy them. Just as an owl swooped past me, a guttural noise made me stop in my tracks.

There. I heard it again. A gasp, a groan. I rested a palm on the drystone wall and tried to penetrate the shadows around the house and barn.

Was it a night creature? Had someone crawled this far drunk? Injured? Or was it a ghostie come to haunt the night? My blood turned to hoarfrost.

Don't be an idiot, Greer MacAlister.

I entered the yard and cautiously approached the farmhouse.

Then I saw them. Two figures locked in a tight embrace against the barn wall. Masks lay at their feet. I couldn't see who they were, but I could hear their breathing, heavy and fast. I turned away, embarrassed by this moment of intimacy. Then, the woman cried out.

'*Na dèan.*' Don't.

It was Peigi. What was she doing up here? Stupid question. It was obvious what she was doing. I'd seen others pairing off, seeking out

darkness for kisses and likely more. But Peigi was only just sixteen, barely a woman, despite the way she looked. No doubt some worker thought to take advantage. Well, I knew all too well where dalliances like that could lead.

I hesitated just a fraction to see if whoever the lad was respected her request.

‘Let me go!’ she cried and began to scream. A hand was clamped over her mouth.

‘Peigi!’ I shouted, tearing off my mask and running forward. ‘Oi, you! Let her go.’

The man shoved Peigi away and spun to face me. It was the bootmaker, Joseph Eddison. One of Mr Gordon’s stent workers. I hadn’t had much to do with him. He arrived on time, did the hours required and left. I was grateful he hadn’t caused trouble like Brandon Stokes or Ewan Morrice.

I strode over to Peigi and put my arms about her, then confronted Joseph.

‘What the fook are you doing?’ I asked. Older than Peigi by some years, Joseph had long red-gold hair and a beard that needed a good comb. His feet were bare, his plaid about to fall off his shoulder, and his kilt misshapen by desire. Handsome, according to Mary and Mabelle, I’d heard he had an eye for the lasses. Younger the better.

‘What do yer think we were doin’?’ he sneered. I reeled from the fumes.

‘I don’t think you—’ I included both of them, ‘were doing anything. I think *you* were forcing yourself on Peigi.’

‘Forcing? Nae.’ He failed to swallow a belch. ‘She wanted it alright. Could nae keep her hands off me when we were dancin’.’

He took a step closer. Peigi gave a whimper. I pushed her half behind me.

‘I wonder if Mr Gordon will see it that way?’

Joseph snarled like a wild animal. If it was supposed to intimidate me, it didn’t work.

‘Go to bed, Joseph. Go and sleep off the drink.’

‘Ye dinnae fookin’ tell me what to do, incomer. Unless ye wanna take her place?’ His stinking breath blasted my face.

Before he could move any closer, I lunged, reached beneath his kilt and grabbed his cock and sweaty staines, squeezing as hard as I could. There was a squelch, then a crunch. He yelped and tried to pull away. I held fast.

‘Ye fookin’ bitch,’ he wheezed.

I twisted my wrist.

This time, Joseph yowled like a wounded bear. ‘Let me go, let me go,’ he gasped, his knees giving way.

‘Only if you get the fook away from here.’ I glanced at Peigi. ‘And don’t go near Peigi ever again.’

Unable to shift, barely able to speak, he nodded.

I slowly released him. He doubled over, hands cupping the flesh I’d savagely compressed. Peigi and I watched as he crab-shuffled across the yard and through a gap in the wall. Only once he was safe on the other side, more shadow than man, did he stop.

‘Dinnae think I’ll forget this, ye fookin’ pair of bitches.’

‘Nor will we, Joseph Eddison,’ I called. ‘And I’ll bet good coin our memory’s better than yours.’

‘Mrs MacAlister,’ said Peigi, once Joseph was out of sight, rearranging her torn shirt, fixing her plaid. Her hair had come unbound, dusting her hips. ‘Thank you. I didn’t know what to do. He followed me from the ceilidh. He grabbed me and—’ She covered her face with her hands and began to weep.

‘Hush, hush, chick,’ I said, folding her against my breast.

She rested there a moment, then levered herself away. ‘I … didn’t discourage him at first. I thought he was Patrick …’

‘Ah.’

‘As soon as I realised it wasn’t, he wouldn’t take nae for an answer. If you hadn’t come when you did …’

I let her cry against me a while.

‘Why did you leave the ceilidh?’ I asked softly, worried the ring I almost swallowed played a part.

‘Why did you?’ she countered. When I shrugged, she sighed. ‘When Patrick left, I didn’t want to be there anymore.’

‘You like him?’ I already knew the answer.

‘I … I did. And for a time, he liked me. A lot. But he liked Alice MacIntosh more.’ She began to cry again.

‘But she’s gone now. Perhaps you and Patrick … ?’ I let it hang.

‘She may be gone from Glasglen,’ said Peigi between sobs, ‘but not from Patrick’s heart.’

After a while, she ceased weeping and, withdrawing from my embrace, used her skirt to dry her eyes.

We stood in silence, the only sounds coming from the loch.

‘You know, Peigi,’ I said, gathering my cloak about me. The wind was sharp, cutting. ‘I once thought I loved a man. He turned my head, filled my ears with fine words and promises. But I learned too late that’s all he could ever give me – words that were as empty as his heart.’

‘Too late?’ She glanced at me.

I reached for her hand and led her to the stone bench. We sat, side by side, shoulders touching. She began to shake. I waited a moment, then pulled her closer, sharing my cloak with her. The cat wandered past, tail pointing heavenwards, ignoring us as if we were spectral beings. I saw the outline of some sheep drifting across the lower field. No doubt Joseph Eddison had disturbed them.

‘Let’s put it this way,’ I said, wriggling so her head could rest against my shoulder. ‘I believed him when he said he loved me, when he said I was the only one. So much so, I gave in to his entreaties, even though I knew it wasn’t wise. You know what I mean by that?’

She nodded.

‘When I learned I was with child, my ma made us marry.’

Peigi sniffed wetly. I held her tighter.

‘Even before then,’ I continued softly, ‘I knew I didn’t love him. Worse, I knew he didn’t love me either.’ I sighed and glanced up at the firmament. Such a beautiful night, a cloth of jewels, an argent moon. I began to imagine the fae dancing around their magical mounds, luring unsuspecting men and women into their wondrous realm … Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

‘Is Fen that child?’ asked Peigi.

I shut my eyes and then opened them. ‘Aye.’

‘But you love her.’

I smiled. ‘To the moon and back.’

‘What about her da? Did he love her, even if he didn’t love you?’

God, why was I telling Peigi this? For her sake, or my own? Did it matter?

‘Aye, he did.’ *Did he?* ‘He did.’

How did I explain that while he might have loved his daughter, he didn’t care for how her affliction reflected on him. He loved himself more.

‘He’s dead, isn’t he? Your husband. That’s why you’re here.’

‘Aye, he is.’ *He lies in a watery grave*. ‘And I am here for many reasons, his death being one of them. One day, I may even tell you the rest.’ I pulled my arm away. ‘But come. Enough. I told you this in the hope you won’t make the same mistake I did and give your heart to someone who doesn’t deserve it.’

Peigi nodded miserably and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands, swiped her nose.

‘Are you going to tell Da?’ She regarded me earnestly.

‘This isn’t your fault, Peigi. This is all on Joseph Eddison. Your da needs to know.’

She nodded miserably.

I stood and offered my hand. Peigi took it and I pulled her to her feet.

‘Thank you, Mrs MacAlister. Thank you.’ Much to my surprise, she threw her arms around me. I froze momentarily, then embraced her firmly.

If only her ma was still alive.

‘Do you want to return to the bonfires?’ I asked quietly. ‘I’ll escort you if you like. Or you can come up to the Folly with me.’

We both looked down towards the glow of the bonfires. The edges of the loch shone like brass.

‘Nae,’ she said. ‘If you don’t mind, I’ll stay here. Minnie will be home soon.’

‘Do you want me to wait with you? In case Joseph Eddison returns?’

‘I don’t think he’d be able even if he wanted to, do you?’

We both chuckled humourlessly.

‘Anyway,’ she said. ‘I think I’d like to be alone a while.’

I knew that feeling well.



I pulled off my cloak as I entered the house and, together with my mask, placed them on the rickety hall table. God, I needed a drink. I needed to think over what had just happened. After making yet another enemy of a villager, the accord between me and Peigi had been nice. Better than nice. I didn’t realise how much I missed that feeling.

Poor Peigi. I prayed she’d take my advice to heart, but I also knew how persuasive young men could be, how passion could make you believe

anything, even when it was patently false. I also needed to rid myself of the image of the two entwined bodies, what I'd first thought the sounds I heard denoted. The sensations they fleetingly aroused, and which even now were crawling their way through my body, teasing me with their rawness.

Aye, a drink, and now.

I wrenched open the door to Mr Gordon's study. I grabbed the jug and, uncaring the quaich wasn't clean, knowing I'd already consumed too much, poured myself a generous amount and downed it in one gulp, coughing slightly. I swiftly poured another.

I sighed, long and loud. Partly relief, partly, I don't know what. Disappointment in men. In myself. Sadness. Regret. Hope?

The so-called cleansing fire crackled. At least the room was warm. I moved towards it gratefully. Only then did I see Bran and Sceólang. Draped across the furs in front of the hearth, they raised their heads to watch me, tails thumping the floor.

What their presence meant didn't immediately register. I staggered over to them and dropped to my knees, the night's events, the whisky, making my fall heavy, my heart too.

'Och, my lovely hounds. Would it not be too much effort to come and welcome me? Or are you like Joseph Eddison, damning my soul to hell? Or are you like most of the village and wishing me gone?'

'I for one am glad yer here.' The voice came from the shadows.

I yelped, leaping to my feet clumsily, striking a chair, my arms flailing to prevent me tumbling.

A pair of strong hands steadied me.

'Mr Gordon,' I whispered.

'Mrs MacAlister.'

His grip loosened, but he didn't release me straight away. We stood, inches apart, me staring into those beautiful clear grey-green eyes. He wore no costume, just a wide-sleeved shirt with ruffles, open at the neck, revealing dark hairs threaded with silver, just like the hair on his head, on his face. The scent of pine, warm fires and whisky enveloped me.

As I stood there, drinking him in, he looked at me in a way that set my senses ablaze. My throat tightened; blood roared in my ears. I could feel the coarse wool of his kilt against my gown, his breath upon my cheeks, the hardness of his body.

I swayed. He held me tighter, closer. I screwed up my eyes, blocking him out. What was I doing? This was my employer. Glasglen's tacksman. I was here to earn enough coin so I could provide for me and Fen. Ensure I never needed a man ever again.

I didn't need one; but dear God, I wanted one. I wanted this one …

Then it struck me. What had I told this man's daughter minutes earlier? I was worse than a bitch on heat. I took a step backwards, then turned aside. I put down my cup and wiped my hands along the front of my dress.

'Forgive me, Mr Gordon, I didn't know you were here.'

There was a beat. 'Obviously.' He gestured to my cup. 'Please, don't stop on my account.'

He moved to the fire and prodded it a few times with a poker, then sat in his favourite chair, leaning over to ruffle the hounds' heads. He poured himself a drink, lifting the jug in my direction. I shook my head. I'd had enough.

'Well, if ye nae going to drink, dinnae stand there like a besom. Come keep me company.' He gave the chair next to his a shove with his boot. 'Sit, tell me what ye thought of the Samhain ceilidh.'

I briefly thought of declining. I didn't want to tell him about Peigi when I was half-blootered. That was a serious conversation for sober folk. But I also didn't want to appear churlish. I joined him, patting the dogs, careful not to look at him. 'I enjoyed it very much.'

'And yet ye've left the celebrations.'

I regarded him indignantly. 'You're a fine one to talk. You never even attended.'

He smiled. 'I've been to hundreds.'

I raised my brows.

'Dozens, then.' He gestured towards the barn with his cup. 'Me and the lads had to finalise our leave-taking.'

'When will you go?' I asked, quashing the flare of disappointment.

'First light. Though I think the Duffs and Big Billy might regret agreeing to such an early departure.'

'How long will you be gone?' With his departure, I lost my best advocate, the person who stood between me and the suspicions of the village. Maybe he did need to know about Joseph Eddison now.

Mr Gordon shrugged. 'We can never be sure. It's dependent on a great many things. State of the roads, how swiftly we can sell the peatreek, and,

of course, the presence of the authorities. I'm expecting we'll be back before winter sets in.' He cocked his head. 'Dinnae tell me yer going to miss me, lass.'

Colour rose up my neck and flooded my cheeks. 'Alright then, I won't.' I retrieved my cup and took a long swallow.

Mr Gordon laughed. 'Ye've naught to worry about. Reverend MacAdam and Mr Nicholson will keep an eye on ye. Con Harrison as well. Ye've Mary, Una, Ishbel at the farmhouse and ye've made friends of Molly, Caragh and Spinney Larnach.'

Friends? I sincerely hoped so. 'They're doing well with the finger-talking.'

I heard, he signed.

I smiled. *You've been learning too, I see.*

'Whoa, Mrs MacAlister.' He held up his palms, shaking his head and laughing. 'Your hands move too fast. That's beyond me.'

'Hopefully, you get to practise on the road.'

'Aye,' he said, the laughter quickly fading. 'Just as long as we don't *have* to put it into practice there.'

We sat without speaking. I knew I should make my exit, but a part of me was enjoying the quiet, the feeling of not being on display or having to prove myself.

'Do ye mind if I ask ye something, lass?' Mr Gordon twisted in his chair so he faced me.

'Depends what it is.'

He gave that roguish smile. 'Ye have an answer for everything, dinnae ye?'

'Not always. But I suspect whatever it is you wish to ask may require another drink after all.' I held out my cup. He obliged.

'Do you regret coming here?'

Now that I hadn't expected.

'The truth?'

'Always.'

'Maybe a little.' I paused, gathering my thoughts. I had to tread carefully. 'I underestimated how … different things would be.' I sat up straighter. 'Please, don't think I'm ungrateful, I'm not, not at all. But I failed to consider how hard it would be without the language, without

understanding how strange some of the customs – tonight being one example. And if I'm finding it hard, well, Fen …'

'Yet, according to Adam and Marcus, she's settling in very well.'

He'd asked about Fen? My heart expanded.

'Aye. Thanks to Pol, better than I could have hoped.'

'It's not really Fen who's struggling then, is it?'

I stared at him. There was nothing but compassion in his eyes. The last thing I needed was his pity. I finished my drink and put the cup down on the table. Hard.

'I'd best bid you good—'

'Why'd ye leave?'

I froze halfway out of my chair then sank back down. 'You know why. It wasn't like I had a choice. You heard what Mrs Tailyour threatened.'

'I meant Edinburgh.'

'Oh.' That knocked the self-righteous wind out of my sails.

I began to pleat my skirts. Did I tell him?

'Because …' I began, then faced him. 'Do you really want to know?'

'I do,' he said solemnly and waited.

I looked into those earnest eyes, saw the understanding that what I was about to reveal wasn't easy for me. 'Because one night, after I confronted my stupid, blootered Uncle Duncan about the terrible debts he was accruing with his gambling and whores, he tried to … to …' I waved my hands towards my body.

'He didn't,' said Mr Gordon, shocked.

'Aye. He did. Tore my bodice, planted kisses on me and said things no uncle should say to his niece.'

'What did you do?'

I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. 'At first, I was too appalled to do much but fend him off; try and remind him of our relationship, of Ma and Da and Fen, but he was too far gone. So, I used what was on hand. I broke a jug over his head.'

Mr Gordon bit back a laugh. 'I assume that worked.'

'It put a stop to his shenanigans that night alright, and though he apologised the following day, blamed the drink and any other excuse he could think of, he also blamed me. Naturally, I didn't dignify any of it with a response. But, as you can imagine, things were never the same between us. Nor did it resolve the issue of his debts or the parlous state of the

business.’ I paused and picked up my drink. ‘A few days after that, Captain Neville appeared and told me William had died and that as his widow, I was entitled to his outstanding wages. It was like a sign from God. I knew then it was time to leave – not just the tavern, but the city.

‘I could have remained in Edinburgh, I suppose.’ I reached down to fondle Bran’s ears. ‘Moved to a different parish, sought work elsewhere. Uncle Duncan begged me to stay.’ I scoffed. ‘Only, I knew if I didn’t leave then, I never would. I packed our few belongings and, after securing all the paperwork I needed, coach tickets and such, and ensuring suppliers and patrons knew that Uncle Duncan was now the sole proprietor of the tavern and all that entailed, left. It was selfish on my part and for a long time Fen hated me for it.’

‘You never told Fen why you left so abruptly?’

I shook my head. ‘Nae. Let her think well of her fool of an uncle for a little while longer.’

Mr Gordon absorbed this. ‘I don’t think she hates you for bringing her here.’ He gave *that* smile. One that made my heart dance, dammit.

‘Nae, not anymore.’ He was right. Fen was finding her place in this strange little village, where the kirk was central and God lived side by side with selkies, kelpies, spirits, the fae and festivals like Samhain.

Where illicit whisky was both currency and lifeblood.

‘Anyhow, that’s why I finally left.’ I slowly stood, resisting the urge to stretch.

He rose to stand beside me.

‘What you’ve yet to learn about me, Mr Gordon,’ I said softly, ‘is there’s very little I regret.’

It was as if a magical force pushed me into his arms. He hesitated briefly, then, sensing my permission, wrapped one arm about my middle, the other burrowing beneath my hair and cradling the back of my neck. Waves of longing rushed over me as he lowered his head, closer and closer …

There was a clatter in the hallway.

‘If that was nae a boggle we saw, then I’m a skinny-arsed Sassenach,’ cried a joyous voice.

Mary.

‘Wide-arsed, ye mean.’ And Una.

Which meant Fen, too.

His arms dropped, and with one last yearning look, he strode to the door and pulled it open.

‘With the racket you lot be making, we’ve naught to fear from hobgoblins or boggles. You’d scare the devil himself with your clang.’ He beckoned them in and guided them towards the fire, bringing over stools.

Encouraged by Mr Gordon, the lasses recounted their evening. How Jon Boyne’s kilt fell off and wee Chris Brown’s dog, Reek, snatched it up, and ran around the bonfire as Jon tried to catch it, his cock on display. Or how Dom’s nephew, Torcall, mistook the lad behind the mask, Lùcas Grant, for his sweetheart Kathleen Smith, and kissed him.

‘She clyted him around the ear,’ chuckled Mary. ‘Nae because he kissed the lad, but because Torc thought she resembled him.’

Aware of Mr Gordon’s lingering gaze as Mary then Una spoke, referring sometimes to Fen who would write a word or two on her quire, sending them all into gales, the way his eyes narrowed as they searched my face, lazily, studied my mouth, it was all I could do to concentrate on the lasses.

It was all I could do not to bid them leave so Mr Gordon and I could return to what we started … whatever it was.



By the time I rose the following day, head sore and a body afire with lustful thoughts and carnal dreams, he was gone.

Disappointment besieged me.

Still, I’d managed to tell him what Joseph Eddison had done; what I came upon.

‘Is that why he called you what he did and wished you to hell, lass?’ he asked.

How did he know? Then I remembered blethering to the hounds.

‘Aye.’

‘Then I’ll teach him a lesson for that, too,’ said Mr Gordon, eyes darkening.

Later, long after he’d departed, as I prepared to issue instructions to the stent workers, I found a note tucked into the ledger.

All it said was, *Till I return … T.*

I convinced myself he meant teaching Joseph Eddison a lesson. But when I saw the man three days later, eyes bruised, face swollen, teeth missing and arm in a sling, it was evident Mr Gordon had already addressed that.

Aware of Joseph's hate-filled eyes following my every move, it was Una who warned me that he was swearing vengeance – on me and Mr Gordon.

Mary was dismissive. 'I wouldn't worry about him, Mrs MacAlister. He's a bully. Full of piss and wind.'

Una and I exchanged a look. We knew all too well what bullies could do, especially those full of piss and wind.

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PART THREE

Heart

Glasglen, Central Highlands
Winter 1780 to 1781

The wild glens of the north afforded secure retreats for the working of the stills; and many ingenious methods of conveying the produce to market were devised.

David Bremner, *The Industries of Scotland*, 1869

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN



‘There she is,’ announced Molly Cullen, blowing into the kitchen like a howder. Close on her heels was Caragh Boyne.

‘Just as I predicted,’ said Caragh, gesturing to me. ‘Wallowing again.’

Mr Gordon had been gone for three weeks and not a day went by when he didn’t saunter into my head. Nor a night either.

Fen kept giving me meaningful looks and asking if I was well. Mary would snigger and give a knowing wink. Una would just offer dimples. Mary was becoming very adept at finger-talking. I must remember to warn Fen to guard her hands when she was about. In fact, I had to remember to do a lot of things of late.

Bitter cold followed the women inside. ‘Would it have hurt ye none to wipe yer fookin’ boots?’ said Mary, staring meaningfully at the trail of mud in their wake. She was in the middle of making a second batch of oatcakes for the workers’ midday meal. Una was buttering the first. ‘Yer as bad as the dogs.’ She glared at Bran and Sceólang, who were camped under the table, hoping scraps would fall their way.

I was entrusted with the care of the hounds in Mr Gordon’s absence, and they’d taken to following me around as if they knew I missed their master as much as they did.

‘And shut the fookin’ door,’ snapped Mary. She was in a right dudgeon. ‘We’re not at the shielings now.’

Suitably abashed, the women mumbled apologies, closed the door and tiptoed awkwardly towards the table.

‘Och, what do we have here?’ asked Caragh, and promptly dropped onto the bench beside me, helping herself to a freshly cooked oatcake and some butter.

‘We dinnae have time for that,’ said Molly, also grabbing one. Mary slapped it out of her hands.

‘They be for the lads,’ she said, steering the plate out of reach, gesturing for Una to salvage the rest.

‘What do you mean, *wallowing*?’ I protested. Before the lasses arrived, I’d been staring into my teacup doing exactly that.

‘Yer face has been longer than a garron’s ever since the lads departed,’ said Caragh.

‘Ever since Tam left, ye mean,’ said Molly, bumping shoulders with Mary, who gave a sly grin.

Was naught sacred around here?

‘We’ve a cure for that malady,’ said Caragh, sooking butter from her fingers noisily. ‘We’re takin’ yer up Cnoc Mòr.’

I raised a brow.

‘Ye may have mastered a sma’ still once, but it’s time ye saw a bigger one in action.’

‘Gather your coat and some belly-timber,’ said Molly, ‘and we’ll be off.’

Belly-timber? Ah. Food. ‘Where?’

‘To see one of our stills in action – not the makeshift kind, either,’ said Caragh.

There was no point arguing. I was going whether I wanted or not. I quickly drank what was left of my tea. As I gathered my coat, a question that had been bothering me a while surfaced.

‘How many stills are there around Glasglen, apart from the small stills, that is?’

‘How many do ye think, lass?’ asked Molly.

‘Two dozen or so?’

‘Two dozen?’ jeered Molly. Una spluttered. Mary shook her head in disbelief.

‘Try about four hundred,’ said Caragh.

My mouth dropped open. ‘That many?’

‘Dinnae worry, we’re not workin’ all of them,’ she laughed.

‘We couldn’t even if we wanted to,’ said Molly. ‘Dinnae ken where half of them are. I’m just helping Caragh and Spinney while the lads are away.

Now, get on with ye.’

Molly passed me my plaid. ‘It’s bitter cold out. Do ye have gloves?’ she asked.

A week after Mr Gordon left, Peigi had presented me with a pair of gloves she’d knitted. Touched by her gift, understanding what was meant by them, I’d worn them every day.

I put them on, all the while issuing instructions to Mary and Una.

‘Make sure Fen practises her writing, won’t you? Oh, and don’t let the bairns have more than two oatcakes after school. And make sure the hounds don’t follow me.’

Caragh and Molly began to usher me out the door, Molly collecting the sack of food Mary passed her and shoving it in the burlap draped over her shoulder.

‘And if you could refill the bladder so Pol has enough to give the workers their afternoon gill …’

‘I was nae born yesterday, Mrs MacAlister,’ said Mary, sighing. ‘Neither was Una. Now shoo. Do ye good to get away. Put the nonsense behind ye.’

Mary was referring to some trouble Joseph Eddison was stirring up in Mr Gordon’s absence.

It all began when a hawker from the east passed through a few days after Mr Gordon left. Selling everything from china plates to cutlery, rope, bolts of fabric and dyes for wool, he was also full of the latest news and gossip. He not only sold out-of-date newspapers and periodicals but also, over a dram, answered questions from those starved of information about the outside world. Everything from news about the American War, the French sending reinforcements to the colonists, reports on General Benedict Arnold defecting to the British side, to murders, arrests and marriages.

From the hawker, we learned the duty on wine had been raised so high, whisky – the illicit kind – was in even greater demand.

These weren’t the only things the hawker shared. He also brought the latest gossip from Montrose. Joseph Eddison couldn’t wait to tell the village a certain snippet. Turns out, I wasn’t a widow as I claimed, but a slattern with a child born out of wedlock trying to tarnish the name of a good family by pretending to have been married to a dead man. Mr Gordon, and all Glasglen, had been gulled.

With so many still ready to believe the worst of me, even from a blaggard like Joseph, it was a blow from which I struggled to recover.

For all Reverend MacAdam advised me to give people the chance to know me, there were those who chose to remain ignorant and believe the horrible tattle. So be it. I couldn't change them or myself. If they thought I was a slut and a traitor, that's all they'd see, no matter what I said or did. The thought saddened me immeasurably.

Thank God for these women. I followed them outside.

Sheets of icy rain blasted down the mountains, while sweeps of wind forced their way through wool and linen. It might be November, but already the white caps of the mountains had been exchanged for glistening cloaks. The louring skies made the range behind the house glow, otherworldly and eerie. Our destination, Cnoc Mòr, glimmered in the silvery light. Down in the village, smoke from peat fires sat above the roofs, a shifting ceiling of brown and slate.

Molly and I followed Caragh up the rocky slopes along a well-worn trail. There was a metallic smell, the kind that presages snow, though from the look of the clouds tumbling in from the north, a storm was likely to arrive first.

As we ascended, Glasglen opened below us. In the fields, men and women laboured. For all they worked, the land gave them so little. Sod walls were almost completed, the thatch on rooftops repaired and secured with fresh rope, and the last of the new barns and byres for livestock were being given finishing touches. Mr Gordon had been firm these tasks were to be completed before he returned, even if it meant his house wasn't.

We crossed the crest of the first hill, and the village disappeared. Ahead lay soggy uneven ground intersected with lichen-spotted rocks that ended abruptly at the edge of a thick forest. A thin track meandered between the trunks of trees before it was swallowed by shadows.

My breath escaped in opaque plumes, my nose and cheeks stinging as the strong *blowder* struck me.

As one, the women glanced at the heavens then each other.

'We'll have to watch that,' said Molly. 'The sky be right attery.'

A mighty thunderclap resounded, causing the ground to rumble and the hills to moan.

With a yelp of fright, we ran into the forest, disappearing between the green boughs as if we'd never been.



The Boynes' bothy was carefully concealed behind Eas Lady Green, or Green Lady Falls. To reach it, we followed a narrow trail, slipping and sliding between the trees until we reached a burn in full spate. We crossed the water, leaping from stone to fallen log to stone, then navigated our way betwixt trees along the slithery banks. We moved without talking. Birds trilled, and the occasional flitter in the foliage and shimmy through the undergrowth meant we weren't alone. Occasionally, a tree would shiver and shower us with freezing droplets. The sense of eyes upon us, watching our every step, was powerful. I continuously looked around, peering through the trunks for a splash of red or blue, the colours of authority. Filib crossed my mind, until I ushered him firmly out of it.

I heard the waterfall before I saw it. The burn suddenly widened to form a depthless dusky pool. At the far end, water tumbled from a great height over moss and steep rocks, a cascade of crystal, parting and flowing, changing colour from white to iridescent emerald.

It was the purest, clearest water I'd ever seen. The air was redolent with its droplets, with the scents of pine, heather and earthy goodness. The closer we drew, the wetter we became as the water crashed and churned. I could see no sign of a bothy, let alone a still.

Trusting the lasses weren't going to abandon me in the middle of the hills, I continued, careful to watch my footing lest I slip into the tarn. I was so busy looking where I stepped, I thought my eyes were playing tricks when first Caragh then Molly disappeared.

I slipped between the curtain of water and the rockface to find a huge cave. The walls were dark, shiny and slick, the ground underfoot spongy with moss and vegetation. The roar from the falls was loud, the spray whipped and whirled. Molly took my hand and led me further inside. Within a few steps, the noise became bearable, the ground quite dry. We rounded a curve and there, beneath a shaft of dim light, sitting atop a fire of peat and juniper like a shrine to a god of old, was a large copper still.

It glowed and shone, surrounded by a golden corona in which motes danced, spiralling towards a hole high above. A long pipe sloped down from the peak of the still into a wooden tub. A smaller one protruded at the base. What little smoke was produced escaped through a tiny opening at the very

top of the cave, no doubt mingling with the misty spray the waterfall expelled. In an alcove to the right were some makeshift beds and cushions. Sacks of grain were neatly stacked in another corner. Casks, ankers, bladders and jugs – I guessed both full and waiting to be filled – sat in orderly rows in another. A small fire close to the still had a pot of something boiling merrily atop it. There were cups, plates and a griddle iron as well. Unlike the Duffs' bothy, this one was very clean, tidy, and awash with the aroma of peat, the floral perfume of many herbs, a velvety wetness and the unmistakable odour of whisky. I filled my lungs.

Caught up in the cleverness of the bothy and how well hidden it was, I was about to say how it would take a miracle for excise to find this place when I saw we were not alone.

Gathered on stools close to the fire, sitting motionless and oh so quiet, were three women: Spinney Larnach, Lucinda Geddes and a woman I'd never seen before. I halted, waiting for the suspicious looks and for accusations to be hurled at Molly and Caragh for bringing an incomer here. None came.

Molly gave me an encouraging shove while Caragh rolled a stool towards me. Spinney Larnach handed me a brimming cup. The smell nearly made me fall off my seat.

'Welcome,' said Caragh.

'This is yours?' I regarded Caragh in wonderment before remembering to greet the others. My eyes lingered on the unfamiliar lass who gave a shy smile.

'Aye. Mine and Jon's, though the equipment—' she nodded to the still, 'is shared between us and the Larnachs.'

'I'm Margaret Macpherson,' said the woman I didn't know, leaning forward. We solemnly shook hands.

'Pleased to meet you,' I said.

Margaret Macpherson. I'd heard of her. She was the wife of Robbie Macpherson, the distiller from down Corryhabbie way. Apparently, he jinxed the gaugers by claiming a reward for an old, useless still and buying a new one with the proceeds. Inspired by him, Mr Gordon had gone to Inverness to try the same sleight of hand. I prayed he'd be as successful as this woman's husband had been.

'Yer Greer MacAlister,' she said. 'Auld Art has only good to say of ye. These lasses too.'

About my age, maybe a bit older, Margaret had black hair and a pair of ink-dark eyes with thick lashes. Her face was weathered and lined from smiling. I liked her immediately. ‘So, yer here to work the big still.’

‘I’m here to learn,’ I said.

Until that moment, I didn’t know I wanted to. Now I could think of naught I wanted more.

‘*Slàinte mhath!*’ said the women, knocking cups together.

‘*Slàinte mhath!*’ I shyly raised my cup.

The clack of wood as the cups struck each other echoed around the cave, bouncing off the gleaming copper still and resounding back and forth like a kirk bell, binding us all together in a secret vow.



The hours flew by. The storm that had appeared imminent held off, though the cave grew darker as the day wore on.

The liquid produced by soaking the fermented grain, called the wash, had already been put through the still weeks earlier to produce low wines. These had nothing to do with wine but were a sort of a cross between water and spirit, the first step in making whisky. Made around Samhain, these low wines had been left in a vat to enrich the flavour. This wasn’t usual practice, as Molly explained; the Boynes and Larnachs preferred to leave theirs sit a while.

‘Improves the quality of the final spirit,’ said Spinney.

The low wines were being boiled again when I arrived and the resultant spirit would, after moving through the still, become peatreek.

I learned much that day, from how to tell when the low wines were hot enough to travel through the worm (when I could dip my finger in without scalding, or see my face in the roiling water), why tin stills were terrible (the metal leeches into the peatreek and poisons it) and why only copper stills would ever be used in Glasglen.

‘But even copper’s nae guarantee yer safe,’ said Lucinda dolefully. Her father died because he failed to wait until the potent head of the spirit – the first liquid that comes off the still and smells metallic and dangerous – ran clear and drank it.

‘Simon always said he didn’t have the heart,’ she quipped, referring to the middle part of a run, when drinkable spirit was produced. I didn’t know whether to laugh or commiserate.

He wasn’t the first man to die because he was impatient. Or lass. The women shared tales of many who’d passed away because of cheap stills or poor distilling, but mostly because those making it were overeager and drank the first bit, the foreshots or head, or the feints or tail (the last bit, which I thought smelled fishy) of a final run. Fortunately, apart from Luci’s da, the worst the folk of Glasglen had suffered since his demise was a splitting headache or upset stomach.

I knew what that felt like, but not from downing heads or tails.

The women all agreed that copper stills not only made better whisky but imparted a kind of fruity taste.

While we waited for the low wines to condense and travel through the worm and trickle down the long nose into the huge tub that sat beneath the pipe, we passed the time blethering.

‘How much peatreek can a still that size make?’ I stared at the contraption.

‘Och, ’bout forty gallons,’ said Caragh, looking at the others for confirmation.

I’d noticed a number of wooden tubs, large barrels and hogsheads stacked nearby.

I recalled that the Duffs had filled jugs, bladders and ankers direct from their still, and while there were plenty of those in the cave as well, I asked what the large open vessels were for.

‘The lads be in a hurry to get their spirit into containers so they can sell it,’ said Spinney. ‘But we learned long ago that peatreek likes to sit a while and enjoy some air, so we pour it into the tubs.’ She gazed about. ‘Whatever is in this cave, whether it’s us and our stories or the wee creatures who visit, it travels from the veil of water yon, lingers in these green walls, the detritus on the floor, and the peatreek’s thirsty for it. Soaks up the odours, the sounds, the sights if ye like. Absorbs the memories. The spirit tastes better for the waiting. Just ask Margaret’s husband, Robbie. He lets his peatreek sit in barrels for months.’

Margaret nodded. ‘Many think he’s mad. But you cannae argue with the taste.’

‘Or colour,’ added Caragh.

‘Or the price his drink fetches.’ Margaret gave a half-laugh. ‘Robbie says one day we’ll all be doin’ it. Leaving the spirit to mature.’

The women chuckled.

‘Well, we dinnae leave it as long as Robbie,’ continued Spinney. ‘Cannae afford to. In a few weeks, we’ll decant what sits in the tubs into those casks, ankers, bladders and jugs. Ye can help with that too if ye like. Ensure there’s plenty of time for the blethermen to deliver it to the agents.’

The lasses took it in turns to scoop up the green flecks that rose to swirl atop the vat, tossing them onto the cave floor. I took my turn as well.

There was a huge pile of blankets and furs behind the still. These were used to wrap it when the weather grew bitter and the cave colder than a witch’s tit (as Molly put it). It was important to keep the temperature as regular as possible. Not too hot and not too cold.

‘Throughout winter, we keep a fire burning day and night,’ said Molly. ‘Hence someone has to be here.’

‘Ye find my lads keen to volunteer for that task,’ said Lucinda.

‘Spend more time in their bothies than with their families,’ added Molly.

‘The biggest risk to discovery on Ben Dhàphen and Ben Ghillean,’ added Spinney, ‘is that excise will see the smoke. That’s why we erect bothies where it’s less likely to be spotted, where it’ll mingle with mist or water haze, or with that rising from a house.’ She passed over an oatcake.

‘Or a lad will be caught wandering twixt cottage and still,’ said Caragh. ‘Footprints can give ye away, especially when there’s snow or mud. One time, when we thought the gaugers were about, we drove a herd of cattle through the snow to disguise the men’s footprints.’

‘Do they find many bothies?’ I asked, eagerly accepting the offered food, not realising until then how hungry I was. ‘The gaugers?’

Margaret thought for a moment. ‘They dinnae used to – mainly because they dinnae come this far inland. But ever since Tam got let off all those charges, that gauger, Malcolm Gillespie, has been more determined than ever to catch us. That’s made it harder. There’s been some seizures over our way.’

Caragh and Spinney exchanged a fretful look.

‘Yer turn will come,’ said Margaret. ‘But not yet. I heard Gillespie has gone back to Strathbogie for winter.’

There were sighs of relief.

‘Them redcoats from Fort William are still hanging about though,’ she added. ‘Heard they paid ye a visit.’

I nodded.

Caragh poked the fire a few times. ‘Probably same ones been asking questions over Birkenbreul and Garioch way.’

‘’Bout Alice MacIntosh, ye mean,’ said Spinney.

‘Aye. What I dinnae ken, why’s a redcoat worried ’bout a wee lass?’ asked Margaret. ‘Dinnae that seem odd to ye?’

‘Who cares?’ said Molly dismissively. ‘She’s nae one of us.’

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

‘Och, Greer, I dinnae mean—’ began Molly.

‘It’s fine,’ I said, with a wave of a hand and a forced smile. And just like that, I was reminded of my place.

I blinked back the tears that suddenly rushed to pool behind my eyes, annoyed at my self-pity. The very fact Molly said that in front of me proved they didn’t see me as an incomer so much anymore, didn’t it? Or would my status never change? Would I always be an outsider to these women? The very ones I thought were becoming friends, even allies.

As if to make up for Molly’s words, Margaret addressed me. ‘Spinney tells me ye’ve been teaching these lasses to finger-talk.’

This was the cue for the women to show what they’d learned. Naturally, we taught Margaret and Lucinda a few words and phrases.

‘Wait till I show Robbie,’ Margaret said, pleased with herself. She slowly signed *Thank you*.

You’re welcome, I signed back.

By the time the last of the run was moving through the still, the light had all but faded. It was time to head back. Fen would be well and truly home and the workers wanting their hours recorded. Mary and Una were unable to read or write, so I couldn’t rely on them to do that. I was about to suggest we leave when there were faint shouts and a scrabbling sound outside.

We froze.

Spinney and Caragh held their hands up for silence.

Our names were called.

‘Wait,’ hissed Molly. ‘I ken that voice.’

So did I and was about to dash outside, when Caragh held me back, shaking her head. ‘Let’s be sure.’

Molly crept towards the crashing curtain of water and slipped past. I held my breath for what seemed an age until she suddenly reappeared. Behind her, red-faced, bedraggled and very wet, were Peigi and Mary. Their faces were drawn, their eyes wide and dark.

‘Is it Fen? Is she alright?’ My voice cracked.

‘She be fine,’ said Mary, gripping my arm in reassurance. ‘She’s at the farmhouse with Ishbel.’

‘Mr Gordon?’

‘It’s not Da,’ said Peigi. ‘It’s Torrie. The babbie’s coming.’ She began to wring her hands.

‘But it’s not due for weeks,’ I said.

Tears slipped down Peigi’s cheeks. She swiped them away. ‘Not ’til after Christmas. She’s bleeding everywhere. Hamish is … Hamish told us to fetch ye.’

Caragh began barking orders. ‘Ye go, Molly, and you too, Mrs MacAlister. Spinney, Margaret, Lucinda and I will finish up here. Mary, go fetch Kate Brown, the midwife.’

‘She’s been summoned to Kildrummie,’ moaned Mary. ‘That’s why we need ye. Torrie needs ye.’

‘Then get the Beaton. She’s probably up Ben Gaothach gathering herbs. Find her.’

Mary darted off.

‘Come, oh please, come,’ beseeched Peigi, waving us forward.

‘Wait. Take some peatreek with ye.’ Caragh swiftly filled a bladder, sealed it tightly and pushed it into my arms. ‘Make sure ye give her plenty. It’ll help with the pain; bring the babbie forth. And have some yerself. Yer paler than the Bean-nighe.’ The Gaelic washer-woman of death.

With the frigid wind fierce at our backs, the swollen clouds threatening to burst at any moment and sleet stinging our faces, we ran – past the waterfall, the pool – and plunged back into the forest, skidding and slithering, grasping trunks so we didn’t stumble, the rough bark shredding our palms.

The thought of Torrie’s baby fighting to be born, wading its way through pain and blood, the fear of what might happen if we didn’t make it, guided us as the day drew to a close and an unnatural darkness descended.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



Night fell like a fist and the storm that had threatened all day broke just as we reached the farmhouse. We were drenched and cold, but the moment we were ushered inside, we forgot our own discomfort.

The main room was filled with women. Fen crouched by Ishbel. I flew to her and gathered her in my arms. Torrie paced the floor, her shift clinging to her body, emphasising her distended belly. Her face and neck were glossy with sweat. Watery blood ran unchecked down her thighs. Mabelle followed Torrie around, mopping it up, wringing out the rags, trying to persuade her to sit or lie in the box bed she'd surrendered.

Hamish was close on our heels. Wet and filthy, he pushed Mabelle aside and grabbed his wife's arm. 'Ye coming with me. I want *my* wean born in *my* house, ye ken?'

Torrie stared at him in disbelief. 'I'm not going anywhere, you muckle sumph. Unless you want me to drop this wean in the fields like a kine.'

Ishbel inserted herself between Hamish and her granddaughter and said something sharp. The other old women raised their voices in support, gathering protectively around Ishbel and Torrie. Peigi joined her sister, regarding Hamish defiantly.

Hamish shot them an angry look. 'Very well,' he said in English. 'I'll go. But—' He shouldered Ishbel out of the way and, ignoring the rest of the women, thrust his face into Torrie's, eyes narrowed, lips thinned. 'If anything happens to my wean,' he warned, prodding the base of her throat with a firm finger, 'it'll be yer fault, ye hear?'

Even in the dim light, I could see Torrie paled. She twisted away from Hamish, shuffled towards the box bed, leaned over and groaned. Peigi went to offer comfort, but Torrie shrugged her off.

Hamish threw up his hands in surrender and left the room. I followed him, watching from the doorway as he disappeared into the lashing night.

Only later did I learn that many babies and mothers had died beneath this roof. It was fear driving Hamish's demands – fear for his wife and wean.

'I'm glad he's gone,' said Molly quietly, joining me in the doorway. 'Ishbel's right. The birthing room be no place for a man.'

So, I thought, following Molly back inside, this was now the birthing room.

Only then did Torrie see me.

'Get her out of here,' she croaked. 'I don't want her anywhere near me.'

I went to leave, but Molly and Ishbel refused to let me. I did my best to stay out of Torrie's sight. I began to replace the wicks in the extinguished cruisie lamps, adding oil where it was needed. Fen passed me the fir candles she and Pol had whittled, and I lit those as well. The room was hot, smoke roiled about the rafters. I caught sight of the cat, paws folded under his body as he watched from above.

The smell of peat, sweat tinged with uncertainty, and the musky, cloying smell of bodily fluids permeated everything. Part of me envied Hamish the fresh air.

'Close the door, lass,' instructed Molly as Peigi returned with a pail of water. Molly took the bucket and poured some water into a bowl. She took it to the bed, wringing out a cloth and wiping Torrie's face, pushing up her sleeves and lathing her arms.

Is she going to be alright, Ma? asked Fen as Torrie's face twisted in agony again. *Is the baby alright?*

It would be so easy to lie, to reassure my lass with a falsehood. *I don't know.*

Torrie had initially ignored her pains, insisting on completing her usual chores then coming to the farmhouse to help Ishbel. She put the ache in her spine, the restlessness in her legs, down to carrying Aoife everywhere.

By the time we'd arrived, she'd been like this for hours. Unable to sit or lie down, she paced and paced.

Glasglen's gossips, the local women who attended every birth, sat near the fire, calling out advice as she shuffled and moaned, tried to sit, stood, rubbed her belly, her back, refused a drink then demanded one. There were seven of them in total; years of wisdom and experience of childbirth were collected in their bent bodies.

At first, I was relieved they were there, as cramped as it was, until one rose and tied a red ribbon at the end of the bed … to stop Torrie bleeding.

All this was so unfamiliar to me. The milling, blethering, chanting women, the stuffiness of the room with its stone walls and dirt floor, the burning fire in the middle, the flickering lights, the basket to place the newborn replete with woven blankets, cheese and a loaf of bread. When I asked about those, Torrie made a scoffing sound.

'You still here?' I waited for her to order me gone again. Too exhausted to care, she simply ignored me.

'Dinnae ye do this back in the city?' asked Molly, nodding towards the basket, the old women pushing bunches of fragrant foliage into the fire. She rubbed Torrie's back. She was not only a voice of sense and reason, but she also translated what the women were saying.

'Nae,' I said. I didn't want to tell her that when I gave birth to Fen it was in a bedroom with whitewashed walls and plenty of light and air. The local midwife, my ma and her friend, Margaret Watt, my only companions. A physician was on call should he be needed. There was plentiful water, clean cloths, the soiled sheets were changed at least twice, and there was a lovely wee mutchie and long muslin frock for the babe to wear after she'd been washed. I'd yet to see swaddling let alone clothing for the newborn. Beeswax candles burned in my birthing room and there'd been a warm broth for me to drink and other medick on hand. 'This is very different.'

'The cheese and bread stop the fae stealing the babe and leaving a sickly one of theirs in its place,' explained Molly.

I nodded, more questions forming, but was afraid if I drew too much attention to my ignorance, it wouldn't just be Torrie insisting I leave. Not only did I want to be here to prove Lowlanders weren't useless, but a voice inside my head told me I *had* to be. While I was no midwife, I'd helped with other births – my neighbour Mrs Costman, the bookshop owner's wife. Mrs Cousin, the silversmith's sister, who was a friend of Margaret's. That had been a hard birth. Then there was sweet Miss Bowden, who'd been raped by a sailor, though few believed her, despite the terrible injuries she'd

received fighting him off. She'd delivered twins, unheard of in our district. They'd been given to the Sisters of Mercy. Ironic, when Miss Bowden had been shown none and was hounded out of Edinburgh. I'd heard her body was found months later, beaten and bloodied in the Shambles in York.

I shook myself to dispel these morbid thoughts. For all the babes I'd seen delivered, I'd never seen one born amid such gloom, such smells and noise. The chanting grew louder, the smoke thicker, swirling around the old women, who were almost atop the fire. It was as if I'd stumbled upon a witches' coven.

I concentrated on refreshing the lamps again while we waited for Mary to arrive with the Beaton, the wise-woman. I wondered what was taking them so long.

Pol, Elspet and Fionn had been sent to Torrie's cottage to watch over her other bairns. Una remained at the Folly with the hounds lest the men return. I half thought of telling Fen to join Una, but knew she'd object. Anyway, she was old enough to bear witness. To think, in just a few years, this could be her. Peigi too, I thought, watching the lass carding at her grandmother's feet, her worried eyes straying to her older sister.

The gossips were all working their spindles, baskets of wool by their sides. They had ceased to sing and begun to relay sombre tales. I asked Molly to translate and immediately regretted it. They spoke of weans dying, or sickly ones being exposed in dales and glens for the fae to exchange. A hunched woman with no brows or teeth began to reel off a list of all the mothers she'd known in Glasglen and the surrounding villages who'd died in childbed. I begged Molly for a story. But when she started telling us about the bairns she'd lost, I gave up. Thank the Lord Fen didn't have to listen to this. Perhaps it was the way of things here; the stories of death prevented the birth being ill-fated. It was clear there was a great deal of superstition involved in proceedings.

Outside, the rain continued, drumming on the thatch as the wind screamed. Bright flashes of lightning pierced the room, followed by great cracks of thunder that shook the very foundations. The women didn't even draw breath.

The door was pulled open. A drookit Mary and a smaller woman appeared. Younger than I expected, with fair hair stuck to thin cheeks, the wise-woman reminded me of a sprite from a mountain tale. She went

straight to the bed to examine Torrie, dropping her plaid and gloves on the floor like royalty for Mabelle to pick up, and assumed control.

Ordered to fetch more peat, blankets, a quern for grinding, extra cloths, to fill the horn cup with peatreek and keep it that way, to get cinnamon from the stores and sprinkle some in a basin of water, we made ourselves as useful as possible, running hither and thither. Ishbel and the other crones remained where they were, distaffs tucked beneath their arms, spindles endlessly clacking, clacking.

At least with the arrival of the Beaton, they ceased their blether.

From her position on the box bed, Torrie cast a chary eye over us, then began to pant and grunt again.

A tearful Peigi was sent to the byre to milk the cow, then to count the cheeses in the storeroom.

One look at her swollen eyes when she returned and Ishbel ordered her to Torrie's house.

Do you want to come? Peigi signed Fen.

I was touched.

Fen shook her head. *Thank you, but I'll stay with Ma.*

Peigi hesitated, torn between remaining and fleeing.

After she left, the shutters were sealed and covered with cloth the Beaton brought. The door was covered too.

'Keeps the evil spirits out,' explained Molly.

Of course.

The fire was banked, smoking and radiating so much heat I had to remove my coat, the steam rising from my wet clothes adding to the fug. I didn't know how the old women could bear it.

My first thought was Torrie must be terribly cold to want the room so hot, but no, it was also done to ensure the faeries didn't steal in and take the wean.

For the same reason, iron was placed at Torrie's feet and in the wean's basket, next to the cheese. At this rate, there'd be no room for the babe.

The night deepened, closing around us, the rain lashing the cottage like a whip. Huge black drips fell from the thatch, striking the dirt floor, the chairs, the table, us, streaming down our faces as if tears sent from the devil.

We took it in turns to help Torrie squat over the jordan, plied her with gills of peatreek and small pieces of oatcake soaked in milk. She didn't

even object when I took a turn, one arm around her thickened waist, the other over her shoulders.

We ate, talked, relieved ourselves (the smell from the jordan was ripe and sickening), the old women dozed, snoring and farting, chewing their gums. Fen curled up on my plaid beneath the table.

The room grew darker and darker, hotter and hotter; the rain eased and then came down like a battalion of drums. Finally, when there was another gap in the barrage, the Beaton sent me and Mary to retrieve the washtub.

It was a relief to escape the room for a while. I inhaled deeply, grateful for the sharp air, the steady plumes streaming from my mouth. I could hear the low of the cow in the byre, the cluck of chickens scratching about in the dirt. From within the barn came the snicker of horses. A fire had been lit just inside the doors and some men were gathered, passing a bladder around, laughing and jeering. Hamish and his friends were on the bash. He hailed us but we ignored him, focusing on our task. Thank goodness Peigi was with the bairns. When we returned and re-sealed the room, the tub was placed near the box bed and filled with ice-cold water.

‘Is that for after the birth?’ I asked, imagining how much Torrie would enjoy immersing herself once it was heated.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ said Molly.

Torrie let out a strangled, anguish-filled cry. She was back on the bed, the Beaton kneeling at her feet. Her face was screwed up in a rictus of agony. Her shift was almost transparent with sweat and the constant bathing of her brow and chest. Blood stained the sheets. The Beaton threw a huge clot to the floor.

Between spasms, the Beaton tried to give Torrie a tonic she’d prepared, but it mostly dribbled down her chin. Quiet again, an anxious look passed between the old women.

Exhausted, Torrie fell back, eyes fluttering, her breath shallow. She was becoming weaker and still the babe gave no sign of coming.

‘When will they move her to the birthing stool?’ I asked Molly quietly. Back in Edinburgh it was what most women used. I hadn’t seen one in the room. Perhaps it was still at Torrie’s. I could send Hamish – on second thoughts, someone else, to fetch it.

‘A what?’ asked Torrie suddenly. Her flesh was grey, her eyes deeply shadowed; her lips were the same colour as her cheeks.

I repeated myself.

‘A birthing stool?’ she whispered.

I explained how it was essentially a chair with a wide hole in the seat. It made bearing down, pushing, a little easier. It made the baby’s passage into the world less onerous, less dangerous.

Maybe.

The Beaton asked Molly to translate. She arched her brows at me, then laughed heartily. She told the other women. They all cackled and slapped their thighs.

‘What’s so funny?’ I asked.

‘We don’t use contraptions like that here in the Highlands,’ said Ishbel finally. ‘They might be fine for ye city-sort, but Torrie’s a sturdy Highland lass. She’ll give birth God’s way, in His time.’

Torrie didn’t resemble a sturdy Highland lass. I stared at the blood-soaked sheets, the dirty floor, in dismay. She’d been labouring for hours. Her strength was rapidly waning despite the caudles, the peatreek, the red wine, herbs and sugar she was spoonfed by the Beaton. The wean didn’t look in any hurry. If Torrie was to survive, it had to come – and soon.

I muttered something under my breath.

‘What? What is it, Lowlander?’ Torrie tried to sit up.

Damn it. I couldn’t stay quiet.

‘Naught you’ve tried is working.’ I refrained from mentioning the chanting, the songs, the red ribbon and iron. ‘You need to try something else. I’m afraid if you don’t …’

The same fear I felt was on Torrie’s face, only magnified. She screwed her eyes shut as another pain tore through her body. She released a long, slow moan, her lips pulled back. Her stomach rippled, sweat poured from her head, down the sides of her face, across her chest. Her hair was plastered to her scalp. More blood gushed out of her. She fell back on the bed.

With a clucking noise, the Beaton and Molly mopped up the blood and used the end of the sheet to wipe between Torrie’s legs. The Beaton took the cloths to a bowl to rinse them. Ishbel beckoned her over. The two women whispered, the others pausing in their spinning to listen.

Reaching for my hand, Torrie drew me closer.

‘Can you turn one of the chairs over there into this stool of yours?’

I glanced at the thickset chairs she was referring to.

‘I don’t think so. It would take too long and then …’ I chewed my lip. ‘But there is perhaps something else we can try.’

‘Och?’ Torrie could barely keep her head upright.

Beckoning Molly, Mary and Fen over, I spoke in soft tones. Torrie’s eyes widened.

‘What do you say?’ I asked her.

‘I need to do something.’ With a grimace, she swung her legs off the bed. Molly and Mary helped her upright.

The Beaton broke away from Ishbel and tried to force Torrie back. She began to scold Mary and Molly. Torrie shook her arm off and said something scathing in Gaelic. Eventually, the Beaton threw up her hands and retreated to the hearth, complaining loudly and pointing at me.

The old women began clecking and catter-battering. Ishbel held up a hand for silence then asked a question. At least, I think it was one.

‘Aye. I do,’ said Torrie, glancing at me.

After that, things happened swiftly.

The gown was pulled from Torrie, leaving her naked. As I washed my face and hands, Fen rolled a heavy stump over and propped it against the side of the box bed. I sat on the edge, resting my back on the solid wood. I pushed my skirt down between my knees until it sat just above the floor. I rolled up my sleeves, ensured my hair was secure, then held out my arms for the women to lower Torrie onto my lap. If we didn’t have a birthing stool for her to use, a person was the next best thing.

I would be that person.

Torrie sank into the gap created by my parted legs, wrapping hers over mine so her arse sat below the level of my lap. She fell back against me, her cheek on my neck. I could feel the rise and fall of her chest. She was hot, her body clammy. Dread and pain were her perfume. I gathered her hair and pushed it over my shoulder.

The glow of candles struck her swollen breasts, emphasised her engorged nipples and the veins that riddled her chest. Her belly was no longer smooth, but a rippling sphere. I made her loop her arms through mine and braced her shoulders with my hands. I would hold her for as long as it took. Keep her in position as she used what remained of her strength to bring her wean into the world. I just prayed she had enough.

The Beaton moved closer, talking quietly, disapprovingly. Let her. Let them all. Fen gave me a frightened glance. Molly, bless her, put an arm

around her and Mary. Mabelle poured gills of peatreek and began to offer them around.

‘Alright, Torrie,’ I said quietly. ‘When the next spasm comes, I want you to push as hard as you can. Lean back against me, bear down, and ask God to help you bring the babe forth.’

‘Whatever you say, Lowlander,’ said Torrie.

For someone with little to no strength left, Torrie managed to squeeze the life out of me as she pushed and pushed.

‘You’re doing well,’ I managed, before my ribs were squashed and breathing became hard.

I could have sworn I saw her belly shift, the shape alter. Still, nothing but blood and fluid gushed from between her legs.

As suddenly as the spasm began, it ceased. Torrie went limp, panting. ‘I can’t do this. I can’t.’ She started to whimper. My heart split.

Time to try something else.

‘What?’ I hissed in her ear. ‘Is that all you’ve got? The lass who told me to fook off? That I wasn’t wanted? Where’s *your* fight? Where’s *your* spirit, *kittie*?’ I rasped the last word. ‘Why, I’m a pathetic Lowlander and I practically spat my Fen out.’

There was a low growl and Torrie raised herself higher. Another pain gripped her.

‘Push. *Push*, damn it,’ I shouted. ‘I’ve got you. My skirt will catch the wean – or maybe the Beaton will?’ I looked at the midwife. I didn’t want to alienate her completely.

Encouraged by Molly, the Beaton squatted in front of Torrie, her earlier scorn gone. She said something and Torrie nodded. She put one hand on Torrie’s stomach and inserted her other deep into her body.

Torrie bucked, she tried to yell but nothing came out as her mouth opened and her eyes widened. Then, her head fell forward, her body stiffened and pressed hard into mine, her fingers dug into the soft flesh of my upper arms. I felt a scream building as Torrie braced, her head forcing my chin back. I fought to keep my legs in place. Just when I thought I had to release her, the Beaton cried out.

Molly exclaimed, ‘The wean’s in the hole!’

There was a great shudder from Torrie and a long, guttural howl that would put mountain wolves to shame. There was a slick, wet noise, a rush of fluid, followed by a triumphant cry. The Beaton struggled to her feet, a

small bloody bundle of red and pink in her arms and held it as high as the cord would allow.

Torrie slumped forward, a dead weight in my arms. I dragged her upright.

‘Look, look, Torrie. Open your eyes. You did it. You have a babe. A beautiful baby—’ I hesitated as the Beaton carried the wean over to the washtub of freezing water. God, what was it? Was it alive or dead? It still hadn’t made a sound.

To my horror, the Beaton pushed the babe under the freezing water. Was she trying to drown it? Then, she raised it up above her head, water cascading off its wee body.

A thin high-pitched wail followed.

Thank God.

As I watched through blurry eyes, under orders from the Beaton, Mabelle rushed over and tipped a spoonful of peatreek into the child’s open mouth. The babe coughed, spluttered, and then cried harder. If this babe survived all that, then it – *she*, I noted – would survive anything.

The afterbirth came and was lifted away to be buried later. There were cheers, followed by tears. Fen’s eyes were shining as she smiled at me. I smiled back, gave her a querying look.

You were … amazing, Ma.

No, my love. Not me. Torrie.

‘You’ve done well, Torrie Dorward,’ I said, hoisting Torrie up higher, gently helping her legs back into a more modest position. I pulled her onto my lap and brushed her hair from her face, kissing her softly. ‘Open your eyes, chick. You’ve a bonnie wee lassie.’

Torrie’s eyes flickered and she gave a faint smile. She rested her head against my shoulder and sighed, long and shuddering.

‘Thank you, Mrs MacAlister, thank you.’ Tears streamed down her cheeks. ‘If you hadn’t said, hadn’t done …’

‘Hush. Hush. And call me Greer.’ I indicated for Fen to pass me a blanket. Together, we covered Torrie.

The wailing babe was passed from one pair of hands to another. The old women made various signs over the child, spitting, blessing or cursing, I couldn’t tell the difference.

‘Greer,’ sighed Torrie, watching her grandmother through half-closed eyes.

I gave a small laugh and tightened my hold.

‘Don’t think for a moment this means I like you,’ whispered Torrie.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t be daft enough to make a mistake like that.’ I paused. ‘Don’t you go getting any ideas that I like you either.’

‘I’m many things, *Greer*, but I’m no numpty.’

‘That you’re not, Torrie Dorward.’

We smiled at each other, and she slowly shut her eyes, her hands resting over one of mine which was holding her tight beneath her breasts.

‘Her name is Caitlin,’ breathed Torrie so quietly I almost missed it.

Then she lost consciousness.

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CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE



One afternoon in late November, Mr Gordon returned. The moment the cry went up, Fen and I ran to the door just as the cart and horses were passing Ishbel's farm. If we hadn't been certain who it was riding up the hill, when Bran and Sceólang dashed across the slopes barking madly, tails wagging, any doubts were banished.

Elspet, Fionn and Torrie's twins ran alongside the lads as they rode towards us. Aoife tried to follow her siblings but fell and was scooped up by Mabelle, who took the wailing bairn back to her grandma. Peigi and Torrie walked beside their father's mount blethering away excitedly. I saw Torrie pass wee Caitlin up to Mr Gordon. He released the reins to hold the babe tight, nuzzling her and smiling broadly before handing her back. Auld Artur was saying something to his grandweans who'd rushed to join him. Dom was laughing, Mick, Jimmy and the Marr lads too. Pol bolted ahead, calling out, 'Da's home! Da's home!' as if we didn't already know.

'This calls for a celebration, doesn't it, Mary? Una?' The ruckus had drawn them out of the kitchen.

'A ceilidh?' asked Mary, her eyes widening. Una clapped her hands in delight.

I blinked. 'I was thinking more along the lines of some peatreek and bannocks.'

'Och, Mrs. We need a proper shindig. Leave it with me and Una,' she said and, taking Una's arm, scarpered away before I could protest.

As the men came over the final crest, Pol grabbed Fen's hand and dragged her towards them. Mr Gordon spied Fen, waved and then, I like to think, searched for me. I was standing in the shadows of the doorway. Our eyes locked and I swear I scarce noticed anything after that. Not the lads dismounting, the workers downing tools in the fields and running forward to help unload the cart, the manoeuvring of the vehicle into the barn, the excited chatter, the squeals.

Mr Gordon swung off his horse and hugged his bairns, one after the other, even turning to embrace Fen, who stood on tiptoe to hug him back. I envied her. Passing the reins of his horse to Rory, he strode towards the Folly.

He stopped a few feet away from the door just as a beam of late afternoon sun struck. 'Mrs MacAlister,' he said.

I'd forgotten how deep his voice was. Its visceral effect on me.

'Mr Gordon,' I replied, noting the way the light formed a corona about him, as if he were a hero from myth. His eyes were luminous. Luminous and inscrutable.

The entire time I was studying him, this man I couldn't stop thinking about, he was examining me.

'Ye look well,' he said.

My heart filled. 'So do you, sir. Welcome back.'

He reached for my hand.

As his fingers threaded through mine, shafts of lightning raced along my body; the elements raged inside me.

Thunderbolts and wild winds.

How long we stood there, simply staring, I couldn't say. The moment was broken when Fen and Pol ran over, Pol holding a miniature sailboat and Fen a dolly.

'Look, Mrs MacAlister,' said Pol, raising his ship so I might see it better. It was a single-masted sloop with rigging and sails and a beautifully painted hull and deck.

Look, Ma. Fen thrust a doll in my face. *Look what Mr Gordon bought me*.

I had trouble speaking. My throat had become thick. 'You bought this for Fen?' I asked, touching it reverently.

'You can't visit the big towns without bringing something back for the bairns,' said Mr Gordon, chuckling at their evident pleasure. 'It's the law,

you know.’

‘You bought this for Fen,’ I repeated softly, marvelling at the lovely papier-mâché figure dressed in a woollen gown replete with petticoats and wee leather shoes. I passed it back to Fen who cuddled it close to her chest, kissing the top of its bonneted head.

‘I bought one for Elspet and Aoife too. If I’d known about Caitlin, I’d have got another.’

In all his travels, William had never thought to buy a gift for Fen. Nor for me.

Mr Gordon was still talking, but I missed the first part. ‘… she says you saved her life. And Caitlin’s.’ He paused, his lips trembling slightly. By God, it took all my self-control not to reach out and kiss the tremors away. ‘I don’t have the words to thank you, Mrs MacAlister. Yet again, you’ve proven to be a mighty boon, not just to the village and my family, but to me.’

I was about to throw ice-water on his compliment. After all, he didn’t know the problems I’d had with the workers. How little had been accomplished in his absence. There was also the case of the missing stores, something I’d only recently discovered. And that was before I even thought about the troubles Joseph Eddison, Ewan Morrice and Brandon Stokes had caused.

But Mr Gordon hadn’t finished.

‘I will find a way to show what you mean to … to us.’

Before I could think how to respond, he was summoned to the barn. With a last lingering look, he crossed the yard.

‘Until later, Mrs MacAlister.’

‘Later,’ I whispered as the weight and promise of that one word made me warm all over.

But later was reserved for the ceilidh that Mary and Una organised. Everyone squeezed into Mr Gordon’s study. In addition to all those who’d travelled with Mr Gordon, their wives and bairns, were the rest of the Gordons, Con Harrison and his family, the Boynes, Reverend MacAdam and Mr Nicholson. Janet, the Beaton, arrived just on dark. Drink flowed, food wasn’t as plentiful as we’d have liked, but it was delicious. The music was sweet, the conversation steady and the stories and laughs constant as we sat, stood, swayed and exchanged news.

It was those who’d been away we were most keen to hear from.

Once the youngest bairns had been taken back to the farmhouse by Mabelle, we settled around the study, drinks in hand. The fire crackled, the dogs roamed about licking up crumbs and spills. As the patter of rain commenced, Mr Gordon recounted their trip, and how it had taken so long because of the number of excise and soldiers patrolling the roads.

‘We were lucky this time. We managed to reach Gordon Castle without getting caught, but we knew we were asking for trouble if we continued to the coast with so much peatreek on board.’

‘What’d you do?’ asked Con Harrison.

‘After delivering what we owed in kind for lease, the duke agreed to buy more. Before you say anything,’ said Mr Gordon, raising a finger, ‘he paid a fair price.’

Con snorted. ‘He’s a laird, there’s naught fair ’bout them.’

‘The Duke of Gordon’s better than most,’ said Auld Art.

‘Did ye manage to collect the reward for the broken still?’ asked Mr Nicholson, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

‘Aye.’ It was Big Billy who answered. ‘We did. All five pounds. The excise stationed in Strathbogie swallowed the story we gave them.’ He grinned at Mick and Jimmy. ‘The lads excelled themselves.’

The men raised their cups. There were chuckles and nods of approval.

‘We took what remained of the peatreek to our agent in Inverness. Once there, we had to rethink our journey home. We’d planned to come through Morayshire. Instead, we approached Glasglen from the west, through Badenoch and over the ranges.’

‘You didn’t strike the gaugers?’ asked Jon Boyne.

‘Nae. Though they were about.’

‘What’s got the excise all stirred up?’ asked Con Harrison. ‘We can usually rely on them to lie low this time of year.’

‘There’s been a number of successful seizures over Glenlivet and Inverness way,’ said Big Billy. ‘It’s emboldened them.’

‘Margaret Macpherson mentioned those,’ said Caragh.

‘Gillespie has men searching as far west as the Nairn River and along the Spey.’

‘Since when does his authority extend there?’ Torrie asked.

‘It doesn’t usually,’ said Mr Gordon. ‘But he’s clearly got an arrangement with redcoats in the area.’

‘What kind?’ asked Con.

Mr Gordon rubbed his fingers together. ‘Ye recall the one who was asking questions about Alice MacIntosh?’

‘Lieutenant Jacobs?’ I supplied.

Heads swivelled in my direction. I wished I’d remained quiet.

‘That’s the one,’ said Mr Gordon, trying to reassure me with a look. ‘He’s been asking everywhere and paying Gillespie and his men to inquire too – hence they’ve exceeded their usual bounds. We ken the reason for the redcoat’s persistence. Turns out, Alice MacIntosh is Jacobs’ sister, half-sister to be exact. Her ma married an Englishman with two sons. The eldest is Lieutenant Reynaud Jacobs.’

There were intakes of breath, then everyone began talking at once.

‘Brandon Stokes was right all along,’ said Hamish, striking his thigh. ‘She *did* inform on us.’

‘I kent there was something amiss about the lass,’ said Jon Boyne.

‘Ye cannae trust an incomer, I tell ye,’ said Con Harrison.

I found my hands very interesting.

A great deal more was said, mostly in Gaelic. It was a while before everyone settled enough for Mr Gordon to continue.

‘Apparently, she ran away from Fort William over a year ago. It was something to do with a lad. Her brother’s been trying to find her ever since.’

‘Well, why dinnae he just say?’ asked Molly. There were furious nods.

‘Why keep his relationship to her a secret?’ asked Torrie.

Mr Gordon shrugged. ‘Maybe because she’s shamed the family? I don’t know.’ There were a few whispers.

‘Did ye speak to him?’ asked Con Harrison.

‘We dinnae see Jacobs,’ answered Auld Art. ‘We heard about him in the villages we passed through. According to folk, Jacobs is intending to remain in the region over winter. None are happy about it. But he’s determined to find Alice.’

‘Ye cannae blame him for that,’ said Caragh. ‘She’s his sister. Kin.’

‘The only good news is, he dinnae have a contingent of soldiers. Just that sergeant with the marked face – probably the same one he brought here,’ added Auld Art.

‘Dinnae ye think that’s odd?’ asked Hamish. ‘Not to have a few redcoats with him at least?’

‘Aye,’ said Mr Gordon. ‘I do. As is asking questions everywhere. He’s up to something. I just don’t know what.’

‘He dinnae learn anything here,’ said Molly.

‘That’s because we’d naught to tell him,’ said Reverend MacAdam.

There was silence as everyone sifted their thoughts. A peat brick crumbled in the hearth, sending a shower of sparks into the room. Bran half-rose, then sank back down.

Big Billy stood. ‘Jacobs should’ve asked for help instead of going about it the way he has. He’s done naught but seed suspicion – and not just of him, but each other.’ He gazed kindly in my direction. ‘I dinnae what he thinks we’ve done with her.’ He finished what was in his cup then handed it to Mary and stretched, stifling a yawn. ‘Anyhow, it’s good to be back. But if ye’ll forgive me, now the rain has stopped, I’ll head home. Sooner I get some rest, the sooner Spinney and I can head up to the bothy on the morrow. We’ve more spirit to make. We all do,’ he reminded the room, as he held out his hand to his wife.

The gathering swiftly broke up.

Una ushered Fen and Pol, who often stayed the night, to bed. Mary and I began to clear away the dishes. With the room almost empty, I became aware of how badly Mr Gordon needed a bath. I also wondered, as I helped Mary carry the plates and cups into the kitchen, if the ‘later’ Mr Gordon promised had arrived.

When I re-entered the study, I found him slumped in his chair before the fire. His cup had dropped from his fingers, his plaid had slid down his shoulders. In repose, he looked younger than his forty-odd years. A bairn almost. A great big hairy one. I stood over him with a blanket ready to tuck around him and simply admired the picture he presented. I carefully draped the wool over him, bunching it gently.

He briefly stirred. ‘*Tapadh leat a ghràidh*,’ he murmured.

I knew enough Gaelic by now to understand. *Thank you, my love*. My heart grew heavy. He thought I was his Bríde.

First patting the hounds, I carefully shut the study door and opened the front one. The ground was sodden. The thatch on the barn dripped. The rush of the nearby burn was loud. I inhaled the loamy moistness, relishing it. A few bold stars perforated the firmament to twinkle defiantly.

That’s what I should do, I thought, twinkle defiantly.

I wondered if Mr Gordon saw me differently because of our last conversation. God knew, I revealed more than I intended. I blamed the whisky. Nae, that was cowardly. I owed him the truth. What about what

almost happened between us? Was that truth as well? Or was he relieved we were interrupted? After weeks away, he'd had plenty of time to consider it.

God, I thought, pinching the bridge of my nose, so had I. I had to cease thinking about the man except as the one for whom I worked. To consider him in any other way was not only doolally, it was dangerous. It risked undoing the very slow progress I was making here.

I'd no intention of staying beyond our agreement, did I? So why was his esteem so important to me?

It isn't just his esteem you want.

How many times was I going to have this talk with myself? With a sigh, I went inside, closing the door and making my way to my bedroom. I shimmied out of my skirts, unpinned my hair and plaited it.

Soundlessly, I slipped into bed beside Fen and Pol and waited for sleep to claim me.



The following morning, weaving between buckets, sawhorses and tools, I waved the bairns off to school. I watched as they capered down the hill, plaids flying, satchels bouncing. I searched for a sign of Mr Gordon and the hounds. They were gone when I awoke.

With a sigh, I shut the door, stirring the layers of dust. There was no point doing anything about it until the workers finished the plastering. For that to happen, the ones with the right skills had to appear. Would they, now Mr Gordon had returned?

Just as I entered the kitchen, Mary came through the back door. She looked harried. Placing the pail of milk on the floor, she clicked in exasperation, hands on hips.

'What is it, Mary?'

'Ye ken how I told ye I thought there was a cheese missing from the larder and that our eggs and butter were low?'

Over the last few weeks, Mary had been having trouble accounting for our stores. Every day we churned the extra milk into butter, made cheese, and collected the eggs. What wasn't used we traded, put aside for winter or sent to the duke's come spring.

'I do. Why? Don't tell me things are missing again?'

Mary scratched her head. ‘I was so careful countin’ yesterday. We’re a dozen eggs short, and a second cheese has disappeared. Not only that, but a pail has gone and the milk that was in it too. And that’s not countin’ the bannocks I swear walked out of here in someone’s stomach. Una’s back there tallyin’ again, lest I’m going daft.’

I didn’t remind her about the oatcakes she’d said vanished earlier.

‘Either the bairns are takin’ more than their fair share when they visit, the stent workers are helpin’ themselves, or the fae are conductin’ nightly raids. And I make sure to give them an offerin’ at the stone each day.’

Next to where Mary and Una milked the cows was a large stone with a small hollow at one end. After each milking, the lasses always filled it as a gift to the brownies that lived in the hills, so they might look after the kine, ensure the calves were healthy and the herd survived winter.

I’d since learned all Glasglen followed such practices. I’d been known to pour a quantity of milk in the stone as well. God forbid I should be held responsible for a sick beast.

Mary sank onto the bench and beckoned me closer. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if it is the workers,’ she whispered. ‘I kent some of them resent labourin’ here when they could be in their bothies or workin’ their own land.’

‘I’m not forcing them,’ I reminded her. ‘Anyway, it’s not their land, and it’s what they owe Mr Gordon. It’s their obligation.’

Mary muttered something under her breath.

‘What did you say?’

Her cheeks began to colour and she levered herself off the bench. ‘Nae matter,’ she said lightly.

‘It does,’ I said. ‘Please, Mary. Tell me.’

She hesitated, then looked me straight in the eye. ‘Sometimes, what ye call an obligation can feel like slavery – nae matter who it is ye work for. I’m not surprised stores are going missin’. Look at this house, its size. It’s mighty grand compared to those in the village. Why, some aren’t more than one room with a dirt floor and even that’s shared with cows and chickens. A hovel, ye might say. Och, it’s right and proper our tacksman has a fine house. He should. But folk look up here and when they see this place, they see plenty. They simply want a share of it. Is that so wrong?’

I couldn’t argue with the logic. Even Mrs Fraser’s house was very humble compared to this. Though half-finished, the Folly was a palace.

God knew what Mary and the folk here would think of the houses in Edinburgh, or even the dingy tavern where I grew up.

I placed my hand gently on her shoulder. ‘I’ll talk to Mr Gordon. The last thing he’d want is for his workers to go hungry.’ Or the villagers to feel like slaves. While I knew what this house meant to him, what he intended it to signify for his family and the village, it had come to mean something else altogether to those forced to work here. What a mess.

Mary pressed her lips together. ‘I think it’s better if ye dinnae say anything, Mrs MacAlister. I dinnae want anyone to get into trouble.’

Neither did I. But if stores were being taken and I knew about it and didn’t say anything, wasn’t I complicit in the thievery as well?

‘Then how about we try and solve this? You and Una ask around and I will too. I’ll be discreet,’ I added as Mary went to protest. ‘Let’s see if together we can’t find out who’s stealing and if we can’t help them.’

‘Ye’d do that?’

‘I would.’

‘Thank ye, Mrs,’ said Mary, her bright smile returning.

I left her in the kitchen, wondering briefly who the culprit might be and why, when they could have simply asked, they were pilfering.

I tried to focus on my tasks for the day, but Mary’s words rang in my head. *Sometimes, what ye call an obligation can feel like slavery – nae matter who it is ye work for.*

Mr Gordon would be mortified to know that folk viewed him as a slaver, like the greedy lairds he so despised and from whom he tried to protect the villagers. The house was built for love, for family. If Mr Gordon wasn’t careful, it could come to mean something else altogether.

And what about Alice MacIntosh, my predecessor, whose absence was causing so many problems? Maybe as I tried to discover who was stealing, I could find out more about her. That way, if Lieutenant Jacobs reappeared and asked questions again, I might even be able to give him answers.

Instead of being the lass who brought the redcoats to the village, I could be the woman who ensured they never returned.

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CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO



All the descriptions in the world, all the warnings and jesting, couldn't have prepared me for the bitter reality of a Highland winter. Not only was the snow relentless and thick, but the winds were fierce and destructive, sweeping down the mountains and rattling the very bones of the house. Slates were blown off, shattering into glittering shards that blew across the yard. Some landed in the snow and could be recovered, meaning Jon Boyne risked life and limb to replace them.

By the time Christmas arrived, it was impossible to recall the palette of colours that first greeted me when I arrived in Glasglen. Everything was white and grey. There were variations – dirty-white, smoky grey, stormy-grey, and even brown-grey where the snow melted around doorsteps and the constant traffic of people in the early days of December trudged sludgy tracks through the village. The water in the loch, so often unruffled, churned until it resembled a boiling cauldron, forcing the fishing families to abandon their boats for days at a time until the New Year, when the entire loch froze.

It became hard to recognise folk as faces were buried beneath layers of wool, linen, skins, fur and, of course, plaids. I learned to distinguish a gait, a cough, even the way someone favoured one side of their body over another. We shivered through the dark mornings, waiting for the rooms to heat; we shivered through the evenings as the night wrapped its frigid hands around the Folly and squeezed the warmth out of it. Windows were covered, the bottoms of doors stuffed with rags, yet somehow the damn icy

air would find gaps. How we didn’t end up scalding ourselves from sitting so close to the fire is a mystery.

Forced outdoors to attend to chores and kirk, we shook our way through the blessedly shorter sermons. Not even the close press of bodies in the pews provided much heat. Often I was jammed betwixt Fen and Mr Gordon and, I confess, enjoyed the extra warmth of his body against mine.

Christmas was a low-key affair. Instead, a ceilidh to properly celebrate the season was held on Twelfth Night. Before that was the all-important Hogmanay to farewell the last twelve months and welcome the New Year.

We would celebrate it, along with neighbours, down in the farmhouse. When I asked why it wasn’t being held up at the Folly, which had far more room and a bigger kitchen to prepare a feast, Mr Gordon shrugged. ‘That’s the way it’s always been.’

For some time now, I’d sensed a reluctance among the bairns – Mrs Fraser, too – to treat the Folly as their future home. They behaved like visitors, calling upon their father or Fen and me, whiling away some time as they would in a shebeen or a shop. Of all the bairns, Pol was the most comfortable here.

Between Christmas and Hogmanay, finger-talking lessons were suspended, and I helped Mary in the kitchen, learning more about making haggis than I ever wanted to know. As New Year drew closer, we also sacrificed a hen to make cock-a-leekie soup and raided the storehouse for tatties and neeps. We also made black buns, a type of sweet bread filled with fruit, which would be offered as a gift to the houses we visited. It was tradition that after midnight on Hogmanay, people would visit each other’s abodes. The first-footer – the first person to cross the threshold after twelve o’clock – would indicate good fortune or ill for the year ahead, depending whether they were male or female, light- or dark-haired. Ale was made and put aside, and Mr Gordon chose an anker of whisky to take to the farmhouse. Knowing that everyone else invited would contribute, I couldn’t help but be concerned about the wastage, especially since we still hadn’t caught the thief raiding our stores.

‘Och, Mrs MacAlister,’ Mary reassured me, ‘naught will go to waste. When we go a-visiting, we’ll take the leftovers with us to share. What’s not eaten at Hogmanay will keep being served in the days and weeks after until it’s all gone.’

I didn’t know whether to be relieved or horrified.

We also had to clean the house from top to bottom. Not a huge task at the Folly, as there were really only three rooms in use. Nevertheless, Hogmanay morning, we swept up the old ashes in the kitchen and study hearths, scrubbed and blackened the fireplaces, then went to the burn and drew pails of water. After we sprinkled the few rooms at the Folly as a blessing, a way of asking the river gods to look over us in the New Year, the Gordon bairns did the same thing at the farmhouse. Before they left, we also smudged the air, which involved walking through every room holding aloft sprigs of burning juniper.

There was a time I would have screwed up my nose at such nonsense, but I enjoyed the preparations, the anticipation, especially when Mr Gordon pitched in and helped. Conscious of him whenever he was about, I found it hard to focus on what I was supposed to be doing. Aware of those eyes, of how his nimble fingers would knead the oats and milk together to make oatcakes, of the way he'd gently push a dram of whisky towards me, Una and Mary when he felt we'd been working hard. He was a quiet but oh-so-welcome presence.

My favourite times were when he'd come home late in the evening, the hounds by his side. At first, I would leave him to his own company, ensuring he had food and a drink, before putting away my mending and getting Fen to replace the book she'd borrowed. Along with Mary and Una, who were generally sewing, spinning or carding, we'd bid him good night and retreat to our room.

One night, he was very late home. Worried, I'd delayed going to bed, telling myself the fire needed tending, that the bookshelves near Mr Gordon's desk could do with straightening. A blizzard was blowing outside, and I knew that Mr Gordon and the lads had ventured to Lady Green Falls to collect the casks and ankers of spirit the Larnachs and Boynes had made, which they would have to carry out of the forest. When they'd left at dawn, the day promised rare sunshine, but by afternoon it had changed. I began to imagine all sorts, not helped by Mary, who filled my head with stories of people falling into chasms or tripping into burns, the weight of their clothes dragging them into the depths before they were carried away by the current. She told me about people going missing in the dead of winter, only to be found at the bottom of gullies, or on the banks of the loch, swept lifeless down from the mountain when the snows thawed.

It was easy to believe some disaster had found the men. My imagination knew no bounds.

When I heard the dogs' claws clattering on the stones in the hallway, I froze on the spot. I'd intended to slump into a chair and appear all casual, but there wasn't time. As Mr Gordon came through the door, grey-faced with cold, snow dusting his great coat, his hair, his boots saturated, I ran forward.

'You're home!' I exclaimed, holding my arms out, sailing towards him, smiling.

He pulled up short. The expression on his face brought me to my senses. I dropped my arms, schooled my face. 'I mean, you're safe, Mr Gordon, you're safe. I'm glad …'

Mr Gordon slowly unwrapped the plaid from his shoulders.

The space between us contracted. His eyes danced. I noted the scar, all but buried in his beard, the thick strand of wet hair that fell across his brow. God, I wanted to caress it away. The dogs sank before the fire and sighed. The wind threw clumps of snow at the window, but I noticed none of that. Just the heat stealing through my limbs to pool in my molten centre.

'Mr Gordon—'

'Mrs MacAlister—'

We spoke at the same time.

'I … I'd best be going to bed.' I glanced towards his. 'To my bed. *Mine*.'

We continued to stare at each other. 'Nae.'

My heart almost exploded. *Nae?* For a wild minute, I contemplated ripping the shirt from his torso, winding my fingers through his hair and drawing his mouth to mine …

'What I mean is—' he continued hurriedly, interrupting my errant thoughts. 'Join me for a dram or two. Please.' He quickly manoeuvred a chair next to his so I didn't mistake his meaning. 'I'd enjoy company while my fingers and toes thaw. Tell me what you've been up to today. Did the workers come?'

The entire time he spoke, as the heat fled my body, my whirling mind slowly regained its usual pace, he found cups and the jug of peatreek and poured us both a drink. Encouraging me into the chair, he sat in the one closest to the fire. He waited until I arranged my skirts, leaning over and touching my cup with his.

‘*Slàinte*,’ he said.

‘*Slàinte*,’ I replied.

‘Now, about your day …’

And so began a habit that we continued most nights. After I took Fen to bed and Mary and Una retired, we’d sit and enjoy a drink, sharing the events of the day, the progress – or lack of it – on the house, and plans for the following year.

I began to anticipate our evenings together, just as, for the first time I could recall, I began to look forward to a New Year.

In Edinburgh, Hogmanay was just another working day, something I dreaded as, despite my efforts to change my life in little ways, nothing new ever happened. I started to think it never would. I thought this without pity or rancour, just an acknowledgement of reality. After all, to others I was naught but a tavern wench. It didn’t matter that my father had been destined for the kirk, nor my mother gifted with music. Nor did anyone care I could read, write, speak a smattering of French and Latin. My da believed it was as important for a woman to receive an education, to think, as it was for her to keep house. As far as any of the magistrates or officers or burghers who frequented our tavern were concerned, I was there to serve them their meridian at eleven of the clock when we opened, and a claret or ale as the town guard beat the drum at ten of the clock to signify closing. Then, the patrons would vanish, their swilling over, their merriment forced to be taken elsewhere. Hogmanay, other festive occasions, it made no difference. My purpose was to fulfil theirs.

Before the bells of St Giles chimed, I too would be abed, curled around Fen, too exhausted to welcome in the New Year. Too tired to even pretend I cared about a first-footer or the singing and whooping I could hear in the distance. No-one asked me to join them. I was ‘poor Mary and John’s daughter’, the charity-niece who Uncle Duncan kept on after he took over management (ha!) of the tavern out of the goodness of his heart – despite the years Ma and I had successfully run it. To make matters even more pitiful, my daughter was afflicted with a condition that aroused both contempt and fear.

I thought about that as I dressed for the Hogmanay celebrations, donning Peigi’s gloves, the lovely plaid Mrs Fraser gifted me after Caitlin’s birth, a coat, boots and bonnet. Darkness crept across the glen, turning it into a landscape of glowing windows and snow-driven air. I helped Fen don

her coat, thinking how even though I still felt like an incomer, at least Fen had found a place. The number of people who would finger-talk with her (most clumsy, some with real skill) warmed my heart. And though it would be a long while before I was accepted (and I'd likely be gone before that ever came about), at least I was no longer solely defined by my absent husband or Joseph Eddison's gossip. For now, that would have to do.

As Mary, Una, Fen and I braved the flurries, the wind having called a temporary cease-blow, and carefully carried our contributions and even two bottles of fine claret that Mr Gordon had given us to take, the flickering lights in the farmhouse were a welcome beacon. Strains of music, of voices raised in glee, wafted around us – and not just from Mrs Fraser's. Ceilidhs were happening elsewhere, too. I felt excited. Not only about the evening, but, for the first time in years, about the future. After all the years of promising myself, daring myself, I'd actually sought change. And look where it brought me – to the last place I could have ever imagined.

Around us, the snow fell silently, stealthily lodging on our clothes and exposed hair. I glanced skywards. Though the stars were concealed behind the slate-dark clouds, I knew they were there, sparkling. That's how I felt. With a clean gown, my hair and body washed, I felt as cleansed as the house.

For once I didn't mind being in the farmhouse's smoky, shadowy main room. Warmth stole over me as did the smell of cooking meat, fresh-baked bannocks, neeps and tatties. Beneath it all, the lingering odour of juniper. The room had been scrubbed to within an inch of its life. As we were welcomed inside, music and laughter enveloped me. A drink was thrust in my hand. I removed my plaid, nodding to familiar faces. The Boynes, Duffs, Larnachs and Geddes. Dom and his youngest daughter, Jane, had walked all the way from the southern end of the village. Reverend MacAdam and Mr Nicholson were there too. Torrie, Hamish and their children as well. And Mabelle, of course.

Mr Gordon arrived after we did, and left soon after, despite my entreaties. No-one remarked upon his decision. I wondered if the evening carried painful memories and wished I could be the one to dismiss them. Instead, I threw myself into the celebrations.

I'd no awareness of time passing, but it must have. The door between the rooms had been wedged open and the two areas used for dancing. Unable to whirl, we nevertheless jigged and jumped, singing at the top of

our voices while pipes and fiddles were played. Some of the songs were in Gaelic, but I didn't mind. There was something haunting about the tunes, the lyrics, as if the language spoke to the spirit rather than the ear. I understood their meaning.

At some point, Peigi prepared to take the younger bairns to Torrie's. For a moment, a fuss was made as the wee ones were dressed for the walk down the hill. Torrie, Peigi and Hamish would take them home and settle them before returning.

The room felt bigger once they'd left and the remainder of us found seats – upon the table, tree stumps, upturned barrels, extra stools and chairs – listening intently as Big Billy, then Mrs Fraser, told tales – stories of war, of brave and foolish men, of princes and generals. There were others about the brownies that lived in the trees and hills, the kelpies that dwelt beneath the waters. Spellbound, or more likely sated with plentiful food and drink, we barely noticed when Torrie and Peigi slipped back to join us. Hamish must have decided to remain at the cottage. Mary and Mabelle began wrapping pieces of black bun, twisting salt into pieces of fabric and collecting some coal in preparation for our visit to other houses. Midnight was approaching.

Mrs Fraser had just commenced another story when there was a hollow pounding on the door. We all started; Elspet yelped. Fen's eyes grew wide, but not afraid. Una looked terrified. Folk shucked off their weariness; the remaining children their sleepiness.

'*Ciad-coise*,' was repeated around the room. The first-footer was here. All eyes turned to the door.

It occurred to me then why Mr Gordon had left. Tradition had it that if a dark-haired person was the first to cross the threshold after midnight, then good luck would bless the household for the entire year. From the grins splitting everyone's faces, they knew. Mary gave me a big wink. Una's relief was palpable.

Torrie rose and, with a skip in her step, went to the door. We all stood expectantly. My heart was beating so loudly, I half-expected to be told to quieten it.

'Welcome to our home—' Torrie began, heaving the door open with a dramatic flourish.

It wasn't Mr Gordon standing there. It was Hamish.

‘What the fook are you doing here, you great gawpus?’ Torrie snapped. ‘You’re not meant to be the first-footer.’ She stared past him into the night. ‘Where’s Da?’

A fair-haired man, Hamish’s appearance did not bode good fortune.

‘I don’t ken where he is, do I? I’m not his keeper. Anyhow, I said I was coming back,’ said Hamish, pushing past her.

‘Because of you, we’re going to have bad luck all year.’

‘Don’t *you* be a gawpus, Torrie,’ said Hamish, turning on her. ‘That’s a load of auld nonsense and you know it.’

There were gasps. Even Reverend MacAdam appeared shocked. Torrie was about to say something else when Spinney intervened.

‘Come along. Don your plaids, coats and gloves. Grab yer gifts,’ she said, indicating for Mabelle to hand out the lumps of coal and twists of salt. Black bun was passed around and Spinney and the men grabbed jugs of whisky. ‘It’s time to go a-knocking.’

The burst of activity put an end to Torrie and Hamish’s argument, though the disappointment that Mr Gordon hadn’t appeared was palpable.

We filed out of the farmhouse, leaving Mrs Fraser and a few of the others who found the walk too hard this time of year.

‘For fook’s sake,’ hissed Caragh to Spinney and Molly as she passed them. ‘Make sure the dark-haired ones do the knocking. We don’t want to ruin anyone else’s Hogmanay.’

‘It’s not like Tam to miss his cue,’ said Spinney.

‘I’ll be having a word with him,’ said Molly. ‘Mark my words. I could have opened the shebeen tonight and been laden with good fortune.’

I glanced up at the Folly. Faint light flickered. We reached the junction in the track. As the others headed down to the village, I made up my mind.

I had a quiet word with Mary, who gave me a strange, knowing look that I could read even in the half-dark of our lanterns. My cheeks flared.

Go on, chick, I said to Fen, who was tugging at my skirts. Pol waited patiently beside her. *Go with Mary and Pol and wish the villagers a Happy Hogmanay. I’ll be waiting at home*.

Home.

Faint cries of *Oidhche Challainn shona* carried. Happy Hogmanay.

Fen didn’t need to be told twice, but took Mary’s free hand and one of Pol’s, dragging them downhill.

I watched until they were swallowed by the darkness. Below, doors opened. There was laughter and screams of glee. As I headed up the hill, the snow began to fall again, as gentle as a sigh upon my shoulders. I raised my hands to catch it.

‘What on earth are you doing out here, Mrs MacAlister?’

I almost leapt out of my skin.

‘Mr Gordon! You gave me a fright. Actually,’ I said, hand over heart, glancing back down to where the roisterers from Mrs Fraser’s were heading, ‘I was coming to make sure you were alright.’

‘Why wouldn’t I be? Anyway, you shouldn’t be out and about. There’s tradition to maintain.’

‘Is that so, sir?’

‘Aye. That’s why I’m heading to the farmhouse. I’m the first-footer.’

I gave him an exasperated look. ‘You’re too late. Hamish took the honour. Everyone’s mighty angry with him. Torrie especially.’

Mr Gordon slapped his forehead. ‘I knew I should have wound the clock.’ He shook his head. ‘It’s not Hamish they should be angry with …’

I waved a careless hand. ‘Don’t worry. They’re down in the village determined to push any dark-haired lad through doors and undo or at least minimise the ill-fortune. I think that’s the plan.’

My head began to spin. After the warmth and comfort of the farmhouse, the icy air was quickly sapping my strength. I felt strange. And very, very cold.

‘Well, let’s hope they succeed, eh?’ said Mr Gordon, gazing down towards the nearest cluster of houses. ‘But in the meantime, I need to get you inside. Back into the warmth.’ He stepped closer and put his arm around me, drawing me close. ‘Come along, if you stay out here much longer, you’ll turn colder than a … a …’

‘Witch’s tit?’ I supplied.

Mr Gordon threw back his head and burst out laughing. ‘Where’d you hear that?’

‘Molly.’

‘I was going to say a duck’s arse in winter, but that’ll do.’

We reached the Folly and Mr Gordon opened the door with one hand, steering me into his study. The hounds barely stirred from in front of the fire.

‘Now, let me look at you,’ he said, and began rubbing my bare hands vigorously. I must have left Peigi’s gloves at the farmhouse. ‘Your fingers are like icicles,’ he said, lifting them to his mouth and blowing on them.

His breath was warm. His hands as well. I watched as his head bowed over mine then slowly twined my fingers through his.

‘Mrs MacAlister.’ He raised his head slowly. His face was inches from mine. I could feel the heat coming off him. ‘What are you doing?’

‘This,’ I said and pulled him towards me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY - THREE



*E*ver since the mess with William, the ugly incident with Uncle Duncan, I'd tried to be mindful of my reputation. But as Mr Gordon's lips met mine, all thoughts of propriety were cast aside.

Nae, they were scorched to ashes in the heat of our kiss.

His arms slowly encircled me, a hand pressing into the small of my back while another burrowed through the hair bunched at my nape. I moaned as he twisted it around his fingers, and pins cascaded to the floor.

I needed no more encouragement. My arms roped around his neck, pulling him closer, closer.

As his hot tongue sought mine and he groaned against me, I was aquiver with a longing I'd never felt before. I ceased to have a coherent thought. I was composed of snow and had begun to thaw, rapidly, without warning. Perhaps sensing I was about to melt in a puddle at his feet, Mr Gordon scooped me up into his arms, his lips never once leaving mine.

For a moment I thought he was taking me to his bed. God help me, I hoped he was. Alas, he sank into his chair, gathering me so I reclined across his legs. We parted briefly to stare into each other's eyes, and he gently smoothed the hair from my face. We smiled, that long, slow one we oft shared. Our foreheads touched. I couldn't cease looking at those lips, lips at once so firm and yet so velvet soft. He began to kiss me again. Starting above my brows, his mouth travelled across my temples, sealed my eyes shut before bypassing my mouth and finding my neck.

I tilted my head back, shivering as butterflies fluttered in my stomach before plunging lower, causing my loins to throb. I could feel his hardness against the back of my thigh, and it only made me want him more. Was this how women were meant to feel? This burning desire? This hunger? My body had become one great need that had to be sated. I was an instrument and he the musician. Only, I too wanted to feel that power, to direct the melody.

I began to claw at his shirt, pulling it open to run my fingers along that broad chest, caress the fine hairs, kiss the pulse beating in his neck. I pulled my tresses, which were completely unbound, to one side. Mr Gordon collected my hair in his hand and buried his face in it.

'Your hair,' he said hoarsely. 'It's so incredibly long, so beautiful, so silky.' He lifted a handful and brought it to his mouth. 'You've no idea how often I imagined you, like this—'

'Tousled and wanton in your arms?'

He smiled. 'Aye. And maybe more.' His eyes travelled to the bed. I followed the direction of his gaze.

'Mr Gordon!' I exclaimed with mock severity. 'And here I thought you were still the grieving widower …'

All at once, his expression altered. As effectively as if she'd walked into the room, the spectre of his dead wife came between us. What was I thinking? God, I was taking advantage. Of the night, of him. Of his grief. Mrs Fraser was right all along. This man still loved his wife. This wasn't right. It wasn't fair – on either of us.

I began to climb off his lap, do up my buttons.

'Forgive me, Mr Gordon. I … I don't know what came over me.'

Mr Gordon didn't move. He sat there, legs parted, his kilt distorted. I tried not to look at what I knew lay beneath it, repressing the shiver of longing that racked my body.

'Nae, you're right, Mrs MacAlister,' he said, watching me as I bent to retrieve some pins and began to twist my hair back into a bun. 'Please,' he said, reaching out and staying my hand. 'Leave it unbound. For me.'

I couldn't deny him this.

I put the pins in my pocket and bent to pick up the others scattered all over the floor. 'Mr Gordon. I cannot tell you how sorry I am. I'm your employee, your housekeeper. This was wrong. Why, I put all sense aside

and all but threw myself at you.' I wiped my hands down the front of my skirt. 'I promise you, it won't happen again.'

'Och, lass. You disappoint me. Won't it?'

He was regarding me with a very solemn expression.

'*Won't it?*' I repeated. 'Well, it shouldn't. We need to remember who we are, sir. Where we are. Why, the lasses could return at any moment.'

'Aye, they could,' said Mr Gordon. Were his eyes twinkling?

'I blame the peatreek.' I folded my hands primly in my lap, my hair draped over my shoulders, falling past my waist, pooling around my hips. Inwardly, I winced.

'The peatreek?' He shook his head in faux disapproval. 'It gets blamed for so many things. Are you sure it was just the spirit?'

I tried to hold his eyes but failed.

'Nae.' I said softly. 'I'm not going to plead an Uncle Duncan. It wasn't the peatreek.'

'Nae,' He chuckled. 'If anything, the peatreek's what gave me the courage to do what I've been wanting to do since the second time I saw you.'

'Second time?' I cocked my head. 'If you seek to flatter me, Mr Gordon, then surely what you mean to say is the first time.'

'Ah, but I don't want to *flatter* you, Mrs MacAlister. And please drop the "Mr". Call me Tam. The first time I saw you, I admired you. I noted how bonnie you were.' He swept an arm towards me. 'Who could not? But also how well you dealt with the terrible news about your husband. When I saw you in the wynd with Mrs Tailyour, I knew immediately you were special. That was confirmed when you chased after me—'

'Chased? This story gets wilder with each telling.' I smiled.

He returned it. '*Chased* after me. I knew then you were also dangerous.'

'Dangerous?'

'To my heart.' He slowly rose and much to my astonishment, dropped at my feet. He put his hands on the arms of my chair, trapping me in a cage I'd no desire to escape. 'Do you really think I care that you're my employee? Or that you're a Lowlander, a widow, or any of the other descriptions you insist upon? I have feelings for you, Greer MacAlister. *Real* feelings. Ones I've done my best to ignore. To pretend they were fleeting, just because you're bonnie, because I was lonely and have been for a long, long time.'

I brushed an errant hair from his forehead, then cupped his cheek. He turned his head and kissed my palm.

‘Try as I might, I can no longer deny what my heart and head are telling me.’ He lifted his face to mine. ‘Other parts of my body as well.’ This time his eyes definitely twinkled.

‘What’s that?’ I asked breathlessly.

‘I asked you to be my house-*maker* rather than my housekeeper.

What I never expected was that you’d do your job so well.’

‘I beg your pardon, T … Tam, but the house is a long way from finished. There’s still so much to do.’

‘Aye, and that’s my point. Before the place is completed, before my family can even think of moving here, you’ve already made it feel like a home. *My* home.’ He gathered my hands again. ‘It’s *you* that makes it feel that way. When you said, “welcome home” to me, I knew in that moment I was. *Home*. It had naught to do with the place and everything to do with *you*.’

‘Me?’

‘Aye, Greer MacAlister. You’re my home. Not this ruin,’ he grinned.

‘Not even this glen and all its fierce, loyal folk. It’s *you.*’

Our kiss was deep and tender. I swear, the rain ceased, the wind hushed, or maybe it was my heart that drowned them out, the choir singing in my head.

He took my face in his hands. ‘And while I’d like naught better than to carry you to my bed and have my wicked way with you—’

Oh, yes please …

‘I respect you too much for that.’

Goddamn his scruples.

‘I would make an honest woman of you.’

‘Honest? I’m hardly that according to half of Glasglen.’

Tam lowered his head in acknowledgement. I was glad he didn’t try to deny it. ‘The reason the villagers are suspicious isn’t only because of where you’re from or that you were married to a Sassenach excise officer.’

‘What then?’ I asked, my ribs tightening.

His hands slid from my face. ‘It’s not your sins alone you’re paying for, *gráidh*.’

Gráidh? What did that mean? I wondered. The way he said it, with such soulful eyes, I could guess.

‘Whose then?’

He sighed and rose and returned to his seat. He poured us both another drink, passed me mine, then stared into his. I waited. Eventually, he raised his head and said one word.

‘Bríde’s.’

And then he revealed to me what happened over eight years ago.

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CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR



Tam had been gone a few weeks longer than intended this trip. Reluctant to leave his wife and bairns, he also had to fulfil his obligations to the laird. The fact the duke was his cousin granted him some favour, but he took his duties seriously – others were relying on him. He travelled his tack, visited each clachan and village, spent time listening and talking to folk, helping. He learned who'd left, who'd died, been born, married or was ill. He checked the supplies of peatreek, distributed grain where needed, sourced other goods, advised on livestock and land management. Then, he picked up cargo from his agents on the west coast and brought it east over the mountains.

When he was gone, his younger brother, Callum, often came to visit. A soldier in the British army (their da would roll over in his grave), he was based at Fort George awaiting posting to America. Talk was that war was imminent – the colonists wanted independence from their British masters. Why his brother would get involved in something like that on the other side of the world defeated Tam when his own people, *their* people, right here, on this land, needed so much help.

But Callum always had an eye for what others had and what they did. He feared missing an opportunity or, more accurately, taking one.

Though he should have been suspicious as to why his younger brother had timed this visit to Glasglen to coincide with his absence, it hadn't occurred to him to think anything was amiss. Grateful Callum was there to

watch over his family, over Bríde, now that unexpectedly, and blessedly, she was with child again after so much grief, he was as blind as a mole.

Returning with a cartload of contraband, fine wine from France, bolts of Lowland wool, cloth from Venice, whalebone combs for his lassies, a pearl bracelet for his wife, porcelain from Delft to delight Ishbel, china from a trader who'd been blown ashore and was keen to divest himself of any pieces still whole (or slightly cracked), Tam had paid a good price.

The sun was setting as he rounded the loch and caught sight of the glen. It never ceased to catch at his heart, the mountains with their great brown and green heads, strewn with rocky moles and tufts of hair like auld crones caring for those nestled in their lap. Ewan Morrice and his sons were aboard their boat, hauling nets, Molly's shebeen was roaring with music and laughter. Tired as he was, it lifted his spirits. He'd turned to Auld Art, Dom and Big Billy and said, 'We'll unload on the morrow, lads. For now, let's get home.'

They hadn't argued.

Auld Art remained long enough to unharness the garrons and help drag the cart into Ishbel's barn, making sure the canvas atop the load was secure. Wondering where everyone was, why his bairns hadn't come out to greet him, their sweet faces aglow at his return, clecking and giggling, Tam paused to look back up at the house he was building. This last run had proved lucrative. The glen's peatreek had attracted top prices, allowing him to purchase not just basic stores, but additional items, including some fine wood and stone for the interiors of the house. Alexander, his titled cousin, had also promised him the pick of the castle's furniture, as he was remodelling and had no use for some of the old pieces. Wait until he told Bríde. She'd give that wide smile of hers and her huge eyes would light up this time, he just knew it.

As he studied his house, he frowned. The roof should be complete by now. Though the weather had turned, there was no reason the final third shouldn't have been finished. The rafters were all there, the other joinery too. It looked like the western wall was incomplete as well.

And where was Bríde? Why hadn't she appeared? She must have heard the horses. Their hails. Was she well? What about their unborn wean?

With his heart in his throat and a chill beginning to envelop his entire body, despite the sultry evening, he strode towards the farmhouse.

Before he could call out, the door opened, and there she stood.

He stopped, and his heart, which had contracted in fear, expanded. God, she was lovely. Her curly ashen hair was unbound, her jet eyes fixed upon him. Her mouth … her mouth was trembling. It was then he noticed that her belly was no longer rounded.

‘Bríde.’ He broke into a run. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Stop, Tam.’

He didn’t, not until he was closer. He extended a hand, but she stepped out of reach.

‘Bríde? What’s wrong? Are you well? What is it? Where is everyone? Where’s our wean?’

He closed the distance, placing a hand against her belly, felt its softness, its emptiness.

‘Oh God, Bríde …’

She slapped his fingers away. ‘The wean is fine. A wee mannie.’ Her words were harsh, sharp.

‘A laddie?’ Another boy. ‘Come, *mo ghràidh*, my love, let me hold you.’ He opened his arms.

She folded hers and lowered her head.

What was this? He’d been gone weeks, aye, but what had happened to alter their relations so?

A prescient chill descended. ‘Is the laddie …?’ He couldn’t finish. They’d already lost two weans, and they were among the fortunate in the village. So many weans had died these last years.

‘He be fine.’ Bríde cast her eyes down the hill. ‘He’s with the other bairns, at the Dorwards. I asked Torrie and Ma to take them there so we could talk.’

All of a sudden, Tam understood, and a lusty grin replaced the frown.

‘*Talk*. Is that what we’re calling it now? Och, I like your thinking, lass.’

‘Nae, Tam, you won’t,’ said Bríde coldly.

A wick of anger began to burn. He was tired, hungry, and wanting his wife, bairns and bed. He didn’t have time for this nonsense. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I been thinkin’ how …’ She raised onyx eyes to his grey-green ones. She chewed her lip a few times, then took a deep breath, her words coming out in a torrent. ‘I don’t love you, Tam. I’m not sure I ever did.’

Tam began to laugh until he realised Bríde wasn’t joking.

It was as if a bucket of well-water had been tossed over him. ‘What game is this? I don’t understand …’

‘Nae,’ she sighed, increasing the space between them. ‘You never did. Neither did I, to be fair.’ There was an expression on her face he’d never seen before. It was somewhere between indifference and, God help him, loathing. ‘It’s the truth, Tam Gordon. I don’t love you. I don’t love *us*.’ Her finger pointed back and forth. ‘It’s taken me a while to see it, but now that I do, I can’t unsee it unless I pluck out my eyes.’

For a moment, Tam was blinded by a combination of fury and utter disbelief.

‘I thought it was time I told the truth,’ said Bríde, lifting her chin as if what she was saying was somehow noble. ‘Time you heard it.’

Rage began to unfurl deep in his belly, rising up his chest and into his throat. He tamped it down, and it seared his insides.

‘Did you now? Well, you can stop this silliness and go inside. Let’s have a dram and sit by the fire, uh? I’m tired, I want to eat, wash and get warm. I want to hold my wife and children. I want to meet—’

‘*You want*. *You* want. It’s always what *you* want,’ hissed Bríde, stamping her foot, her eyes flashing. ‘What about what *I* want?’

Tam lifted his hands in confusion. ‘I thought this is what you wanted too, for us to be together, our family.’

Bríde began to shake her head, slow at first, then faster and faster, her hair coming loose, spilling over her shoulders, flying about her face. ‘Nae. I told you, I don’t want *you*. Not anymore.’

‘You don’t mean that.’

‘Aye, I do.’

He curled his hands and stepped towards her. She backed away.

Ashamed at the fear that streaked across her face, it took all his willpower to loosen his fingers, to halt in his tracks. Bríde’s father had been fond of his fists. Ishbel and her daughters all bore the scars; Bríde, with her hot temper and impulsive tongue more than the others. He would never strike his wife, never. But by God, he wanted to shake this foolishness out of her. Only, this wasn’t his Bríde talking. Someone had put these ideas in her head. Poisoned her against him. Who?

Even as he asked himself the question, he knew.

‘Callum,’ he said. ‘Callum’s making you do this.’

Bríde seemed about to deny it, then changed her mind. She straightened her back.

‘Aye. Callum. But he hasn’t made me do anything I didn’t want to.’

The whole sordid story poured out. Tam barely heard a thing, the roaring in his ears was so loud, the restraint he had to master so he didn’t head straight to Fort George and tear his cocky bastart of a brother apart, immense.

Bríde and Callum had been planning this for a while. Intending to desert his army post, Callum had booked passage on the *Alexander*, sailing to St John’s in Newfoundland. They were going to use false names. Once they settled, she would send for the children and, like her, they’d have a fresh start in a new world.

She dared to speak to him, her husband, their da, of her love for his conniving brother, how they were made for each other. How this is what she had to do, needed to do. *Wanted.*

Feet apart, he shouted at her, his throat raw from the very abrasiveness of the words, how they scoured away all his hopes and dreams.

What about me? What about the bairns? Our bairns?

Was the wean even his? The way Bríde touched her stomach when she spoke of the babe. Only, if it was Callum’s, she wouldn’t leave him behind, would she?

When she finished, her face defiant and alien, she waited, her breath harsh. Darkness had fallen; a night bird called somewhere nearby. Tam saw lights twinkling on the slopes of Ben Ghillean. Someone en route to their bothy. Beyond the drywall, he saw the house he was building for Bríde, for their family.

She gazed up at it too.

‘I never wanted that. That was you. You could have built me a castle, and I’d still be goin’. You ken that, don’t you?’

‘When did you become so selfish?’

He tried to see her in the shadows, his wife who in a matter of minutes had transformed into a stranger. Even then, he knew he wouldn’t fight for her. What was the point? It would be like caging a wild animal that would run the moment freedom presented itself.

‘Where’s Callum?’ he asked finally.

Always a rogue, a lad who never settled on anything – until he did. *His* wife.

‘Waiting for me. I told him I had to face you myself.’

So he was still a fooking coward.

Tam barely remembered what was said after that. She told him that while their two eldest, Ciaran and Torrie, knew what was happening, and Ishbel, the others didn’t.

‘Please, all I ask is that you don’t blacken my name. I love my bairns.’

‘But you’ll abandon them anyway – and the newborn.’

‘I’m not abandoning them. They’ll come to me. When it’s safe and when I can give them the kind of home they deserve.’

Her eyes flicked to the house on the hill again.

‘The bairns deserve their ma *and* da,’ said Tam fiercely.

‘And they’ll always have us. Just not together.’

He took one long, last look at her, then in disgust, despair, fury and incredulity, strode away, towards the house that would never be finished. Never be a home. It had been a folly from the start.

By morning Bríde was gone. Ishbel and the bairns returned to an empty house, empty until Torrie, who found Auld Art and Dom unloading the cart, knew her da was home and ran up the hill.

She held him as he wept, as they both did. Not a word about Bríde or Callum was spoken. Not between them, and not between Ciaran (who joined the army less than a year later and was sent to war soon after), and naught betwixt Ishbel and Tam either, except to agree that they would tell the other bairns their ma had gone to visit relations in Aberdeen and would be gone a while.

As if to make up for her daughter’s callous disregard for family, Ishbel now cared for the bairns when Tam was away, which was more often than ever as it was too painful to remain at home. The reminders of Bríde were everywhere: in the big, incomplete house atop the hill that slowly fell into ruin, and in the wee body of the son Tam named Pol, a son he loved fiercely but could never be entirely sure was his.

Tam appeared to take Bríde’s leaving in his stride. Only Reverend MacAdam and Art knew the rage that fuelled him – rage that he had trusted Callum, trusted Bríde; that he’d lived a lie for so many years.

How could his own brother betray him like that? How could his wife?

The questions tormented him day after day, week after week, throughout the long bitter months that followed, losing sleep, losing flesh from his bones, looking for any excuse to leave the glen, to stay in various

bothies, managing the spirit run, drinking it too, recklessly delivering cargoes to the east and west coasts in any season, putting himself in danger.

When word reached him, months later, after he'd had a close call with a troop of soldiers near Badenoch, that Bríde and Callum never boarded the *Alexander*, he tried not to wonder where they'd gone and whether emigrating was just a tale to put him off their scent. It wasn't. He later learned that Callum Gordon had been captured as a deserter near Inverness and shot. The reason he was caught was because he refused to leave the body of his wife. It was said she hadn't long given birth and likely died of childbed fever, but there'd been no wean.

He recalled thinking, shamefully, that perhaps there was a God after all, then proceeded to get very drunk and weep late into the night.

Despite everything, Tam mourned her. Mourned what they had been. Callum, he couldn't. Maybe one day. The children, already accustomed to their mother's absence, cried a little when he told them she wouldn't be coming home, but then, as children are wont to do, slowly forgot they'd ever had a ma, all except Pol, who had no memories.

For all that he did love his bairns, Tam found Pol the hardest to hold, to comfort. Every single time the wee laddie sought his arms, raised his darkling eyes to look at his father, craved praise or crumpled at his anger, Tam saw Bríde touching her stomach, deliberately planting doubt about Pol's paternity. Not that it should matter. Whether he was the father or Callum, Pol was his blood. He *was* his son, dammit.



A cold wet nose brought Tam back to the present. I saw the change in his eyes, and hoped he didn't see the tears that threaten to spill from mine.

'Sorry, girl, did I forget to pat ye?' Sceólang bumped his fingers apart so they'd rake her long hair.

He stroked her a few times and, just to be fair, reached for Bran.

Then, he turned back to me.

'For years, I kept my feelings locked away, refused to allow myself to want or need.' He gave a mocking laugh. 'I thought I could live like a hermit within this community, accept the barest minimum to survive. Of course, Adam wouldn't allow it, Torrie and the bairns, Auld Art, Dom and

Big Billy neither. But other than them, it had been working, in its own way … until you. Until you and your attery wee daughter came along.'

He gave a wry smile and finished the drink that had sat untouched the entire time he'd been talking. 'There you have it, Greer MacAlister. That's another reason why some of the villagers have been reluctant to accept you. Ishbel, too. It's not you so much but their loyalty that makes them suspicious.'

'Aye. Their loyalty to *you*.' How could I be angry about that?

'They didn't want me hurt again.'

This time, I rose and knelt at his feet, wriggling my way between his legs, forcing them apart, reaching up to hold his face in tender hands. 'And you won't be, Tamhas Gordon. Not by me at any rate.'

I sealed my words with a kiss. Using his shoulder to help me stand, I took his hand and hauled him to his feet.

'I want to promise you in another way.' I looked towards his bed.

'Are you sure?' he said hoarsely. 'Because I can understand if it's too __'

'Aye, *gráidh*.' I began to undo my shirt.

He watched briefly for a moment, then stepped close and lifted my hair, using it to pull me closer. Moving my hands aside, he took over my buttons. 'You don't even ken what *gráidh* means, do you?'

Mirth bubbled from me. 'I'm hoping it's not cock-breath or ball-bag.'

He stared. 'Where on earth did you hear those expressions?'

'Fionn,' we said in unison.

He burst out laughing and I pressed my mouth to his to silence him.

'Ssshhhh,' I said against his lips. 'You'll wake the glen.'

'I don't care if we do, Mrs MacAlister. *Greer*.' He gave that unhurried smile of his and this time it reached his eyes. They danced and twinkled in the cruisie light. Once again, he picked me up and began walking past the hounds, past the hearth. He lowered me onto the blankets and eased himself over me. 'You're my *gráidh*, Greer MacAlister, my beloved.'

I sighed as he opened my shirt, lifted my shift and stared at my breasts. 'My God, you're beautiful,' he whispered. Then, he stroked my hair, which was splayed around me.

'So are you, Tamhas Gordon,' I said, and drew him down. 'So are you.'

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PART FOUR

Second Cut

Glasglen, the Central Highlands
Spring 1781

The distillery is in a thousand hands. It is not confined to great towns or to regular manufacturers, but spreads itself over the whole face of the country, and in every island from the Orkneys to Jura. There are many who practice this art who are ignorant of every other, and there are distillers who boast that they make the best possible Whisky, who cannot read or write and who carry on the manufacture in parts of the country where the use of the plough is unknown, and where the face of the Exciseman is never seen. Under such circumstances, it is impossible to take account of its operations; it is literally to search for revenue in the woods or on the mountains.

From *Report of a Select Committee of The House of Commons*, 1798

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CHAPTER TWENTY - FIVE



It wasn’t until March that winter began to loosen its grip. Trees shrugged off their white coats to display their emerald foliage. The heather started to change colour and tiny buds appeared. The burns that laced the mountains, swollen with snow-melt, burbled and bounced, rushing with abandon towards the loch. Green Lady Falls roared and thundered; boulders and rocks, shucking off their icy shackles, raised their lichen-covered heads again; the thin livestock were released to graze once more. Shutters were cautiously opened, doors left ajar, bedding washed and aired, spread over bushes and drystone walls.

We were like bears escaping their caves after the long dark months, raising our faces skywards, squinting into the bright clouds, the mizzle, rain or occasional sunshine, unfurling towards the heavens and regarding each other in bewilderment as if we’d forgotten what our neighbours looked like. Folk were able to tend their neglected runrigs and fields and began harnessing horses, wielding hoes and axes. Vegetable patches were newly dug, weeded and manured, and infields of barley prepared for sowing. The women brought their spinning and weaving outside, sitting in pairs or small groups clecking and clacking. Quern stones were carried outdoors and oats ground in the fresh air. Coracles and boats bobbed on the loch and fresh fish once more graced supper tables. Bairns skipped to school each day, grateful that what they called the shivering months were mostly over.

At the same time, work recommenced on the interior of the Folly as those still owing stent began to plaster and paint. Mary and Una were

finally able to claim a room for themselves upstairs under the watertight roof.

It was still cold. I had to crack the frost atop the troughs for the kine and sheep, and my boots crunched as I walked from barn to house with baskets of eggs. We were still reliant on fires throughout the day and especially in the evenings, but there was a brief period some days where we were gifted a taste of the summer to come.

Ever since that night when Tam and I confessed our feelings, and he took me (or did I take him?) to his bed, I'd gone about my days in a dream-like state from which I never wanted to wake. To think, at my age, and after William, I would find a man who not only respected but loved me as well. Someone I could trust. I could scarce credit my fortune and not a day went past when I didn't send silent prayers to God for Tam.

It was still new, to think of him that way. In public, I continued to address him as Mr Gordon. We'd agreed we would keep our relationship secret for now. Well, for as long as we could, considering the propensity of the villagers to gossip and somehow simply know things. We were both worried about the impact our relationship might have on his family, on the community. They all needed more time to grow accustomed to me; to the idea of *us*.

What if they didn't?

Torrie came to mind, of course. After a bumpy start, I was enjoying our burgeoning friendship. I was afraid of ruining it – not only because I was in love with her da, but because I was keeping my feelings from her.

Secrets were never good. They had a way of being uncovered and usually at the worst moment. They could also be misinterpreted. It was impossible to predict what would happen if or when one was exposed. A part of me dreaded the consequences of ours.

This is what lay behind our decision to tell Fen and Reverend MacAdam.

Though Fen, Mary and Una had grown accustomed to me spending evenings alone with Tam, how did I explain to Fen why I crawled into bed so dishevelled in the wee hours? I smelled of him. Nor could I hide the silly smile I wore whenever he appeared.

Naturally, Fen wasn't surprised when I told her. If anything, she was pleased for me, and herself.

I think you've loved him since Montrose, Ma.

I think perhaps she was right.

Together, Tam and I went to see Reverend MacAdam. As Tam's closest friend, Tam felt it was important he know. I knew part of the reason was also to ensure the reverend helped smooth any objections when our relationship became public.

''Bout fooking time,' drawled Reverend MacAdam when we told him. 'The heat in your looks alone risks burning down the village. You need to make an honest lass of her, Tam – the sooner the better.'

'Marriage cannot make me what I already am, reverend,' I began.

'Over summer,' interrupted Tam. 'We'll marry then.'

I stared at him, mouth agape.

'Unless you have objections?' A flash of concern crossed his brow.

I sat, stunned. 'Objections? Naught I can think of … yet. It's just that I didn't expect … I didn't think …'

'That I'd want to marry you, lass?'

'Oh, I thought you'd want to marry me.' I gave a cheeky smile. 'I just thought you might ask me first.'

'Haven't I?' He pretended to be confused and then fell upon his knees and took my hands in his. 'Well, I'm asking you now and before a man of God. Greer MacAlister, will you do me the honour of—'

'Aye, aye, you great gawpus.' I placed his arms about my waist. 'Of course I will.' We shared a long kiss.

We drew apart, smiling at each other, forgetting where we were and who we were with until the reverend cleared his throat.

'Welcome to the Gordon clan, lass.' The reverend pulled me into a tight hug. He released me, helped Tam to his feet and held him close too, whispering something in Gaelic and slapping him on the back. Tam glanced in my direction then replied.

I wondered what was said but, dizzy with happiness, didn't bother asking.

'Come,' said the reverend, grinning at us both. 'This calls for a drink.' These were swiftly poured. 'Well,' he said, holding his cup aloft. 'You have my blessing and that of the Lord too.' He raised his eyes to the ceiling, one hand resting on his Bible before he cast a laden look in Tam's direction. 'So, you really intend to take this lass as your wife, Tamhas Gordon? Ye choose her?'

'Aye, I do.' Tam searched for my hand and gripped it.

‘And what about you, lass? Do you, Greer MacAlister, choose tacksman and smuggler Tamhas James Charles Gordon for a husband?’

James Charles? I mouthed at him. I tapped a finger against my lip and furrowed my brow, pretending to consider. ‘I don’t know … Ouch! Tam! My fingers.’ He raised them to his lips. I lost myself in his eyes. ‘I most certainly do.’

The reverend nodded sagely, his grin growing even wider than before. He smacked his knuckles against the Bible, then rubbed his hands together gleefully. ‘Och, that does me good to hear. Tam’s a lucky lad, but I think he knows that, don’t you?’

In reply, Tam leaned over and kissed me again and all I could think was that the luck went both ways.



The day for Tam and the lads to depart Glasglen with the biggest load of illicit spirit they’d ever conveyed, drew closer. Throughout the winter, stills had worked day and night and gradually the number of barrels and ankers grew. Peatreek from over Glascreag way was rowed across Loch Dubh and arrived on garron-back from Glas-uisge in the east, while daily more was brought down from the surrounding mountains and carried out of hidden glens. All of it was stored in Tam’s barn. Lookouts were posted high atop the nearest peaks, and guards set outside the barn each night. It wasn’t just the authorities Tam had to worry about, but theft.

Our stores were still being filched – butter, oats, cheese and eggs mainly. The thief was yet to be uncovered. It had become so frequent, I’d been forced to tell Tam.

‘If you steal from one, you steal from us all,’ he said. ‘I’ll not have it whether it be food or peatreek.’

A total of three carts laden with whisky would leave Glasglen: two would head south-east to Montrose under the leadership of Dom, while a new large cart, with Tam in charge, would go north via Gordon Castle and then along the coast to Inverness. The new cart, which needed six garrons to pull it, was equipped with a false bottom. Able to secretly store over twenty barrels, it was hoped the canny design would outwit any excise or militia.

Ankers would also be strapped to the garrons, and the lads themselves would have bladders wrapped around their middles.

Both groups would move mainly at night, along the whisky roads used by generations of smugglers before them that wound up ragged slopes, across fens and moors, through forests and glens. The men would be armed with long rifles and other weapons. Though they were under instructions to hide and protect their precious cargo and themselves whenever possible, resisting the excise with force was to be a last resort.

I felt sick at the thought, though when I tried to tell Mary how worried I was, she dismissed my concerns.

‘Och, Mrs MacAlister, we’ve been doing this for years. Mr Gordon has. How do ye think we’ve survived? Not through the goodwill and generosity of the laird, I can tell ye.’ Upon seeing my expression, she softened. ‘He’ll come back; he always does. They all do. Well, except that blootered eejit, Fergus Buck. He wandered off the trail in the dark to take a piss without telling anyone and fell into a burn. They dinnae realise he was missing until dawn. By then it was too late.’

So much for offering reassurance.

Since mid-February, lads had been dispatched regularly to assess the passes for travel (the greatest fear was avalanches as the tight-packed snow began to break up). As the days grew longer and the cape of white gradually receded from the mountain peaks, I found myself dwelling upon Lieutenant Jacobs and whether he’d found his missing sister. He’d been sighted over Strathbogie way again and even near Kirktoun. I couldn’t help but feel an affinity for this Alice, not only because in a sense I’d replaced her, but because she too had run away from home to avoid an intolerable situation.

I was forever hearing tales about wives, widows and their children who left their homes, crossing the country – traversing seas – to begin anew. Some out of desperation, others necessity, but most because they weren’t given a choice if they wanted to avoid poverty, brutality, exploitation, or just to experience liberty. Why, look at Una. It wasn’t women alone either. Tam’s son, Ciaran, had joined the British army. Whereas Tam had always condemned his brother for enlisting, when it came to his son, he was far more tolerant.

‘It’s not the colonists he’s fighting against, or the British he’s fighting for. It’s himself.’

Torrie admitted Ciaran had taken their ma's decision to leave with their uncle and her subsequent death very badly.

'Not that any of us took it well, I suppose,' she said to me one day in a surprising admission. I waited to see if she'd say more. She didn't, and as much as I wanted to, I didn't pry.

Since I'd come to the village, a few letters had arrived from Ciaran. Though they were generally weeks if not months old by the time they reached Tam and revealed very little, they were read and re-read, shared and spoken of for days and weeks afterwards.

'They tell me he's still alive,' said Tam hoarsely, poring over the latest for the umpteenth time. 'Or was when he wrote. I must cling to that, to the hope it gives.'

I prayed that one day I might meet this young man, and his family would be reunited.



Tam's imminent departure, the danger he and the others were putting themselves in, and our prolonged separation, played on my mind as spring emerged. One night, after the house was asleep and it was just Tam and me curled together in a chair, the hounds at our feet, the fire shimmering golden and warm, I couldn't shake the feeling of doom that enveloped me. I pressed my head against Tam's chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart, gently tracing the scar that cleft his cheek. To think if I hadn't come to Montrose, if he hadn't been at the Customs House that very day, if he hadn't surrendered to my imprecations, I might never have known this.

I levered myself away from him slightly. 'I wish you didn't have to put yourself at such risk.'

Tam captured my hand in his. 'I can scarce ask the others to do what I'm not prepared to do myself, *mo ghràidh*. I don't do this lightly – gamble the lives of my men, my friends, my own. I do it, we all do it, because we have no choice.'

'I know, I know.' I lowered my head momentarily. 'Forgive me. I'm being selfish. I've only just found you and I'm just so afraid …' I bit my lip. It wasn't fair to impose my fears on him, not with all the other burdens he carried.

Tam gently raised my chin. ‘I’m not William, Greer. I *will* come home. To you and Fen. I will. That’s a promise.’ He sealed it with the softest of kisses.

It was a vow that rose from the soul.

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CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX



On an overcast spring morn, the day I'd been dreading arrived. Tam, along with over thirty other men, three carts and every last barrel, jug, bladder and anker not kept aside for households, left Glasglen bound for the north and east coasts. As they trundled down the hill to the main road, I fought back tears. Fen ran up and down the line of horses, garrons and men, waving madly, exchanging signs with those she'd taught and grown to care for.

Goodbye.

Stay safe.

Back soon.

The night before, a ceilidh had been held at Ishbel's, spilling out into the yard. There'd been feasting, dancing and raucous singing that, as the evening drew to a close, transformed into plaintive stories of loss and longing. Recited and sung in Gaelic, I didn't need Mary, Una or anyone else to tell me what they meant. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, fathers and bairns, stood and swayed, arms looped around each other, whispering softly, chuckling at a memory shared.

I stood to one side, wishing I could hold Tam. Instead, I watched as he danced with his lassies and Fen, joined Fionn and Pol in a mock wrestling match, hoisted Torrie's twins, then Aoife and Caitlin into his arms and, finally, took Ishbel for a twirl.

Last to leave the farmhouse, Tam held his children close, breathing in their scent, offering words of solace and extracting promises of good

behaviour. Hamish was pulled aside – Tam had made him responsible for keeping us all safe.

‘Aye, and coos might wear a crown,’ mumbled Torrie.

I tried not to laugh.

At least a dozen men would be deployed as scouts and guards. Word had reached Glasglen a few days earlier that Gillespie had left Strathbogie and was heading east with a contingent of redcoats. More groups of militia had been dispatched from Fort William, Corgaff Castle and even Dufftown. Soldiers from Fort George in the north were rumoured to be rallying. *Please, God, keep Tam safe. Bring him back to me. To us.*

Bring them all.

‘Come on!’ said Peigi suddenly, breaking away as the pony-train reached the main road, beckoning us to follow. I spied Torrie darting up the slope behind her house, her twins running hard to keep up.

‘Hurry, Mrs MacAlister,’ said Elspet, tugging my hand. ‘If we want to see them, we must reach the top of the hill before they reach the edge of Ronan Gordon’s outfield.’

We scrambled up the western face of Ben Gaothach to catch a last glimpse of the men. Urging Fen and Elspet to run ahead, I picked up my skirts. Beside me were Molly, Spinney, Caragh and Mary.

We shouted encouragement to each other, even as the wind grew stronger, and light spittle fell. I ducked between boulders, pushed my way through the heather, carved a path between the gorse, all the while climbing higher and higher. I could no longer see the bairns, but I could hear their squeals and shouts. Behind me Molly and the others slowed, red-faced and panting, their initial dash transforming into a determined stride. Rocky crags still hid the road from view.

‘Keep going,’ shouted Spinney. ‘Yer almost there.’

Just when I thought this was a cruel jest and I’d end up stumbling upon another bothy (I’d already passed two heather-thatched ones I’d never realised were so close), I reached a summit. Ben Dhàphen’s western head rose high above, but here on the lower slopes of Ben Gaothach was a large flat ledge. The wind was fierce and icy. So much for spring. It bit and blustered, warning us not to stray too close to the edge. I defied it, wiping away the tears that sprang to my eyes. Gathered together, arms linked, legs apart for balance, were the bairns and some other women from the village. When Fen and Pol saw me, they beckoned me over, huddling close to keep

warm. Peigi flashed a smile. Torrie directed my gaze downwards. A wide track wound below before disappearing around the base of the mountain.

I heard Spinney and the others arrive, their breathing loud and ragged. There were some whispers, then silence as we waited for the pony-train. Thick raindrops began to hammer the rocks around us.

At first I thought we must have missed it. Then I heard the faint rhythm of a drum, the rousing skirl of the bagpipes. The clop of hooves, the grind of wheels. The chanting of deep melodic voices. Wrapped in the thin embrace of a ghostly haar, the men appeared like an eldritch army emerging from the otherworld. I searched eagerly for one beloved face.

I saw him. A small cry escaped and, as if I'd called, Tam raised his head. I swear our eyes met, and he lifted an arm in salute. A promise.

I will return. Remember. I choose you.

And I you, I answered.

I caught a glimpse of Dom, Big Billy, Con Harrison, Jon Boyne and others. Among them was Filib Mackenzie. True to his word, we'd not seen or heard from him since Tam ordered him to his bothy months ago. When the lads went to fetch his peatreek, they'd told him he was to accompany the pony-train north. Filib outright refused. Mick and Jimmy were despatched to bring him down the night before. Mr Gordon didn't trust Filib to keep away from Una if he wasn't there. Forced to ride between Tam and Mick, Filib's shoulders were slumped, his head lowered; he wore resentment like a plaid. Una had remained inside as the pony-train mustered. I didn't blame her.

Brandon Stokes was also among the men leaving. Mr Stokes didn't usually accompany the pony-trains, being the last person to risk himself. But the night before, not long after Filib had been found and handed over to Dom for safe-keeping, he'd shown up at the Folly and insisted on being included. Tam unwillingly conceded. I recalled thinking how relieved Patrick, who was staying behind, would be.

Then, the fool of a man had headed straight to the shebeen and injured himself. Blootered, he'd fallen in the fire, burning his hands. I could see the bandages even from a distance.

'Strange thing is,' Molly had said, as the men assembled, 'I could have sworn his hands were quite the mess before he fell in the hearth.'

I just hoped he wouldn't be a liability. He and Filib – the troublemakers. Along with a surly Joseph Eddison, who rode towards the rear.

How long we stood there on the mountainside, I don’t know, only that we didn’t move until the last echoes of the song, the drum and the pipes had faded. Then, together, we returned to the glen.

It was a much diminished, quieter place, but at least the rain had eased and the wind calmed.

Now, the waiting began. Waiting and praying.



Though I was warned it would be weeks before there was any word, a few days after the men left, someone shouting my name made my heart leap in my chest.

‘Mrs MacAlister, Mrs MacAlister!’

There must be news. Bad news.

With one look at Una, who was working beside me, I dropped the paint brush I’d been wielding in the workers’ absence and ran to the front door. Stumbling up the track were Hamish and young Joe Boyne. Red-faced and sweating, between them they half-carried, half-dragged an unconscious lad.

It was Patrick Stokes.

No-one had seen him since the pony-train departed and there’d been rumours he’d snuck away to join them.

Not so. There was dried blood all over his shirt. His kilt was ripped, his plaid badly torn. His boots were worn away at the toes. One cheek was horribly swollen, his lip split. There was a cut on the back of his head. His face was as pale as a new moon, and his flesh had a greyish hue.

‘Jesus Christ. What’s happened? Bring him inside. Quick. Into Mr Gordon’s room. Una, fetch a pail of water and some rags. Some peatreek too.’ I ushered the lads through the door.

‘Lay him down,’ I ordered, pulling back the covers on Tam’s bed, shooing the hounds out of the way. They’d been miserable since Tam left.

‘What happened?’ I asked. ‘Where did you find him?’

Hamish and Joe placed Patrick carefully upon the bed. The lad didn’t even stir. I plumped some pillows and put them behind his head, my hand coming away sticky with more blood. His knees were grazed, his knuckles raw, his lips the colour of the loch in winter.

Mary appeared with a sloshing pail and shoved some rags in my hand. ‘I didn’t have time to warm the water,’ she apologised.

Una dragged over a small table, putting a jug of whisky and some cups down. ‘Here,’ she said to the lads, pouring them both a generous gill. ‘Get this into ye.’

They swiftly accepted. I noticed she poured one for Mary and helped herself as well.

I began to gently wash the worst of the blood and dirt from Patrick, my eyes searching for more injuries, for a sign of life. The entire time, I whispered to him. I could feel his heart beating when I lay my palm on his chest, but in every other regard he was like a dead man. Cold, too. I dragged the covers over his legs and middle.

‘Mary,’ I said, as I wrung out the rag again, the water brown. ‘Fetch the Beaton. Tell her Patrick Stokes is in dire need of medick. Stop at the farmhouse and ask Ishbel to come as well.’ My mind was racing. With his da away, who else should I summon? Who would come to comfort the poor lad? ‘Patrick has a sister, doesn’t he? We need to let her know what’s happened.’

‘She lives over Glascreag way,’ said Joe. ‘I can ask Ma to send Jenny and Shona.’

His sisters. ‘Good lad,’ I said. ‘Do that. Now.’

Joe gave a brisk nod and left.

I turned to Hamish. ‘Sit down. Please, tell me what happened.’

Hamish sank onto a stool, nursing his gill. ‘I dunno. He was like this when we found him, just inside the forest.’

‘What was he doing there? Is that where his bothy is?’

‘It’s where his da’s bothy is, was. They broke it up once they collected the peatreek, as Mr Gordon ordered.’ He paused. ‘I think Patrick made a new bothy, at least, I’d catch sight of him sometimes over near Widow Adams’ croft. I dinnae think he wanted his da to ken what he was doing.’

I nodded grimly and turned back to Patrick. He’d been brutally beaten – punched, kicked and, from the marks around his neck, it seemed strangled as well. ‘Who’d do something like this?’ I whispered.

Hamish swallowed the remainder of his gill. ‘I dunno, Mrs MacAlister, but the lads from Glas Thar Beinn, the clachan over the mountain, said that redcoat was lurking in the forest again.’

I sighed. Sightings of the lieutenant were becoming as frequent as those of boggles and brownies.

‘Did *you* see him? The lieutenant?’

‘Nae. But we were looking for his whereabouts when we found Patrick.’

With some more of the blood and dirt washed away, the lad’s injuries were more stark, more dreadful.

My heart bounced. ‘You think the lieutenant did this?’

Hamish studied Patrick, his expression mournful but also laced with anger. ‘I wouldn’t put it past any of those Sassenach bastarts. Doesn’t matter we told him we knew naught about his sister, that she left long ago, he didn’t believe us. We’re smugglers, remember? Highlanders. In his mind, we’re nothing but a bunch of thieving, lying savages who need to be wiped from the face of the earth.’

‘You spoke to him?’

‘Not me. But others did. He’s convinced we’re hiding Alice. Says there’s nowhere else she could be.’

‘That’s ridiculous. Scotland’s a big place.’

‘Ye ken he asked for Patrick by name? Reckons Patrick was sweet on her …’

There was something in Hamish’s tone.

‘Peigi told me he was.’

Hamish looked uncomfortable and shrugged. ‘Along with just about every other lad in the village.’

‘Including you?’

His eyes slid from mine. ‘Och, what did you go and say that for?’

That didn’t answer my question.

Uneasy under my scrutiny, Hamish poured himself another gill. There was a commotion at the door. In flew Torrie and Peigi, followed by Ishbel. Thank goodness the children were still at school. Hamish made a point of draping a heavy arm across Torrie’s shoulders and glaring at me. Torrie swiftly shucked him off and dropped to her knees beside the bed.

For the next while, as explanations were given and between us we removed Patrick’s clothes and washed him, built the fire, and poured some peatreek in his mouth (most of it escaping), we discussed who might have attacked the lad and why as we waited for the Beaton.

‘The redcoat’s obsessed,’ said Hamish. ‘There were rumours he stayed in the mountains throughout winter. Lived in a cave.’

‘I doubt that,’ I said. ‘He’d be arrested for desertion. It’s more likely he came with the men from Fort William after the passes reopened.’

‘Where *are* his men then?’ asked Hamish. ‘Last time, it was just him and that sergeant, remember? For that matter, where’s *he* gone?’

‘Hopefully, far from here,’ said Torrie.

‘He’s wasting his time lurking about Glasglen,’ said Hamish. ‘Alice is long gone.’

‘If it was my sister missing,’ said Torrie finally, ‘I wouldn’t give up. I’d do everything I could to find her. Imagine if it was Elspet or Peigi?’ She flashed a look at Peigi.

‘Of course,’ agreed Hamish quickly. ‘But I wouldn’t go beating the shite out of someone because I dinnae like their answers to my questions.’

No-one spoke. It was hard to look at Patrick without feeling physical pain.

‘We don’t know for certain it *was* him—’ I began. I saw the raised brows, the looks exchanged. Once again, I was the Sassenach-loving, excise-marrying incomer making excuses for their enemies. *God, Greer, guard your tongue*. ‘What I mean is, we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Maybe Patrick fell …’ Even I sounded doubtful.

‘These injuries weren’t caused by a fall,’ said Ishbel. ‘Why, ye can see finger marks around his neck clear as the nails in that table.’

An image of Brandon Stokes’ hands, covered in bandages, came to mind.

Before I could think on that further, the Beaton swept in, the basket over her arm filled with plants and bottles of tonic. She swiftly examined Patrick, then began grinding herbs with her mortar and pestle. She mixed these with some water and a great deal of peatreek, then forced the foul-coloured liquid between Patrick’s lips. He coughed and spluttered. His eyelids fluttered. With a mighty groan, he stared at us in bewilderment.

‘Patrick?’ I said softly.

‘Patrick,’ said Torrie, leaning over and sweeping his hair from his forehead. ‘It’s alright, you’re safe.’ He gazed about the room, a small frown puckering his brow. He tried to speak.

‘Alice,’ he said hoarsely.

Peigi’s hand flew to her mouth, her face stricken.

Patrick closed his eyes. He didn’t open them again but his breathing gradually steadied.

‘Alice?’ Torrie’s brow puckered. We stared at each other in bewilderment. ‘Why say her name?’

‘Do you think Patrick knows where she is?’ I asked.

While the Beaton applied poultices to the open wounds on Patrick’s face and torso, the cut on the back of his head, and a salve on the bruises, she fired questions at us. Torrie translated.

‘You say the lieutenant was sighted a couple of days *before* the pony-train left?’ The Beaton didn’t look up from her ministrations.

‘Aye,’ said Hamish. ‘We told Tam and Auld Artur. Tam ordered us to keep an eye out. But we never saw him again.’

The Beaton’s arm swept Patrick’s body. ‘These injuries aren’t fresh. They were inflicted upon the poor lad days ago.’

She waited until Torrie finished explaining to me what was said before continuing. ‘He has broken ribs, his nose too. His ankle is badly swollen, so he’d have struggled to walk.’ She held up one of his hands and gestured to his legs. The nails were damaged, torn away, his hands and knees were covered in scratches and badly grazed. ‘Look at the state of his knuckles – here, where the broken skin has started to heal? He’s fought someone.’

‘Or defended himself,’ I said.

‘But it’s the damage to his throat that’s the worst. Someone’s tried to choke the life out of him,’ said the Beaton, gingerly touching the livid ring of bruises.

‘You think the lieutenant did this?’ said Hamish, swallowing hard.

‘The first thing Patrick said was Alice’s name,’ said Peigi wistfully. ‘Perhaps he saw her.’

‘Then why would the lieutenant hurt the person who could help him find her?’ asked Torrie. ‘It makes no sense.’

‘Unless it wasn’t the lieutenant,’ I said.

We exchanged a long look. Suddenly, Brandon Stokes was back in the picture. Had he really burned his hands? Or had he seen Alice too? Caught Patrick with her and flown into a rage? Hurting his son? Was he capable of such violence?

‘He’s been out in the weather for days with all these injuries. Where exactly did you find him?’ the Beaton asked Hamish.

‘Propped against a tree on the western slope of Ben Gaothach.’

‘Could he have been there when we farewelled the men?’ I stared at Patrick in dismay. We were above Ronan Gordon’s fields, not far from

where Patrick was found.

‘Maybe he crawled there knowing we’d rush to the lookout to see the men off,’ said Torrie despondently.

Peigi pushed her fist against her mouth, her eyes welling. I rose and put an arm around her. She leaned into me. Clearly, Peigi’s feelings for Patrick were still strong.

‘The lad would nae have been able to call out,’ said Hamish sadly. ‘You could nae have seen him though, not unless you walked right past, like me and Joe.’

‘All I can say is, thank the Lord you did find him,’ said the Beaton, rising from the bed, washing her hands in the bucket. ‘I’ve done all I can for now. Someone needs to remain by his side.’

‘I can do that,’ said Peigi quickly.

‘Me too,’ said Torrie and Una in unison.

Torrie explained what the Beaton said. ‘We’ll take turns,’ I added.

The Beaton nodded approvingly. ‘I’ll come by this evening, see how he’s faring.’

‘He’ll be alright then?’ asked Peigi hopefully.

‘Alright?’ The Beaton replaced the vials and herbs in her basket, packed the mortar and pestle, her eyes on the sleeping lad. ‘I don’t know. My skills are limited. I suggest you fetch Father Son. One can’t be too cautious in these life and death situations.’

‘Life and death?’ gasped Peigi.

‘I’m afraid so. The lad needs naught short of a miracle. When it comes to those, well, that’s God’s department and the reverend’s. Not mine.’

When Torrie translated, her voice caught.

‘Let’s pray for one then.’ I gently released Peigi and replaced the Beaton by Patrick’s side, lifting one of his bandaged hands carefully into mine.

Torrie, Peigi and Ishbel escorted the healer to the door, their voices low. Mary had gone to the kitchen to find food and more cups, and Una and Hamish went to help her.

Left alone with Patrick, a thousand questions buzzed inside me. Who did this to him? Who bore him such ill will? Was it a redcoat? Or could it have been his da?

I pictured the man as he rode out of town, straight-backed atop the sturdy garron, his face set in its permanent frown. Was Patrick the reason he’d been so keen to join the pony-train? To flee responsibility for what

he’d done? We all knew Brandon Stokes was a drunkard, but this was more than liquid brutishness. Whoever did this to Patrick had tried to kill him. This was the work of a desperate person. A dangerous one …

Could it have been the lieutenant? If he was lurking in the area, then he could have encountered Patrick at any time.

Only, he seemed such a decent man. But then, so had Filib Mackenzie. And why was the only word Patrick uttered Alice’s name? Had *she* done this to Patrick?

God, so many questions. I looked towards the window. Ben Gaothach was wreathed in a thin fog, the canopies of the tallest trees just visible above it. Looming large behind it were the forbidding twin peaks of Ben Dhàphen.

The Beaton believed Patrick needed God’s intervention. But we also needed answers, and I knew in my heart the place to find them was up there, on the slopes of the mist-wrapped mountains.

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CHAPTER TWENTY - SEVEN



For over a week, it rained so heavily the entire glen became a blur of pine-green, mud-brown and shimmering grey. Even the mountains vanished behind the thick wall of endless water and mist. Unable to venture outside except briefly, my plans to search the mountain were delayed.

The Beaton came to the house every day, sometimes twice. Divesting her sodden cloak, she'd go to Patrick's side and check the condition of his wounds, changing the dressings when needed. She'd pinch the skin of his arms, open his slack mouth, and spoon a fresh concoction patiently between his lips. Oft-times more ended up on the blanket than in the lad. There were rare moments when he swallowed, and his eyes would flutter and open. The Beaton would exclaim, I would call his name, and Peigi would take his hand (she spent every spare moment by his side). But despite our efforts to call him back to us, his senses were shut. Though his body was here, he wandered in another realm.

Ishbel said as much when she visited. Torrie, too.

'The fae have him now,' they'd mumble. Or, 'He's bound for Tir nan Òg,' the land of the forever young.

'Maybe Alice is there,' whispered Peigi one day. I did all I could to offer comfort, but what if she was right?

Patrick's sister, a large lass named Dollar possessed of a booming voice and lumbering gait like her father, made the journey to see her younger brother, but remained only one night. She arrived in a rush of noisy tears and a great deal of shrill chanting (a *coranach*), filling the house with

lamentations about Patrick's life. The moment she entered the room and spied the lolling hounds, she chased them out.

'If they should walk over my brother, he be as good as dead.'

I stared in bewilderment as she dropped to her knees and rocked herself back and forth and tore at her hair, wailing loudly. If Patrick hadn't already been unable to hear or see, I swear he would have rendered himself that way. I wished I could.

Reverend MacAdam and Torrie arrived not long after, slipping into the room. When she saw the reverend, Dollar clambered to her feet and spoke quickly, gesticulating emphatically. The reverend listened intently, frowning and nodding. Torrie translated.

'She says she knew things were dire even before the message was delivered as a coffin-shaped coal leapt out of her hearth-fire three days ago. She claims that only last night, she dreamed of a ship sailing over dry land.'

'What does that mean?'

Torrie sighed. 'She foresaw a death. Patrick's.'

'But he's not dead.'

'Yet.'

Dollar insisted Reverend MacAdam say prayers for Patrick's soul. We joined in, me reluctantly. At that stage, I thought there was still hope. He hadn't succumbed to his injuries.

I overheard Mary talking to a couple of the workers one day in the kitchen. Unaware I was in the doorway, the heavy rain disguising my approach, I understood enough to glean they were discussing where to leave the changeling lying on Tam's bed so the real Patrick might be returned. Instead of rebuking them, I redoubled my efforts to remain with the lad lest someone snatch him and expose him on a hillside. He wouldn't last a day.

Once more I was reminded of how different I was to these Highlanders. They may believe in God, but they hadn't abandoned their old ways either. Ancient customs and Christian ones existed side by side. When I saw the solace these strange practices offered, how it gave purpose and hope, it was hard to remain unmoved. My respect for Reverend MacAdam, already high, grew as I saw how he negotiated between his faith in God and that of the villagers and reconciled their need (and his too, I suspected) to acknowledge the older forces that shaped the land and its people.

The village folk came in dribs and drabs to pay their respects, trudging up the hill, shaking off the worst of the weather, tracking mud and filth into

the house, much to Mary and Una's chagrin. They'd remain with Patrick a short while, offering prayers and strange tokens such as coloured stones, feathers, a bracelet of shells, bundles of herbs, which they tucked beneath his pillow. I caught Widow Jupp trying to place old, rust-covered coins on the lad's eyes. Even Caragh left a pat of butter on his chest.

'To draw out the disease,' she explained.

'They're just trying to help,' sighed Peigi, removing many of the tokens each morning. If she was frustrated by some of the visitors, she kept it to herself.

After seeing Patrick, the villagers would gather in the kitchen and, over a dram or ale and often a cup of tea, blether. I could hear the low murmur of their voices, sometimes a laugh or two. Mary told me they were impressed with the care I gave the lad. That his da would be as well when he returned.

Yet, it didn't seem to matter what I did, or what the Beaton and the villagers tried, naught changed.

As the days went past, and his bruises began to fade and his wounds heal, Patrick scarce stirred. I began to wonder if the villagers were right and the lad lying on Tam's bed, not-living but not-dead, growing paler and frailer with each passing day, was no longer of this world.

Then, ten days after he'd been brought to the house, just when I was beginning to lose hope, he opened his eyes and spoke.



At first I didn't register that anything had changed as we sat around the bed clecking quietly, not until Torrie grabbed my wrist and gave a nod in his direction.

Patrick was watching us. But unlike previously, there was reason in his eyes.

'Patrick?' I whispered.

Worried about alarming him, only myself and Peigi approached the bed, falling to our knees so we didn't loom over him.

'Patrick,' I repeated.

It took Patrick a minute to understand where he was and who was with him. He blinked a few times then slowly turned his head one way then the other.

‘Peigi?’ His voice was gruff from the trauma to his neck and lack of use, his lips dried and cracked. The Beaton poured a dram and, moving Peigi gently aside, put it to his mouth. He took a tentative sip, coughed, then sipped again.

‘You’re in Mr Gordon’s house,’ I said. ‘Do you know who I am?’

‘Aye.’ He squinted. ‘Of course. Yer Mrs MacAlister. But what’s the Beaton doing here?’ He stared at her and tried to raise himself, wincing and gasping in pain. ‘Torrie?’

The Beaton helped him ease back down. ‘Careful, lad, careful. Ye were badly beaten and strangled. Yer nose is broken, some ribs too. You’ve a very nasty gash to the head. Ye cannae move too sudden-like.’

Patrick lifted a bandaged arm, studied his healing hands, and tentatively touched his misshapen nose, then the back of his head, drawing a sharp breath. He pulled back the covers and stared at his body as if it were a stranger’s. His tongue explored his mouth; his fingers his neck.

‘Ye lost a few teeth,’ said the Beaton. ‘Yer lip is badly torn. But the swelling in yer ankle’s all but gone. Ye’ll be bruised and sore a while yet. Ye need to heal. Ye were close to death, lad. Someone had it in for ye.’

‘Who did this to you?’ asked Torrie, after first telling me what the Beaton was saying.

Patrick’s eyes lost focus. He frowned. ‘I … I dinnae. The last thing I remember, I was on Ben Gaothach …’

‘And?’ urged Torrie.

‘I … I dinnae.’ He lowered his eyes.

The Beaton encouraged him to take another drink. He grimaced as the whisky stung.

‘How long have I been here?’

It was Torrie who answered. ‘Two weeks, give or take a day. Hamish and Joe found you—’

‘Two weeks!’ Patrick pushed the Beaton away and struggled to sit up. ‘Nae, nae, it cannae be—’ He tried to heave himself off the bed. But his body defeated him. He’d no strength. He fell back on the pillows and began to snivel.

‘It’s alright, Patrick,’ said Peigi.

‘No-one can hurt you here,’ I added.

His whimpers grew louder. The lasses began to murmur consolations.

‘Ye dinnae understand,’ croaked Patrick. ‘I have to get back. I have to.’ He weakly pushed aside the covers and attempted to rise again. It was useless. He fell against the pillows, sweat breaking out on his forehead. His thin shoulders shook as he fought tears.

‘Back where?’

‘The bothy,’ he sobbed.

‘Shush now, shush, lad,’ said the Beaton softly, encouraging him to lie back against the pillows. ‘Yer not going anywhere.’

‘The bothy will be fine without you for a few more days,’ said Torrie. ‘And before ye ask, Elspet and Fionn have been taking care of yer livestock and all.’

‘Ye dinnae ken,’ wailed Patrick, shaking his head. He tried to get up again but was too feeble.

When he understood he couldn’t go anywhere, no matter how much he insisted, he fell into a deep melancholy and refused to speak. He barely ate. Though we maintained our watch over him, he ignored our questions. Eventually, we ceased asking.

He would tell us when he was ready.

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CHAPTER TWENTY - EIGHT



*J*ust over a week later, a series of shouts in the yard, followed by the excited barking of the hounds, distracted us from tending a still morose Patrick.

‘It’s the lads!’ exclaimed Molly.

We looked at each other, then with cries of joy, ran to the front door.

Three horses were coming up the track.

‘God’s bunions!’ exclaimed Torrie. ‘It’s Mick. And that’s the Mavers with him, isn’t it? Niall and his da, Stuarn. You can’t mistake that hair.’ Their distinctive burnished locks shone even from a distance.

My heart began to pound. I grabbed Torrie’s arm, Molly’s hand. ‘Where are the others?’ I could scarce contain my excitement. ‘I didn’t think they’d return so soon. Why—’

Torrie shook herself free of my grip. ‘Something’s wrong.’

‘It’s too early,’ said Molly.

I picked up my skirts and flew down the road, the lasses close behind, the hounds, barking excitedly, overtaking me.

When the men saw us, they reined in the horses and we raced to their side. Molly doubled over, hands on knees, drawing in lungfuls of air.

‘Where’s Da?’ Torrie puffed. ‘The rest of you? What’s happened?’

The men were scarce able to keep their seats. Their clothes were caked with mud and grime and something I recognised but didn’t want to name. Their cheeks were cracked from the wind and rain. The Mavers had lost their bonnets, their plaids slipped from their shoulders. Their Gordon

brooches, the sprigs of ivy they always wore, were missing. So were their weapons.

My stomach clenched.

‘Mrs MacAlister, Torrie, Molly,’ said Mick wearily, acknowledging each of us in turn. ‘I’m the bearer of sorry tidings.’

I held my breath.

‘Gillespie ambushed us.’

Torrie’s hand flew to her mouth.

‘Not again,’ said Molly.

A chill descended, freezing my innards and making my head reel. ‘Is Ta … Mr Gordon alright?’

Mick hesitated. ‘Last I saw, aye. But he’s been arrested. Along with the others. They’re being held in Aberdeen.’

I gasped. *No. God, no.*

‘Aberdeen?’ gasped Molly. ‘Why there?’

‘Because Gillespie deemed it so. He knows Tam has solid contacts in Inverness. Our links with Aberdeen … well … they’re not so reliable.’

‘It was bound to happen sooner or later,’ said Torrie, a hand atop her head, as if trying to prevent her mind bursting. ‘Especially once Gillespie was on our scent. Fook! We’ll inform the duke. His influence is far-reaching. He’ll have them out of gaol in no time, Aberdeen or no.’

‘Not so fast, lassie,’ said Mick. ‘It’s not just smuggling ye da’s been arrested for.’

‘What trumped-up charge has Gillespie concocted this time?’ Torrie asked, indignant.

Mick was about to answer when distant laughter sounded. The children had been let out of school and were heading towards us.

‘Not here,’ said Mick wearily. ‘This conversation should be private, away from the bairns.’ He released a long, tired sigh.

I stepped forward, determined to be pragmatic when, like Torrie, all I wanted to do was demand to be told everything immediately. ‘Look at the state of you.’ I tried to lighten my tone when every word was a leaden weight. ‘You need food, drink and somewhere to talk where you can’t be overheard.’ I jerked my chin towards some curious workers, then rested my palm against the horse’s sweaty flank. ‘The beasties need tending. Come, let’s get you to the Folly, before the children reach us. I’ll send the workers

home. Mary can see to the horses and Una can keep the bairns down at Ishbel's. That way, we can speak freely.'

Mick gave a grim nod. 'If you'd be so good as to fetch the reverend, Mrs MacAlister. He needs to hear what we have to say. Mr Nicholson as well.'

'We'll ask Hamish.'

They wearily nudged their horses and headed up the hill.

'Those men have been through hell from the look and smell of them,' whispered Molly, as we followed behind.

'We should let Ishbel know what's going on,' said Torrie.

'Hamish can fetch her too,' I said.

The hounds reached the Folly first, greeting Mick and the Mavers when they entered as if they hadn't just loped beside them as they led their horses into the barn. The men fell into seats, accepting food gratefully, doing their best not to shove it down their throats. Between mouthfuls of oatcake, cheese, meat and whisky, they held their frozen fingers and toes towards the fire, as if they might absorb the heat. They shot curious looks at Patrick, who quietly watched everything.

I studied the lads' faces, the lines of worry and fear etching their foreheads. Finally, when we were all seated and Patrick's condition explained, Mick spoke.

'We were on the road to Gordon Castle when that persistent bastart, Gillespie, and a troop of redcoats raided. They waited until dawn before pouncing, just as we'd settled after riding through the night.'

Molly stifled an exclamation.

Mick grimaced. 'It could have been worse. They dinnae find *all* the peatreek. Tam makes us conceal what we carry each time we set up camp, just in case of a raid. Thank God for his foresight or we might have lost the lot. As it was, they only seized what was in the cart.' His eyes slid to the other lads, who looked positively sickly. They drained their drinks and I quickly refilled their cups.

The window rattled as the wind picked up and a spray of rain dashed against the glass. I shivered. It wasn't from cold, but the expression on Mick's face. He looked … What was it? Aye, haunted.

'Then what happened?' urged Torrie.

'While they were distracted pulling apart the cart – it was all they were interested in, swooping like damn corbies,' Mick shook his head, 'Tam

pulled me aside and ordered me to take Stuarn and Niall and hide ourselves. It was a risk, but if someone can bear witness should something go wrong, give a fair account to those at home, evidence to a magistrate and the laird if need be, it helps. Christ, it was as if Tam knew. I've nae doubt, that gauger fookin' did.'

'Gillespie found the peatreek under the false bottom then?' asked Molly.

'Aye. But he dinnae care about that.' Mick took the deepest of breaths. 'Not after what else he found there.'

Stuarn buried his head in his hands. Niall stared at the ceiling. Mick swept a hand across his face.

'What else did he find?' I asked quietly, sharing a look of dread with Torrie and Molly.

Mick levelled his gaze at me. 'A body.'

'A body?' we repeated.

Mick nodded miserably. 'It must have been in there all along. Stinking, bloated, riddled with maggots. It was stuffed between the barrels. Nae wonder the cart had a putrid stink. Nae wonder flies chased us closer than a beggar a coin. We cannae work out how it got there. Who put it there. When. But it must have been before we left Glasglen. The fake bottom was sealed for godsakes. Once we were on the road, it couldn't have been opened, not without someone seeing.'

'Who was it?' Molly was breathless.

'Was it Alice MacIntosh?' I asked quietly.

Patrick gave a cry of anguish and sat forward.

'Alice MacIntosh?' Mick eyed Patrick, then me, strangely. 'Nae, it was nae her.'

Patrick fell back in relief.

'Who then?' asked Torrie.

'It was the redcoat who claimed to be her brother. Lieutenant Jacobs.'

My mouth dropped open. Molly reached for Torrie's hand.

'It cannae …' whimpered Patrick, staring at Mick in disbelief, his face paler than a boiled tattie.

But Mick wasn't finished yet.

'Tam's been arrested for his murder.'

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CHAPTER TWENTY - NINE



By the time Mick finished telling the rest of the story, not once, but thrice as first Hamish arrived with Reverend MacAdam, Mr Nicholson in tow, followed shortly thereafter by Ishbel and Mary, we were all in shock.

For a while, no-one spoke. The hounds, sensing the distress, did the rounds, shoving their furry heads and wet snouts into limp hands, tense laps. I patted them without thinking; for once, their soft fur offered scant comfort.

Murder? Tam? A hundred scenarios played out in my head.

According to Mick and the Mavers, moments after the lieutenant's body was found, the redcoat in charge tersely questioned Tam and took him into custody.

'Gillespie refused to listen to Tam or anyone when they said they knew naught about the body or how it got there. As far as the fookin' captain with him was concerned, one of his own had been brutally murdered and Tam was the culprit.'

By way of further punishment, Tam was tied to Gillespie's horse, aware the gauger would use him ruthlessly. The rest of the lads were rounded up and trussed together like kine en route to market and led away, their garrons and horses, the cart, too.

'They collected any bladders they could find, which was nae many, weapons as well,' added Niall, slapping his empty hip. 'I'd foolishly left mine next to where I slept.'

‘One redcoated gawpus started running his sword through the bladders, letting the peatreek drain away,’ said Stuarn. ‘I thought Gillespie was going to murther him.’

‘There’s no bonus in whisky-flavoured dirt or empty bladders, is there?’ said Niall wryly.

‘We would have reached Glasglen sooner,’ Mick continued. ‘But after securing the peatreek still hidden, making sure if the excise or redcoats returned, they’d not find it, we followed the route Gillespie took.’

‘To Aberdeen,’ I said.

‘Aye. Tam and the others are being held in the tolbooth, the old gaol there. I managed to bribe my way in to see him.’

I tried to shuck off the fear and trepidation that was tearing my thoughts into shreds. ‘How … How is he?’

‘How ye’d expect, Mrs MacAlister. Putting on a brave face.’

Torrie reached for Hamish. ‘We must go to him.’

‘Of course we must,’ I agreed and stood.

Mick flapped a hand until I sat back down. ‘He kent you’d say that – both of ye.’ He reached into his jacket and pulled out some filthy, creased pieces of paper. ‘He’s given me these.’ He handed a letter to me and one to Torrie. She began to read hers immediately, exclaiming, clutching her chest. I didn’t want to read mine with everyone watching.

Mick glanced at Stuarn. ‘He gave me another letter as well. For the duke. Hopefully, if his lordship’s in residence, he’s read it by now and is acting accordingly.’

‘Do you know what it said?’ I asked.

‘Roughly. Tam explained he’d been wrongly accused and asked the duke to send the best legal representation to ensure he’s acquitted.’

‘And will his lairdship?’ I asked.

Mick shrugged. ‘The duke’s been good to Tam in the past, but this is different. This is a murther charge. I cannae be sure and, truth be told, Mrs MacAlister, I dinnae think Tam can be either.’

I shut my eyes briefly. ‘What do we do?’

‘Naught. Tam said to tell ye to do naught. For now,’ added Mick quickly as we began to object. ‘Until he hears from the duke, until *we* do, we do naught.’

‘That’s what his letter to me says,’ admitted Torrie, passing it to Hamish. ‘That we’re to sit tight. Trust the duke and each other. You can

read it too, Greer.’

As he scanned the letter, Hamish pulled Torrie to him, wrapping another arm around Ishbel. I fought to blink back tears. Sorrow sat heavily in the room; sorrow and a seething anger at the injustice of it all.

Who put the lieutenant’s body in the cart? When? How? Was Patrick involved? From the look on his face, his pale silence, he knew something.

‘Did anyone else get away?’ asked Una. I’d forgotten she was there, she was so practised at making herself inconspicuous. I knew who she was thinking of.

‘Nae, lass,’ said Mick. ‘Only us. Though we be hoping Dom, Big Billy and the rest – those bound for the coast – have made it to Montrose unscathed.’

We sat with our thoughts a moment. Sceólang released a long, loud yawn. Such an ordinary thing to do when we were all so fraught.

‘You must have spent some time with Tam if he managed to write letters,’ I said to Mick. Hamish handed Torrie’s letter to me.

‘The warden at Aberdeen gaol has a fondness for the aqua vitae. Fortunately, he enjoyed it enough to allow me another visit. That was when I was able to bring Tam what he asked for: decent food, paper, ink, medick, blankets and a change of clothes as well.’

‘Medick?’ I asked.

‘Aye, for Art.’ He sighed. ‘The poor bastart was wounded. One of the fookin’ redcoats ran him through with a sword.’ He patted his side.

‘Nae!’

‘I’ll pray,’ said the reverend.

‘It might just be a flesh wound,’ said Mick. ‘But I think my brother needs more than a few prayers, reverend.’

‘Not for Art,’ scoffed Reverend MacAdam. ‘I’ll pray the balls of the fooking bastart who did it shrivel and fall off.’

Mick nodded approvingly. Mr Nicholson coughed.

Questions, worries and fears came pouring out after that. While Tam was being held for murder, the rest of the lads were charged with smuggling. That could carry a fine, imprisonment, transportation, or worse, death. What punishment the men would receive depended on the magistrate – and the duke’s connections. I sat still, reading Tam’s letter to Torrie as a tempest of words raged around me. Much to my relief, not for a moment

did anyone believe Tam had murdered the lieutenant. But neither was anyone asking who had. Or who'd put his body in the cart.

In his letter to Torrie, Tam told her to lie low, work with me and the villagers, keep safe. They were the kind of words a loving da would write to console a daughter.

As for doing naught until we heard from the duke. Well, forget that. But what *could* we do?

'How could he pass you letters, ask for all those things, with the warden right there? I thought there were rules?' asked Torrie, blowing her nose loudly.

Mick gave his only smile. 'Tam dinnae say one word the warden or turnkey couldn't repeat to a magistrate or Gillespie.' He turned to me. 'When he let some Gaelic words slip, he got a blow to the head and stomach each time from this fookin' brute that works with the warden (hope he choked on the peatreek). But he mostly used Fen's finger-talking. We all did, Mrs MacAlister. Long before the redcoats and Gillespie appeared, while we were still on the road, we were using Fen's signs to communicate. Did it at the gaol, too. For that, we owe you and wee Fen a debt of gratitude. If not for finger-talking, things could be a lot worse.'

How? I thought. This was a disaster. How could I go on without Tam? How could Glasglen? I tried to get Torrie or Peigi to look at me, but they were too caught up in their own misery. I shut my eyes and conjured an image of Tam as I last saw him, riding up the north road, bonnet cocked, arm raised in salute. There was so much hope that day.

'Och,' said Mick, snapping his fingers. 'There was one other thing Tam said to pass on to ye, Mrs MacAlister.'

I opened my eyes, aware of everyone's attention. My cheeks started to colour. 'Oh?'

'He said to say, "I choose ye".'

'What does *that* mean?' asked Molly.

Before I could respond, Mick answered. 'He explained that it means he chooses Mrs MacAlister to manage his affairs in his absence – all of them.'

What?

For a beat, no-one said a word.

'But,' began Torrie, 'and I'm sorry to say this, Greer, but that's not right. You've no authority to make decisions on behalf of my family, let alone the

clan and village. It's one thing for Da to urge us to work together,' she flicked the letter I'd handed back, 'another to put you in charge.'

There were mutters and some suspicious looks cast in my direction. Just when I was making headway, the tide turns again.

'Why,' Torrie kept going, 'Greer's the housekeeper, a worker. If anyone should take care of Da's affairs, it's me. I'm the eldest here. And a Gordon.' Torrie looked around for support.

Hamish sat up straight beside her.

Trouble was, I was inclined to agree. I'd no right to tell anyone here what to do. I knew the limits of my responsibilities. I started to say this, when the reverend stood up, cleared his throat and waited for us to quieten.

'Under normal circumstances, you'd be correct, Torrie. Only these are not normal.'

Torrie harrumphed. 'You're telling me.'

The reverend drew himself up to his full height, which was considerable. 'According to clan law, in the absence of the husband, the right to handle his affairs passes to his next of kin.'

'Aye,' said Torrie. 'Me.'

'Or his wife,' said Ishbel, her eyes gleaming.

'Gran,' said Torrie pensively. 'You know she's not here anymore.'

'Oh,' said the reverend. 'But she is.' He faced me with an uncertain smile.

I gave an awkward laugh. 'We merely spoke of it.'

'Spoke of what?' Torrie swung towards me.

'Marriage. Your da and I. God.' I brushed hair from my face. 'This isn't how you were supposed to find out. We were going to tell you … but it doesn't matter. Not now. What's important is, we're not married.' I shook my head. 'We never …'

'Och, lass,' interrupted the reverend. 'Not only did you and Tam make a promise to marry in the future, what's known as *per verba de futuro subsequente copula*—' I was relieved he didn't translate the last part, 'but, wittingly or unwittingly, you both made a marriage of declaration before me.' He paused. 'And that is as binding as if I'd performed an entire service in front of witnesses.' He ignored the shocked faces around him, focusing solely on my thunderstruck countenance.

'Like it or not, you are legally Tam's wife. You are Mrs Tamhas Gordon. And you are now in charge.'

The room erupted.

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CHAPTER THIRTY



*H*ours later, after patient explanations from the reverend, followed by furious arguments about what to do next, exhaustion set in, and everyone finally went home. I waited a while, shoring up courage, then followed Ishbel, Torrie and Hamish back to the farm. Livid at this latest turn of events, caught up in concern for her da and anger and hurt at what she was calling his great deceit, Torrie could barely look at me. Even so, I needed to give an account to Fen and help Torrie and Ishbel tell the other bairns what had happened. Hamish had deliberately slowed so I could catch up and whispered, 'Welcome to the family.' His timing was ever poor.

Fen saw me approaching and ran to greet me. Inside, the bairns waited in the semi-darkness of the main room as the rest of us found seats. Torrie took Caitlin and Aoife perched on Hamish's knee. The twins sat in the dirt. Mabelle hovered nearby. She knew something was afoot. They all did.

As the light faded and an audience of curious kine and two sheep watched, their heads thrust through the window and doorway, Torrie told the bairns about the ambush and Tam's arrest. About the marriage. I finger-talked to Fen at the same time.

The moment Torrie finished, everyone began speaking at once. Mabelle burst into tears. Peigi was trying hard not to weep. Ishbel held Pol while Elspet and Fionn vigorously defended their da. Torrie's twins stared at everyone, mouths open, eyes agog until they too decided it was best to cry. Fed up with Mabelle's snivelling, Torrie stood and, passing Caitlin to

Ishbel, shook Mabelle and said something, her eyes sliding to me. Mabelle stopped crying and gave me a watery smile.

Fen tugged at my arm to get my attention. *Mr Gordon's a good man, Ma. He didn't kill that officer.*

I know, chick, I know, I replied, trying to shut out everyone as I drew her close. Thank God for Fen.

Why didn't you tell me you'd married Mr Gordon?

I grabbed the quire of paper that hung from Fen's belt and the pen. I wrote down what had happened. I was worried I didn't have the skill to communicate about the unwitting verbal consent with my sign vocabulary. How did I explain that Tam likely never intended I would know what he'd done, not until we had a public union? He simply sought to protect me by bestowing his name, giving me status.

As if, just as I had, he'd a premonition something was going to happen.

Considering Torrie's reaction and what some of the others had said, I wondered if he'd made things worse.

To my relief, Fen's eyes sparkled as she read. A smile danced on her lips. *You're really Mrs Gordon then?*

Apparently.

Does that make me Fen Gordon?

I retrieved the pen and paper. *Or Fen MacAlister if you'd rather*.

I think I'd like to be a Gordon. She looked around. Fionn and Elspet were back to pinching and punching each other. Even Torrie's twins had stopped crying and were drumming their heels in the dirt, ignoring their da's order to stop.

Does that mean Pol's my wee brother now? And Elspet and Fionn my siblings too?

Aye. I looked askance at them.

And Peigi. And Torrie, we said together.

Fen grinned.

She's not so bad, Ma.

I know. And I did. Even though when she was displeased with someone, the entire glen knew. I didn't need to look in her direction to know she was staring daggers. I was like a giant archery board, pierced with her baleful looks.

He's going to be alright, isn't he, Ma? Mr Gordon? My new da? We're going to be? Fen asked.

I didn’t repeat what Patrick had said: that once word got out that a redcoat had been killed by one of us, every soldier this side of the Spey and beyond will be out for vengeance.

Bloody Patrick. Didn’t help that I thought he was right.

I cupped Fen’s face with one hand. *Everything will be fine. Mr Gordon didn’t do this.*

But someone had killed the lieutenant. Someone who wanted to frame Tam for the murder. Who? And why?



It was almost dark when we finally left Ishbel’s. Torrie, Hamish and their bairns had left earlier. Late workers were roaming the fields. Pol and Fen ran ahead up the hill, Peigi striding behind them, determined to continue her care of Patrick. Ishbel stood beside me in the doorway, watching them. A strong wind whipped our skirts, dashing them against our ankles. I pulled my plaid tighter.

Ishbel lifted a gnarled finger and pointed towards where the lights of Torrie’s cottage glowed. ‘Ye should talk to her. For all her fire and spit, she’s a good heart. Loyal, too. Dinnae make friends easily. Not since her ma, my Bríde, did what she did.’ She pursed her lips. ‘Was a time, I thought I could forgive my bairns anything. But even though she be long dead, I cannae forgive Bríde.’

Ishbel’s face was lined with sorrow. What Bríde’s decisions must have cost her. It was too easy to overlook Ishbel when there were the bairns and Tam to consider. Snow-white tendrils caressed her wrinkled cheeks, her dark eyes were knowing.

‘Is that why you took in the children? Why you still look after Tam?’

‘Someone had to. If not me, who?’

I opened my mouth to tell her I was here now, and I would. But I realised how it might sound. ‘We both can, can’t we? Look after them? Love them? Together?’

Ishbel fell silent. A light mist floated over the fields, unfurling towards us like a contented cat. Uncertain if I’d overstepped my mark, I was about to bid her farewell when she spoke again.

‘Torrie sees ye as a friend, ye ken.’

I gave a light laugh. ‘Not anymore. I fear marrying her da, even though I was unaware, was a step too far.’

‘Really?’ scoffed Ishbel. ‘I don’t think ye fear much, Greer … *Gordon*. And if I ken Tam, and I think after all these years I do, he thinks the same. He wouldn’t have married ye otherwise.’ She patted my hand. ‘Repair things with my granddaughter. Och, she’s quick to anger but even faster to forgive. Sometimes, ye just have to ask her.’

I cocked my head. ‘You don’t miss much, do you, Mrs Fraser?’

‘I dinnae, lass. I dinnae. And more fool those who think just because I’m auld, I’m useless.’

I began to laugh. ‘I can think of many things you are, Ishbel Fraser, and none of them are useless.’

She raised her face to mine, her gaze bright, even in the dimming light. ‘I like ye, lass. Ye remind me of Torrie, of myself. Ye speak ye mind.’

I smiled. ‘It’s got me into a great deal of trouble in the past.’

‘What’s trouble but the harbinger of change? Folk around here dinnae like change, nor those who herald it – especially when it’s a lass. An incomer too.’ She gave a wicked chuckle. ‘They gave Tam a mighty hard time in the beginning. He was nae one of them either. Tam kens what he’s doing. Remember that, lass; remember what Mick told ye. Tam said: “I choose ye”.’

She took a step closer, and I thought for a minute she was going to nudge me on my way. Instead, she raised herself on tiptoes and planted a kiss on my cheek. Her whiskers prickled and I checked the impulse to rub my face.

‘For what it’s worth, Greer Gordon, I choose ye too. And for godsakes, call me Ishbel.’

Without another word, she turned on her heel and hirpled back inside.



With Peigi’s help, Patrick moved into my room. It was time. His body was healing, he was able to hobble about, eating again and, if naught else, today’s news seemed to have shocked him out of his malaise. There, alongside Pol, he slept in Mary’s old bed, while Peigi and Fen shared mine.

Finally, I was alone in the study with Tam's letter. I carefully unfolded it and, a brimming cup of peatreek within reach, began to read.

Mo ghràidh,

My love. I pressed the letter to my breast before continuing, blinking the tears back.



By now, Mick will have told you what unfolded on the road to Gordon Castle. Despite all our caution, our preparations, we were undone. I was betrayed. We were betrayed. It's evident Gillespie knew our intended route and waited until we were close to the castle to make his move. He knew about the false bottom in the cart; about the peatreek. I also wonder did he know what else was among the barrels? Of us all, he appeared the least surprised.

It's evident Lieutenant Jacobs met his end in Glasglen. The condition of the body tells me he died before we ever set out. Whoever did this also intended that the blame would fall squarely upon my shoulders.

Even as I write, I'm convinced the real killer sits in gaol beside me, silent, waiting for his moment of triumph while I am punished for his sins. I have my suspicions as to who it might be but refrain from naming him lest I am wrong or unjustly prejudice you and whoever else may read this missive.

While I would spare you the details of the redcoat's death, I will tell you that the lieutenant was naked and stripped of his weapons when found. It might be that the killer was foolish enough to either discard the uniform, pistol and sword or keep them as trophies to gloat over. Finding them may go some way to forcing a confession from the real killer.

At last. There was something I could do.

No matter what happens to me, there is the welfare of the bairns, of the village to consider. If we are to survive another year, the raid site

must be revisited. Greer, I ask that you organise for Mick, Stuarn and Niall to return and, from there, continue our work.

In other words, retrieve what the gauger didn't find and sell it.

Mo ghràidh, *now comes the difficult part. I must warn you of imminent danger. I fear that Gillespie will conduct a raid upon Glasglen. The entire journey to Aberdeen, he threatened this, to seize whatever he found, put an end to our trading once and for all. Whilst I've no doubt this was said to taunt me, I would not put it past him to follow through, especially while the village is depleted of men. I ask that you use the authority the Gordon name bestows to protect the village from Gillespie or whoever else he sends in his place.*

I'm going to make one final request, one I know you'll find the hardest. Do not come to Aberdeen. I know, I know, my love – aye, I'm addressing you in your tongue, for you are my love in every language known to man and more. Here lies only danger and sorrow and I'm afeared that, once the authorities know what you are to me, if you step outside Glasglen, they will use you to force a false confession. There's no doubt that knowing you or the bairns were under threat is all that could persuade me to such a measure. I do not trust the law to act fairly or wisely in this matter, nor do I trust them not to use my wife or bairns to ensure my cooperation.

Aye, my wife. I pray you forgive me the manner of our sudden nuptials. The verbal agreement was not meant to bind you to something you might find distasteful. I pray fervently that's not the case. It was done to protect you and the bairns and give you the right to take control if needs be. There's no-one I trust more to look to the wellbeing of my family and that of the villagers. This is another reason you must remain in Glasglen; I need you to do what I cannot.

Remember, I choose you – now and always,

T.

Tears flowed as I lay my head against the filthy pages, careful not to smudge the writing, wanting to absorb the words, to consider them from every possible angle. My mind burned, my heart too.

Oh, Tam.

How well he knew me; how little, too, I thought with a smile. A smile that broadened as I slowly sat up and wiped my face. Taking a long draught from my cup, letting the heat travel down my throat and through my veins, I steadied myself, then read his letter again.

I would do as Tam asked – as far as I was able. But he didn't only choose me because he loved me.

Tamhas Gordon chose me because, as he said himself, he trusted me. He trusted me to know my mind; my abilities. It had taken a long time, but I did, and my mind was telling me, as I considered what he'd written, that there were things he hadn't thought of that I *could* do. How could he when he was locked away in prison, charged with a heinous felony that no-one who knew him could conceive of him ever committing?

I need you to do what I cannot.

I rose and poured another drink, staring out the window into the darkness. Behind me, Sceólang stretched, her great paws coming to rest across Bran's flanks.

Part of me longed to fold myself around the hounds, but I'd work to do and plans to make, especially if I was to persuade Tam's family – my family now – and the residents of Glasglen that Tam's trust in me wasn't misplaced. That *his* judgement was sound.

For what Tam was relying on me to do above all was to bring everyone together and get them to work as one.

And God Himself knew, when it came to the folk of Glasglen, that was easier said than done.

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CHAPTER THIRTY - ONE



I was underwater. Submerged in a warm, comfortable sea in which naught could harm me. There were strange muffled gurgles, the kind I imagined a kelpie might make. They became louder, sharper. The water turned hard, resistant.

I woke suddenly to find myself tangled in blankets. I wrestled my limbs free, almost falling onto the floor. The hounds were facing the door, baying madly. I'd just found my feet when in burst Reverend MacAdam, Mr Nicholson and a harried-looking Mary. The dogs' barks turned to excited yelps.

'I told the lads not to disturb ye, Mrs,' said Mary. 'That ye'd been awake half the night working. But I could nae stop them.'

'Apologies, Mrs Mac— Gordon,' began the reverend. 'Mr Nicholson and I felt it imperative we speak with you.'

'You're already dressed,' said Mr Nicholson.

I'd fallen asleep in Tam's bed fully clothed.

'Just as well,' said the reverend. 'I fear they're not far behind.'

I stared at first the reverend then Mr Nicholson, trying to shuck off my thick-headedness. 'Who's not far behind?'

'The villagers,' the men chimed.

'Really?' My shoulders drooped. 'Fen—' I began. The bed was empty. No sign of Pol either. They'd both stumbled into the study in the wee hours and climbed in with me.

‘Och, the bairns woke long ago,’ said Mary. ‘I told them to let ye sleep. They’re off doing their chores before school. Peigi and Patrick are in the kitchen.’

Time to compose myself. I smoothed my skirts and managed to twist my hair up into a bun at my nape. I strode to the table.

Mary, bless her, began to straighten the bed.

‘Forgive my manners, gentlemen,’ I said and swept my hand towards the chairs. ‘Please, have a seat.’

Mary mumbled something about tea and peatreek and left.

‘Very well, reverend, Mr Nicholson.’ I fixed a smile to my face. ‘You have my attention. Why are the villagers about to storm the Folly?’

The men cast sidelong glances, each urging the other to speak first.

It was the reverend who finally spoke. ‘Errr … news of your … nuptials has not been well received in every quarter.’

Torrie’s face loomed large. ‘Well, that’s a shock.’

Mr Nicholson cocked a brow.

‘Seriously, gentlemen. Have you come all the way up here to tell me *that*?’

‘It’s a little more complicated,’ said Mr Nicholson. ‘It’s not so much the marriage they’re unhappy about, or even that it’s you, it’s this apparent conferral of authority.’

‘About that,’ I began, when there was a furious clattering, the sound of boots. Mary shouted, and the door flew open.

In poured many of the villagers I knew by sight and a few I’d never seen before. There was Sarah Morrice, Ewan’s sour-lipped wife, followed by her cantankerous husband. Behind them were at least four unfamiliar faces followed by Mary’s parents, the Todds. Old Ronan Gordon, Widow Jupp, Maire Marr, Rory and Rupert’s mother, at least half a dozen crofters, as well as, much to my relief, Spinney, Caragh, Molly, Lucinda and Simon Geddes, Janet the Beaton, and Mick Duff, trailed closely by Stuarn and Niall Mavers. Lastly, Peigi and a pale Patrick appeared.

As the volume in the room grew, and I fruitlessly tried to quieten everyone, from over by the door, Mary raised her hands above her head and relayed a message.

Will fetch Ishbel. Take children to school.

I nodded. She gave a sharp whistle and the hounds, busy barking and pushing their wet snouts against the visitors, bolted out of the room.

Taking a deep breath, I rested my hands on the desk and faced the throng.

The guttural cadence of Gaelic swirled around me. Mick was in a heated discussion with the crofters, who were pointing in my direction and shaking their heads. Widow Jupp was arguing with Spinney, the Todds with Ronan Gordon. I couldn't make head nor tail of what was being said but it wasn't hard to guess.

The reverend caught my eye and shrugged.

Mr Nicholson tugged my elbow. 'This is what we tried to warn you about. I'm sorry, lass, we were too slow.'

I patted his hand where it rested on my forearm. 'It doesn't matter.'

And it didn't. Mary was right, I'd been awake half the night. Thinking about Tam, about what had happened out there on the road, about Gillespie and his ambush. The seizure, the body of the lieutenant. It was clear Tam had been framed for murder. And someone from Glasglen had done it; someone Tam suspected currently shared a gaol cell with him.

But I also thought about what Tam had written: *I need you to do what I cannot.*

That's why, by the light of a flickering cruisie lamp as a gale buffeted the house and the hounds and the bairns slumbered on, I wrote a list of what needed to be done, a plan of sorts.

It was rough. It was likely incomplete, but at least I had something to put before these anxious, angry people. Their leader was captured, accused of a shocking crime. The peatreek they'd laboured all winter to make, intended to secure their lease and supplies for the winter, was either seized or hidden and needed to be retrieved and sold. On top of that was the threat of an excise raid.

Tam once said to me that far from having no accomplishments, I not only had an orderly mind, but I hadn't let what had happened throughout my life break me. Be damned if I was going to let what was going on now do it either.

All I ever wanted was to live a good life. And, for a few brief weeks, in the arms of Tamhas Gordon, I had. I wasn't going to give that away – not without a fight. These folk weren't my enemies. But as the reverend once urged me, I had to make them see that. No time like the present, as Ma used to say.

Unnoticed, I lifted my skirts and stood first on Tam's chair and then, with Reverend MacAdam's help, clambered onto the table.

I raised my arms.

The sun was straining to be seen behind pale grey clouds, but God must have been on my side. A shaft of light struck the window and surrounded me in a golden halo. Later, the reverend told me, I looked like an avenging angel come to earth, about to blast fire and brimstone upon the assembled.

Gradually, folk raised their faces in bewilderment. The nudging and shushing began. There were scornful chuckles, a couple of mocking looks, even a salute, which I met without flinching. One by one, the room fell quiet.

'Good morning,' I said.

Manners meant a few automatically responded. It would have been amusing if this wasn't so serious.

'Though this is unexpected, I thank you all for coming. Your visit is both welcome and timely.' There were some mumbles, the flash of a smile from Spinney at my obvious falsehood, nods of encouragement from Caragh and Molly.

'By now you'll have heard what's happened to Mr Gordon, to your fathers, brothers, sons and friends, the lads who left here weeks ago to take the peatreek north.' I paused. 'You'll also know about the body found in the cart. The body of Lieutenant Jacobs who, we now know, was the brother of Alice MacIntosh. Not only was the redcoat brutally murdered, but Mr Gordon has been charged with the crime. The others, with smuggling.'

There were more mutters. Darker, fraught. Aye, they knew.

'The lads are confined in the tolbooth in Aberdeen. Dom, Big Billy and those who went to Montrose are, we hope, safe and, we pray, on their way home.'

I paused while they absorbed the information, then continued.

'More than ever, we need to stick together. Help each other. We need to work out not only how we're going to bring those imprisoned home but retrieve the peatreek from the ambush site and sell it.' I waited for the sudden chitter to cease. 'Mr Gordon wrote that the redcoat's body was unclothed and unarmed. There's a chance his uniform and weapons are hidden somewhere in the village or even in the mountains. These could lead us to the real killer. What we need to do is find him.'

The talk began again, growing in volume.

‘Who the fook are ye to tell us what to do, lass?’ boomed a voice.

‘Aye,’ murmured a few. A fist pumped the air.

‘Ye can perch atop Tam’s table like yer a fookin’ priest or somethin’,’ said a short balding man. ‘But yer not one of us.’

‘And ye never will be,’ said another.

‘Just because Tam married ye, kittie, dinnae give ye authority over us.’ It was Widow Jupp. She lifted her pointed chin defiantly.

‘Shut yer mouth, Clodagh Jupp,’ snapped Molly. ‘I seem to remember my ma telling me how ye came to Glasglen from the Borders.’

‘Aye,’ agreed Caragh. ‘That’s further south than Edinburgh.’

‘It’s practically England,’ drawled Lucinda, earning a few chuckles.

Widow Jupp folded her arms and sucked her lips, frowning heavily. ‘At least I dinnae wed a gauger.’

There were more mutters and nods. I could feel hostile eyes upon me as well as the concerned looks of those I counted as friends.

I opened my arms. ‘I know many of you here don’t know me, but surely, I’ve proven I’ve no loyalty to the excise. Glasglen is my home now. My daughter’s as well. Your tacksman is my husband. I’m his wife. All I want to do is protect you—’

‘Protect us? *Ye?*’ scoffed someone loudly. There was mocking laughter.

‘We dinnae care what *ye* want, lassie.’ It was Ewan. He pushed his way to the front of the crowd and turned his back to me, arse pressed against the table, facing the villagers. ‘We dinnae have to listen to her.’ There were some half-hearted cheers. My throat tightened.

‘Ewan’s right,’ said a man with a scattering of fine hair across a freckled scalp and a squint in one eye. ‘Ye can call yourself the Queen of Glasglen for all we care. We’ll not listen to ye, let alone take orders.’

‘What the fook are we doing here, anyway?’ continued Ewan. ‘We can work this out ourselves, tacksman or nae, like we always have. I won’t be told what to do by this Lowland incomer again, I dinnae care who she’s married to.’ He took his wife by the arm and began to push his way to the door.

All except those I knew would stay, began to leave. Nae. Nae. This would not do. We’d accomplish naught like this.

Before I could stop myself, the words were out. ‘You bloody fools,’ I shouted.

There was a collective gasp.

Ewan swung around, face blazing. ‘What did ye call us?’

‘You heard,’ I said, standing at the very edge of the table. ‘You’re a bunch of fooking fools – with exceptions,’ I added quickly. Molly snorted. I released a long sigh. ‘Listen, all of you. Despite what you think, I’ve nae desire to tell you what to do, to take control. What do I know?’ I began to laugh, it was dry, hopeless. I buried my face in my hands, drawing breath, drawing strength.

I raised my chin. ‘From the day I arrived, I’ve done everything I could to try and please you all. God knows I’ve tried. Nae, forget God.’

There were gasps.

I spun swiftly. ‘Och, reverend, I don’t mean that. What I do mean is that *you*,’ my arm swept the room in an encompassing gesture, ‘every one of *you* knows I’ve tried. But it was never enough for some of you, was it?’ I searched each face. Some looked away, others studied the floor or tilted their heads as if considering me from a different angle. ‘Hate me later, if you must. Object to me too. Ignore me if that suits you better. Only, not today. Nor tomorrow. Until we bring the lads home, sell the bloody peatreek, and prepare for a likely raid—’

There were gasps.

‘Aye, you heard aright. Gillespie is threatening to raid Glasglen.’

Worried looks were exchanged.

‘Until then, I ask that you count me as one of you.’ I waited.

Naught.

‘At least listen to what I have to say before you discount me.’

More silence.

I caught the expressions of Spinney, of Caragh and Molly, the Mavers, Lucinda and Mick. They urged me to keep going.

So I did.

‘I foolishly thought that *together* we’d help Tam. That we’d help the lads. That we’d help each other. That you would help *me* do whatever it took.’ Dammit if tears didn’t begin to build. ‘But I was wrong. You’d rather let the fact I’m an incomer and a Lowlander stop you.’ I glared at Ewan. ‘Let an Englishman I was briefly married to, who deserted me and my daughter, who was a fooking gauger, be the reason you discredit anything I say or do. What *is* your problem?’ I put my hands on my hips. ‘I can’t help where I’m from any more than you can. But I am responsible for *who* I am.

For the choices I make. My actions. So are *you*. Aye, Tam chose me. But I chose him. And, if you'll let me, I choose you too.'

I paused and waited to see what would happen.

No-one moved. No-one spoke.

My heart was replaced by a stone. Every breath became heavy and painful.

'Well,' I began. 'I guess you've made your feelings clear. Let me tell you this for naught. Nae matter what you do, what you choose, *I*—' I stabbed a finger in my chest, 'intend to do whatever is in my meagre power to help the man I love and save this wretched village. I thought it needed to be saved from failing to meet lease, or from the excise, or from God knows what sentence a magistrate will pass against Tam and the men. But now I realise the only thing this village needs saving from—' I prayed my friends would forgive me, 'is its fooking self.'

With that I jumped off the table, shouldered my way through the crowd and out the door.

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CHAPTER THIRTY - TWO



‘Please don’t gloat, Torrie.’

The words slipped out before I could guard them. I was in the kitchen, head in hands, slumped at the table. She’d been standing there a while. I’d ignored her. I’d had my fill of insults and recriminations for one day.

Voices carried from the hallway, from outside. Why the villagers lingered, persisting in arguing back and forth, I didn’t know or care. I just wished everyone gone. Even Molly, Caragh and Spinney. What good could they do?

Even so, Torrie didn’t deserve my bitterness. Tam never meant for her to find out about us the way she did. I sure as hell didn’t. As strange as it was when I considered our first meeting, she’d become my friend. And now she was kin.

From beneath my lashes, I observed her leaning casually against the doorframe, arms crossed. I tried to find the words to at least offer a truce. But I was so weary of having my efforts flung back at me.

There was the clink of china, the sound of liquid pouring.

Torrie slid onto the bench opposite. It wasn’t until my elbow bumped a warm cup that I understood she’d poured tea.

I raised my head.

‘I put some peatreek in it,’ she said, indicating the jug at the end of the table. ‘Or we can forget the tea and just have peatreek.’

‘I’m sorry, Torrie—’ I began. ‘You didn’t deserve what I said before.’

‘Tosh,’ she said, with a cavalier wave of her hand. ‘It’s me what owes you an apology.’

‘*You* apologise? Maybe I will skip the tea.’

She studied the ceiling briefly, then fixed her gaze on me. ‘You really didn’t know about the marriage of declaration, did you?’

I took a sip and pulled a face as my throat burned. ‘You sure there’s any tea in this?’

‘A wee bit,’ she grinned. ‘I thought you needed peatreek more.’ She lifted her cup. ‘We both did.’

I smiled back. ‘I really didn’t know.’ I swirled the tea. The smell of peatreek grew stronger. ‘Truth is, your da and I were going to tell you about … us, when he returned. That we intended to wed after harvest. We hadn’t made plans. It was just an idea … A lovely idea …’ My voice petered out. Tears that I’d battened down with thick ropes and nets, shuddered loose. Dammit.

Torrie covered my hand with her own.

I stared at it. ‘For godsakes, Torrie, don’t be nice to me now. I couldn’t bear it.’

‘Shut up, you festering cow-turd,’ she said. ‘You incomer hizzie, you kittie-strag.’

I shut my eyes and released a long sigh, as if I’d just sunk into a warm bath. ‘That’s better.’

I opened one eye, then the other. We clinked cups and drank.

She waited a beat. ‘I’m not completely blind. I guessed there was something going on. I haven’t seen Da so happy since—’ She thought. ‘Come to think of it, I can’t remember ever seeing him that happy. Not really. Not the way he’s been since you arrived.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. You’re worth tolerating for that alone.’

My insides lit up like a cruisie lamp and for just a moment, I allowed myself to forget the situation we were in and think about Tam, not languishing in a tolbooth and facing a death sentence, but smiling, holding me, loving me. *Lord, please.*

Torrie slid her hand from mine, but not before she gave one final squeeze. ‘I wondered why he kept making excuses to remain here in Glasglen and sent others to check on his tack. I knew something was amiss. When I asked, he said he had to keep an eye on the peatreek production, but

he’s never been quite so vigilant before. Not like this winter.’ She shook her head. ‘Cunning bastart. And Mary wouldn’t give anything away. For someone with a reputation as the village gossip, she was hopeless when it came to clecking about you. Una and Fen as well. Didn’t matter how many times or how many ways my sisters and I asked, they wouldn’t say a thing. But Fen at least knew, didn’t she?’

‘Not about the marriage. Not even I knew about that. But your da didn’t act recklessly. He did it for a reason.’ I glanced at where the letter lay. I encouraged her to read it, watching as her face grew horrified, grim, then determined.

When she finished, she leaned across the table. ‘You really love him, don’t you?’

Her eyes were so like her da’s, for a moment words dissolved. ‘With all my heart. And I will do anything, *anything*, to bring him back. I don’t care whether that lot out there will help or not. I’ll do it without them if I must. I’ll not abandon Tam. I won’t. Nor will I forsake the villagers, even if they reject me.’

‘Good.’ Torrie stood and drained her teacup, putting it back down and swiping her sleeve across her mouth. She came to my side of the table and held out her hand. ‘Come along. We’ve plans to make.’

‘I know. I know. Just give me a bit longer, Torrie. At least until the others have gone. I can’t bear to look at their smug, judgemental faces again.’

‘Och, I think you’ll find you can. In fact, you don’t have a choice. They’re waiting.’

I gave her a puzzled look.

She thrust her hand towards me again. ‘You can be very persuasive when you want to be, Greer *Gordon*.’

A small sob escaped me.

‘Come along, we’ve work to do if we’re going to save Da, the men, save the peatreek and—’ she adjusted her demeanour, ‘save this village from its fooking self.’ She mimicked me perfectly.

‘I do *not* sound like that,’ I said indignantly, knocking back the tea, coughing, then rising.

‘You fooking well do when you’re in a dander.’

‘I wasn’t in a—’ I looked at the expression on her face. ‘Alright, I was. But I know it wasn’t my words alone that swayed them.’

Torrie grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door. ‘I might have said something.’

‘That’s so unlike you.’

‘So did Mick, Una and Ishbel. Aye, *Ishbel*. Then there was Molly, Spinney—’ she counted off on her fingers, ‘Caragh, Father Son, Peigi and Lucinda Geddes.’ She cocked her head. ‘They reminded folk of what you’ve done since you’ve been here. Who you’ve helped. How you’ve helped. You *and* Fen.’

As I entered the hallway, my vision blurred again.

She swung to face me so suddenly, I almost ran into her. ‘Do you realise that when you married Da, you became my step-mamma?’ Her eyes twinkled. ‘What should I call you now?’

‘What you usually do.’

‘Kittie it is then.’

‘That’s step-kittie to you, lassie,’ I said, reaching over to slap her arse, just missing as she hopped through the door with a yelp.



They were gathered in Tam’s study. Not everyone, but more than I could have hoped.

We were an eclectic group. Twenty of us to decide what action to take. Twenty of us to persuade the rest of the villagers to accept our decisions. I knew which would be the harder task.

Once again, I outlined the gist of Tam’s letter – the charges he was up against, the need to retrieve and sell the peatreek, and the likelihood of an excise raid.

Together we drew up a plan of attack.

Firstly, we agreed we had to send someone to Aberdeen to try and see Tam and the lads again. Find out what was happening. I begged to go.

‘You cannae go, lassie,’ said Mick gently. Sympathetic looks were levelled by Torrie and the other lasses. I pretended not to see them. ‘Ye dinnae ken Aberdeen, ye dinnae ken the way the gaols work or for that matter us Highlanders.’ He smiled gently to soften the blow. ‘What if Tam’s already on his way to Edinburgh – or maybe even London – in shackles?’

It didn’t bear thinking about.

‘Dinnae worry, lass, ye can still do a lot of good here,’ said the reverend.

‘It seems to me that the most important thing we *can* do is what ye said, lass,’ began Mick cautiously. ‘Find the redcoat’s missing uniform and weapons.’

‘They could be fooking anywhere,’ said the reverend.

Grave looks were exchanged. I was convinced Patrick knew something, but determined I would talk to the lad privately, see if I could jog his recollection of the events leading up to the attack. He was recovering his strength – why not his memory?

‘Whoever returns to Aberdeen has to take some peatreek with them,’ said Spinney. ‘I’ve some spare and I know the other lasses do as well.’

There were murmurs of agreement.

‘Why do you need peatreek?’ I asked. Surely, ensuring Tam wasn’t charged for a crime he didn’t commit was more important than profit?

‘Liquid currency,’ said Mick, rubbing his fingers together. ‘I told ye how it worked with the warden. He’ll nae be the only one. With it, we can bribe a whole range of officials. Smooth our path.’

They could also use it to buy medick for Artur and anyone else who needed it, pay for information, and do whatever it took to improve conditions for the lads. It was agreed Mick and Niall should be the ones to go, as they had navigated the tolbooth before. I would ensure a letter for Tam accompanied them.

‘We also need to find Dom and the others,’ said Hamish. ‘Ensure they ken what’s going on. Send someone towards Montrose.’

‘What if they’ve been ambushed and their cargo seized as well?’ asked Maire Marr.

‘Then we’re fooked,’ said Hamish.

‘Hamish,’ exclaimed Torrie and Ishbel, the latter adding something in Gaelic.

Hamish shrugged. ‘Well, it’s the truth.’ He dared anyone to contradict him. No-one did.

‘Look,’ said Stuarn Mavers, Niall’s father. ‘I’ll go to Montrose. I ken which roads they would have taken – the byways. If all’s well, then I’ll intercept them returning and warn them what’s happened. If not, I’ll go on to Aberdeen.’

‘I’ll go with yer,’ said Simon Geddes.

That was settled. The conversation turned to retrieving the peatreek hidden prior to the ambush.

‘For the time being,’ said Mick, ‘we’ve no choice but to leave it where it is. It’s too dangerous to try and move it with so many excise and militia about.’

‘What about the rent?’ I asked. It had been foremost in Tam’s mind. The entire reason for the trip in the first place. ‘Apart from going to Inverness and selling what wasn’t seized – most of which we’ll need to buy supplies – and giving the duke a portion, how can we prove to his lairdship our intentions to honour the remaining debt?’

‘Maybe,’ said Spinney eventually, ‘we can use the sma’ stills, make some more peatreek. But that means using grain we’ve reserved for winter. It’ll mean we’re short come the snows.’

From the doleful expressions, this was not a popular plan.

‘Is it possible his lairdship will give us an extension or even waive what’s owed?’ I asked.

Torrie shrugged. ‘Da always said he was a good laird.’

Mick sneered. Mr Nicholson and the lasses gave mocking laughs.

‘He’s not *that* good,’ said the reverend.

‘Profit before people,’ said Mr Nicholson. ‘Isn’t that the motto of the aristocracy?’

‘We can ask, though, can’t we?’ I persisted.

There were noncommittal shrugs.

‘Aye, lass,’ said Mr Nicholson finally. ‘We can do that. I’ll write a letter.’ He began making notes.

‘And I’ll deliver it to the duke in person,’ said the reverend. ‘Now, let’s talk about Gillespie.’ He gestured to me. ‘Greer – ye’ve something to say.’

‘Thank you, reverend.’ I waited until I had everyone’s attention. ‘I’ve been giving this some thought. As Tam wrote, there’s no better time for excise to raid a village than when their leader is absent and half the menfolk gone. Having once been married to a gauger, and dealing with many more at my parents’ tavern, I think I know something of the way their minds operate, especially when it comes to raids. While Gillespie might regard us as vulnerable, I think there’s something we can do to turn a perceived weakness to our advantage.’

‘How?’ asked Torrie.

‘By offering Mr Gillespie something he won’t be expecting.’

Eyebrows rose; doubt shaped expressions.

‘What’s that?’ asked Mick.

In the early days of my marriage, and even before we were wed, when William talked of his work he’d moan about how paltry his pay was. Excise were paid a percentage of whatever they seized. The greater the haul, the greater the bonus. But before they were remunerated, they had to pay for horses, food and shelter, any extra men or soldiers they hired, and any bribes they offered – all out of their own purse. The irony was that the good and honest excise officers, those who really believed in what they were doing, ended up working themselves out of a decent wage. Once they’d seized all the stills or whisky from basements in the city, the back of an inn, beneath a kirk, or from a ship or boat, paid the militia and informants what they were owed, little remained. The smugglers that weren’t arrested would disappear, move their operations, and deprive the excise of future revenue.

‘What a canny excise officer does,’ boasted William one day, referring to himself as he oft did, ‘is leave the stills intact – at least enough equipment so the fools can keep churning out spirit. Then, after a decent period, make a return visit. Better *still*—’ he laughed at his own joke, ‘raid the same place regularly – months apart. That way, you don’t have to waste time hunting out new dens of iniquity and bearing the costs and time, or the extra men, but instead develop a continuous stream of revenue by revisiting the old still-operable ones.’ He rubbed his fingers together to demonstrate exactly what he meant. ‘If you remove every piece of apparatus and spirit, let alone the producers, the well runs dry, doesn’t it? Be damned if anyone can drink from that.’

‘What won’t Gillespie be expecting, Greer?’ asked Mick again.

I waited a beat. ‘For us to make a deal with him.’

‘Ye dinnae negotiate with the likes of Gillespie,’ guffawed Simon, taken aback. The others began shaking their heads as if I’d gone doolally. Torrie lifted her hands as if to say, *What on earth?*

‘*You* might not negotiate with Mr Gillespie, Simon Geddes, but with the permission of everyone in this room, *I* will,’ I said.

Before they could raise any further objections, I explained.

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CHAPTER THIRTY - THREE



*M*r Gillespie and a troop of ten redcoats were sighted approaching Glasglen a few days later. They entered the glen from the north. The scouts alerted those nearest and the signals went up – the white sheet across Caragh's roof, another draped over a cairn near the Henleys' house.

We were ready.

Well, I was as ready as I could be to face the man who had arrested and incarcerated my husband. I would put aside my grief and anger to face Mr Gillespie and try to save the village from his wrath. And I thought leaving Edinburgh was the hardest thing I'd ever done.

The irony was that one of the main reasons the villagers distrusted me was the very reason they capitulated to my plan. My past as a gauger's wife was what swayed them – that and the fact there were more than a few who felt if anyone was entitled to try and outwit the excise, it was the woman who lost her new husband because of them.

Not lost, I wanted to say. Just misplaced.

Yet, if my plan failed, it wouldn't matter who I'd been married to or what I did or didn't do. I would never be trusted again.

So, I told myself over and over: *Don't fail.* For my own sake, for Tam, for the village he loved.

I stood at the window of the study. We'd all agreed it was important folk give the appearance of normality, even though Mr Gillespie was unlikely to be duped by our efforts. The bairns attended school, fishermen bobbed in their boats, people ambled along the main road, filing in and out of each

other’s houses, the shop, the joiner’s, the bootmaker’s, the sawyer’s. The fields and beasts were tended. Patrick, concerned his injuries might raise questions, insisted on returning to his own home not merely for the duration of the excise raid, but permanently. I wasn’t entirely happy with this arrangement and not only because I felt it was too soon. When the Beaton endorsed it, and Peigi explained Patrick wanted his independence, I capitulated. I think the real reason he left the Folly was to avoid my questions, questions I’d barely begun to ask. It was also apparent he intended to attempt searching for Alice by himself. I’d made it clear, once the danger posed by Gillespie and his men had passed (please, God, let it), we’d all help him. But if he insisted on clambering over the hills in his condition, he ran the risk of encountering the excise, which would put the entire village in jeopardy.

It wouldn’t take a very observant eye to note that this clachan was a place of women and bairns, with just a few old men or injured young ones. We were ripe pickings.

I prayed that the lack of fighting men, the predominance of lasses and children, might work in our favour.

Taking a deep breath, I tidied the ledgers, straightened the pens and nibs, then walked through the house. Buckets and sawhorses were stacked in one corner of the hall. The smell of paint and limewash was strong. A ladder was propped against the far wall near the stairs. Mary, Una and Torrie barely spared me a glance as I entered the kitchen. They’d just finished cooking the last of the bannocks. The other lasses were busy arranging cups on a tray. They offered brief smiles of encouragement as they filled them. Apparently, it was a well-known superstition among the redcoats that if they drank a smuggler’s whisky, it was dishonourable to seize their equipment.

Not that Mr Gillespie would care about that either, I supposed. But then, I had other plans for him. *If I didn’t pummel his smug face first.*

I let the lasses know company was imminent, then made my way back through the house to the front door, breathing deeply.

I can do this. I can.

It was mid-morning. A fine spring day. Fluffy clouds floated above like sheep separated from their flock, which was gathered around the twin peaks of Ben Dhàphen. The sky was a hazy blue. A cool breeze blew, ruffling the timid shoots of barley, making the sweet yellow and violet flowers wave in

celebration. The scent of lilacs, the earthy odours of peat and dung, even the perfume of the fragrant soap I'd used that morn, were in the air. Bees hummed; butterflies frolicked. A few cows wandered over to stare at the newcomers riding up the track.

I leaned against the drystone wall as they approached. Torrie stood one side of me, Ishbel and Mary the other. We wore our Sunday best. Our hair was partly gathered under clean kertches, the remainder tumbling freely down our backs. Hamish remained with the smallest bairns at the farmhouse. We'd agreed it should be women greeting the soldiers and the excise. I could feel the eyes of the lasses waiting in the hallway boring into my back. I could smell the bannocks on my clothes, the peat smoke in my hair. Using supplies we could ill-afford, cooking had begun the moment the signals appeared.

Mr Gillespie's dog reached us first. It was notorious in its own right, mainly for clamping its jaws around the noses of smugglers' garrons so they couldn't flee. The large black hound ran into the yard, snout hovering above the ground. God, it was big. I'd shut Bran and Sceólang in the study and I could hear their protesting barks. Not far behind the dog rode his master in the distinctive navy blue of the excise. Dark-haired, with a swarthy complexion, it was evident why he was oft called Black Malcolm Gillespie. He sat straight-backed in the saddle, his uniform giving him stature. Beside him rode a redcoat officer.

I waited until the dozen or so soldiers brought their mounts to a halt. The horses blew and snickered. Tack jingled. The men talked quietly, jerking chins towards the smoking chimneys, the women in the fields, the sheep grazing by the distant burn. The whole scene was quite bucolic, unlike the one playing in my mind.

'Well, look here,' began Mr Gillespie, 'a welcome party.' He was the first to dismount. His dog began to stalk the kine, who backed away. Gillespie clicked his fingers, bringing the dog to heel.

'Welcome to Glasglen, sirs.' I curtseyed. 'I'm Mrs Gordon.'

'Mrs Gordon,' said the redcoat, sweeping off his hat and tossing his reins to a soldier. 'I'm Captain Goodman.' He joined Mr Gillespie.

Torrie made a strange noise in her throat but curtseyed also, as did Mary. Ishbel inclined her head.

'Under usual circumstances,' I said, pleased my voice wasn't quavering, 'my husband would be here to greet you. But as you know, these are not

usual.’ I tried not to glare at Mr Gillespie.

‘No, indeed,’ began the captain.

‘*Husband*, ye say,’ interjected Mr Gillespie, raising a thick brow. ‘He made nae mention of a wife when I left him in Aberdeen.’ He raked me from top to toe. I waited until he met my eyes again.

God, the man dared to allude to Tam’s imprisonment. ‘Aye, *husband*.’

Torrie trod on my toes hard, jerking me back to the present. ‘And this is his daughter, Torrie Dorward. His ma, Ishbel Fraser. And this is my …’ God. What was Mary now? I hadn’t given it a thought. ‘Housekeeper, Mary Todd.’

‘*Housekeeper?*’ Mary preened at the promotion.

‘What brings you to Glasglen?’ I asked, flashing my teeth. ‘It’s an arduous journey through the mountains. You must be weary and in need of refreshment.’ The signal. ‘Let us show you some Glasglen hospitality.’

‘Ye fookin’ well ken exactly what brings us here, Mrs Gordon,’ drawled Mr Gillespie. ‘We’re not here to partake of any refreshments, but—’

In a rush of noise, laughter and much jollity, the lasses swarmed out the door, past a huffing and puffing Mr Gillespie, towards the soldiers, carrying laden trays of food and spirit.

Torrie quickly joined them, lifting the cups from the tray and pressing them into uncertain hands. Una, too. I watched them smiling, twirling, talking rapidly in their thick accents, thinking how lovely they both were, what canny performers. The dusty, tired soldiers were dazzled. All the while, another conversation was happening with their fingers.

A young ’un over here.

This one stinks.

Smile, don’t frown.

The men took the cups and, sniffing cautiously, looked to their officer for permission. The captain, who by now also had a drink in hand, shrugged, beamed, and took a sip. After that, the soldiers didn’t ask again. They happily drank, lifted steaming bannocks from Caragh’s tray and shoved them into their mouths. I wondered when they’d last eaten anything hot.

Mr Gillespie watched them in disbelief, ignoring his dog’s baleful stares. The man might be resistant to the smells wafting around, but his hound wasn’t made of such stern stuff.

‘What’s wrong with ye, man?’ he said to the captain. ‘Can’t ye see they’re trying to bribe ye?’

‘I hardly think a bit of food—’ began the captain, helping himself to another bannock, ‘or a small drink to stave off thirst count as bribes, Gillespie.’

There were murmurs of agreement from the soldiers.

Keep pouring. Torrie’s fingers moved swiftly.

‘We’ve plenty of time to perform our duties,’ said the captain, allowing himself to be led to a broad, flat rock. Torrie sat beside him, beckoning Una over to refill the officer’s cup. The captain held it up to make it easier.

Before Mr Gillespie could object, I interrupted, placing my fingers lightly on his forearm. ‘Why don’t we leave the captain and his men in peace?’

‘Get ye hand off me, lass. I ken what you’re about. None of this—’ he swept his arm in an arc, almost striking me, ‘is going to make a whit of difference to your husband, ye ken? He’s in gaol where he belongs. I’m here because I’ve a job to finish and by God, I’m going to do it.’

‘I’ve no doubt about that at all, Mr Gillespie,’ I said tersely, lowering my voice. ‘And I have a proposition for you that will not only make your job easier, but profitable as well.’

Mr Gillespie was about to brush my words aside when he paused. ‘Profitable, ye say?’

‘If you would just step inside, I’ll explain.’

Mr Gillespie studied me. ‘Why are ye doing this? I’d have thought the last thing ye’d want is to strike a bargain with me; offer sustenance to redcoats. What’s in it for ye? I’ve already told ye, naught ye say or do will help ye husband. It’s too late for that. He’s a fookin’ *murtherer*.’

I prayed he couldn’t see how much his words pained me. Instead, I moved closer, doing my utmost not to screw up my nose at the pungent combination of unwashed body, onion breath, piss and shit. And not only on his boots.

‘You know damn well he’s nae such thing,’ I hissed, then, before he could reply, walked back towards the house, crooking my finger for him to follow.

I paused at the door. *Wish me luck, lasses*, I said with my hands, while to Mr Gillespie I said, ‘While you’re welcome inside, sir, your dog stays here.’

Mr Gillespie seemed about to argue, then changed his mind.

‘Sit, Caesar, sit.’

‘Caesar?’ I looked at the poor beast’s scarred face. Hardly an emperor.

‘*Seizer*,’ Mr Gillespie corrected, his laugh following me all the way into Tam’s study.



Mr Gillespie made a show of scanning the room, touching all the surfaces. He picked up objects and turned them over. I hated that he was here, in my sanctuary, in the very place where Tam and I would talk, laugh, drink and … I slammed *that* door shut.

Bran and Sceólang snarled and barked when he entered, standing protectively in front of me. His hand had gone straight to his sword. I quickly calmed them by sinking into Tam’s chair and making them sit either side.

‘So,’ he said, a wary eye on the dogs. ‘This is where Tam Gordon lives.’ He directed a laden gaze towards the bed. ‘Where he does business.’ He sniggered and waggled his brows suggestively.

‘What you don’t know about me, Mr Gillespie,’ I invited him to sit, ‘is that I used to be married to an excise officer.’

That caught his attention. ‘Is that so? What was his name?’

I’d made that mistake before. ‘His name is irrelevant. What’s important is that I know how badly you excise officers, who risk life and limb for the king, are paid. It’s poor compensation for the dangers you face.’

‘Cease the flattery, lass, and get to the point.’

I tried not to show I was rattled. I’d an entire speech prepared. ‘Very well,’ I began. ‘I know your earnings depend on the number of seizures you make and the amount of spirit you retrieve.’

‘It’s no secret. Everyone kens that.’

‘I imagine the number of successful raids you’ve made since being posted inland is a great deal less than when you worked along the east coast. The Highlanders are many things, but they are excellent at concealing *their* business.’

‘Bunch of savages.’

‘*Clever* savages.’

Mr Gillespie grunted.

‘Tell me this, Mr Gillespie. What happens after you, the captain and his men march through Glasglen and seize our equipment, the little spirit we’ve left? You’ve already ambushed the pony-train, taken the results of months of labour. Surely, you can’t expect to find a worthy haul here?’

Mr Gillespie leered and crossed his arms. ‘There’ll be more than enough to justify a raid. Might even be enough left over to buy a wee trinket for my wife and lasses.’

I’d heard he had a wife and four daughters. I couldn’t imagine this man loving anyone, let alone buying them a gift. On second thoughts, maybe his dog.

‘Perhaps.’

Quick as a snake striking, he leaned on the desk and jabbed a finger in my direction. ‘Ye dinnae deny there be illicit spirit and equipment here, then?’

I gave him a jaded look. ‘That’s no secret.’ I paused. ‘You wouldn’t be here otherwise, would you?’

‘I’m here, lass, to ensure Tamhas Gordon can’t smuggle anything ever again.’

My heart tumbled like an acrobat. ‘If he’s found guilty, whatever you do here, whatever you find, will make not a whit of difference to his sentence. You said so yourself.’

He settled back in his seat, a satisfied grin on his face. ‘It will to me. Tamhas Gordon has avoided the authorities for too long; avoided *me*. It’s time he’s brought to justice – and anyone who aids him.’

‘He didn’t do it. Whatever you think you know, whatever you found, Tam didn’t murder that man.’

For just a moment, Mr Gillespie’s eyes showed something other than contempt. Then his face hardened again. He didn’t like conversing with a woman, despite being curious about what I had to say.

‘Prove it,’ he said.

Och, I will. I will.

He slapped the desk. ‘I’m wasting time here.’ He went to rise.

‘Wasting time?’ I gave a hollow laugh. ‘Only if you leave before you hear me out. You see, Mr Gillespie, I know how you can turn this raid into a profitable one – not just today, but in the future.’

Reluctantly, Mr Gillespie fell back in the seat. Bran growled. I quieted him with a gentle hand on his head.

‘Explain what ye mean, lass.’

My insides were roiling with anger and loathing, but I had to put the villagers ahead of my own desires. ‘What if, instead of searching house to house, spending days wandering through the mountains trying to locate bothies, encountering cold, hardship and hunger, not to mention danger, all in the hope of finding distilling equipment and maybe a little spirit – which may or may not be there—’

He let that slide.

‘—destroying perfectly good washtubs, worms and vessels, wouldn’t it serve you better if Glasglen and the other villages and clachans around here became a regular revenue stream for you?’

‘*Regular?*’ he asked.

‘Let me explain something my first husband and his fellow excise officers used to do.’

And so, taking my time, I did.

The sun was warm in the window. A bird alighted on the ledge, fluffing its feathers. ‘Think on it, sir,’ I continued once the bird flew away. ‘If we willingly hand over say, some old pieces of equipment along with a little spirit – and what you do with that is up to you,’ I added quickly, ‘and you and your men return before winter to collect a few more barrels and ankers, maybe additional used equipment, and do the same in each of the villages in Tamhas Gordon’s tack, well, collectively, there’d be a tidy profit, wouldn’t there? There’d be no bloodshed, no violence. No arrests. You’d need a fraction of the men you’ve brought with you today, which means less cost to you and more revenue.’

Mr Gillespie made a scoffing noise. ‘You’re suggesting I aid felons? Work *with* ye?’ His cheeks began to redden, his eyes to flash. ‘That would make *me* one. Unlike yer fiendish husband, I’ll not countenance such an outrageous notion.’ Bran growled again. Sceólang scrambled to her feet.

‘The way I see it, Mr Gillespie,’ I said calmly, comforting the hounds, ‘is that the felons are in fact helping *you*. Cooperating with the law by surrendering a portion of our equipment and our produce. You not only get to curtail operations, reduce what leaves the county, but you fund the continuance of your raids and seizures in other places. If anything, you would be using criminals—’ I almost choked on the word, ‘to catch other,

greater criminals. At least, that's how my first husband saw it and he was promoted … often.'

When he didn't respond, I continued. 'Mr Gillespie, wouldn't it serve you better if you could count upon Glasglen to top up your coffers now and then rather than destroying our production completely today? Once you raid our village and take what remains of our men and any illicit equipment that may or may not exist, any peatreek that's stored, well, we'll have no more to give you. Not today, nor tomorrow – perhaps ever.'

He sat there quietly, drumming his fingers on the table while he absorbed what I said.

The sun carved a road across the wood, past the ledgers, past the book of poetry I'd begun to read, *The Ever Green* by Allan Ramsay, one of Tam's favourites. A drawing Pol had done of his new family lay half in shadow, half in the sunlight. It had his da, Torrie, Hamish and the bairns, the twins, Peigi, Ishbel, the hounds, Mary, Una as well, and there, in the midst, were me and Fen.

'Well?' I asked after some time had passed. I could hear faint deep laughter. Noises issued from the barn. Bran's ears pricked. Mr Gillespie heard it too.

'I confess, I underestimated ye, lass.'

Wouldn't be the first time, I thought.

'I was convinced ye were bringing me here to beg for yer husband's life; to try and persuade me to drop the charges or free him – not that either is in my power anymore. Instead, ye fight for the villagers. For the Highlanders.' He shook his head, chuckling. 'Are ye sure yer not one? Seems Tamhas Gordon kent exactly what he was getting when he married ye.'

Mr Gillespie stood without ceremony and smoothed his hands down his breeches. His pistol knocked against the desk, his sword swung across his knees. I'd scarce paid them attention before. Now, the metal gleamed. I swallowed. Everything hung on what this man said next. By rights, he could arrest me for bribery; the real kind, not just whisky and bannocks. Then tear apart the Folly, the village, force folk to reveal the whereabouts of their stills, their spirit, their bothies. He could break us and erase Glasglen from living memory.

The end of Glasglen would come not from a rapacious laird but the exciseman, Malcolm Gillespie. I rose and we faced each other across Tam's

table.

Mr Gillespie put his hand on the hilt of his sword, then thrust it towards me.

I flinched before realising it held no weapon.

‘You have yerself a deal, *Mrs Gordon*.’

I placed my hand in his and he squeezed hard. I could feel his strength.

‘Only, there be a condition.’

My hand froze in his grasp. Sweat broke out on my upper lip, trickled between my shoulder blades. I stood straighter.

‘If I ever see lads from Glasglen outside where these lands begin and end, I’ll take whatever they be carrying, agreements be damned. Ye ken?’

‘I ken.’

‘So, we have a deal?’ His eyes narrowed.

‘We have a deal.’ I extracted my hand from his, resisting the urge to run to the pail of water near the hearth and submerge it.

And so, the smuggler’s wife made a pact with the devil – the exciseman who, if he had his way, would see her husband hanged for murder.

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CHAPTER THIRTY - FOUR



When Mr Gillespie and the redcoats left the glen with an old copper worm and two ankers of spirit, destroying only one ancient still, their departure was met with more than a modicum of relief and a great deal of grateful disbelief.

For a moment I was regarded with something akin to respect. Few had believed I'd be able to persuade Mr Gillespie to agree to my proposal. I didn't admit to being among the doubters myself.

The bairns arrived home from school to find us celebrating.

I'm so proud of you, Ma. Fen wrapped her arms around me, and I kissed the top of her head.

'If it wasn't for you and your ma teaching us finger-talking,' said Torrie, kneeling so her face was level with Fen's, 'we might not have succeeded. You and your ma are heroes.' She gathered Fen in her arms.

Hesitant at first, eyes widening over Torrie's shoulder at this unexpected display of affection, it was a moment before she fell into the embrace. Fen's smile mirrored mine. Who'd have thought after the welcome Torrie gave us that very first night, we'd not only be family, but hugged and hailed as saviours of the glen months later?

I shut my eyes briefly, determined to capture this moment, even though it was a hollow victory. If only I could persuade those responsible for sentencing Tam the way I did Mr Gillespie, then we would have cause for real cheer.



A day or so later, Reverend MacAdam returned from his mission to Gordon Castle to deliver the letter Mr Nicholson had written on behalf of Glasglen asking to extend payment of the lease monies. The duke had already sent riders with hefty purses east after receiving Tam's letter from the tolbooth.

'But not before he demanded the whereabouts of his seized barrels and ankers,' said the reverend sourly. 'When I told him we believed they were being held in the Customs House at Aberdeen, he sent more letters demanding they be restored to him immediately.'

'But it's illicit spirit he's claiming,' I said. 'Surely the authorities can't just hand it over?'

'Can't they?' The reverend's tone was mocking. 'Don't forget, lass, there's one rule for nobles and another for the likes of us. That peatreek was intended for his lairdship's London residence. He'll be warming his insides with contraband peatreek while Tam and the lads freeze their staines off in the tolbooth for making and selling it.' The reverend sighed. 'Nevertheless, he's promised Tam will be assigned the best legal counsel he can buy. Odds are the duke will know the magistrate who hears the case, have a word in his ear.'

'Does that mean Tam will be released?' I asked.

The look of pity on Reverend MacAdam's face was my answer. 'At best, he may avoid the death penalty. The only thing that will ensure Tam doesn't get a conviction for murder is finding the real culprit and extracting a confession. As for the other lads, they'll likely be fined – which the duke may cover – or serve time for smuggling and be sent home. But who knows the mind of the law? Those dispensing it are as mercurial as the weather and as biased as a Highland poet.'

When the others told the reverend what happened with Mr Gillespie, he was full of praise, but dubious when it came to believing the gauger would adhere to our arrangement.

'I don't fooking trust him. I don't trust any of them,' he said.

Having once called a gauger husband, I was inclined to agree.



The same sentiments were expressed less than a week later when, dirty, hungry and exhausted, Mick and Niall returned.

Insisting they eat and rest first, that their news could wait, I confess I was relieved when they refused and asked that I send for folk to join us. I'd already notified the farmhouse and Torrie of their arrival.

It was early evening by the time everyone gathered. The bairns were in the kitchen with Mary and Una, the rest of us were sat around the hearth in the study. A couple of the older men who, after Mr Gillespie and the soldiers had left without taking their stills or searching for their bothies, deigned to notice me, marched up to the house uninvited to find out what was going on. Mick said to admit them.

'I have some sad tidings,' began Mick. His eyes were red-rimmed, his words weighted with grief. 'Young Rory is dead.'

There was a collective gasp. 'Nae!'

'How?'

A lump began to grow in my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. Rory-With-A-Story with his wide, crooked grin, big laugh and constant blether.

Mick rubbed his forehead. 'Tam says it was a knife wound on his leg. A mere gash, it became infected … They dinnae ken how ill the lad was until it was too late. He died in Rupert's arms, clecking to the end.' He raised his eyes to the ceiling. 'I'll go see Maire myself later.'

'I'll come with ye, Mick,' said Caragh. He shot her a grateful look. I couldn't imagine how hard it would be to deliver such awful tidings to his ma, let alone be the one to hear them.

'Things aren't looking good for Art, either.' Mick's face was bleak. 'We kent the poor bastart was run through with a sword, but it happened because he was trying to calm the bloody garrons.'

'Of course,' choked Molly, shaking her head.

'I'll have to let his grandweans ken. We were able to get medick to him, some peatreek …' Mick's lip began to quiver. After all, this was his brother he was talking about. He reached for Molly's hand. She gripped it as if his life depended on it.

Poor Artur. I blinked back tears, tried to swallow, but my throat was bone-dry. He'd been the first person from Glasglen, apart from Tam, to show me and Fen kindness and make us feel welcome. I couldn't bear the thought of him being in pain or worse.

Poor Maire and Rupert. Oh, Rory … Some of the women began to cry quietly.

‘At least Jimmy’s with Art,’ said Mick softly, referring to his son. ‘The rest are bruised, battered, sore and furious – their spirits low. Much lower than when I saw them last.’

‘Do ye ken any more about how the lieutenant died?’ asked Spinney.

I’d shared the details in Tam’s letter.

‘The coroner said his leg was broken,’ said Mick. ‘There were terrible cuts and bruises all over his body – deep gashes. His skull was crushed, his face smashed and chest as well.’ He tapped the areas.

‘Did you speak to Tam?’ I asked.

‘Aye. Bribed the warden with peatreek again. Rest assured, for someone with murther hanging over his head, he’s as right as can be expected. He’s more worried about you lot, about the village. About the lads with him. We managed to get supplies to them – if the warden did as he promised, that is. He would nae let us see them a second time.’

There were grim murmurs.

‘He asked if we’d any luck finding the lieutenant’s uniform or the weapon.’ Mick gazed around and we shook our heads.

It had been difficult to mount a proper search. Folk were reluctant to look in people’s homes as it implied an accusation. Instead, we trusted them to carry out their own searches and report. Thus far, among those who said they’d looked, naught had been found (and some were so offended by the idea, they outright refused). The rest of us hunted where and when we could – in barns, byres, nearby bothies, along burns, around the shores of the loch, in wells, without any success.

Mick then told us the Circuit Court that travelled throughout the north dispensing justice had been delayed. This could work to Tam’s advantage as it was expected that when they heard his case, they’d refer his trial to the High Court in Edinburgh. Mick also met the duke’s appointed lawyer, a man so *bulfie* his buttons wouldn’t meet across his belly, and with cheeks the size of a parish.

‘But he kent what he was about. That’s the most we can hope for,’ said Mick.

Was it? I found my mind drifting as Mick answered questions about the other lads in the tolbooth.

Tam had enemies, but then, who didn't? Being tacksman for the duke carried its own rewards, responsibilities and penalties. Despite everything Tam did for the village, there were those who resented his authority and the stent work, and that he wasn't born and bred in the glen.

Brandon Stokes was always quick to point out Tam's divided loyalties and question his judgement. He was also a drunkard and inclined to rage. But was *he* capable of treachery? Such violence? All I'd ever seen him do was shout and clyte his son over the ear.

I regarded Patrick now, huddled in the corner, listening. His eyes were no longer as swollen, but his face was still bruised. He said his arm ached, and it hurt if he breathed too deeply. He'd likely carry a limp for life. The marks ringing his neck were no longer obvious unless one looked for them; his head was healing. It had been a shocking assault. Yet Patrick claimed not to know who did it.

I no longer believed him. Aware of my interest, his eyes slid from mine, cheeks colouring. What was the lad hiding?

And then there was Una's man, Filib. Though he'd capitulated faster than a newborn puppy to Tam's commands, I couldn't forget what he'd done to Una, what she'd endured while they were together. The reason she lost her weans was because the bastart repeatedly punched her heavily pregnant belly. Yet, it's one thing to attack a powerless, frightened female, another a burly soldier. I couldn't imagine Filib, a lily-livered woman-beater, being bold enough to fight someone as capable as the lieutenant.

Anyway, Tam would have questioned everyone in the tolbooth – including Brandon and Filib. Tam said he had his suspicions. Who was in his sights?

What about Joseph Eddison? Tam had given him a right beating, broken his nose and teeth. Joseph was a sly one; he'd threatened vengeance. But would he murder an officer of the Crown and let Tam be blamed?

I tuned into the conversation again. Someone had asked Mick what conditions were like in the gaol.

'The lads are spread across two cells. They are wee, dank and dark and stink like a pig's arse, but it could be worse.'

'Worse?' exclaimed Una.

'At least they're together.'

My eyes fell upon Patrick once more. Then I became aware I too was being watched.

Torrie. She frowned and cocked her head. Her fingers moved.

What are you thinking?

I gave Patrick a pointed look. *No more excuses. It's time to ask this lad the hard questions*.

Torrie pursed her lips. *Want some company?*

I nodded. *Tonight?*

Tonight.



It was bitterly cold by the time we reached the Stokes' house. After our meeting ended, and arrangements for mourning Rory and supporting Maire Marr and Artur's grandweans (who were staying with the widow, Moira Fraser), were tentatively discussed, Torrie had gone home with Hamish. I saw Fen and Pol to their beds and told them a story. Una had long gone to the room she shared with Mary upstairs, exhausted by the day's events. After learning what I intended, Mary insisted on waiting up for me. I couldn't keep anything from that lass.

'If ye not back by the time the clock strikes midnight, I'm coming for ye,' she said. 'Both of ye,' she said. 'I like Patrick and all, but I liked Filib too and look what he did.'

We'd all liked Filib, until we didn't.

The Stokes' house was on the edge of the north-west outfields held in common by the village, a brisk twenty-minute walk from the Folly. Silhouettes of cows and a puddle of sheep clumped together under a lone tree watched us drowsily as Torrie and I trudged over muddy pasture. An owl flew low overhead, the whoosh of its wings making us jump. The moon was momentarily shadowed by lumbering clouds, its argent path first glowing then dimming as it cleaved the fields.

Silently, we splashed across the shallowest part of a burn, the wooden planks that used to form a bridge washed away days earlier in the spring melt. The water was fast and deeper than we expected, so it was with wet skirts and boots that we waited for Patrick to answer our knock.

A light glowed in the cottage. Smoke curled sinuously from the hole in the thatch. We exchanged a look. We both felt Patrick knew or at least remembered more than he was admitting. Moving back home was naught

but an excuse to distance himself from everyone and avoid questions. He'd even begun sending the Beaton away when she came to change his dressings. He'd only come to the Folly tonight because Peigi gave him no choice.

However much he might want to protect his da, we couldn't allow him to maintain this stubborn silence any longer. Not when Tam's life was at stake.

I pressed my ear to the door and could just make out the faint broody noises of hens, the snuffling snore of a beastie, the crackle of a fire.

I raised a questioning brow, and Torrie gave a firm nod. I put my hand on the door and pushed. Something blocked it, so I put my shoulder against it and gave a hard shove. There was a grating sound. Torrie added her weight and whatever was against the door shifted.

'Patrick?' I called into the semi-darkness and slipped through the gap. 'It's Mrs Mac … Gordon and Torrie. We'd like to talk to you.'

No answer. I cast my eyes about. The cottage was tiny, even smaller than Ishbel's main room, and this one wasn't divided. The pungent smell of animal shit struck me. Smoke slouched under the ceiling. At the far end, I could make out a bed of straw upon which lay a skinny cow. Two small sheep were curled near it. Hens sat on nesting boxes and piles of dirty straw were scattered over the floor. Eyes glowed in the muted light.

A rocking chair tilted back and forth by the fire. There was a small table littered with bowls and cups of half-eaten oats and rancid milk. The floor was compact earth, dark and damp in the centre. Runnels of black striped the walls and spotted the ground where the sooty thatch had dripped. Two box beds were against a wall, the curtains pulled across one. I pointed towards it. Torrie tiptoed over and waited.

'Patrick,' I said softly, as one might address a timid cat. 'We know you're here. We just want to ask a few questions. There's no need to be afraid, no need to—'

Torrie yanked the curtain back and there, sitting atop his bed, knees drawn to his chest, was Patrick.

He blinked at us. 'Go away. I dinnae wanna talk to ye.' He buried his head in his arms.

I signalled Torrie to open the jug of whisky we'd brought and pour drinks, then sat on the very edge of the box bed.

'Leave me alone,' said Patrick. There was no vehemence. Just sadness.

‘I will once you’ve answered some questions,’ I said.

‘I’ve told ye again and again, I dinnae ken anything.’

‘Well, you see, Patrick.’ I took a horn cup of whisky from Torrie and offered it to the lad. He stared, then took it and sipped. I was yet to see a Highlander refuse a dram. ‘I’m afraid I don’t believe you. I think you do know something. Torrie does too. We think you know something about what happened to Lieutenant Jacobs. Something that may save Mr Gordon’s life.’

‘I ken naught,’ said Patrick and began to rock back and forth.

I took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. The sour smell of the bedding, of Patrick, who clearly hadn’t done so much as wash his neck or hands, reached me.

‘You heard what Mick said,’ I began softly. Torrie drew up a stool. It may have looked like it was done out of concern, and it was, but it was also to prevent the lad from bolting. ‘Mr Gordon is set to face the High Court charged with murder. But Torrie knows, I know, and I think you do too, how unjust that is.’

Patrick grew still.

‘But you know what makes me really miserable?’

Patrick shook his head.

‘It’s that someone from Glasglen is prepared to let Mr Gordon, their tacksman, Torrie’s da, Pol’s, Fionn’s, Elspet’s, Peigi’s and Fen’s da too, my husband, take the blame for a murder he didn’t commit. Someone not only killed the lieutenant, but hid his body in the cart and then, in all likelihood, informed the excise of the route the lads were taking so the body would be found. All so the blame would fall squarely on Mr Gordon.’

I let that sink in. The fire crackled. Patrick shifted on the bed. The blankets were all lumpy, the sheets askew, gathered beneath him like a cairn.

‘I can’t let that happen, Patrick. Do you know why? Because I love Mr Gordon. With all my heart. And the thought of losing him is more than I can bear. More than Torrie or the other bairns can bear too.’

Patrick stared ahead.

‘I think you know something about love, don’t you? I also think you know something about anger, about what it’s like to have someone you love hurt.’

Patrick’s shoulders began to shake. A sob escaped, hollow, deep.

Torrie's fingers flashed. *Keep going*.

I swallowed. 'You know what I think happened? I think your da learned you were in love with Alice, that you were hiding her up the mountain. You said he never liked her; thought she was an informer. I think he was furious with you and, most likely blootered, he beat you. Is that what happened, Patrick?'

Patrick's body was rent with silent cries.

'I also think your da came upon the lieutenant and, maybe afraid of what he'd do if he found you and Alice, killed him.'

Patrick wailed.

A triumphant look gleamed in Torrie's eyes.

'You saw what happened, didn't you, Patrick? You know.'

Was that a nod?

'Did you, Patrick?' urged Torrie. 'Did you see your da kill the redcoat?'

The nod turned to a shaking of the head, a feral flinging back and forth that blurred his features.

'Nae, nae, nae.' As suddenly as the shaking started, it stopped. He covered his face with his hands. 'Ye dinnae understand.' His voice was muffled.

I rested a hand on his shoulder.

'Just tell us, Patrick. Admit it. Your da killed Lieutenant Jacobs, didn't he?' Torrie's tone was firm.

Patrick inhaled loudly and threw his head back, gazing at the ceiling. 'Alright, alright. I'll admit it.'

My hand slipped away. The relief on Torrie's face was palpable. It *was* Brandon Stokes. The stupid, blootered bastart. But why frame Tam?

I wanted to bolt out of the cottage, saddle a horse and ride to the nearest constable, go to Aberdeen and force a magistrate to listen and then get a confession from the real murderer, whatever it took.

But Patrick wasn't finished. His tears quieted, as though finally admitting the truth calmed him. The effect on me and Torrie was the opposite. We were energised, filled with righteous anger. I began to rise, preparing to leave and tell anyone who'd listen the real story. Patrick's next words stopped me mid-stride.

'It was an accident. It was never meant to happen.'

Torrie jeered. 'Are you telling us your father – the man who did *that* to you—' she swung her arm at the lad, 'didn't mean to kill a despised

redcoat?’ Her laugh was more hoarse bark. ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Nae,’ said Patrick, wiping his nose on his sleeve, smoothing his hair from his face. He wriggled to the edge of the bed, put his feet on the floor and looked from one of us to the other.

‘What I’m telling ye is that my da dinnae lay a hand on me. And I ken he never killed the redcoat.’

I made a scoffing noise, then tossed back my drink. ‘What makes you so sure?’

Patrick met my eyes, and something flickered deep within.

‘Because I did.’

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CHAPTER THIRTY - FIVE



‘*You* killed Lieutenant Jacobs?’ I repeated, reaching blindly for a stool and slumping onto it.

‘Why?’ asked Torrie.

Patrick was unable to return our incredulous looks.

‘It was an accident.’ His voice was muffled. ‘I dinnae mean to.’ He gave a great waul of anguish then began to sob uncontrollably.

Torrie rose and, sitting beside the lad, put her arms around him, drawing him against her, and rocking him like a wean. ‘There, there. Come now, wee laddie. Come now.’

Anybody less like a wee laddie I was yet to see, but her words and soothing tone seemed to have an effect. I saw a different side of Torrie. A gentler one. Eventually, Patrick dried his swollen eyes with his sleeve, sniffed loudly and then stared blankly at the smouldering peat in the central hearth. Torrie released him but remained next to him.

‘Tell us what happened,’ I said softly, reaching for one of his limp hands and holding it.

He inhaled deeply and gave a stiff nod.

‘It was a few weeks ago. I … I was meant to be working on the Folly – sorry, I mean, yer house – but I needed to look after Alice—’

Torrie and I locked eyes.

‘So, I made sure my name was marked off in case Da came to check, then, as soon as I could, went back up Ben Ghillean.’

‘Is that where she was?’

He bit down on his lower lip as if considering whether to tell us or not, then, understanding things had gone beyond that, nodded. ‘We found an abandoned bothy last year. It was when Alice was still working for Mrs Fraser. We used to go up into the woods on a Sunday afternoon, after kirk. We found it by accident when I put my foot through the roof. Thought I was done for, that a monster had me—’ A smile curved his mouth before he remembered why he was telling us, and it disappeared. ‘It was a cave of sorts – mostly rocks and tree roots. Well hidden. Whoever used to distil there deserted it long ago. There was a broken washtub and a few cracked old jugs, but the smell of peat, of low wines, still hung about. When Alice had to leave the farmhouse, I remembered it. I fixed it up good and proper for her.’

‘So, Alice has been hiding there the whole time?’ asked Torrie.

‘Since she left.’

‘But that’s months ago.’

‘Aye. And no-one would have found her either, ’cept that brother of hers came snooping about.’

I released Patrick’s hand. ‘Why did Alice leave in the first place? Why did she hide? I don’t understand.’

Patrick pushed greasy hair from his forehead. The odour wafting from him was powerful.

‘Patrick?’ urged Torrie when the lad didn’t immediately answer.

‘Because … because she dinnae want anyone to ken she was with child.’

My expression was echoed in Torrie – half surprise, half-expectant.

‘I see,’ I said.

‘She didn’t need to run away,’ exclaimed Torrie. ‘Gran and Da wouldn’t have liked it, but they would have helped her. Helped you. We all would have.’

‘I ken that,’ said Patrick, staring at his hands.

‘Were you scared what your da would do?’

Patrick made a snorting noise. ‘Aye, her and me both. He never liked Alice. Thought she was a hizzie who batted her eyelashes at any lad. Who informed on Mr Gordon to the excise last year. She never. But he didn’t know her. Not like me.’

This wasn’t answering our initial question, though it did answer others. ‘Alright,’ I said firmly. ‘You hid her in an old bothy and, I suspect, stole

stores from the Folly, didn't you?'

'Aye. I'm … I'm sorry.'

I shrugged. As if it mattered now.

'I stole from other places as well. Blankets from Widow Jupp and the Boynes; fish and milk from the Morrices and Wilsons. Stuff like that.'

I recalled the shadowy figure I'd seen traversing the hill up to the Folly months ago. I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. 'What happened with the lieutenant?'

Patrick lowered his head, hair falling over his face. He spoke so quietly, we were forced to lean closer to hear. 'It was mid-afternoon. Cold. I was bringing more peat and supplies to Alice. We'd had some late snow. I saw tracks going to and from the bothy and at first I thought Alice must have gone for a walk. The closer her time came, the more restless she'd become. Then I noticed some of the tracks were big, a man's. I ran. When I reached the bothy, she wasn't there. Instead, her brother was waiting. The lieutenant.' He paused, sucked the air through his teeth.

Torrie poured him another peatreek and passed it over. He took a long drink, swallowed, and rubbed his chest.

'He grabbed me before I could flee, demanding I tell him where Alice was. All I could think was if she saw or heard him, she'd have bolted like the clappers. He dinnae believe me when I said I dinnae ken her whereabouts and began to hit me. Punch me. When I fell to the ground, he kicked me over and over. He was like a madman. I managed to crawl outside and started yelling for help. He grabbed me around the neck and began strangling me. He would have killed me too if he hadn't slipped on a loose rock. He lost his balance. Before he could get hold of me again, I shoved him with my boot. He stumbled back a few feet and then disappeared.' He made a dropping motion with his hands. 'I could nae believe it. An almighty hole opened in the heather, and he just fell through. I crawled to where he'd vanished and there he was, way below, lying on the rocky ground, broken and bleeding. I thought he was dead but, as I wondered what in God's name I was going to do, he opened his eyes and looked straight at me.

'I clambered down. It took an age. I tried to do what I could, honest. But his head …' Patrick paled and swallowed. 'It had struck a big rock and I tell ye for true, there was a terrible wound – here.' He touched the back of his head. 'There was a lot of blood. His leg was twisted at an angle God never

intended. I could nae leave him, so I stayed. Tried to comfort him even though I was fair hurt too. I told him how much I loved his sister, and that I would care for her and my bairn, that we'd remember him. If it was a boy, we'd name it after him.' He raised his weary head. 'Ye ken what he said?'

'What?' asked Torrie.

'First, he laughed. I thought he must be doolally with the pain, but then he said something that if he hadn't been so close to death, I swear I would have killed him.'

'What?' I whispered.

'He told me the wean was nae mine.'

'Whose was it?' asked Torrie sharply.

I shut my eyes. *Oh God. No.*

'It was his.' Patrick's voice cracked. 'That's why he was searching for Alice.'

'How could it have been his?' asked Torrie indignantly. 'She'd long left Glasglen before he appeared asking questions about her.'

Patrick shook his head. 'That's what I said. Then he told me they'd been meeting in secret for weeks.' There was a glazed look in his eyes. 'Do ye remember how my da, Filib Mackenzie and the others accused Alice of being an informer? They went and told yer da.'

'How can I forget? Filib said he'd seen her with the redcoats,' said Torrie.

'Ewan Morrice, too,' said Patrick. 'I dinnae believe them.'

'But it was her brother all along?'

'Aye, but not for the reasons ye think,' said Patrick. 'She met her brother over in Glascreag, in an abandoned house there. And each time she saw him, she did whatever he wanted.' He paused so his meaning was clear. 'All so he would nae raid the village.'

'*What?*' Torrie leapt to her feet.

'Are you saying Alice …' How did I say this? 'Traded favours with her own brother to keep the village safe?'

'That's exactly what I'm saying,' said Patrick miserably. 'I'd nae idea. Not till he told me.'

'God,' said Torrie, pressing her fingers into her eyes. 'Even I'd begun to believe she was a traitor …'

'The lieutenant's story about her fleeing a marriage was false then.' I rested a hand lightly on Torrie's thigh. This wasn't her fault. *Poor Alice.*

Brave Alice.

‘Aye,’ said Patrick, his voice becoming wobbly. ‘He needed to make sure no-one ever learned what he’d done. I think he intended to murther her – her and the wean. He wanted to ensure his reputation was nae sullied. He never gave a damn about his sister.’

Patrick began to cry softly. ‘I think that’s why she was happy to marry the likes of me, a poor crofter’s son. Give the wean a name, a life, give her respectability, protection. If she was my wife, then no-one would ever ken what her brother had done. I wondered how someone like her, so bonnie and clever, from a good family, could love me. She loved it *here*. *Loves* it. It’s her home. It will be her wean’s home too, once we find them.’

We sat together before the glowing fire, Patrick’s story sitting thick and heavy between us. Lieutenant Jacobs and his sister … He’d seemed so concerned for her wellbeing, wanting to bring her back to the family. We’d tried to help him find her. I felt sick.

‘What did you do after he told you?’ asked Torrie.

‘I could nae bear to look at him any longer. I was afeared of what I’d do, so I left him and went looking for Alice. What if the bastart was lying and he’d already found her? That’s when I ran into Da. He’d come looking for me at the Folly and when I was nae there, guessed I was in the hills. When he saw the state of me, covered in blood, my injuries, clothes torn, he demanded to ken what happened. I led him back to the lieutenant. When he saw him lying there, dead now, he told me to go back home, clean up, that he’d look after the body. He said he’d deal with me later.’ Patrick took a deep breath.

‘Only I could nae go back, could I? Alice was out there. At first, I hid and watched Da bury the lieutenant. He dug a shallow grave then lay him in it, covering him with rocks. I made sure Da was on his way back home before I went looking for Alice. But I never found her. I searched for days. Fell a few times – hurt my leg badly. Struck my head and was all aswoon. I dinnae sleep nor eat. It was bitter cold. I dinnae remember much. When Hamish and Joe found me, I’d given up. Thought I was gonna die, Alice too. And she will if I dinnae find her. Do ye see why I must go back up the mountain? Why I cannae stay here?’

‘But you can’t,’ said Torrie. ‘You’re not able, not on your own—’

‘I ken, I ken,’ said Patrick, eyes glimmering with unshed tears. ‘I’ve tried and I can scarce make it to the Boynes’.’ He began to cry.

I regarded him sorrowfully and released a long sigh.

Sitting in front of me was all I needed to prove Tam's innocence – of murder, at least. Only, now that I knew the circumstances of the lieutenant's death, of Patrick's role, and his da's, it wasn't so simple. How could I give Patrick's name to the authorities? A young lad who simply pushed a man, a man who deserved to burn in hell for what he'd done? Patrick was no killer. Nor Brandon Stokes. But neither was Tam.

What a fooking mess.

I didn't need to look at Torrie to know she was thinking the exact same thing.

'What did your da do with Lieutenant Jacobs' uniform?' I asked finally. 'His sword and pistol?'

'Uniform?' sniffed Patrick, wiping his nose on his sleeve. 'Last I saw, the lieutenant was wearing it, and his weapons when Da buried him. Da tore his hands to pieces on the rocks and icy dirt, wiped the blood off on the lieutenant's coat. I remember that. Why?'

'You're sure your da didn't strip him? Take the weapons?'

'Nae. That would be stupid. Far better to bury any evidence than take it.' His eyes swept the room. 'Ye can see there's naught here. I saw Da bury the man with my own eyes. And I tell ye this for naught – my da might be many things, including a drunken bastart – but he's no murtherer. And though he has differences with Mr Gordon, he would nae do anything to hurt him. Why would he? Mr Gordon looks out for Da. For me, too.' Patrick wrung his thin hands. 'I killed the lieutenant, I'll admit that. Da buried him – fully clothed. No-one should have been able to find the body, not there. Not unless they ken where to look.'

Dark looks were exchanged.

'Someone must have been watching,' said Patrick finally. 'Whoever it was, they dug the body up, took his uniform, stole his weapons, and put him in the cart. They must have told Gillespie too. I swear, it was nae me nor Da.' Patrick began to rock again.

I rested my head against my fingers, thinking, thinking, when I recalled an incident back in Edinburgh. A blootered patron, a lawyer as it happened, stumbled out of the Coo's Horn and promptly fell, striking his head hard on the cobbles. His wig had flown off and he lay like a drowned cat in one of the puddles. He was utterly senseless, unable to move or speak. His pulse was faint, his breathing shallow. Blood and brain matter splashed the road.

We were convinced he was minutes from death. He was carted away and apparently tended by a doctor. Weeks later, he was back in the tavern, drinking as if naught had happened, just sporting a huge scar and an indentation in his skull to remind everyone what had occurred. He'd swipe the wig from his head and show it off to any who asked and many more who didn't. The story put about was that he'd been proclaimed dead later that evening only to say to the attending doctor, 'Fook ye, man, if I'm dead, then I must be in hell cause ye stink worse than a privy.'

Turned out, he'd simply been knocked unconscious. A stupor, the doctors called it.

'Are you *sure* the lieutenant was dead?' I asked. 'I mean, you said he spoke to you.'

'He did. But he looked mighty unwell, and his speech was slow and a wee bit slurred. There was so much blood … by the time Da was there, he was dead.'

'But – what if he wasn't?'

Patrick sat up. Torrie frowned. 'What are ye thinking, kittie?'

I stood and began to pace. 'What if Patrick *didn't* kill the lieutenant?' I pointed at the lad. 'What if your da didn't bury a dead man, just an unconscious one? Tell me, was your da rough or gentle with the corpse?'

Patrick scratched his head. 'He dug something fierce, tearing his hands, but then he was gentle with the body, placing him just so, putting the rocks atop carefully. He was muttering prayers. Da respects the dead. We all do.'

I swung to Torrie. 'Do you recall Mick telling us the lieutenant's skull had been crushed?'

'That would have been from where he struck the rocks when he first fell,' said Patrick.

'Aye. Here,' I said, patting the back of my head. 'You said he fell backwards. But Tam said it was also crushed here.' I tapped my temple. 'His cheek too.'

'Oh …' Patrick looked from me to Torrie, hope shining in his eyes. 'Does that mean I just near-killed him?'

'There's a good chance. If we find the uniform, or the weapons, at least we'll know who to question.'

'Unless they've discarded them,' said Patrick glumly, hope fading.

'Somewhere on the road north if they've got any sense,' agreed Torrie.

‘In which case, we look there as well. Mick knows the route the men took. Niall as well.’ I drummed my fingers against my lip a few times. ‘But there’s something we need to do in Glasglen first. Torrie, we need to search everyone’s house. Fook permission.’

Torrie raised her chin. ‘Aye. Fook that. If the evidence is here, we’ll find it.’

‘And if we do,’ I said, drawing her to her feet, ‘we’ll find the murderer. The man who was prepared to let you believe you’re a killer, Patrick. Have your father believe it as well. A man who wasn’t above murdering an injured officer of the Crown and ensuring the death was blamed on Tam.’

Excitement, a real sense of purpose, rushed into my head, making me feel light, dizzy.

‘It’s too late to do anything tonight,’ said Torrie. ‘Tomorrow we’ll start.’

I didn’t want to remind her that there was still the serious charge of smuggling to contend with. One thing at a time …

‘What about Alice?’ asked Patrick as we reached the door. The moon was high above, its silvery light making the hills shimmer in its lambent glow.

I’d almost forgotten about the lass in my relief. Alice was out there somewhere, in the cold and wind, likely scared, hungry and tired. And what of her wean? We had to try and find her before the child came into the world.

‘I ken she did the wrong thing letting me believe I was the wean’s da,’ said Patrick, raising his voice to be heard above the nearby burn. ‘But now her brother is dead, she and the babe need me more than ever. A da *and* a husband. I need to find her.’

I threw my arms around Patrick, ignoring the stink. I spoke directly into his ear. ‘I promise you, we’ll look for Alice as well and, like this bloody uniform, pistol and sword, we won’t stop until we find them.’

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CHAPTER THIRTY - SIX



It didn’t take long for word of Patrick’s role in the lieutenant’s death and what Alice sacrificed to save Glasglen to spread. Perhaps it was a genuine desire to help or, more likely, as Mary muttered, guilt, but some of the villagers who’d previously shown no interest in the lass now joined those of us combing the mountains. When we weren’t searching the steep crags with their numerous trails and hidden caves, skirting the tarns, it was the villagers’ houses. Once more the divisions that rent Glasglen became apparent – there were those willing to do whatever it took to help clear Tam’s name, and others who aggressively denied us access.

How they could remain indifferent to Tam’s fate when it was so tightly woven into their own, made me despair.

Unable to manage the higher slopes, Patrick helped search for the uniform and weapons. I was relieved to note the change in him, as if a great weight had been lifted. He was more determined than ever to help bring the real killer to justice. After all, it was no longer only Tam’s name we’d be clearing. It was Patrick’s conscience as well: ‘I want Da to ken I dinnae kill no-one.’

But the great unanswered question was, as neither uniform nor weapons manifested, who was the murderer?

Despite rummaging through chests, checking under box beds, prising lids off storage barrels, hoisting hay out of troughs, rummaging through sacks, levering trap doors up to explore beneath houses, roaming the banks of the burns, naught was found.

The mountains kept their secrets as well. Alice was well hidden and, I prayed, safe. Every afternoon, Fen, Pol and I joined the search parties as they spread out between the trees that hugged the lower western slopes of Ben Dhàphen. The forest was vast, and I could hear Molly and Caragh as they called Alice's name, followed by bleating as they startled some adventurous sheep. We happened upon many a bothy, the telltale smell of peat usually the first sign. The noise of the rushing burns, still swollen, oft disguised our approach, so we'd shout and thrash the bushes with sticks to let the smugglers know we were friendly. Most were from Glasglen, and most female, the women having taken over from the men in their absence. Some lads from nearby villages and clachans had ventured over the hills to avoid the excise that had swept through recently, destroying stills, seizing spirits and equipment, including horses.

'Fookin' Gillespie,' grumbled one man with the largest, reddest nose I'd ever seen. 'Tore the village apart, he did. Said since he scarce found anything over yer way, he had to make up for it.' He eyed us suspiciously.

'Ye were lucky,' said another.

Try telling that to those in the Aberdeen tolbooth, I thought.

The raids meant folk from neighbouring counties were erecting bothies around Glasglen, on Gordon land. I wondered how Tam would feel about that. Or Mr Gillespie when he returned. Considering my agreement with him was no doubt the reason they'd ventured off their clan lands, I wisely remained silent.

The higher up the slopes we went, the colder it became. Snow was still upon the ground and even the tarn nestled just below the peak of Cnoc Mòr appeared frozen, its surface a solid dark green. Yet, from where I stood, I could see parts of it had melted, the water shifting and swirling just under the ice.

Does a kelpie live in there? asked Fen, walking tentatively around the unstable edges to peer into its depths.

When I saw where she was, I swallowed my panic, only just preventing Pol from following her. What if the verge crumbled, or the surface cracked and shattered, plunging her into the freezing cold?

Fen! Come away. I waved my arms, made large gestures – the equivalent of shouting. *Now*.

Fen, as she was doing a bit of late, pretended not to understand. *Come, look, Ma.* She bent over, peering through the frozen layer, confidently,

defiantly.

I ran over and grabbed her arm and forced her to look at me.

Don't frighten me like that again. Stay on firm ground.

She rolled her eyes. *It* is *firm, Ma. It's ice.*

Aye, Fen had reached *that* age.

She was an oracle and her ma, a mere fool.



We began the fourth day of our respective searches much like the others, only with hope dwindling. This time, Molly and Mary joined me and Patrick, who, using a makeshift crutch, was finally able to manage steeper climbs. It was midday and the children were in school. Una remained at the house lest the other searchers find something. It had been an unusually warm couple of days and the snow along the mountain peaks had visibly decreased. The burns that laced the slopes were running so swiftly, the makeshift bridges used over winter had mostly been swept away. Forced to keep to our side of the widest burns, we were covering much of the same territory we had when Fen and Pol were with us. It wasn't until we stopped to have a drink and share some oatcakes, I realised we were close to the tarn Fen had tried to walk upon. I rose and brushed the crumbs from my skirt, meandering through the ferns and pushing aside branches until I reached the perimeter.

Sunlight struck the surface, which rippled gently, as if relaxing now it was free of its glacial covering. God, the ice must have been thin when we were here last. My heart somersaulted. Imagine if she'd fallen in. She couldn't swim and my abilities hadn't been tested since I was a wee lass.

Holding onto some tough reeds to keep from slipping, I cautiously approached the edge. It had an almost circular lip, like a large well or crater. It would be so easy to stumble into if you didn't know it was there. I let go of the fronds and wiped my hands on my skirts. I drew the kertch off my head and, kneeling carefully, dipped it in the frigid waters, gasping as the cold water swallowed my hand. I wrung it out and wiped my face, the back of my neck, screwing up my eyes and admiring the way the sunlight dappled the surface. The colour of the water was something to behold, a mix of sapphire and turquoise, like a rare jewel. It sparkled like one. No

wonder Fen had been drawn to it. It was easy to believe that sprites and faeries, even displaced selkies, lived here in the serene surrounds and blue-green depths.

Weeds undulated just below the surface. They looked just like hair, so smoothly did they flow, back and forth, back and forth. There were long, viridescent tresses caressing a pale, willow-green face. The small lump emerging out of the water beside it could easily pass for a man-made island, fit for a brownie to perch upon.

I took a second look. Then, a third. My heart began to thump and the back of my neck to prickle. I slowly rose to my feet, the kertch sliding from my hand.

‘Molly …’ I tried to call, but my voice failed. ‘Molly!’ I screamed. ‘Mary!’

My name was shouted. There was the crash of undergrowth. Then, Molly and Mary appeared, out of breath, all anxious eyes and fluttering hands. ‘What is it, hen?’

‘Mrs Gordon?’

I didn’t say a word. I couldn’t. I just pointed.

‘Oh dear God,’ began Molly.

‘Jesus wept,’ said Mary and dropped to her knees just as a heart-wrenching cry rose behind us.

Before we could stop him, Patrick tore through the last of the brush and, casting aside his stick, leapt into the tarn. His head disappeared below the surface before he re-emerged, gasping, howling, and began to swim towards the bloated woman and the wee swollen babe floating beside her.

Alice was lost no more.

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CHAPTER THIRTY - SEVEN



It was late. Outside, a gale blew, the wind wailing and whirling like a banshee around the house. The room was semi-dark. I'd allowed the cruisie lamps to burn down. The only light came from the glow of the hearth. I was alone with my thoughts. The bairns were long abed, Mary and Una too, everyone exhausted by what the day had revealed.

Poor Alice, poor Patrick. The poor wee babe. Such a brief time in the world. I sighed and poured another dram, but feared not even Mary's usquebaugh, rich with honey and herbs, could banish the memory of those bodies and Patrick's wails. I took a long drink and leaned back in the chair, rubbing a hand along one arm, pretending it was Tam's I was feeling. I swore I could still smell him in the fabric.

I'd tried to persuade Patrick to stay at the farmhouse or with me, but he'd refused to leave Alice and the babe, Ceana.

'It was what Alice said we should call a lass. It was to be Rabbie if it were a lad.'

They'd been laid atop a makeshift table in his house. Mortcloths had been draped over them. Peigi and Ishbel remained with him to keep vigil. I imagined the three of them sitting around the bodies, the fire smoking, the wind howling outside.

Just then the windows rattled, making me jump. Sceólang raised her head, her ears pricking.

'It's just the wind, lass,' I said soothingly.

But she clambered to her feet, and Bran followed her to the door.

Not just the wind.

I was about to rise and find out what had disturbed them, my foolish heart leaping and jumping with false hope, when there was a light knock. The door swung inwards a little and Una peeped around, her face partly concealed by shadows.

‘Mrs Gordon,’ she began, sliding through the narrow gap, fussing over the hounds, whose tails wagged. They thrust their noses at her, satisfied they’d been noticed, that Una was a friend, and loped back to their rug and threw themselves down.

‘I ken it’s terrible late,’ she apologised. ‘But I was hoping I might have a word.’

‘Of course,’ I said, waving her in. Since the day she’d come to live at the Folly, Una had been a constant quiet presence. Though she didn’t say much, I’d kept an eye on her, noticing how she’d blossomed, even more since Filib had gone away with Tam. Of all the folk in Glasglen, Una had been glad of the arrest and incarceration – not that she’d admit it, but sometimes one didn’t need an admission to know how another felt.

It wasn’t until she hesitated that I became aware she carried something.

‘Please, sit, Una.’ I gestured to the chair next to mine and began to search for another cup so I could pour her a dram. She was shaking. ‘You’ve been outside?’ I asked.

‘Earlier,’ she said, gratefully taking the drink I offered, sitting down then taking a sip. ‘I went to the house to get my old boots.’ She looked down at her feet. ‘I wanted to have them for when the rains come again, keep the ones ye gave me for good.’ I’d given her a pair that Fen had recently outgrown.

‘You didn’t come here to talk about boots, did you, Una?’

‘Nae, Mrs. But they’re why I’m here all the same.’

She contemplated the bundle which now sat in her lap. It was an old sheet wrapped around an odd shape.

‘Ye ken I’ve never returned to my … to where I lived with Filib, not since ye took me in. But after what happened today, I needed some time by myself, so I finally went there.’ She took a breath and another sip of usquebaugh. ‘But ye see, my boots weren’t where I left them. In fact, I couldn’t find them anywhere, so I began to search in places I’d never leave them. And that’s when I found these.’

Una put down her drink and, with a sense of the dramatic, hoisted the bundle onto the table and slowly unwrapped the sheet. She let the ends of the fabric fall and sat there, eyes downcast, waiting for me to say something.

I slowly came to my feet. It couldn't be.

With deliberation, wanting to make sure I could see everything clearly, I relit two cruisie lamps and brought them closer. I could hear my breath in my ears as I reached out and examined what was on the table. There was a dusty thick red coat with buttons that glinted on one side and fabric clasps of knotted weave on the other. The once cream-coloured cuffs were wide and badly stained, the breeches had rents and what appeared to be bloodstains on them. My hands began to quiver as I slowly pushed the material aside to find what was buried within its folds.

Gleaming in the golden light was a sword and a pistol.

'You've found them, Una. You've found Lieutenant Jacobs' possessions.'

'Aye,' she said. 'They were hidden … in my house.' She waited for me to meet her knowing, sorrowful gaze. 'I want ye to ken, Mrs, if I'd kent they were there, I would have told ye.'

'I know that, Una. I know that. This has naught to do with you.'

'Och, Mrs, but it does. My coming here, accepting the protection of ye and the master, meant Filib had it in for Mr Gordon. He wanted to teach him a lesson, make him pay for taking what he deemed was his.'

I remained silent.

'I never believed he could do such a thing. To me, aye. But to the redcoat? To the master?'

Tears streamed down her face. More than anything I wanted to take her into my arms.

'This is not your fault, Una. I won't allow you to think that.'

She dismissed my reassurances with a shrug. 'Nice of ye to say, but because of me, Mr Gordon …' She took a shuddering breath. 'Well, I ken what this means.'

'What do you think it means?' I didn't ask her to be unkind, but because I needed to hear the words.

'Filib is a murtherer and a traitor. He wasn't up the mountains in his bothy like we thought – at least not all the time. He not only killed the lieutenant, but he informed on Mr Gordon. Told the authorities about the

pony-train, the false bottom and all. No wonder he resisted going with the lads … I thought it was because of me, but …'

I gazed up at the ceiling, yet all I saw was darkness. I shut my eyes, sent a swift prayer heavenward, and then opened them to regard Una again. She was staring at the uniform and weapons as if they were a selkie's skin.

'You know what I have to do?'

Una nodded miserably. 'I do, Mrs. I do.' She began to tremble uncontrollably.

I crossed the room and pulled her into my arms. She was such a wee frail thing, like a newborn lamb.

She buried her face in my neck. 'Promise me, Mrs, that ye'll save the master from the hangman's noose and see it put 'round Filib instead. I want that bastart to die for what he's done, for the misery he's caused. For being a fookin' traitor.' She burst into tears.

As I stroked her hair, and whispered reassurances, my thoughts wheeled in a different and darker direction. I too wanted Filib Mackenzie to pay for what he'd done to Tam, his family, Una and the village. I wanted his soul to burn in hell for all eternity.

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CHAPTER THIRTY - EIGHT



I wasted no time in sharing Una's discovery. I grabbed the bundle, raced to Torrie's and woke her. Together, we went to Ishbel's. Huddled around the fire, we whispered well into the night, imagining what would happen next, making plans and discarding them just as quickly. The relief we felt was tempered by sorrow. Still, it was obvious we had to make haste to Aberdeen, expose the culprit and force a confession.

'I want to see Filib Mackenzie's face when he sees those,' muttered Ishbel, nodding at the bloodied garments, the weapons.

'I want to shoot him in the face,' said Torrie, picking up the pistol and aiming it at a wall.

I made sure to wrap everything back in the sheet and take it with me when I went home.

Before we could do anything, we had to bury Alice and the babe.

The funeral was a quiet affair as far as these things go in Glasglen, at least according to Torrie. At first there'd been some objections to Alice and the babe – who'd never been baptised – being given funeral rites and buried in the kirk's cemetery. Appalled by the lack of 'Christian charity', the reverend reminded folk what the lass had done for the sake of a village that had maligned her. It didn't stop all the dissenting voices, but it did dull them.

Mirrors were draped with dark cloth and candles lit. We took turns to sit with Patrick and his dead; Fen insisted on keeping vigil with me.

Two evenings after Alice and her daughter had been carried back down the mountain, cleaned and wrapped in shrouds, folk began passing through Patrick's house to lay hands on their bodies and murmur final blessings. Only after the last one had paid their respects did the funeral procession leave Patrick's house.

It wended its way between the fields and onto the main road. Torchbearers led, followed by a piper and bell-ringer. As village healer, it was the Beaton's role to be the *bean-tuirim* or keening woman. While I'd seen and heard many a lass maunder over the dead, I'd never encountered anything like this. Dressed in a long black gown, the Beaton walked afore the coffin. Her feet were bare, her hair unbound, her arms raised as she lamented the two lost souls. Mother and child had been placed together, Alice's arms wrapped around Ceana. As Alice had no family except for her brother (the worried family back in Fort William had been another fabrication), Patrick took their place, along with me and the rest of Tam's kinsfolk. A lass I'd never known in life had become family in death.

Pale and grief-stricken, Patrick held his head high and every time the coffin paused outside a house and peatreek, shortbread, ale or some other sustenance was offered, he leaned against his stick while the coffin-bearers partook or traded places with someone else desiring to help carry Alice and her child to their final resting place. As we passed each dwelling, the lights were doused and the doors shut, folk falling in behind us.

The short journey to the graveyard took hours because of all the stops, which not only involved drinking and eating, but creating a tower of stones at each resting place – miniature cairns. I'd seen these about the village and wondered what they signified. For such a small place, there were a great many such memorials.

As we marched, Torrie explained what was happening and why. Then she said something that lodged in my mind.

'You know, some smugglers disguise themselves as mourners to carry their peatreek overland. You can see why—' She jerked her chin towards the pallbearers and twin lines of mourners behind them. 'There's few would dare interrupt a funeral procession, let alone search one. Not even the excise.'

'But where do they hide the whisky?' I asked.

Torri gave a quiet snort. 'Where do you think, hen? In the coffin, of course.'

I was both appalled and impressed. Such a blasphemous move; such a clever one …

Once we reached the graveyard, we circled it a few times, always *deiseil* – clockwise. It was past midnight by the time the coffin was gently lowered into the hole as the reverend offered prayers, the Beaton more laments, and the rest of us, tears.

A subdued wake was held at Ishbel's, the place where most people had come to know Alice. Whisky was drunk, food shared and stories told. I didn't understand them, but the expression on Patrick's face spoke to his displeasure. Later I learned these were mostly accolades for Alice's bravery in protecting them, but given by those who'd been swift to judge her.

A fight broke out at some point. Two of the younger men, encouraged by too much peatreek and some of the elderly who should have known better, came to blows. They were only separated when Hamish threw a pail of water over them. Bloodied lips, lost teeth and torn clothing were paraded like badges of honour. I wanted to knock their heads together. The last thing this village needed was more violence.

Never had pulling together been so important. While some understood this, too many either refused to accept how dire the situation was or, worse, didn't care – not when they were worried about debt, peatreek, excise, crops and livestock.

As the night wore on and folk left, I sat at the table near the window. Rain began to fall, and I welcomed its freshness, the way it struck the thatch rhythmically. Beside me, the bairns were curled up asleep. Ishbel and the Beaton sat either side of Patrick, sentinels protecting him. He stared into the distance, an undrunk gill in his hand, the conversation of those who remained washing over him. Encouraged by Ishbel and Hamish, who picked up a fiddle, Peigi began to sing a plaintive tune and I found my mind wandering.

What must Alice's last days have been like? Fear of her brother driving her to keep hiding. Fear for her unborn wean. Did she die thinking Patrick had abandoned her?

According to the Beaton, wee Ceana was at least a week old when she died. Alice had endured childbirth without anyone to help her. How strong the pair of them must have been, only to drown in a bloody tarn. Once we knew where to look, we found blankets and the remnants of a fire and small

birds' bones in a bower not far away. We must have walked past it a dozen times.

I looked over at Fen. Even asleep, her brow was drawn and serious. I worried about my daughter, about the other bairns, who were beginning to fret for their da. I was frustrated at being so far away, being forced to do naught. Whenever I said anything, I'd be told Tam would resolve this; he would work it out. I had to trust him. Him and the duke.

How could either of them change anything when we held the key to a confession in Glasglen? As far as I was concerned the only solution was to go to Aberdeen. *I* had to go to Aberdeen.

And if I had to crawl over the mountains to get there, defy the wishes of my new family and friends, even of my husband, I would.



Before I could announce my intentions, let alone commence preparations, Dom, Big Billy and the lads who had travelled to Montrose returned, Stuarn and Simon Geddes with them. The morning after Alice's funeral, just as we stirred late morning, a pony-train was sighted making its way down Callieach Pass.

Together, Fen, Pol and I staggered down to the farmhouse to share the news, before going on to Torrie's.

By the time a weary, dusty and oh-so-grubby pony-train rode through Glasglen, almost every villager had lined the main road to welcome the lads back.

There were no cheers, just relieved if tired smiles on all sides as the bairns, seemingly unaffected by the night before, ran alongside the garrons, stroking their mud-splashed coats, hanging off the tack that dangled from their sides, petting, skipping and dancing. Women strode beside their men, anxious eyes upon worn faces. Daughters cleaved to fathers, sisters to brothers, neighbours to neighbours and wives to husbands. Snatches of news were briefly exchanged, carried by breathless lips needing to share what had been kept close for too long. I understood the words 'Tam', 'the redcoat', 'murther', 'Patrick', 'dead' and 'Ishbel's maid'. Before Dom and Big Billy had even led the men up the hill to Tam's house to unload the

stores and give presents to their beloveds, they already knew much of what had happened in their absence.

In turn, we learned that while Tam's trip north had been a disaster, the trip east hadn't reaped the rewards they'd been hoping for either. There was an air of despondency about the men. I could see it in their faraway eyes, their eagerness to get to their own homes.

As the rest finished unloading, Big Billy and Dom accepted my invitation to come inside. Spinney, who, crying tears of relief, had refused to part from Big Billy's side since she first clapped eyes on him, joined us.

It was hard not to notice the purses attached to the men's belts as they entered the house. Rather than jingling with promise, they clinked quietly, apologetically.

It was quite the crowd in the study, what with the entire Gordon family, Reverend MacAdam, Mr Nicholson, Spinney, Molly and Caragh, Mick, Niall and Stuarn, and the hounds, who should have been exhausted from running beside the pony-train, demanding more attention. The bairns sat on the bed, shuffling for space, while the rest of us gathered around the main table, dragging stools and chairs closer. I sat in Tam's old seat, as was my right as his wife. A right I was yet to earn in many eyes.

I could barely contain my despair as the men spoke of dodging excise and soldiers on the roads and in the towns they passed through. How they were forced to spend hard-earned coin on bribes, release more peatreek than they had intended to keep mouths shut and eyes blind. Mary and Una brought in jugs of spirit, a platter of bannocks and some cold deer left over from Alice's wake to share. Atholl brose was offered as well. Dom waited until everyone had been poured a dram, or taken the thicker, sweeter drink, then raised his cup to me.

'Enough about our travails. I ken ye've a great deal to tell us. But, before ye begin, Stuarn told us congratulations are in order. *Mrs Gordon*,' he said, standing.

I inclined my head, my mind whirring like bees' wings.

'Och, aye,' said Big Billy, also rising. 'Congratulations.'

We all drank, and the men regained their seats.

'From what Spinney here says,' said Big Billy, his eyes warm, 'Tam chose wisely when he wed ye, lass. Seems ye've done a great deal to try and keep things running in his absence. Kept the excise from the bothy, so to speak.'

I bit back a dry laugh. ‘If only it were so easy. There’s many still resent my presence. In some ways, being married to Tam just made matters worse. If it hadn’t been for my friends—’ my arm encompassed the room, ‘the family, and the reverend’s support … well …’

There were nods and murmurs at the truth of my statement.

‘Sorry to hear that, lass,’ said Dom.

He may have been sorry, but I could tell he wasn’t surprised.

‘I’ve done everything *Tam* would expect me to do,’ I added. ‘Thus far, I’ve even obeyed his instructions.’

There was a wicked chuckle, more nods.

‘What I want to let you all know, and your return could not be more expedient, lads, is that from this moment forth, I no longer intend to.’

There was a pause in the conversation before everyone started talking again.

‘But, lass,’ began Mick, forced to raise his voice, ‘Tam said ye weren’t to do anything ’bout the charges, ’bout him being locked up. Me and Niall told ye how the land lies. We’re to wait for word from the duke.’

I waved his protest aside. ‘A duke who hasn’t bothered to contact us, despite Tam’s letter and the reverend travelling to the castle. The lawyer he hired has failed to send word as well. We know naught. How long do we have to wait, Mick? Until the noose is around Tam’s neck?’

Peigi gasped. Elspet clutched Fionn. Pol paled. Torrie shot me a look that should have turned me to a pile of ash. I signed *sorry*. I let them air their objections, their shock at my words, mount a half-hearted defence of the duke and how important it was to listen to Tam, that he would find a way clear, he always did.

But Tam had never been charged with murder before, had he?

Gradually, the blether ceased. I gazed around the gathered group and took a deep breath. ‘Thus far, we’ve done everything Tam’s way. *Your* way,’ I said, including the reverend, Mick and the others. ‘And what’s that accomplished?’

There was silence.

‘Now that you lads are back from Montrose,’ I continued, ‘I think it’s time we tried *my* way.’

‘*Yer* way?’ Dom glanced at Big Billy. ‘And what way might that be, lass?’

‘In his letter, Tam said finding Lieutenant Jacobs’ uniform and weapons would reveal the identity of the murderer. Thanks to Una we have them in our possession and know who’s responsible. But what good is proof of Tam’s innocence, here in Glasglen?’

I waited.

‘Exactly. That’s why I’ve decided, against Tam’s wishes, against yours, to go to Aberdeen and take them with me.’

There was a rumble of disquiet.

‘Och, ye have, have ye?’ Dom shook his head.

‘Someone needs to take these—’ I placed a hand atop the carefully wrapped evidence on the table, ‘to where they’ll serve a purpose. To the lawyer, the magistrate, a sheriff, or someone there who can stop a travesty happening. I was merely waiting until after Alice and Ceana’s funeral before I left.’

The silence was thick, filled with uncertainty. It was Big Billy who broke it. ‘I hope ye weren’t thinking of going alone?’

I leaned back in the chair and gave a relieved smile. ‘Not if I don’t have to. You see, I also have an idea of how some of us might not only get to Aberdeen safely but retrieve the abandoned whisky on the way.’

There were mutters of disbelief tinged with hope.

‘Kittie,’ began Torrie, shaking her head in disbelief, ‘you’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking, are you?’

‘Och, I think I am,’ I grinned.

Torrie leaned over and whispered something to Caragh. Caragh then told Molly, who told Spinney and Big Billy. Dom heard and leaned back in his chair, shaking his head, but not before he’d told the reverend, Mr Nicholson, Ishbel, Mick, Niall and Stuarn and even the bairns.

They all began to talk at once. Fen rose and joined me, slipping an arm around my shoulders. I held her close.

Finally, Hamish, who’d been patting the hounds and looking thoroughly confused, walked over to the table and brought his fist down hard upon it. ‘Hold ye wheesht, would ye!’

It took a minute before everyone quieted. Elspet giggled nervously. Pol ran to my other side. Bran let out a low growl.

Hamish glared at the room. ‘For fook’s sake, *what*? What’s she thinking? Will someone fookin’ tell me what’s going on?’

And so I did.

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PART FIVE

Feints

Glasglen, Aberdeen and Inverness
Spring to early summer 1781

‘A paltry exciseman’ with a job that is an ‘insignificant existence in the meanest of pursuits, and among the vilest of mankind’.

Robert Burns, describing his role as an officer of the excise.

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CHAPTER THIRTY - NINE



We left the glen just as evening fell two days later, a dozen of us, spirits high, concerns buried so deep it would take a coal miner to unearth them. Una rode beside us, having refused to be left behind.

‘I’ll give sworn testimony, Mrs, I will,’ she promised. I couldn’t deny her.

Initially, my idea had been to ask Mick, Niall or Stuarn, one of the lads who knew where the peatreek was hidden, to accompany me and maybe Dom or Big Billy to the site and help hoist it on and off a cart. I knew Torrie, desperate to see her da, would volunteer to come, and hoped that Caragh might, for Jon’s sake, and maybe Spinney, who wouldn’t want to let Big Billy out of her sight.

But when just about every lass in the room, including Peigi and even Ishbel, demanded to come to Aberdeen, I was both elated and conflicted. I was asking them to journey into danger. Not even the lads’ vehement objections swayed them.

Finally, it was agreed. All the lads would join us. Patrick insisted on being included, claiming he was fine to ride.

‘I owe it to Da, to Mr Gordon,’ he said. ‘And to ye, Mrs Gordon. Was me brought this trouble on everyone in the first place. I have to try and help fix it.’

Mary, Mabelle and Molly would stay to care for the bairns, along with the reverend and Mr Nicholson.

‘The village mustn’t feel as if they’ve been completely deserted,’ said Mr Nicholson.

The most important cargo was Lieutenant Jacobs’ belongings. Wrapped in the sheet Una put them in, an oilskin was added for extra protection. Torrie had wanted to carry the pistol but was dissuaded. I couldn’t forget the expression on her face when she picked it up and aimed it. God knew what she’d do given a chance to wield it.

We secreted the uniform and weapons in an old coffin I’d managed to barter in exchange for peatreek. It was draped in a mortcloth that Ishbel had been saving for herself.

‘Nae good to me when I’m dead, really, is it?’ she cackled. I hugged her.

We left Glasglen without fanfare, just the quiet, forlorn farewells of the bairns, the hounds, Mary, Mabelle, Molly, the reverend and Mr Nicholson.

I’ll be back before you know I’m gone, Fen.

With Mr Gordon?

I didn’t even hesitate. *With Mr Gordon.*



We spent the first night just north of the village over the mountain, Glas Thar Beinn. Before the sun rose, we were on the road again, but this time, the men in our party were dressed in women’s clothes.

This was the only part of my plan the lads objected to.

‘I’m more than happy to get into my wife’s knickers,’ said Big Billy, jerking his chin towards the full skirt Spinney held towards him the morning after we left. ‘But only when she’s in them.’ He was less convinced about removing his beard but acknowledged it would be difficult to believe he was a lass with all that facial hair.

‘I dunno,’ said Hamish, looking critically at Big Billy. ‘Have you seen Widow Jupp of late? She’s got more hair on her face than I have on me bollo— Oof!’ Torrie elbowed him hard in the ribs.

Dom refused to consider it. ‘Ye can argue until ye faces turn blue. I’m not shaving and that’s that.’ He did agree to cover his head with a shawl.

Niall and Mick took less persuasion. Patrick made not one complaint. Hamish opened his mouth to object but a look from Torrie closed it again.

Once the lads were dressed and all but Dom had shaved, we studied them carefully. The older men made very unconvincing lasses. With a few sharp instructions, Ishbel had them dropping their shoulders, lowering their heads, drawing shawls down over their foreheads and wrapping the lower half of their faces. She had them practise sitting atop the garrons in the manner of a lass, not boldly astride like a lad.

‘Jeezus,’ moaned Big Billy. ‘How do ye lasses manage?’

‘Same way we manage everything, Billy,’ said Spinney unsympathetically. ‘Through sheer bloody-mindedness.’

‘It’s me staines I’m worried about,’ moaned Dom, cupping them through his gown.

‘I’m not,’ said Ishbel coldly.

And so we travelled throughout the day, around the hills and across moors and burns, through spring woods, past villages humming with life and ghost-like clachans. My reasoning was that the redcoats and excise were far less likely to be interested in a group of women travelling across the country than men – especially those accompanying a coffin.

On the second day, the skies opened. Sheets of rain fell, soaking through our cloaks and plaids, dripping from the garrons, running off the cart. Drookit and cold, we could barely see a few feet before us, then conditions worsened as a haar rose. We grimaced, grumbled, but forged ahead, leaping off the cart and pushing it when it became bogged in yet another muddy runnel. What was a bit of rain and discomfort compared to a cell in a tolbooth?

As we approached a settlement, we behaved like the funeral procession we were pretending to be. Good practice for when we needed to gull the authorities. Niall played the pipes, Peigi rang the bell and took on the Beaton’s role, removing her boots and walking before the cart, keening loudly. Ignoring the rain, folk came out of houses, shepherds from long-grassed fields, maids from byres, to solemnly watch us pass. Schoolchildren sat on walls, farmers paused in fields, pulling bonnets off heads in acknowledgement of the almost empty coffin in the cart.

I felt a little guilty fooling so many until I thought of Tam, then any regret simply vanished.

At night we escaped the rain, seeking accommodation in barns or sheltering in abandoned houses. There were so many scattered across the countryside.

On the fifth day out, just as there was a break in the weather, we rode through a tiny village. A blacksmith working his forge ceased hammering and approached the cart. Mick slowed it. Peigi ceased to wail, Niall silenced the pipes.

The blacksmith held his bonnet to his chest as a sign of respect for what we appeared to be, studying us, then Mick, curiously. He spoke quietly – a question.

It was Ishbel who answered and whatever she said, it seemed to satisfy the man. He rested a huge hand on Mick's knee, then made a crude gesture. Mick stiffened. He said something else and, with a mocking laugh, turned away.

The group exchanged worried glances.

I waited until we were well past before whispering, 'What was that about?'

Mick sighed. 'He wanted to ken where we're from. Ishbel told him Balvenig.'

'Balvenig?'

'It's an abandoned village over yon hill.' Mick jerked his head west. 'He dinnae believe it. But he did tell us Gillespie's been in the area and there's a group of soldiers not too far ahead. Ever since the redcoat's body was found, patrols have doubled. He said to be careful.'

I sucked in my lip. We'd been expecting this. I just hoped we'd continue to evade Gillespie.

What he'd do if he found us beyond Tam's tack, and with peatreek, didn't bear thinking about. 'I was under the impression he saw through your disguise.'

'Och, ye were, were ye?' Mick pulled the wet shawl roughly away from his neck. 'I told ye this would nae work.'

'Not while ye sit with ye hairy ball-bag hanging out, it won't,' said Ishbel, rapping him hard on the thigh. 'Keep yer fookin' legs together like I told ye, ye great gawpus.'

Mick grumbled but did as he was told, pulling the skirts around him like a fussy grannie, rearranging the plaid so his face was mostly hidden.

'Ready, all?' said Dom. 'Remember, we're a funeral procession. And lads, ye be lasses now.' His beard bristled. 'Just keep the heid and we'll get through this.' In other words, remain calm.

We came upon the soldiers minutes later. There was no sign of a gauger. They lined either side of the muddy track, muskets raised. When their sergeant saw what we were, he ordered his men to lower their guns and waved us forward.

We approached slowly, Peigi keening and ringing her bell. Niall played a melancholy tune on the pipes. Torrie and Caragh wept softly, Hamish too. The other lads bent low over their mounts, giving the appearance of being weighed by sorrow.

‘Who’s died?’ called out the sergeant.

Englishman from the sound of him.

Before we could reply, he blocked our way, forcing Mick to halt. My heart was beating so loudly in my ears, I scarce heard the next question.

‘Where are you heading?’ The sergeant strolled beside the cart, jumping on the wheel to look at the coffin in the back. ‘Or am I wasting time speaking to you in the king’s English?’

‘To try our hand as fisherfolk in Fraserburg,’ said Ishbel, startling me.

‘Fraserburg?’ Another soldier came alongside, using his bayonet to stab the wood. ‘That’s a long way from here. By the ocean.’

‘It’s where ye usually find fish, isn’t it?’ Ishbel didn’t raise her head.

The soldier frowned and began to make his way to the front.

‘Where are you from?’ asked the sergeant, giving the soldier a silent order to back off.

‘Balvenig,’ I answered after a beat, glancing at the redcoat who was level with me. He was a short, portly man with brown hair and close-set eyes.

‘Thought that was abandoned?’ He touched the carthorse’s head, who jerked it away.

‘’Tis now,’ said Mick, adjusting his tone so he sounded like a lass. ‘We be the last, sir. We’re taking my brother – her da.’ He indicated me, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder. ‘With us.’

I held my breath.

There were some mutters and mumbles among the soldiers who eyed us carefully. There was a cough. Someone hoicked.

‘Fucking Highlanders,’ said the sergeant, backing away and turning to address his men. ‘Lugging a stiff around. It’s … it’s unholy, that is.’

After a beat, he ordered his men to let us pass. We rode between them, enduring their smug comments, the sneers and spitting. Mick’s knuckles

were white on the reins.

We travelled a bit further, then once there was sufficient distance between us and the soldiers, pulled off the road for a chance to rest the horses, have a drink.

They marched past us some time later, calling out suggestions about what to do with the body.

‘I dinnae think I’d ever say this,’ said Dom, addressing me as the last redcoat disappeared over a distant hill, passing the bladder of whisky to Patrick. ‘But yer idea of making us dress as lasses was a fookin’ good one.’

Then, without further ado, he pulled a dirk out from beneath his skirts, wandered over to the nearby burn, and shaved off his beard. I swear I wouldn’t have recognised him had I not seen him remove it with my own eyes. He looked like a bairn, a sweet, cherry-cheeked lad of no more than twenty. Not that I dared say that to him, a man of more than forty who’d shown the kind of restraint only the bravest would when faced with an enemy.



Was God on our side or was it one of the ancient deities that dwelled in the mountains or roamed the windswept moors? I couldn’t say, but it was hard not to believe something or someone watched over us, for seven days after we left Glasglen, we reached the clearing where the attack had taken place without encountering another patrol.

Mick and Niall immediately checked the whisky was still there. As we waited beneath the trees for the rain to ease, they described how the ambush had unfolded.

‘How more weren’t injured or killed is a mystery,’ said Dom, shaking his head.

‘If they’d waited a few more minutes,’ said Niall, ‘we’d have started loading the peatreek we’d concealed back on the garrons.’

‘If they hadn’t found the lieutenant’s body when they did, they may have gone searching,’ admitted Mick. ‘The captain was as thrown by the corpse as the rest of us. Then there was Art and the other injured men …’ His face collapsed into angles of sorrow.

I reached for him. ‘I hope Art’s alright, Mick.’

‘So do I, lass, so do I.’ His eyes narrowed as he gazed across the clearing and between the trees. ‘We’ll find out soon enough, won’t we? We’ll reach Aberdeen in a few days.’

My heart skipped.

‘Should we retrieve the whisky now?’ I asked.

Mick peered through the canopy. Shadows were growing. ‘It’ll be dark soon, and just in case the excise or soldiers stumble upon us overnight, we dinnae want to be caught with the stuff, do we? It has remained hidden this long, it can be left one more night.’

‘Aye,’ said Big Billy with a heavy sigh. ‘Let’s get some rest. God kens, we need it.’

‘And for the fookin’ rain to stop,’ said Hamish, shaking a fist at the sky.

Whether it was Hamish’s fervent admonishment, or the clouds had wrung their last drop, the rain did ease then ceased altogether. A watery sunset cast the woods in an eerie light, the constant dripping a chorus to the birds who began to chirrup and sing. We did our best to light a fire, but it was difficult with the wood so wet and the ground sodden. It was Patrick who finally summoned a flame, an achievement that earned him a rousing cheer.

‘Where’d ye learn to do that, lad?’ asked Big Billy, holding up his shawl so it might dry before the flames, ignoring Spinney’s wry grin.

‘Used to do it for Alice,’ said Patrick, staring at the fire, his eyes glistening.

‘Well, it be grand,’ said Peigi, kneeling beside him and holding out her palms.

Peigi had taken it upon herself to watch over Patrick and he was slowly responding to her attention. It was one of the reasons Ishbel and Torrie said she should join us – for Patrick’s sake.

As we fell to preparing food, drying what we could of our clothes and organising the bedding, my mind began its usual trek back to Glasglen. I wondered how Fen and the other bairns were faring.

I just prayed that Mr Gillespie wouldn’t descend on the village while I was away.

If he was true to his word, he’d wait a few months yet.

But then, as Mick said, when was a gauger ever true?

William’s face danced before me and was still leering and laughing when I lay down on the cart and tried to sleep.



It took about three hours and a great deal of digging and scrambling beneath tree roots, scurrying down embankments and lifting huge rocks before Mick and Niall were satisfied we'd retrieved all the whisky.

There were at least two dozen ankers, and as many bladders. There were even a few earthenware jugs. No wonder the lads had been keen to fetch them. We opened the coffin and managed to pack much of the peatreek inside.

We were filthy, with dirt-caked hands, smeared faces, skirts and shirts. The only exception were the men, who'd removed their women's clothes and searched in their own.

We trooped down to the nearest burn and washed away the worst. When we returned, the lads were attired as females again. They watched us approach with wicked grins on their faces.

'What?' I asked suspiciously.

'Before we leave, there's something you have to do,' said Big Billy.

'What's that?' I asked, just as Torrie groaned and Peigi's shoulders slumped. Una gave a sigh of resignation, as did Caragh.

'This,' said Big Billy and lifted his shirt to reveal a bladder tied about his middle.

'And this,' added Hamish, who had an anker strapped to his front and bladders on either hip. I thought his skirt looked full. 'I told Mick ye'd be fit to wear two ankers, Torrie. Scarce ken the differ—!'

Ishbel clyted him across the ears. He howled, rubbing his head.

'What were you sayin' 'bout my granddaughter?' She wore a dangerous smile, hands on hips.

'Naught,' said Hamish quickly. 'I was saying naught.'

The men helped us strap the bladders they couldn't squeeze into the coffin onto our hips and stomachs. Ishbel was given an anker to strap over her belly. Along with Torrie, I sported an anker about the middle and a bladder on each of my hips. The more slender Peigi and Una wore a bladder each. Three ankers were hidden in the footwell.

'Ye'll be grateful for these, lassies,' said Mick, slapping the bladder about his middle hard. It made a dull, plashing sound. 'Especially when we get near town.'

‘And not only because of the coin they’ll bring,’ said Dom.

‘Grateful I feel like a cow about to calve?’ said Peigi, a hand over her enlarged stomach.

‘Those ankers and bladders,’ said Mick, ‘*should*, and I repeat, *should* deter the soldiers from searching ye. And by searching, I mean pawing ye with their fookin’ grubby fingers. The soldiers and excise around here are notorious for that. Searching bonnie lasses for illicit goods. I’m hoping they’ll think twice before touching one with child.’

‘But all of us?’ I pulled a face. ‘Surely that just looks suspicious.’

‘They’re not going to think all of ye are carrying a babe,’ said Mick, looking pointedly at Ishbel, then Dom and Big Billy.

‘What he means,’ said Dom, ‘is they’ll assume some of us are just *bulfie*. And if it means they keep their hands to themselves … Well, better for them, I say, aye, lads?’

There was gruff laughter as Hamish and Big Billy mimicked slicing off fingers and bollocks with their dirks.

It was mid-morning before we recommenced our journey. I was all too aware of the weight of the anker, the sloshing of the bladders bound to my hips, the way they rubbed. I kept complaints to myself, unlike Peigi and Una, who’d also never transported whisky in any form before. I couldn’t help but stare at them atop their garrons. The bulging bladders really did give the impression they were with child. I saw Una’s hand drop to her stomach and her face take on a pensive look, which was quickly replaced by one of woe.

My chest tightened. How hard it must have been for her to lose her bairns. It was important to remember that Filib Mackenzie was responsible for their deaths as well.



We reached the outskirts of Aberdeen a day later than predicted. The rain had been infrequent, but the track was so muddy, the land like a bog, it forced us to deviate, delaying our arrival.

The closer we drew to Aberdeen – the old and new towns – the more cultivated the land became. Farms with herds of sheep and kine appeared. Houses, including a couple of fine stone ones, were dotted about and smoke

drifted from chimneys to join the ruffles of clouds. To the north, atop a rise, we could see some grand buildings. Dom explained these were part of Old Aberdeen, on King's College lands. Tam and the men were being held just a short ride south, in New Aberdeen.

We turned onto the main road, joining other horses, carts and ambling folk heading north and south. To the east was the distant glint of ocean. The acrid smell of a nearby tannery was overpowering. There was the ring of hammers, the baying of beasts. Music, raised voices, a bitter argument, weeping. The sounds of human habitation.

The new town, which to my mind was also quite old, began to emerge further down the hill. Seen through a haze of smoke, it was a cluttered place of chimneys and spires. There was a harbour beyond, the deep blue waters interrupted by the masts of cutters and merchant ships waving to and fro in the wind. But my eyes were drawn back to the township and the huge clocktower that dominated the central skyline.

'That's the tolbooth,' said Mick grimly. It was like a beacon drawing us on as we rode down Spittal Hill towards the township.

God and the ancients must have been laughing, for as we came over a rise, there was a large patrol assembled at the crossroads.

We communicated with our fingers.

Redcoats.

Excise too.

Not much further.

Following harshly issued orders from an excise officer, soldiers blocked the road. We slowed and came to a stop. The reins were snatched from Mick's fingers. I could feel my anxiety rising. We were so close, surely God couldn't be so cruel as to have us fail now. Then again, He'd taken Alice and her wean …

The soldiers filed around us. A gauger, officious in his blue uniform, weapons swinging at hip, approached.

'What do we have here?' His lips tripped over themselves as he sought to navigate them around large, crooked teeth. 'A funeral. At this time of day?'

'The funeral is yet to happen, good sir,' I said meekly when I heard his English voice. 'We're merely transporting my da to the kirk.' I gestured to the back of the cart.

'You're not from around here, are you?' he said, coming closer.

‘Nae, sir. I hail from Edinburgh.’

‘But your father was a Highlander?’

‘He was from Aberdeen.’

He looked towards the town then back along the road.

‘But you’ve come from the north, have you not?’

‘She had to fetch him first, dinnae she?’ rasped Ishbel.

The gauger regarded Ishbel for a long moment.

I prayed his curiosity ended there.

‘I see,’ he said, eventually. God, he reminded me so much of William. The same carriage, the same pompous tones I’d once mistaken as the voice of a gentleman. ‘And where are your menfolk?’

‘They be at war, sir,’ I said. That part at least was true. At war with his kind. His eyes grazed my middle. ‘They were only recently recruited,’ I added quickly.

His colourless brows rose, and his face reddened slightly. ‘I see. Which kirkyard are you burying him in?’

‘St Ninian’s in Castle Hill,’ said Mick, lowering his chin into his chest as if weeping. Ishbel made soothing circles on his back.

‘We still need to search them, sir,’ said a younger soldier, his eyes firmly on Una as he licked his lips. ‘Orders are orders.’ Mick and Dom’s warning replayed in my mind. My hands rested on the anker snug against my belly.

The officer took a step back and swung his arm hard. The young soldier staggered and almost fell from the force of the blow. ‘You’ll show respect, you rascal!’ His voice was like thunder. ‘They’re in mourning *and* with child.’

The other soldiers, who’d been leaning casually against drystone walls or rocks, jumped to attention. The struck soldier rubbed his face where a vivid red mark was blooming.

‘But sir,’ said an older redcoat, a corporal. ‘It’s folk like these who’ve been murdering our men.’

‘And you’d do well to remember who’s paying you, corporal.’ The gauger sighed. ‘My apologies. I’ve been lumbered with a bunch of ignorant oafs who wouldn’t know a woman or how to treat one if they fell over her.’ He swung towards the corporal. ‘Can’t you tell the difference between murderers and ladies in mourning? Stand down.’

The soldiers retreated to a nearby hut, mumbling darkly.

The excise officer cleared his throat. ‘To spare you and your family any further insult, madam, please allow me and my men to escort you …’

‘That won’t be necessary, sir,’ I said quickly, drawing a shuddering breath and patting my chest as if overcome. ‘You have my gratitude, but we’d best be on our way. My da’s soul has been unquiet of late, and we’re keen to put him to rest.’

The gauger’s eyes slid to the coffin. He stepped back nervously. ‘Unquiet? Well, we can’t have that, can we? Of course, don’t let me detain you any longer.’ He waved us on.

We’d scarce moved when the soldiers began forming and marching up the hill towards the old town, a drummer marking quick time. They were mere red and blue specks in no time.

‘Restless spirit, hey?’ said Torrie.

I shrugged. ‘It was all I could think of.’

‘It was good thinking, lass,’ said Spinney. ‘There’s naught more superstitious than a Scotsman – the gauger may have been English, but his men were Highlanders.’

‘I thought Big Billy was going to pick up his skirts and dash when ye said that.’ Hamish laughed.

‘I had to look twice at the coffin, remind myself there’s only peatreek in there,’ said Patrick nervously. ‘And the lieutenant’s things. What if *his* spirit is restless?’

Dom brought his horse up beside Patrick and gave him a push. ‘Ye great gawpus.’

‘The only gawpus was the bloody still-hunter,’ laughed Torrie. ‘*Please allow me and my men to escort you*.’ Her accent was perfect.

I grinned. ‘What? For being polite or for not allowing his men to search us?’

‘For fancying you, that’s what,’ said Torrie, shaking her head in memory. ‘Thought he was going to jump your bones then and there. Shame on him, what with you about to give birth to another man’s wean.’ She looked pointedly at my distended skirts.

‘Whoever the da is,’ I said, clutching my belly and nodding towards hers and the others’, ‘someone needs to tell him he’s got peat in his pintle.’

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CHAPTER FORTY



Situated on the wide thoroughfare of Castle Street in New Aberdeen, the tolbooth was an impressive building. It rose for many storeys, a large pale structure with distinctive stonework surrounding the arched entrance. There were windows of varying sizes, some vaulted, some rectangular. Battlements topped one segment before the building soared to a pointed tower replete with a large clock face and spire. If I hadn't known it was a prison, it would be easy to mistake it for a royal residence, such was its majestic facade, which it shared with the buildings either side. Mick explained it wasn't just a gaol. Inside was a Freemasons' lodge and an inn, as well as a courthouse. Prisoners wouldn't have to go far to have their fates decided.

I kept imagining Tam and the other lads languishing in there. It was hard to envisage the conditions Mick described when the building itself was so splendid. One could almost believe that justice would be served in such a place.

Almost …

The entire street was lined with important-looking buildings.

There were bookshops, a stationer, mercers, an apothecary, a doctor, and offices from which poured the black-robed figures of lawyers. I wondered if one of them was the *bulfie* gentleman Mick had met. I could also spy a baker, silversmith, coppersmith, and a shop that sold all kinds of curiosities. Patrons were coming and going from a busy coffee house and a couple of taverns were just starting to become rowdy. Outside the tolbooth was the

Market Cross, a round, vaulted structure with a tall pale column rising through its centre.

The street was crowded with vendors, and well-dressed women strolled arm in arm, seemingly without a care in the world. Merchants and sailors hailed each other; there were constables, students and apprentices, as well as pickpockets and beggars. Maids passed by cradling everything from bunches of sticks to piglets and weans. Kilts and tartan, sporrans and dirks were on display everywhere, despite the laws. Yet the dress was a peculiar blend of what I'd been accustomed to seeing in Edinburgh as well as what passed for Highland finery. Dogs rummaged about the rubbish liberally strewn around the streets, cats stretched in the shadows, chickens, a donkey and even a couple of goats did their utmost to avoid the press of feet, wheels, hooves and skirts.

Voices ebbed and flowed. Shouts from stallholders mingled with those of newspaper lads spruiking the headlines. The shrill voice of an old woman involved in a tug-o-war with a younger one, a struggle that soon came to blows, attracted a crowd who began to goad them.

Alarmed, Peigi reached for my arm. I pulled her close, Una too. There was a sharp whistle, and two uniformed men with clubs appeared, but before they could get near them, the brawling women disappeared.

People swiftly dispersed, going about their business. Few looked twice in our direction. We were unremarkable, and no longer in mourning garb – just inside the gates, we'd stopped in an alleyway and changed our outerwear for plaids and regular shawls. The lads returned to their own clothing, which was just a case of slipping the skirts off over their breeks and donning jackets over their shirts. We'd removed the mortcloth and thrown hay over the coffin to hide it.

I'd entered New Aberdeen with my heart in my throat, even though Mick assured us there were friends here, including the owners of the inn where we'd be staying. Called the King's Crown, it was located in Virginia Street, a mere two streets from the tolbooth, near the harbour. When we arrived, it was clear the owners were on good terms with the lads, and Spinney and Caragh. We were welcomed warmly and ushered into three rooms at the top of the building with views over the water. I could also see the Customs House. As I gazed upon it, at least four excise officers appeared. When I expressed concern, Dom gave me a wry look.

‘How do ye think we’re going to get rid of the peatreek, lassie? Walk about the streets selling it?’

Truth was, I hadn’t thought.

‘There’s a couple of gaugers work out of there should help us sell it – for a fee,’ said Dom, who along with Hamish had brought our belongings up to our room – including the evidence. The cart was in the inn’s courtyard, the garrons resting in stalls, while the peatreek was hidden in the cellars. He joined me by the window. ‘Dinnae ye worry about them. Ye have yer own task. We all have.’

The entire trip, we’d gone over and over what to do once we reached Aberdeen. The first priority was to learn how Tam and the lads fared. Second was to find the *bulfie* lawyer and learn who the magistrate presiding over his case would be and arrange a meeting. That was Dom and Niall’s task.

They were on their way to the courthouse with a letter of introduction the reverend had managed to extract from the Duke of Gordon’s factor. Once a meeting was set, they’d hand over the proof we carried so the duke’s lawyer could use it to persuade the magistrate that the real murderer was yet to be charged.

Big Billy, Spinney and Hamish were off to the Customs House with a sample of the peatreek to open negotiations. Ishbel remained in the rooms to keep an eye on our belongings. The rest of us made our way to the tolbooth. At first, Mick wanted to go on his own, but Torrie, Peigi, Caragh and I refused to wait in the rooms with Ishbel. It had been difficult enough to agree that Mick would enter the tolbooth first and do whatever it took to secure time with Tam. Bribe the warden again, wheedle his way in. He’d taken a bladder of peatreek for just that purpose.

At the last minute, Una and Patrick had insisted on coming too. I think they were more curious about the town, neither having been outside of Glasglen before.

Now the clocktower struck the hour, its chime tolling like a death knell. All sorts of ideas began to take root in my head, strangling hope. Mick was taking a long time in there. Every single nerve in my body was frayed. I was like a worm at the end of a taut fishing line, plunging into deep waters, not knowing if I’d be pulled from the depths or eaten alive. The amusing reactions of Una, Patrick and Peigi to all the hustle and bustle of the town were all that kept my mind off what might happen.

The air was rich with Gaelic and English, Nordic tongues, French, Spanish and others. There were people with skin the colour of ebony, burnt caramel and cream. The noisome odours only a city, even one younger than Edinburgh, could exude surrounded us. Patrick had already managed to walk in horse shit and was busy trying to get it off his boots.

Just when I thought Mick had been captured and put in a cell with the rest, he appeared at a side gate. When he spied us, he waved us forward.

My heart leapt and tears began to gather behind my eyes. God, lass, the last thing Tam needed was woman's water. The last thing any of the lads needed. I glanced at Torrie to see her face also betrayed her emotions, Peigi's too; a combination of fear and relief. Only Una was steely-faced. I should have understood that this would be hardest on her. But I was too caught up in my own reunion, and what we had to do.

'What took you so long?' began Torrie as Mick bundled us all inside the gate and ushered us towards a small wooden door.

'Can we see him?' I began. 'Mick? Can we see Tam?'

'How's Jon?' asked Caragh.

Mick's face was pale, his eyes dark with knowledge.

'What is it, Mick?' asked Torrie. 'Did you get permission?'

'Aye, aye. I have permission, but only for you.' He nodded towards me. 'Sorry 'bout the rest of ye.'

Caragh's shoulders drooped. 'Is Jon … well?'

Mick hesitated. 'Better for learning you're close.'

Torrie and Peigi began to protest; they were desperate to see their da. Una pressed her lips together; Patrick didn't say a word, but from the look on his face, he wasn't too disappointed.

'Before I take you to the warden, Greer, there's something you have to ken.' Mick took my hand in his. This was so unlike him, any urge I had to hurry him died.

'What are you *not* telling us?'

Mick scraped his boots on the moss-covered steps. The sharp smell of piss and damp was ripe.

'The news isn't good.'

I couldn't breathe. Peigi let out a sob. I pulled her close. Torrie stood behind me, hands resting on my shoulders. 'Tell us,' she demanded.

'I managed to get the warden to loosen up a bit. It's a wonder what some drams will do.' He pushed back the hair that had fallen across his

forehead. ‘Dom, Niall and the duke’s lawyer are wasting their time with the magistrate here. Seems Tam’s case is to be heard in Edinburgh.’

‘*What?*’ said Torrie.

‘When?’ I asked. My voice was tight, unrecognisable.

‘Tam didn’t know.’

‘You saw him?’

‘Aye, lass, briefly. The warden left me outside his cell for a few minutes – said he had business to attend, if you get my drift. Tam told me he was being moved. The warden warned him a week ago.’

My mind galloped. *A week.* Thank God we’d found the evidence; that it was here, in Aberdeen.

‘I must go to him.’ I tried to push past Mick, but he held me tight.

‘Listen, lass, ye need to prepare yerself. It’s not … pleasant down there.’

I snorted. ‘I don’t care.’

‘Not for yerself, maybe. But ye will when ye see the conditions.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I just want ye to ken.’

I bit my lip and nodded.

‘It’s colder than my dead wife’s smile in the cells,’ said Mick, ‘and their clothes, well, I’ve seen better on battlefield corpses.’

‘Tell Jon …’ began Caragh. ‘Tell him *tha ar gràdh cumail làidir*.’ She choked on the last word. *Our love keeps us strong.*

Torrie wrapped her arms around her. Mick squeezed her wrist.

‘Sorry I could nae get ye all in. We’ll try again on the morrow. The warden’s not a bad fellow, ye ken. But there’s pressure on him. He’s got the turnkey and a guard with him today. Tam’s accused of a capital crime and he’s playing it careful.’

‘A capital crime he didn’t commit,’ I reminded him.

‘I told the warden that. Said there was fresh evidence that would help prove Tam’s innocence.’

‘What did he say?’ asked Una.

‘What could he say? He just follows orders, he dinnae make the laws.’ He sighed. ‘Come on, lass.’ He took my elbow. ‘The rest of ye, wait on the street. We won’t be long. The warden said ye can have five minutes.’

I’d take whatever I could.

I turned and placed kisses on Torrie’s and Peigi’s foreheads, locked eyes briefly with the others, then followed Mick into the darkness.

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CHAPTER FORTY - ONE



First there was a gloom so thick, I could taste it. Then, a flickering lamp – carried by the turnkey, a scrawny, bent man who grunted and groaned as he led us along a narrow corridor with dank walls – sliced through the pall. I was brought to the warden's office. Seated at a table in a cold, poorly lit room, the warden looked me up and down and raised his cup in a mock toast. He gave a solemn nod to Mick, who returned it, then waved us past.

Before we even reached the spiral stone staircase that would twirl us into the bowels of the building, the stench overpowered me. Shit, urine and sweat, along with an indefinable odour that clogged the nostrils and stopped the heart. After we'd descended two flights, passing floors that echoed with the wails of men and screams of women, curses and pleas, I identified it: fear.

Determined not to collapse under the weight of my own dread, I kept a hand on Mick's back, reassured by the strength I could feel, the lack of hesitation. The steps were uneven and worn in places. So many feet had passed this way.

It wasn't until we stopped outside a huge knotted wooden door that my bravado dissolved. I was breathing through my mouth, my heart was pummelling my ribs. There were three other doors in this space, half-shadowed in the dim light. Each was scarred with marks of defiance and anger. A small barred window towards the top allowed deep murmurs to escape. These ceased at the jangle of keys. Aware of Mick's eyes upon me as the old man found the right key and inserted it into the door, he wasn't

the only one watching. Fingers folded around the iron bars and faces pressed against them. I raised my chin.

I wouldn't show my terror. Couldn't. Not to Tam, who'd been reduced to whatever this was.

The door creaked open. A rancid smell engulfed me. I pressed my nose into the crook of my arm. The turnkey hirpled into the darkness of the cell, his meagre light revealing ragged men shackled to the walls, others lying lifeless on the straw-tossed floor.

There was a small whimper. It was me.

There were low voices. The scurry of rodents. The clank and clang of iron, the slithery knocking of chains loosened. A groan.

Then *he* filled the doorway.

Everything else fell away: the other lads, the reek, the walls surrounding us.

It was just Tam. Tall, proud, thinner than I remembered, covered in filth, his beard and hair wild and unkempt, his clothes in tatters; manacles circled his hands and feet, his wrists and ankles worn raw.

I took two steps towards him, arms outstretched, the tears I was silently commanding not to fall disobeying me. I was mere inches away when he raised a hand to prevent me coming closer.

'Nae, *mo ghràidh*,' he said softly, shaking his head. 'Don't. As much as I want to hold you, know you're real, I don't want *you* to hold me. Not here, not when I'm in this state.'

I controlled my trembling mouth, blinked back what remained of those errant tears. I forced a smile. 'I'll admit, you've smelled better. Looked better too.'

'It's good to see you as well,' he said with the flicker of a smile.

We stared at each other. Our mouths may have been saying one thing, but our eyes said another.

Instead, as if we weren't surrounded by pain and suffering and unspeakable cruelty, we stood – not awkwardly – but alert, every nerve tingling, like soldiers awaiting the order to charge.

Ignorant of the silent communing beside him, the turnkey brought Tam into the area outside the cell and shut the door. He pulled up an old stool and, perching upon it, proceeded to light a pipe. He resembled a spider, he was so long-limbed and thin. There was the crackle and hiss of tobacco, the pungent smell adding to the melange of aromas.

‘Ye’ve five minutes,’ he reminded us.

Mick came forward and gripped Tam’s forearm.

‘It’s good to see ye out of there.’ He nodded towards the cell.

‘Good to be out.’

‘How’s … how’s Art?’

Tam turned his head and raised his voice. ‘How are ye, Art? Ye brother wants to ken.’

A familiar voice, albeit slightly hoarse, replied. ‘Better than that lousy gobshite out there’d have me.’

There was a volley of hollow coughs.

‘And the rest of the lads?’ I asked.

‘Lads! My wife, the incomer, wants to know how you all are. How about you tell her?’

From Tam’s cell and the one next door came a series of catcalls, some crying out my name, dissembling about their condition, asking after their loved ones.

‘Jon Boyne,’ called Mick. ‘Ye wife has a message for ye.’

He repeated what Caragh said, almost shouting to be heard above the sudden din and not just from our lads but from those in the third cell who were yelling and kicking the door.

Nevertheless, we heard Jon’s reply. A whoop of joy followed by a barrage of Gaelic which made Mick’s eyes widen and a smile break out on his face.

‘I’ll tell her,’ he said.

Our lads may have been flung down into hell, but they hadn’t lost their spirit. Ignoring the ruckus from the third cell, I answered who I could. I told Brandon his son was here and had much to tell him. Only Filib Mackenzie’s voice gave me pause. I didn’t admit to Una’s presence in New Aberdeen; he would learn that soon enough. Mick’s eyes narrowed and he nodded in approval at my restraint, then gave a pointed look towards Tam. His fingers danced.

Ah. Tam didn’t know about Filib. I was to tell him.

‘How are the bairns?’ asked Tam, his eyes searching my face, as if he was branding me in his memory.

I raised a shaking hand to cup his cheek, then remembered and let it fall. ‘Missing you. Worried. Mary and Molly, Mr Nicholson and Reverend

MacAdam are caring for them. Torrie and Peigi are here with us. Ishbel too.'

'Ishbel?' Tam's brows rose. 'Torrie's still speaking to ye then?'

'Today, aye,' I said. Our shared smile spanned time and space.

Mick cleared his throat and, aware of the ears drinking in our every word, chose his carefully. 'Look, Tam, as I explained, Dom and Hamish have gone to the courts. Not sure it will accomplish anything but do ye ken when they're intending to transfer ye to Edinburgh?'

'The warden isn't forthcoming about that, I'm afraid,' said Tam.

'Would nae tell me either, despite the peatreek I gave him,' frowned Mick.

'Ye gave that bastart peatreek *again*?' said the turnkey suddenly, sitting forward. 'Why, I'd have told ye for half what he demands, greedy arsewipe.'

We stared at him in astonishment.

'Ye know when they're moving me?' asked Tam.

The cadaverous man gave a throaty laugh and rubbed the end of his considerable nose. 'Aye. And I ken what's to happen to the rest of the sorry lot with ye.' He used the stem of his pipe to point towards the relevant cells. By now the occupants of the other one had grown quiet.

'It's a waste of time appealing to the magistrate they've assigned in Auld Reekie. He's a Sassenach with a hatred for Highlanders. And he thinks peatreek be the devil's drink. He means to make an example of ye. By this time next week, dinnae matter ye a tacksman or the Duke of Gordon's cousin – ye be a murthering smuggler and ye'll be swinging from the gallows. The rest of ye—' he made sure his voice carried, 'will either be fined, locked up, or transported. Depends on what His Judgeness decides, dinnae it?'

There were cries of protest and pained bellows from the cells. Something slammed hard against one of the doors. Another rattled. Tam pressed his hand against the cell door.

'Steady, lads.'

'Why dinnae ye say something before?' demanded Mick of the turnkey. 'Ye heard me asking the warden.'

The turnkey shrugged. 'Ye never asked *me*.' A sly look crossed his gaunt face. 'Nor did ye offer *me* any of yer aqua vitae.' He gave a crooked

grin, revealing grey stumps. ‘It’s from over yer way, ain’t it? The good stuff.’

Mick raised his fists and took a threatening step. ‘I’ll give ye the good stuff—’

The man pressed himself against the wall, palms lifted. ‘Now, wait a—’

‘Mick,’ I said, pushing his fists down. ‘That’s no way to treat this gentleman.’ I glared at Mick, making a point. ‘Our only *friend* down here.’

Mick unfurled his fists.

I spun towards the turnkey slowly, raising a smile, even if it didn’t reach my eyes. ‘I apologise for Mr Duff here, Mr —?’ I placed a fingertip against my lips and tilted my head. ‘I don’t think I was ever told your name? May I ask, what is it, sir?’

The turnkey eyed me suspiciously. ‘What’s it to you?’

‘Well, if I’m to address the person who obviously knows *everything* around here, at the very least I’d like to know his name.’

The turnkey glared at Mick. ‘Good to see someone kens how to treat me proper-like.’

Mick gave a low growl.

I blocked Mick from the turnkey’s view and inched closer. ‘Good sir, I would very much like to know when the authorities are planning to move my husband.’

‘We all would,’ said Mick.

‘So, Mr —?’ I began. ‘What name should I give to the lad who’ll be delivering a bladder of our finest? Need to be certain it doesn’t mistakenly get given to the warden again.’

‘Ye would nae be trying to bribe an old man, would ye, lass?’

I didn’t answer.

He took my measure, put down his pipe, wiped his hands down the front of his dirty shirt and licked his thin lips. ‘It’s Augustus Cramm, madam. Augustus Cramm.’ He gave what was meant to be a bow.

‘Pleased to meet you, Mr Cramm,’ I said, dropping a curtsey. ‘Are you able to tell us—’ I included Tam, Mick and the cells, ‘exactly when Mr Gordon is to be moved?’

‘Why, on the morrow, Mrs. On the morrow. Early.’

I couldn’t look at Tam, I couldn’t look at anyone as the walls shrank, pressing against me and the world began to turn black.



On the promise of an additional jug of peatreek, which I told Mr Cramm he was welcome to sell for profit, I managed to persuade him to allow me five more minutes with Tam. Mick went upstairs to ensure the warden was distracted, luring Mr Cramm onto the stairs for a moment. Fully recovered from my ridiculous turn, I wasted no time.

Uncaring that Tam was filthy, that he smelled worse than a jordan, I closed the distance between us. Before he could object, I took off my plaid and wrapped it over his head, across his shoulders and chest, then pulled him into my arms.

He resisted at first, then fell into my embrace. I pressed my face into his neck. I could feel his lips on my hair, the metal bands on his wrists pressing into my back.

Catcalls rose from within the cells, quietening only when Tam shot warning looks at the doors.

‘Fook off, will ye?’ he rumbled.

Fingers loosened then disappeared from the iron bars, the glow of eyes dimmed. There was the clank of chains settling.

‘I could scarce believe it when Mick said you were here,’ Tam began. ‘Torrie, Peigi, Ishbel and the rest …’ He drew in a shuddering breath. ‘I told you not to come. I should have known you’d never listen, my brave, bold lassies …’

‘I’ve missed you so,’ I whispered.

Tam groaned and held me tighter. ‘I’m sorry, Greer. So damn sorry. What a fooking mess. I thought …’

‘Me too, my love. Me too.’

‘Mick says there’s been more letters sent to Gordon Castle.’

I sighed. ‘A number. I’d hoped, *we* all hoped, prayed, that along with the one you sent, they might have made a difference, that the duke would be able to do more than he has …’ The urge to weep overcame me and words died.

Tam pressed his forehead against mine. ‘This isn’t your fault, Greer. And, as much as it lifts my spirit, you can’t be here. Please, *mo ghràidh*, go home, back to Glasglen. Take the others with you. It’s dangerous here. You’re in danger. As my wife, there’s a chance the Edinburgh High Court

might hold you responsible for the lieutenant's death, too. Argue you were present when it happened.'

'You can try and send me away, Tam, but I won't go. Not without you.' I glanced over my shoulder. Whether it was kindness or indifference, the turnkey remained on the stairs. I took advantage, lowering my voice. 'Big Billy, Niall and Spinney have gone to the Customs House. We retrieved the peatreek from the ambush site. Once it's sold, we'll have enough to pay any fine. Bribe a judge.'

Tam shook his head. 'Nae, *leannan*. There's nae bribe big enough to secure my release. Not for what I'm charged with.'

'But you're innocent and—' My voice was softer than gossamer. 'We can prove it.'

Using a combination of finger-talk and whispers, I told him about finding the uniform and weapons. That Filib Mackenzie was responsible. When I spelt out his name, Tam's eyes travelled to the cell behind me. So that's where the bastart was.

'I suspected as much.' Each word was graven in stone.

'I'll take Una to the magistrate in Edinburgh,' I continued quietly. 'She can tell her story. The court will make Filib confess. The authorities could call Gillespie as a witness; force him to reveal who informed. Then we can do whatever it takes to get you and the other men a reduced sentence. Dom and Big Billy say it happens all the time. And if the duke continues to press your cause in the meantime, well—'

Tam stopped me with the gentlest of kisses.

I didn't know I was crying until he kissed my tears away as well. Damn it, I couldn't stop.

He held my face in his strong hands, bending over slightly so our eyes were level. 'Do you really believe Filib will confess? Admit to his crime when he knows the consequences? He'll deny hiding the uniform, the weapons. Claim it was Una or that *he* was framed. As things stand, he's got away with murther.'

I stared into those grey-green eyes and thought of the loch on a dreich day, how it reflected the sky so perfectly. Only, Tam's eyes took my plans, my determination and showed them to me for what they were. Hopeless.

'This isn't fair.'

Tam released my face. 'Life rarely is, *leannan*. Look at us. Look where we are.'

I rested my head against his chest and studied the grim walls, the dirt floor, the daunting entries into those dark spaces. I thought of the lads chained in there, risking everything for their families so they might simply eat, drink, work and live. All they wanted was to pay their bloody rent; make a bit extra to stave off hunger, cold, alleviate the endless hardship, and for that they're arrested and flung into the pit of hell itself.

Like those other lads, Tam risked everything for his family. A family that included me and Fen. We were his women.

Women.

I withdrew from Tam slightly and looked at him anew. He tried to pull me back into his arms, but I resisted and began to rearrange my plaid so it covered his face, pulled it across his shoulders so it fell further down his body, hiding his foul shirt.

'What happened to your boots?' I asked.

'The gaolers took them. Why does it matter? What are ye doing?' he asked, bemused and more than a little frustrated.

'Wait,' I said, as a ridiculous, daring idea began to form. I studied him top to toe.

'Greer – what?'

There were footsteps, followed by voices in the stairwell. Mick was returning.

I threw myself back into Tam's arms and he squeezed me tight. 'What the fook are you up to? I ken that look.'

'Do you trust me, Tam?' I scanned his face.

'With my life,' he said and kissed me.

I savoured it for a moment, then just as Mr Cramm shuffled up, pulled back, taking my plaid with me. 'Right answer,' I said, and kissed him again.

'Enough of that,' said Mr Cramm. 'Time for ye to return to yer quarters, Mr Gordon,' he said, holding his keys aloft. 'I've already given ye more time than I should.'

'You're so very kind, Mr Cramm,' I said, reaching for Tam's hand. 'I won't forget. In fact, I've been thinking.'

'Dangerous thing for a lass,' said Mr Cramm.

'Are you working this evening?' I asked.

'Noon to midnight. Longer most days. What of it?'

'Ah, well, I'll ensure you're in receipt of the promised peatreek before your shift finishes.'

Mr Cramm regarded me with surprise, then opened Tam's cell door. 'Well, ye won't hear any complaints from me. Now, come on, get back in here, Mr Gordon, so I can chain ye, or the warden will have *my* neck in a noose.'

'Just a moment, sir, please.' Buzzing with my idea, I had to summon tears, make my voice break. 'I'll return, my love,' I addressed Tam dramatically. 'To say a last goodbye.'

Tam's fingers began to work.

What are you up to? he asked.

Being an obedient wife.

Tam caught my hands for a second, just as Mr Cramm began to push him back into the cell, kicking out at the prisoners who'd dared to approach the open door. There was the rattle of chains, then the shuffle of Mr Cramm's boots before he pulled the door shut and locked it again with a giant key.

'Since when are you obedient?' asked Tam, pressing his face against the bars.

'Since you left me no choice.' I gave him one last, lingering look, hoping he could feel my love. The tears were real now and flowing.

Till tonight. I blew a kiss.

With a nod to Mr Cramm to lead the way, and taking Mick's arm, I followed the turnkey back up the stairwell.

We were halfway up before I spoke again. 'If I might have a private word, Mr Cramm. About tonight: how would you like to earn even more peatreek …?'

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CHAPTER FORTY - TWO



I could scarce contain myself as we left the tolbooth and joined the others on the street. Instead of waiting for Dom and Niall (who still hadn't emerged from the courthouse), we returned to the lodgings. I did my best to reassure Torrie and Peigi about their da, despite the terrible news, and Caragh about Jon.

I linked arms with Torrie and Peigi as we walked back to Virginia Street, Patrick and Una close behind us, hanging on every word. Mick and Caragh strolled ahead, Mick occasionally turning to verify something I said or add his own version.

'Your da is in good spirits considering the conditions. Considering the crime he's been accused of,' I told the lasses. 'But he's filthy, tired and thinner.' My voice began to break. Torrie squeezed my arm. 'He's very focused on what's been happening beyond his cell. I think that helps.'

I drew a shuddering breath. 'And though I didn't see the rest of the lads, I did hear their voices. They wanted to know their families were alright. Heard your da, Patrick. He's been worried about you. I told him you were here.'

Patrick made a soft sound.

'What about Filib? Was he there?' asked Una.

'Aye,' I said. 'He was. And he asked after you. I told him naught.'

'Good,' said Una.

'What about Art?' asked Torrie.

Mick answered. ‘He sounded well enough. I hope he’s through the worst. Still, we won’t know for sure until he’s out of there.’

Torrie gave a dry bark of laughter, turning her face aside so we didn’t see the tears gathered in her eyes.

No more was said. We were alone with our wretched thoughts, oblivious to the crowds surging around us, each step a great weight.

Two constables swinging truncheons strolled by, frowzy with sour ale and tobacco. They slowed as they caught sight of us, doffing their hats.

‘Gentlemen,’ I said, bowing my head.

‘Lasses,’ they replied, leering after us until we rounded a corner.

I could hear Mick grinding his teeth.

Lasses. At one level, women drew men’s notice, but on another, we were invisible. Especially older women whose dress revealed their low status. My mind began to turn over the idea that came to me in the cell. It had worked once, why not again?

We arrived at the inn to find Ishbel pacing. She didn’t cease until I assured her Tam was as well as could be expected under the circumstances, though not holding out much hope.

Dom and Niall still hadn’t returned, but a grim-faced Big Billy, Spinney and Hamish appeared not long after us. Rather than repeat their news, they waited for the lads. Knowing it wasn’t going to be agreeable, we were in no hurry to hear it. To pass the time, we crowded into the room I shared with the women, and some food was ordered from the kitchen and a pack of playing cards found. Peigi had brought a book and sat in a chair by the window, pretending to read. I joined her, unable to read or play, though I forced some oysters and bread down. I leaned on the windowsill, staring across the harbour, watching the rare sunlight dance on the moving waters, the many boats moving to and fro between the larger sloops and cutters moored in the harbour. I turned my idea over and over, playing out various scenarios. Was I unhinged to consider such a thing? Maybe. It was very different to being on the road. Far more dangerous, especially if we were caught. But there’d been a precedent. A successful one.

Which was why it just might work.

The town’s clocks had not long chimed four of the clock when Dom and Niall finally returned. Like the rest, they were downhearted, flinging their bonnets off, tossing the bundle containing the bloodied uniform and weapons on the bed, and sinking onto the stools that had been brought in

from the other rooms. At once, cards were forgotten, and a jug of peatreek and cups were found and fresh drams poured.

‘What news?’ asked Mick.

‘Not good, I’m afraid.’ Dom drained his cup and held it out to be refilled.

‘You and us both,’ said Big Billy.

‘Go on,’ said Dom. ‘You first. Give us time to catch our breath.

Cool a hot head.’

Big Billy released a long sigh and, holding his cup loosely in two hands, shared what had happened when he, Spinney and Hamish went to the Customs House.

‘Used to be we had reliable connections here. The old collector was a good friend to us. He’s retired and his grandson’s been appointed. Turns out, he’s a stickler for the rules.’

‘That’s all we need,’ said Torrie, throwing her hands up in surrender.

‘Let’s just say, he’s not his grandsire when it comes to where to look and when as far as smugglers are concerned. One of the excisemen informed us he’d rather arrest his own mother than buy illicit whisky from the likes of us. And I only learned *that* by sacrificing one of our bladders.’

‘The men – if ye can call them that,’ said Spinney scornfully, ‘were right scared to be seen even talking to us, never mind making a deal.’

‘Ye dinnae manage to shift any peatreek then?’ asked Dom.

‘Under half of it,’ said Big Billy, holding up his cup to accept another pour. ‘I’m to take half a dozen ankers and a few bladders down to the waterfront as soon as it’s dark. But that’s it, I’m afraid. So much for making enough coin to bribe a judge. It’ll scarce be enough to graft sugar sweets from a bairn.’

There were mutters and shaking heads. Peigi gazed mournfully out the window.

‘And ye can forget bribing the magistrate,’ added Dom. ‘He’s more upright than a Jacobite fist up the king’s arse. He dinnae care we have evidence that will help prove Tam’s innocence. Said it’s not his case, not now it’s being heard by the High Court in Edinburgh.’

‘Then,’ I said, ‘we get the lawyer to present the evidence there.’

Niall shook his head. ‘According to the duke’s lawyer,’ said Niall bitterly, ‘it’s not enough. He said *that*,’ he gestured to the bundle on the bed,

‘could belong to anyone. The only thing that’ll help Tam is if someone confesses.’

And we all knew the likelihood of that happening. I wanted to scream like a *caoineag*. So much for justice.

‘Och, come on!’ exclaimed Hamish. ‘Surely we deserve a wee bit of good news?’

‘Not from us either, I’m afraid,’ said Mick. ‘We’ve learned that Tam’s to be taken to Edinburgh on the morrow.’

‘Nae!’ said Hamish, jumping to his feet.

‘We’re too late then,’ said Dom.

Peigi burst into tears. Torrie began kicking the bed, shrugging off Hamish when he tried to comfort her. Ishbel stared darkly out the window. Spinney poured more whisky. The lads began a heated discussion about fookin’ Sassenachs while Patrick and Una simply sat pale-faced, dumbstruck.

My eyes drifted back to the harbour before alighting on the bed. Next to the wrapped uniform and weapons was my open burlap, out of which spilled another skirt, a couple of kertches, a plaid … Time to share my idea.

‘Maybe not,’ I said with far more confidence than I felt.

Voices quelled. Tears were dried. All eyes were on me. I swallowed. Now was not the time to let my despair get the better of me.

‘I have an idea. *If* it works, not only will Tam be freed, but all the lads.’

Doubt fought with hope, I could see it in their faces.

‘Well, spit it out,’ said Mick.

‘You might think I’m doolally, but hear me out.’ I took a deep breath. ‘Before we left the tolbooth, I pulled the turnkey, Mr Cramm, aside and promised him an entire anker of peatreek if he lets Tam’s family bid him a final farewell.’

‘I wondered what ye and him were blethering about,’ said Mick.

‘I said I would personally bring the anker – tonight.’

‘What did he say?’ asked Spinney.

‘He didn’t say nae.’

‘But he didn’t say aye either, did he?’ Torrie looked sceptical.

‘You think that for an anker of peatreek you’ll be able to walk Tam out of the tolbooth?’ asked Niall.

‘Not exactly,’ I said.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ asked Big Billy.

‘Not *just* Tam.’

There were noises of disbelief, scoffing. A half-laugh that sounded like a cry.

‘Ye’ll have to be clearer than that,’ said Dom, scratching his head.

‘What if Tam and the other lads do what *you* lads did to get here safely?’

‘Pretend to be part of a funeral procession?’ asked Hamish.

‘Nae, you gawpus,’ said Torrie, slapping his shoulder. ‘She means dress as lasses.’

Niall and Hamish began to jeer.

‘Just because it worked once, dinnae mean it will again,’ said Dom.

‘Why not?’ I asked defiantly. ‘It doesn’t mean it won’t either.’ I met their cynical eyes. ‘For a start, it will be the middle of the night. They’ve only to get past the turnkey and, from what Mr Cramm revealed, another guard, who, by the time Mick’s finished with them, will be blootered. If anything, it should be easier than fooling a section of soldiers in broad daylight.’

‘But it’s a gaol in the middle of a fooking great town, not the countryside,’ protested Big Billy. ‘It’ll never work.’

‘What if I told you that it’s been done successfully before,’ I persisted. ‘And at the most heavily guarded prison in the whole of England.’

Before another objection could be raised, I quickly reminded them about the Jacobite countess Winifred Maxwell. Back in 1715, she’d travelled in terrible conditions to London to rescue her beloved husband from the Tower – the most fortified prison in the land. On the eve of his execution, she’d not only plied the guards with drink and flattery but dressed the earl as a woman and led him out right beneath their noses.

There was silence when I finished. They all knew something of the tale.

‘But that was one man,’ said Big Billy, shaking his head. ‘Not over a dozen.’

‘I know,’ I sighed. ‘But we’re more than one woman, and we’ve plenty of extra clothes.’ I began pulling my spare plaid and skirts out of my burlap. ‘Don’t forget, I asked permission for *all* Tam’s family to say farewell. Just so happens, Tam has a huge family.’ I paused. ‘More importantly, we’ve something the countess didn’t.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Niall.

‘*Our* whisky.’

‘It might work,’ said Torrie, holding aloft the skirt Hamish had worn.

‘If we’re quick,’ I continued, ‘and the turnkey consumes a great deal, all he’ll see is several distressed lasses who’ve just said a last goodbye to their da, brother and husband. We’ll do our best to disguise the lads. Don’t forget, it will be dark.’

No-one spoke. No-one moved. My heart began to deflate. My hopes to shrink.

‘Yer right,’ said Niall finally, nodding. Gratitude for the lad swelled. ‘I think yer doolally.’

Mick dropped his head into his hands, muttering.

‘We’re tempting fate,’ added Dom. ‘Doing it again. Dressing as womenfolk.’

‘Better to tempt it than let it run its course,’ said Torrie.

‘And it won’t be *you* who enters the tolbooth, Dominic Grant,’ I said. ‘Just the real women among us.’ I gestured. ‘Oh, and Mick, to ply the turnkey and guard with peatreek. After all, Mr Cramm knows you. The rest of you need to get us safely away.’

Noises from outside drifted in. Muffled conversation, dogs barking, the squawk of gulls.

‘How do we do that?’ asked Big Billy.

I shrugged. ‘I only thought as far as escaping the tolbooth. We need to plan what happens after. Together.’

Caragh turned from where she’d been gazing out the window. ‘You said you sold about half the peatreek?’

‘Aye,’ said Spinney.

‘Would that be enough to buy passage on one of those?’ She pointed to the sloops and luggers anchored in the harbour. ‘If we leave by ship, and sail north, I doubt anyone will be looking in that direction. They’ll expect us to make haste for Glasglen the usual way.’

Suddenly, the mood altered.

‘We could lay a false trail,’ said Mick.

‘Aye,’ agreed Dom. ‘And if we separate, one half go overland, the other by sea, it will make it harder for the authorities to catch us.’

‘We could start off in one direction, then change course,’ said Big Billy. ‘Confuse the bastarts.’

I watched and listened as they began to discuss my idea as a reality. There was a rush of warmth for my bold, brave friends who were willing to

take a risk, not just in coming to Aberdeen, but on me. Torrie caught my eye and winked.

‘This is all well and good,’ said Dom after a while. ‘But what if it doesn’t work, what then?’ It was a pail of cold water. ‘What if the turnkey dinnae admit ye, Greer? Dinnae let ye see Tam or anyone else for that matter? What if he just takes the peatreek and laughs in yer face?’

‘He won’t,’ I said, not entirely convinced.

‘Why not?’

I waited until Dom met my eyes. ‘Because *I* won’t let him.’

Dom was the first to look away.

‘And what about Filib?’ asked Una, using the moment of quiet to be heard. ‘Are we just going to help him escape too? After everything he’s done. He’s the reason we’re here, the reason Mr Gordon and the others are in gaol.’ Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears. Her cheeks were flushed, her hands balled into fists by her side.

‘We need a confession from him to clear Tam’s name. I’m sorry, lass, but we must bring him with us,’ said Dom. ‘Force him to admit his crime – before a magistrate. One that will listen.’ He punched his palm. The lads nodded grimly.

Una stared in dismay.

‘All right then,’ said Big Billy, breaking the uneasy silence, pushing the small table into the middle of the room, arranging stools and chairs. ‘Gather around. We haven’t much time. Let’s go over everything. Greer, ye making notes?’

‘I am,’ I said, retrieving my burlap. Inside, along with the other documents I always carried, was pen and paper.

The clecking and catter-battering went back and forth as we discussed who would do what and when. We tried to think up alternative solutions should an unforeseen problem arise – or, worse, if the plan went catastrophically wrong.

By the time the sun began its descent, we were as prepared as we’d ever be and agreed to rest until nightfall.

As I lay on the bed next to Torrie, her hand clutched mine.

‘Thank you, Greer,’ she said softly.

I inhaled sharply. ‘What for?’

‘For not giving up.’

I shut my eyes. I was a long way from sleep. My mind was like a colt finding its legs, wobbling, staggering. Doubt and triumph alternated for space. It was easy for Torrie to thank me now, before we'd put our plan into action. We hadn't failed.

Yet.

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CHAPTER FORTY - THREE



‘Good evening, Mr Cramm,’ I said, relieved to see the turnkey was, indeed, on duty. Next to him was a diminutive lad of no more than ten. Dressed in dirty breeks, a stained shirt and a patched jacket, there was a strong resemblance between the bairn and the turnkey. This was confirmed when the laddie asked, ‘Who are they, Da?’

Da? I would have thought Mr Cramm old enough to be his grandpa. I could tell from the way Mick started, he thought so too.

‘You remember me?’ I asked Mr Cramm.

He made a performance of rubbing his chin, frowning, clicking his tongue, until Mick deposited an anker on the table. Miraculously, his memory was restored.

‘I remember ye,’ he said, rubbing his hands together with glee. ‘Ye be Mr Gordon’s wife – the one with manners.’ He looked pointedly at Mick. ‘And ye be her delivery lad.’

‘What’s that, Da?’ asked the laddie, stroking the wood.

Mr Cramm smacked his hand. ‘Dinnae ye go touching what dinnae belong to ye.’

I waited as patiently as I could while Mr Cramm, eager as he was to try the peatreek, enjoyed the ceremony. He took his blessed time. First, he produced a small hammer and knocked out the bung. Then he poured a generous cupful, held it to his nose, inhaled like it was a bouquet of fragrant flowers, then filled his mouth. He shut his eyes in apparent ecstasy as he

rolled the liquid about noisily in his mouth before swallowing. He stood so still, I thought he'd become a statue.

'Ahhhhh.' He expelled his potent breath in a loud rush, a dragon come to life. I half-expected flame to follow. 'This is the goods,' he said, and went to refill his cup.

'Sir,' I said, stopping his hand. Mick replaced the bung. 'If you recall, I made mention earlier today of an arrangement.'

'Arrangement?' The man seemed genuinely confused.

'I'm not sure what I can offer the likes of ye, Mrs Gordon, unless ye want to share me anker.'

'Nae, this is entirely for you, Mr Cramm.'

His relief was almost comical.

'I agreed to provide you with an anker of our finest if you provided Mr Gordon's distraught family some last moments with him. After all, Mr Gordon is to be moved on the morrow. This is our only opportunity to say farewell.'

I waited. Mr Cramm looked from me to Mick and back again. 'I'm not s'posed to admit anyone after dark, unless it be the constables or the warden hisself.'

'Is that so?' I said, giving a pointed look at his son. 'And yet, you enjoy the company of *your* bairn while Mr Gordon, languishing below, is denied the chance to farewell his.'

Mr Cramm regarded his son. The lad stared at his da. Mr Cramm eyed me, then Mick. 'His bairns are here?'

'They're outside.' I gestured roughly. 'Along with his sisters and ma, trying very hard to be stoic. The last thing they want to do is upset Mr Gordon with their grief.'

Mr Cramm scratched his cheek, the rasp of bristles loud in the small space. A wail rose from below followed by a series of shouts. Was our plan foiled before it even began?

'Five minutes,' he said finally. 'That's all I can give ye.'

'Come on, Cramm,' said Mick. 'Have a heart. Poor Mrs Gordon has travelled a long way to say goodbye to her man. So have the bairns. His auld ma, too. Surely ten isn't unreasonable. And, while they're down there taking their leave, ye and me can enjoy more of this.' Mick removed the bung and poured another cup, passing it to Mr Cramm.

Mr Cramm took a mouthful, his face transforming into a picture of bliss. He gazed into the cup, at the anker, then me. ‘Och, what’s ten minutes between *friends*, eh?’

He did remember.

‘Go on with ye. Bring in the family. In fact, while me and the delivery lad here enjoy some libations, my Petie can supervise yer lot in the dungeon. How’s that sound?’

Terrible. Mick was trying to catch my eye.

I smiled. ‘Excellent. I’ll just go and fetch the lasses.’

Without further ado, leaving Mick to take care of Mr Cramm, I raced back through the corridor, trying to avoid touching the walls, and opened the door. A huge, weather-beaten guardsman with a large wen on his forehead stood outside. The lasses had been entertaining him. Dom and Hamish remained in the shadows of the building.

‘We’ve permission to enter,’ I told the guardsman, whose only concern seemed to be that the lasses were leaving him.

‘We’ll be back shortly,’ said Torrie, giving him a wink.

I led the way to the guard’s room. It was a terrible crush. Not all of us could fit. Spinney and Una remained in the corridor. Mr Cramm’s brows crept further and further up his forehead when he saw how many of us there were.

‘I thought you said they was Mr Gordon’s bairns.’ He eyed Caragh and Spinney suspiciously. He didn’t seem to notice that each of Mr Gordon’s lasses was quite thickset.

‘I said *family*. These are his spinster sisters.’ I gave a casual wave towards Caragh and Una. ‘He’s responsible for them. They’re like bairns,’ I added quietly.

‘Jesus,’ said Mr Cramm, scratching his head. ‘Poor sod.’

‘And this is his ma.’ I gestured to Spinney, who was half bent over, hiding her face.

‘I dunno if I can allow this …’ said Mr Cramm. ‘How many are ye? It’s like counting bloody sheep.’

‘Course ye can, Cramm. Sit, sit,’ said Mick, slapping the stool and sliding over another cup of whisky. ‘What harm can a few lasses do?’

Mick raised a cup and took a long draught, making noises of appreciation. That was enough for Mr Cramm. He pushed his way through,

heading for the stairs. ‘Come along then, the lot of ye. If my head dinnae roll for this, it will be a bloody miracle. That peatreek better be worth it.’

‘It is,’ answered Mick.

‘Save me some,’ he added, and beckoned us forward.

Before I followed Mr Cramm down the stairs, I gave a salute to Mick and Una. We’d agreed she remain upstairs. She would escort the men outside to where the other lads waited. It was the only way I’d agree to her coming. I was still worried about how she’d cope with seeing Filib.

The blether ceased the lower we went, the darkness, the oppressive, cold walls leaching us of conversation, of optimism.

‘God’s breath,’ hissed Torrie at one stage as a loud scream echoed and reverberated, making us all jump.

Finally, we reached the level where the Glasglen smugglers were held. The lanterns announced our arrival as much as our footfalls. From behind the closed doors there was a rattle and clink of chains, thuds as bodies pressed against the cell doors. Faces loomed at the bars, changing rapidly as the men vied for turns to see these unexpected night visitors. There were quiet gasps, a muffled moan. I could have sworn I heard Tam’s name called, Artur and Jon Boyne’s too, like susurrations. The lasses knew not to react and, fortunately, the lads, once they set sight on us, knew better as well. Not so the prisoners in the other cell who, as I hoped, raised a cacophony.

I’d warned everyone about them, and the smell. The women were panting heavily, reaching for kerchiefs, and staring about in round-eyed horror.

Keen to get back upstairs to the whisky, Mr Cramm issued quick instructions to his lad, Petie, then unlocked the door of the central cell, disappearing inside briefly before, in a clang of iron, he emerged, leading Tam out.

‘There ye go, Gordons. Ten minutes to say ye farewells. Then, me lad’s going to lock him away again and yer all going to come trooping back up those stairs, ye hear? Any funny business and I’ll call the guardsmen and ye’ll all end up in a cell.’ He pointed a gnarled finger at each one of us, then, with a cackle of anticipation, all but ran up the stairs.

Torrie and Peigi threw themselves against their da, immediately regretting it.

‘Phaowg, Da,’ said Torrie, clutching him tighter. ‘You stink worse than Dom’s byre, and that’s saying something.’ She was half-crying half-

laughing.

‘Lovely to see you too, Torrie,’ said Tam, grinning. He smiled at the others then noted Caragh. ‘Jon’s in there,’ he said, jerking his head.

They looked at Petie who held the keys tightly in his fist.

Torrie began signing to her da, tugging his shirt to force him to watch her quick fingers. He frowned, then gave me a measured look.

I wasted no time on greetings, but tried to distract young Petie, who was all agog as the women lifted their skirts, removing the other ones beneath.

‘What are they—’ he began, before I ushered him into a corner.

The prisoners in the adjacent cell began to cry out and bang on the cell door. It was time for Spinney to make them the offer we’d decided on.

‘Let’s leave the lasses to their farewells, shall we?’ I said to Petie. ‘Give them a bit of privacy, eh?’

‘But they’re taking off their clothes.’

He tried to look over my shoulder, but I blocked his view. There was a tearing sound.

‘How about you tell me—’ I began, when Peigi and Caragh appeared by my side.

‘There’s no time for this, Greer,’ said Caragh. Before I could react, the women grabbed the lad.

‘Nae!’ I cried, as they gagged him and bound his hands and feet. A cheer went up from the cells, quickly suppressed.

When the lad was trussed like a goose, they propped him against the far wall. Too bewildered to cry out or object, wee Petie just stared.

‘Och, Petie,’ I said softly, kneeling beside him, stroking his cheek. ‘I’m sorry about this. We won’t be long.’ I untied the keys from where they were looped to his breeks and gave them to Spinney just as Tam pulled me to my feet and held me tight.

‘*Leannan*. You said you were being obedient.’

‘I am. I’m going home,’ I said. ‘Just not alone.’

The moment the cell door was reopened, Caragh entered and, after removing Jon’s shackles, brought him out, blethering quietly, wiping away the worst of the filth with his shredded shirt. Before he could register what was happening, she began to dress him from the growing pile of clothes on the stool. Tears poured down her cheeks. Jon’s too.

Auld Artur was assisted out by Spinney and passed to me.

‘Och, yer a sight for sore eyes,’ he said.

‘And yer a sight that will make eyes sore.’ I gave his bearded cheek a soft kiss. ‘Come on, let’s get you dressed.’

The other cell was opened and one by one, the men brought out. They were pale, sickly, unsteady. Their eyes red-rimmed, their wrists and ankles rubbed raw. Their lips bone-dry. Many of them coughed badly, limped, as protective arms were wrapped around their middles. When Brandon Stokes appeared, blinking in the dull light, he looked very different, and not just because his clothes hung off him. His cheeks had lost their florid look, his eyes were clear. It occurred to me it was the first time I’d seen the man sober.

I tried not to look at Filib Mackenzie as he staggered out, demanding his wife. I could sense his growing frustration when no-one would tell him where she was. Could we force him to confess? Con Harrison emerged in relatively good condition and, once he understood what was happening, pulled a skirt over his filthy trews, and then helped the other lads.

There was little we could do about the men’s beards. They’d grown considerably, as had their wild hair. Where we could, we tucked it under kertches, and draped shawls over their heads. There weren’t enough clothes to dress them all completely, but between us, with skirts, retied plaids, shirts, kilts rearranged and draped (leaving some of the men bollock-naked underneath) and with the lasses removing their boots and giving them to the men they fitted, we managed to disguise most of them.

If one didn’t look too closely, and there was no direct light, they might just pass as lasses. Large hairy ones badly in need of a wash.

Quiet whistles issued from the third cell. Faces were still pressed against the bars, but the sly looks had been replaced by hopeful ones. Spinney had been successful with her offer. She nodded towards the prisoners as she unshackled the last of our lads from the first two cells.

Jon Boyne was hobbling. Artur needed assistance and a couple of others were very weak. And while we’d increased the family size threefold, if Mick and Una had accomplished what was needed in the guard’s room, and with the boldness of the enterprise plus a good amount of peatreek, we might just get them out.

‘What about the laddie?’ asked Tam, eyeing the lad dubiously.

I knelt by Petie. His eyes were brimming with curiosity. ‘You alright, Petie?’ I asked. He nodded slowly.

‘Ye need to lock him in there,’ said Auld Artur, indicating the cell they’d just been freed from.

‘We can’t,’ I protested. ‘It’s bad enough we’ve done this to him.’

‘What we can’t have is him racing up those stairs and telling his da before we’ve gone a few feet. Otherwise, this is for naught,’ said Torrie.

She was right. But he was also innocent here. ‘You explain to the men what they must do next. Leave the laddie to me.’ I was firm.

As Torrie and Caragh quietly outlined the plan, I knelt beside Petie, trying not to think what the rust-coloured stain on the floor next to him might be. ‘Listen, Petie. When all those lads over there have gone, I’m going to untie you.’

He made a noise behind his gag and tried to sit up straight.

‘But only if you promise me, on God’s soul, that you’ll wait until that lantern—’ I pointed to the one his da had left, ‘is spent before you go back up the stairs. Can you promise you’ll do that?’

A sly look crossed his face and he nodded. I inwardly sighed. I didn’t want to do this. But needs must.

‘Now, Petie, do you know what happens to bairns who swear on God’s soul and then break their promise?’

He shook his head.

‘An angel swoops down from the heavens and drops them in the pits of hell. They spend all of eternity wiping the devil’s arse – with bare hands.’

There was a splutter behind me. Petie’s eyes were bulging, his face became very pale.

‘So, I’ll ask again. Do you promise not to move until the lamp gutters?’

This time, his nod was enthusiastic.

I rose to find Tam behind me. ‘Remind me never to get on the wrong side of you. Wiping the devil’s arse.’

‘I think the comeuppance he’ll receive when these cells are found empty will be far worse.’

The men were restless, ready to move. Time to put the next part of our plan into action.

I raised my arm to quell the whispers. ‘You need to mount the stairs; no more than four at a time. Torrie will snuff out candles on the way, so watch your footing. Mick’s up there distracting Mr Cramm and the guard as best he can.’ I deliberately avoided mentioning Una. Filib would learn she was here soon enough. ‘Move through the guardroom swiftly, cry a little. For

godsakes, even though it will be dark, hide your faces. Remember, you're lasses who've just said final farewells. Big Billy and Dom will meet you outside. Get down to the harbour as quickly as you can. Don't stop for anything.'

'Where are we going?' asked someone.

'Home,' I said. Eyes shone. 'Most of us by sea. The rest with Mick. He's travelling overland to set a false trail. Either way, we still need to get to the harbour.'

'I'll not set foot in a boat,' grunted a pockmarked lad.

'Me neither.'

'Nor me.'

'Or me.'

I exchanged a look with Tam. At least half would go with Mick.

We'd been well over ten minutes. The fact Mr Cramm hadn't come back down to see what was afoot meant Mick's charm (and the peatreek) must be working. I gave Torrie a nod.

I swear we held our breath as we heard faint conversation and weeping as the first group ascended the stairs and passed through the guardroom. We waited a couple more minutes, then sent the next lot up, then the next.

Finally, it was only me, Tam, Filib Mackenzie, Brandon Stokes and Con Harrison.

'What about us?' hissed a voice from the occupied cell.

'You were told,' I said. 'You'll get the keys once the last of us leave – providing you remain silent.'

We'd debated long and hard about what to do with the other prisoners. Most were lads from the land, reduced to stealing to survive. Only one had a charge worse than theft and that was fraud. They were all lawbreakers, but then, so were we. Was there any difference between us? It was Mick who suggested releasing them, adding another felony to our ever-growing list.

'If naught else, they'll distract and divide the constables pursuing us, any militia as well. It can't hurt.'

I gave Petie one final warning look and was just about to start up the stairs when I heard rapid footsteps descending. *Oh God.*

What is it? Tam used his hands.

I don't know. I waved the men back.

I saw her skirts first.

It was Una.

She practically tumbled off the last step, and stood, wild-eyed, staring, before she found the one person she'd determined to see.

Filib.

'Una,' he said, striding towards her, arms outstretched. 'Ye came back to me.'

Una gave a little cry and ran into his arms.

I didn't see the dirk. Not until it was plunged into Filib's chest again and again.

A strangled scream erupted from Filib. He twisted away, raising his arms to protect himself. Blood sprayed hot and fast, striking the walls, strewing my face, my gown. Tam tried to wrest the dirk from Una's hands, hold her back, but she was like a woman possessed.

'We ken ye killed the redcoat, ye lousy bastart,' she said. 'Just like ye killed my beautiful weans. Yer a traitor, Filib Mackenzie. A coward, a bully and I hate ye, I hate ye!' She stood back, ready to drive the dirk into her husband again. Tam and Con managed to grab her.

Filib staggered, hands pressed to his many wounds, trying to stop the blood flow. It was hopeless.

Petie managed to get to his feet, his body pressed into the wall, his face twisted away from the carnage. The poor lad.

Spit flew from Una's mouth as she raged at Filib, tried to wrench herself free from Tam and Con. Her face was misshapen by wretchedness. She was no longer in the tolbooth but trapped somewhere in the horror of her memories; the pain, the suffering. Tears streamed down her cheeks, tears of utter rage.

Try as hard as they could, neither Tam nor Con could make her release the dripping blade. She held it fast in her grip. She couldn't, wouldn't, let it go.

Filib stared down in disbelief at the blood welling over his fingers, spilling onto the floor. He fell to his knees, the scarlet pooling and slowly spreading.

'I dinnae think ye had it in ye,' he said softly, shaking his head weakly. 'My Una. My quiet, dutiful, bonnie wee lass.' He sighed. Blood burbled from his mouth, dripped down his chin, onto his shirt. He gave a sad, hollow laugh that turned into a cough and spat. 'I'm sorry 'bout the weans, Una. I truly am. But I'm not sorry 'bout the redcoat.'

There. We had it. An admission. A confession. Con sucked in his breath. Brandon Stokes exclaimed as realisation dawned. I glanced at Tam. He was watching Una.

‘He had it coming,’ said Filib, not looking at Una. ‘Ye had it coming, Tamhas Gordon. I said that to Gillespie when I told him ’bout the peatreek, the special cart and what else was hidden in there. Still the bastart arrested me.’ He panted hard. ‘Ye took my wife, Gordon. Ye had no right. She belongs to me.’

‘I was never *yours*.’ With a roar, Una wrenched herself free and threw herself at Filib, taking the men by surprise. She raised the knife above her head, ready to plunge it in one more time.

With what must have been the last of his strength, Filib grabbed her by the skirts and yanked. The knife flicked from her hand as she fell. He caught it and, in one neat motion, slashed it across her throat.

‘Nae!’ I tried to catch Una as slumped forward. Tam prevented me.

We watched in horror as she collapsed on her husband. Her eyes bulged as she clutched her ragged throat with both hands. She tried to speak but no words came. Filib pulled her closer, turning her over so she lay atop him, facing us. Blood gurgled from the terrible wound, down her neck, soaking her gown, his torso and kilt. Their life-forces mingled.

‘Yer mine, Una,’ croaked Filib against her ear. ‘Ye always have been and always will be. Nae one can take ye from me. Not him, not her.’ The look he gave me chilled me to the marrow. ‘You swore an oath. Until death do us part …’

Una never heard him. Her hands fell away, her eyes glazed. I gave a low moan and tried to reach her one last time.

‘Greer,’ whispered Tam against my hair. ‘We must go. Now.’

I slowly became aware of the precariousness of the situation.

‘We can’t leave her.’ I could scarce see for tears.

‘We have to,’ said Tam. ‘There’s naught we can do.’

Sprawled across her bastart of a husband, blood everywhere, Una’s body was limp, lifeless.

Tam slowly released me and I stumbled over to a chalk-faced Petie. I quickly pulled the gag away. Unresisting as I removed the bindings holding his wrists and ankles, he was like a puppet with severed strings. I cupped his cheeks.

‘Petie,’ I said softly. ‘Petie. You come with us, lad, you hear?’ I helped him to his feet.

‘Greer,’ warned Tam.

‘Wait.’ I held up my hand. ‘Do you understand, Petie? I’m taking you to your da.’

Petie nodded dumbly, his gaze fixed on Una and Filib. ‘Will I have to wipe Satan’s arse?’

‘Nae, wee boy.’ I helped him step past the bodies, past the blood. So much blood.

Petie stopped and pointed at Filib. ‘He said he killed the redcoat.’ He stared up at Tam. ‘That’s what the warden said you did.’

‘Aye,’ said Tam softly. ‘But as ye heard, lad, it wasn’t me. It was that man.’

‘We heard it too,’ came voices from the locked cell. The other prisoners. If only their testimony counted.

Petie looked from Tam to Filib and back. ‘He killed the pretty lady too. He was a bad man.’

‘Aye, lad,’ said Tam, ruffling Petie’s hair. ‘That he was.’

‘I’ll tell Da,’ said Petie. ‘He’ll tell the warden.’ Tam’s eyes met mine over the top of his head. Could it be?

Tam put an arm across the boy’s shoulders. ‘Come, lad. Let’s get you away from here.’

‘Take him. I’ll be there in a moment,’ I said.

Tam waited on the bottommost stair as I took hold of Una’s feet. I dragged her off Filib. The last thing she’d want, even in death, was to be held by him. I carefully shut her eyes and placed a soft kiss on her brow.

‘I’m so, so sorry.’ My voice caught. ‘Go with God, my gentle, sweet Una.’ I rose.

‘Dinnae leave me.’

Against all odds, Filib was alive. Barely.

‘Please, dinnae leave me here, Mrs MacAlister.’ He held out a bloodied hand, his voice was soft, beseeching.

I bent over him, studying the once-handsome face, those deceptively kind hazelnut eyes.

I saw hope dawn on his features.

I leaned closer. ‘That’s Mrs Gordon to you, you fooking bastart.’

Then, without another glance, I passed the keys through the bars of the last cell. As I went up the stairs Filib’s final scream echoed.

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CHAPTER FORTY - FOUR



The harbour was crowded this time of night, which, thank the Lord, worked to our advantage. We spread out, promenading on the foreshore, hovering outside the many taverns in this part of the town. Before we'd reached the waterfront, the lads had ducked into an alley and divested themselves of the skirts, retied their shabby kilts. They'd found a stash of boots in one of the tolbooth offices and taken a few pairs, swapping them around until those who'd travel by sea had footwear. The reasoning being those going overland would trade for some in villages when and if they could. We even found a nearby well where the men were able to wash the worst of the filth away. Tam looked much improved, not the least because Una's blood no longer stained his face.

I couldn't get those final images out of my mind. The madness that glazed her eyes, the dirk rising and falling, the sound it made as it entered Filib's body, then when it sliced across her white neck. Though I too had washed away what I could, I could still smell the metallic odour of the blood, feel its warmth as it struck my flesh.

Unable to think clearly as I mounted the stairs in the tolbooth, the last thing I recalled was pressing a few coins into Petie's palm as we left him with his blootered da and the huge guard, both with their heads sunk on their arms at the table. Mick had done a fine job of ensuring they drank themselves into oblivion. While it aided our getaway, each group of Tam's so-called family blurring into the last until Mr Cramm was convinced it had just been one herd of lassies, weeping and thanking him for his kindness, it

was Petie I was most worried about. He'd seen what no bairn ever should. Yet he'd also heard Filib admit to killing the redcoat. Of his own volition, he'd made the connection between Filib's guilt and Tam's innocence. Before I left, I knelt before him.

'When your da wakes, you make sure to tell him everything you saw, Petie. Everything that happened. How we tied you up, how the men escaped. You make sure he knows there was naught you could have done. This wasn't your fault.'

Petie nodded, casting frightened glances in his da's direction. No doubt imagining the beating he would get.

'I'll tell him 'bout the bad man too, Mrs. What he did. What he said.'

I sucked in my breath. 'That would be a very good thing, Petie.' I kissed first one grubby cheek then the other and stood. 'I promise you this, Petie Cramm. I'll never forget your bravery. Thank you.'

Seeing my reluctance to leave the bairn, Tam took control and led me away. It was also Tam who divided us into three groups, ensuring we all made it to the waterfront. Forced to dodge two patrols, we ran through gardens, ducking and weaving between trees and bushes, moving in a more orderly manner once we reached another street.

Not far from the pier, Tam assembled us again and told the men going overland with Mick to wait in the forecourt of the inn while the garrons were hitched to the cart. They were to leave immediately, taking some of the peatreek and any belongings remaining in the rooms.

Tam also insisted Art, Jon and the other injured men accompany Mick. Caragh went as well – of course – as would Ishbel, who said travelling by sea would be too much. We'd already said our farewells. Dom volunteered to go with them.

'Have to keep them out of trouble, dinnae I?'

At least once they were away from the town, they'd be able to seek medick for the injured and buy supplies.

Before Mick took his leave, I threw my arms around him. 'Thank you for everything, Mick Duff. We couldn't have done this without you.'

Mick planted a resounding kiss on my mouth, then held me tight. 'And we could never have done this without ye, lass. If it was nae for what's in that head of yours,' he tapped it lightly, then gently tugged a loose tendril of hair, 'well, Tam would soon be en route to his death.'

We didn’t say what we were both thinking. That he still could be. We all could be. Glasglen was still a long way away.

We waited in the darkness as the men and Caragh ran or hobbled off to meet the cart and Ishbel. They would head for the road that led out of town, North Street, and, after leaving a false trail, make their way due west.

All that remained were those of us travelling by sea. There were fifteen in total. Big Billy had arranged for one of the boats moored between ocean and shore to pick us up around midnight. From there, we’d be taken to a sloop anchored in deeper waters and sail north to Inverness. Big Billy, Niall and Con had returned to the inn to fetch what remained of the whisky – well, most of it. A portion would be left for the innkeeper. The rest would be used for bribes, and to ensure we were able to hire horses once we made landfall.

I had a small purse, as did Spinney and Torrie. While it didn’t amount to much, it should cover food. Nevertheless, we were placing a great deal of reliance on the illicit spirit. All it needed was for a gauger or a suspicious soldier to appear, and what we had would be seized and we could end up imprisoned again. That was if word didn’t get out before dawn about the prison break. Thus far, there were no whistles, no bells warning folk that felons were on the loose. No running boots or shots being fired. I wondered where the other prisoners had gone. All we could hear were the sounds of men in nearby taverns, voices raised in song and laughter.

The lads would occasionally lift their faces to the velvet skies and inhale deeply. The air was tangy with brine, fish and seaweed, and the malty smell of ale. After the conditions they’d endured, it must have felt like heaven.

We were a much-subdued lot, talking in sporadic whispers. Tam and I put our heads together, Torrie and Peigi with us, and spoke quietly of what had passed in Tam’s absence: about Alice and her babe; about Patrick believing he’d killed the lieutenant. What Brandon, thinking the same, had done for his son.

Tam didn’t want to talk about his capture or confinement – not then. Perhaps not ever.

Big Billy and Spinney leaned against a wall, arms around each other. Patrick and Brandon stood shoulder to shoulder, staring out to sea. Thus far, our doolally plan had succeeded. Yet, as we waited for the boat to appear, all I could think about was what we’d lost.

Una.

I sent a swift silent prayer for her soul and then, being greedy, another that we'd all make it home safe. *I'll be with you soon, Fen.* I also prayed she fared well. That she didn't miss me too much.

As the night wore on and men staggered out of the taverns, many forcing us to retreat into the shadows and hold our breath, no boat appeared. A couple of cats ran past on light paws. A dog wandered over, tail wagging. God, I missed Bran and Sceólang.

'Are ye sure this fellow is reliable?' Tam asked Big Billy as midnight came and went.

Big Billy shrugged. 'As sure as the promise of a jug of peatreek.'

Just as the sky was transforming from deep violet to mauve and the stars were blinking goodbye, a fight broke out in the gardens behind the Customs House. For hours, we'd believed we were the only folk on the waterfront, but as the brawl became louder and more violent, men appeared from everywhere – from under the crane not far from where we hid, from the stoop of a tavern, bursting out the door of a tenement. They ran past, whooping and hollering.

Tempted to follow, Tam ordered everyone to remain and turned back to scan the harbour.

Finally, as clouds parted to reveal the silvery face of the waning moon smiling upon the waters, a boat appeared. A lone man was rowing, the bow rising as the waves swelled under it, casting it forward before slamming it down and sending spray into the air. Two gulls flew above, following its passage, their cries resounding in the early morning air.

'That's a mighty small boat ye hired, Billy,' said Tam ruefully, sizing it up and then looking at those waiting beside him.

'We'll have to do two trips,' said Torrie.

'Maybe three,' added Peigi.

'I should have offered an anker,' said Big Billy, shaking his head.

'Too late now,' said Tam and, just as the boat hit the shallows, he broke cover and, along with the lads, leapt off the embankment and brought the boat closer, holding it steady in the waves. The oarsman was a ruddy-faced man with massive, tattooed arms.

'Come on,' Tam waved to us. 'Spinney, Torrie, Peigi, Greer – lasses first.'

I pushed Spinney and the girls forward. I'd no intention of leaving Tam again. I would wait and ride with him. I grabbed Patrick.

'Take your da and go, lad.'

Patrick hesitated, then did as he was told.

I watched as Big Billy and Torrie helped Spinney clamber into the boat. Patrick jumped aboard and turned to help Peigi. Brandon and Niall found seats. Two other lads also climbed in.

'Go with them, Billy, make sure the captain is clear about where we're heading.' Big Billy didn't argue.

The boat was full.

'I have to leave now,' said the oarsman. 'Give us a shove.'

'Get in, Torrie,' said Tam.

She shook her head. 'Not without ye, Da.'

Tam looked back to where Hamish and I waited on the foreshore and threw up his hands before giving the boat a mighty shove. Together, he and Con pushed it out as far as they could. They stood in waist-deep waters as the oarsman expertly rode the waves, taking the boat into the deeper swells beyond.

Tam didn't even argue when he reached the shore. He just placed his arm around me and Torrie and drew us to him.

'Jesus, Da. If you're not stinking, you're drookit.'

'I prefer wet to malodorous,' I said.

'Malodorous?' Torrie raised a brow. 'My, aren't you posh.'

We grinned. Now it was just a matter of waiting. We sat with our backs against the wall of a building watching the boat grow smaller and smaller and disappear entirely for a time as it glided between larger craft.

The town had grown quiet. The fight had broken up, the men dispersed. Morning birds soon began their chorus. Rats pattered along the edges of the buildings opposite the shore. We were outside what appeared to be warehouses. I wondered if they were part of the Customs House which, as the sky lightened, became clear.

Every noise made my heart leap, but it wasn't until the bells chimed five of the clock and the boat hadn't reappeared that I began to understand how precarious our position was.

From the way Tam was repeatedly squeezing my hand, he felt the same way.

Suddenly, just when I thought we'd have to hole up for the day and try again in the evening, the boat reappeared.

'Come on,' said Tam, helping me and Torrie to our feet. 'We don't have the luxury of waiting for it to land. We have to meet it.'

I unwound my shawl and shoved it in the burlap, placing it on top of my head. Torrie did the same. We followed Tam and Hamish. Con was beside him. The other three lads behind us. The marrow was sucked from my body as the freezing water sprayed my clothes, splashed my face, pulled at my skirts and threatened to knock me off my feet.

Torrie grasped my shoulder. 'Fook, it's cold.'

A faint noise made me glance back. One of the lads, Red-Haired Ralph, remained on the sand, watching us.

Torrie saw where I was looking. 'Ralph!' she called. 'Come on.' She tumbled, falling onto one knee. A wave swallowed her, almost taking me under as well. I held onto her and, with Hamish's help, hauled her upright. She rose, water cascading off her, pushing her hair from her face. She began to laugh, until she turned to look back at the shore.

'God,' she said.

Ralph hadn't moved. Behind him, two soldiers appeared. They stood a few yards from him, arms folded across their chests, watching him. Watching us.

Then, some more came around the corner. These ones had weapons drawn.

'Ralph!' I urged him forward.

'I … I cannae swim,' he cried. He was shaking.

'Hamish, take Torrie. Keep going.' I turned and waded back through the water.

'Greer,' called Tam. He'd reached the boat. 'What are you doing?'

'She's getting Ralph, Da,' said Torrie. 'He's frozen with the fear.'

The two soldiers were climbing down the embankment and getting ready to cross the sand by the time I reached Ralph.

'Wait,' one of them ordered.

I waved at them. 'My son!' I shouted. 'He's scared of the water, foolish lad. That poor oarsman's being mightily tested. His da and brothers will pay to leave him here if I don't hurry.'

I snatched Ralph's wrist and pulled him into the water. He lost his balance and fell face-first beneath the swell. He leapt up, coughing and

spluttering.

‘Stop fighting me, lad,’ I said as he twisted first one way, then the other.

I looked about in despair. Tam was thrusting through the waves towards me.

Suddenly, Ralph’s weight was taken as the two soldiers grabbed him beneath the arms and lifted him up.

‘Nae!’ I protested.

But instead of dragging us both back to shore, they began to push through the water with him, towards the boat.

‘Come along, lad,’ said one. ‘Don’t be such a feardie. Ye put ye ma to shame.’

Seeing what was happening, Tam let them pass, thanking them, before grabbing my burlap.

By the time we reached the boat, Ralph was safely seated, shivering worse than a wet cat, and the soldiers were already making their way back to shore, the sounds of our gratitude ringing in their ears.

Con and Hamish heaved me on board, my skirts indecorously riding up my thighs. Tam threw my burlap in before joining me.

As the town grew distant and my heart returned to normal, I stared at the shore. The sun was peeping over the horizon, spreading its golden light across the harbour, turning the water into a bronze shield. Why had there been no alert rung? Where were all the soldiers and constables searching for the missing prisoners? Was it possible that our escape, the bodies outside the cells, hadn’t yet been found? And what of wee Petie?

It wasn’t until our ship, a frigate named *Seaford*, had left the harbour and was gliding up the coast, sails bellying in the brisk wind, that the faint cacophony of bells could just be discerned.

I wished upon everything I held dear that we were safe. That we were out of reach.

You’d think by now I’d know to be careful what I wished for.

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CHAPTER FORTY - FIVE



The voyage to Inverness was mostly uneventful. Apart from Patrick's seasickness, and Con getting into a fight with a sailor who accused him of cheating at cards, we spent our days keeping out of the crew's way and watching the coastline and other ships pass by.

Tam and I were given a wee cabin that we shared with Peigi. The arrangement denied us intimacy, not that it mattered. We were content just to hold each other in the narrow bed, our limbs entwined. Peigi slept in a hammock suspended from the low ceiling.

We spent the time talking about the bairns, hoping that between them, everyone had managed. Torrie spoke about her weans, an ever-present ache in her heart. I knew what that felt like. I couldn't think about Fen without hurting. Hamish pretended indifference but from the faraway look that sometimes entered his eyes, I could tell he longed for his bairns. And home.

We all did.

It wasn't only Tam and I who discussed my daughter. Fen was the subject of many conversations. After all, it was because of Fen that we were able to instigate the escape, and have it succeed. As Tam pointed out, and Big Billy and Spinney concurred, finger-talking was what enabled us to communicate on the road to Aberdeen and in the tolbooth – right beneath the noses of redcoats, the turnkey and guard. It also enabled us to have conversations without the crew of the *Seaford* being aware. I couldn't wait to tell Fen how important her language was to everyone. How she'd helped save us.

At least, I hoped that's what would happen. We weren't home yet, and we worried endlessly about those going overland, trying to work out how far they would have travelled by now, which route they'd have taken. Whether or not they'd been apprehended by excise or militia. It didn't bear thinking about.

Big Billy and Spinney had been given a junior officer's cabin, which they shared with Torrie and Hamish. The rest of the men shared a space below deck with the sailors, a dark musty area filled with canvas hammocks and a makeshift kitchen. Even when the weather turned cold and blustery, waves crashing over the deck, it was hot down there. Odours of grease, bilge water, shit, piss and rancid food mingled with the ever-present miasma of smoke from the cook's fire and the many pipes. Nevertheless, the lads all said it was better than the tolbooth.

Brandon Stokes was a different person. Whether it was his experience in gaol or his obvious relief that his son wasn't culpable for the death of the lieutenant, or that his drinking was much reduced, his anger no longer hung about him like a winter haar. Taciturn, he nevertheless tried, joining us on the quarterdeck when we weighed anchor. He even quietly thanked me for proving his son's innocence.

'Who'd have thought Filib Mackenzie capable of such things?' he asked over and over in bewilderment.

One evening we were sitting on deck in a small group, wrapped in plaids, enjoying the relatively mild starry night. The ship had dropped anchor off Peterhead and was pitching gently. We were close enough to shore to hear the rumble of waves striking the rocky shoreline. There was the occasional flash from a lantern, and the swish of oars cutting through the water. We knew what they signified, but, 'What ye dinnae ken, ye dinnae ken,' as Big Billy said.

'You know he used to beat Una all the time,' said Torrie, determined to challenge Brandon's opinion of Filib. An opinion many in the village still held.

'It was because of him she lost her weans,' added Spinney. 'He didn't want to share her with anyone. Not even his own bairns.'

Brandon shook his head. 'But he'd give ye the shirt off his back if ye asked for it.' He rubbed his cheek. 'Anyway, dinnae think it's right ye speak ill of the dead – not when the lad cannae defend himself.'

Nor Una.

Torrie was about to argue when I closed my hand over hers and gave a slight shake of my head. Tam steered the conversation into calmer waters. Some people refused to see what was right in front of them. Some men had to attribute their own faults to women, their crimes, too. For the first time in days, I thought of William. But he wasn't alone in blaming his faults, his anger and cowardice on women. It was the way of the world.

A man's world.

Fortunately, I thought, resting my head on Tam's shoulder, not all men were cut from that cloth.



It took just over a week to sail around the coast, past Fraserburgh, Banff, Cullen, and towards the Moray Firth. I'd never seen my country from the water before and relished the vista. There was the rounded softness of green hills as well as the sharp beauty of jagged mountains. Small islands would appear, shit-covered mounds erupting out of the ocean inhabited by naught but a screech of seabirds. The smell and sound of the avian colonies was overpowering. Nevertheless, Torrie, Peigi and I remained by the rails, mesmerised by the swooping, gliding creatures, the way they danced above their nests, above the water, too, without once colliding. We saw seals lolling like lazy lads upon reefs and sand, or herding fish to share with the pelicans and gannets. Dolphins would sometimes follow the ship, lovely, slender arrows that arced and dived in the wash. We passed stretches of sand of unimaginable beauty and waters the colour of heaven-sent rainbows. We saw folk fishing, farmers tending their crofts, shepherds overseeing herds of wee sheep, as well as skinny kine grazing. The few houses we spotted, the occasional cluster of a clachan, were like those of Glasglen, squatting in the land as if they dared the winds and lashing rain to shift them. The people were lean, but incurious, continuing with their lives. I wished Fen was here with me to marvel at it all and stored up the sights greedily to describe to her later.

To the other bairns too, I thought, and smiled.

Almost every night, under the cover of darkness, fishing boats gathered around the hull like ducklings to their ma, delivering or receiving contraband. During daylight hours, legitimate cargo was taken ashore and

more was brought on board, some of which might even be accounted for once Inverness was reached. By the time we sailed into the Moray Firth, the hold was full – of whisky, rum, jenever, French and Spanish wines, matts of tobacco and so much more, including the few ankers we'd brought with us. The jugs had been shared among the crew.

The *Seaford* sailed into the mouth of the River Ness less than ten days after we fled Aberdeen, just as clouds gathered around the horizon were transforming the dawn light into a pearly haze. Rain was coming. Seagulls accompanied us, riding the thermals, their grey and white plumage glowing in the eerie light. Some alighted on the rigging, cawing instructions to the men.

We'd been awake for what seemed like hours. Our few possessions were assembled on the deck, our clothes brushed, our bodies and faces as clean as they could be. Already Inverness was abuzz. Smaller craft glided upstream, fishermen with nets and creels heading to the firth. On the river verge, sturdy men clambered over a crane that was negotiating the placement of huge bales on a cart. A short way downriver, we passed HMS *Berwick* and another cutter leaving port, much to my relief. Soldiers in uniform lined the rails, their stern faces fixed towards the horizon.

We glided past a huge partly ruined fort – Cromwell's, the captain told us. The flash of red and glint of steel marked the presence of more troops. I reached for Tam's hand and didn't let go. We'd been lucky so far but, as everyone knew, luck was finite.

The town itself was a mile or so south of the pier, spread along both banks of the river, which was deep and wide in parts. I could just discern the span of a bridge before the ship changed direction. Sails flapped, sailors clambered among the rigging, commands were shouted and there was bustle and ordered chaos as, finally, the ship's anchor was cast, her sails furled and the boats that would transport us and the cargo ashore prepared.

We'd reached our destination: New Quay. Next stop, Glasglen.

The captain was obliged to admit a couple of tidewaiters, excise officers who boarded the ship to check the cargo against the manifest. We were forced to be patient as the wheels of bureaucracy turned and I wondered how the captain would deal with the goods that wouldn't be acknowledged.

Tam was concerned for our few ankers of whisky. He hoped to sell them to the agent he originally planned to contact before his mission was rudely interrupted. As it was, he didn't have to be concerned. Whatever the

tidewaiters saw below deck, whatever documents the captain showed them, appeared satisfactory, as did the long handshake and meaningful looks before they disembarked. Finger-talking wasn't the only silent language.

After the tidewaiters left, the captain strode over to where Tam and I stood with the others. 'You might be interested to learn that since I last passed through the port, a new collector's been appointed.'

The old collector had been a Gordon and tended to look the other way when clan members did business in the area.

'I'd heard naught of this,' said Tam, eyes straying towards the pier. 'You think he'll be a problem?' asked Big Billy.

The captain shrugged. 'I pray not.'

'Who is he?' asked Spinney.

'The lads tell me he's a pompous Sassenach called Rogerson. While some of the gaugers, the tidesmen and riding officers we know are still posted here, this collector's brought his old surveyor from down Fife way. Whether it's fair weather or foul we be heading into, I dinnae ken. But ye may have bigger problems. We both may.'

All faces turned to the captain.

'The tidesmen also gave me a warning.' The captain removed his pipe from the corner of his mouth. He squinted over the distant water. 'The militia has been put on alert. Seems there was a mass breakout at the Aberdeen tolbooth around the time we raised anchor. A group of men disguised as lasses escaped, aided and abetted by their womenfolk. A number of other prisoners too. It's the talk of Aberdeen, talk of the country. The authorities here, including the excise, have been ordered to check the passenger register as well as cargo. Not on board, you understand, but once all passengers have disembarked. Ye won't be allowed to leave port until the officers give clearance.'

'I see,' said Tam. Torrie and Peigi exchanged terrified looks.

The captain leaned on the rails. 'I told them *my* passengers had nothing to do with any such breakout. That we were already at sea when this must have occurred. They said they'd inform their master.'

'Thank you, captain,' said Tam. He waited until the man went to talk to his lieutenant. 'Well. This is a wee bit awkward.'

'What do we do?' I asked.

'Brazen it out. Keep to the captain's version of the story. We were at sea when this happened. We heard the bells tolling but knew naught.'

‘Don’t you think it’s strange there was no mention of … well, Una and Filib?’

‘I do. All I can hope is that their deaths are being treated as a separate crime.’

I thought of Petie, witness to it all. Would anyone believe him? A wee laddie? I turned to Torrie and Peigi and opened my arms. They fell into them, one either side.

‘It will be alright,’ I murmured against their hair. ‘Your da will see us safe.’

While I believed Tam would see *us* safe, I no longer felt confident he could or would do the same for himself.

What if, after all the hazards we’d faced, leaving the bairns and Glasglen, we ended in a worse position than when we started?

Soon it was our turn to board the smaller craft that would take us to the pier. Together with a few sailors who’d earned the right to early shore leave, Tam, who’d insisted we go first, Con and I squeezed in next to the sailors and their belongings as we were rowed towards the fine new pier. The others would come on the next boat.

Every pull of the oars that brought us closer to land also brought us closer to officialdom. The Customs House grew in size and menace. You could tell them anywhere – the unimaginative stamp of secular authority.

It didn’t take long to draw level with the dock. Ready hands helped us up. I stood on the wooden boards brushing my skirts, my burlap at my feet, my stomach churning. We were at the mercy of whoever checked the register. Just as I was wondering if they’d be inclined to believe us, there was the tramp of heavy boots. The whole pier shook.

I turned to see who was approaching and my heart leapt into my throat.

It was the controller, flanked by a man who was clearly the surveyor and two other excise officers. Behind them marched four militia.

As they drew closer, I found it difficult to focus, to breathe. I grew hot, then ice cold. I reached around for Tam, anything to ground me. This couldn’t be happening.

‘*Leannan*, Greer,’ said Tam, sensing the panic threatening to swallow me. ‘You’re paler than a haggis.’ He tried to hold me steady, but he didn’t understand. He couldn’t. I wriggled out of his grasp, gave my head a little shake.

Surely, my eyes were playing cruel tricks. Coming towards me, chin held high as he nodded to workers who paused in their tasks to doff their bonnets or call out ‘Sir!’ in respectful tones, was the Inverness controller.

It was none other than William fooking Reed.

My dead husband.

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CHAPTER FORTY - SIX



*W*illiam halted a few feet away, deep in discussion with the junior officer beside him, oblivious to my presence. Disbelief and horror rose off me like steam. I wondered that he couldn't hear the shouting in my head. I couldn't stop staring, marvelling that he was here, a revenant, back from the grave.

Then I remembered. When the Montrose collector, Mr Warburton, explained about William's death at sea, he said they never found the body. Had William faked his death? To escape not only me and Fen, but Ava Tailyour and his two wee laddies? It was one way of starting afresh, I supposed.

And here he was, bold as you like, strutting down New Quay, his new life and his position about to collide with his past.

Tam tugged my sleeve. He used his fingers. *What is it? Why are you staring at the* … He fumbled a bit, failing to remember the sign for excise officer, but his meaning was evident. The concern on his face tore at me. Only, I didn't know how to tell him.

'The collector,' I whispered. 'I know him.'

My thoughts were like the birds wheeling above, changing direction, whirling, twirling, flapping, screeching. Thank God Fen wasn't here. Did this mean I was no longer Tam's wife? Please God, don't let William claim me.

'How?' asked Tam.

'How do you think?' I said.

Tam looked from me to William and back again. 'It cannae be.'

‘It is.’

My throat began to constrict, I tried to control the tremble in my hands. Tam took both in his and held them tightly.

‘Och, Tam. What do we do?’ I asked breathlessly.

Tam’s eyes narrowed. ‘We use this to our advantage.’

Good God. How?

The next boat from the *Seaford* began making its way across the river. Soon, we’d be together and have to answer for our presence here in Inverness. The redcoats moved into position around William and the other excise officers. The most senior of them, a sergeant, leaned over and said something to William, who’d just been handed a ledger by a sycophantic clerk who’d come tottering out of the Customs House.

‘All in good time, sergeant,’ said William with a dismissive wave. ‘The passenger register takes priority today.’

God. It was his voice. The clipped consonants. The slightly nasal enunciation. I’d once found it pleasant. Now it grated like metal wheels on cobbles.

‘Where’s the captain?’ William asked loudly, his eyes sweeping over me to land on Tam. Naturally, he returned to look at him again. How could you not? My savage Highlander, made all the more dangerous-looking after being locked in the tolbooth for weeks. Torrie and I had worked hard to tame his hair into a neat queue, combed his unruly beard, but that couldn’t disguise the broad shoulders and chest, the thrust of his chin, the wide mouth and cheek altered forever by the scar Gillespie left. Nor could his shabby kilt and plaid, his clean but stained shirt, hide his nobility. That was what William saw. It’s what everyone saw.

‘Can someone tell me where the captain of the *Seaford* is?’ repeated William calmly. He wore authority well. ‘Or do one of you—’ he gestured to the sailors who’d brought us across, ‘have the register? Find out, will you, Jones?’ William nodded in the direction of the sailors who were supervising a crate onto the dock.

Jones scurried off.

William leaned back and whispered something to the other excise officer, who stood to attention. ‘Sir!’ he exclaimed then stepped aside and in a booming voice shouted. ‘In the name of His Majesty King George, we hereby order those who’ve recently come ashore to present their papers to

the controller, Mr William Rogerson. Those who fail to comply will be taken into custody.'

Rogerson. That was also new.

Tam made a guttural sound. Con began muttering darkly. So, William had been tasked with making sure the Aberdeen escapees weren't on board any ships coming into port.

A dead man, a dishonest, cheating, lying scoundrel and bigamist, was about to seal our fate. I could just imagine the pleasure he'd take in arresting me, confining me to a cell before sending me back to Aberdeen to face trial. And what of the others? What would happen to them? To Tam? William always loathed Highlanders, almost as much as they did him.

The arrival of the rest of the family and our men from the *Seaford* provided a momentary distraction and there was a rush to help the lasses onto the pier. Torrie and Peigi joined us. Big Billy and Spinney and the other lads as well. There were more whispers and glances as Con and Tam told them what was happening. I was surrounded by Glasglenians, all of whom looked expectantly from Tam to the collector and back again.

'We're fooked,' said Big Billy.

'It will be alright, Greer,' said Torrie, trying to convince herself as well.

Whether it was because he heard my name, I'll never know, but at Torrie's words, William slowly spun around.

I saw his expression change from disregard to disbelief to a flash of fear. Then his nostrils flared, his chest expanded. He tugged his cuffs and a leisurely smile crawled across his face. Dear God, there he was. The old William. I could almost see the operation of his mind like the cogs in a clock ticking over, trying to fathom why I was there, how he could use it to his benefit. The world contracted until it was just him and me, separated but also inextricably linked by the finest of threads.

How to sever them?

I began to tremble as memories flooded me. His charming smile followed by vicious words, threats and insults. His cruel fingers, poisonous promises. His rejection of Fen. The way he could cower me with a mere gesture. Have me believe the worst of myself.

Standing there on the pier at Inverness, I momentarily forgot who I was, who I'd become, and began to transform back into a person I despised. The person he'd made me believe I was.

But, as our eyes locked, I also saw something else, felt something else. I was no longer *that* lass. I hadn't been for years. I'd made choices that he had no say over, that he didn't even know about. I was not the lass he left. Nor was I where he left me.

William took a confident step in my direction, believing his power had never waned, intending to stand over me as he always had.

Before I could brace myself, there was a rush of fragrance and skirts as two women pushed past the soldiers, blethering loudly, distracting William.

'Oh!' said a child-like voice. 'There you are, my love. I was wondering if the cloth I ordered had— Oh. No. Not yet.'

A very pretty English lass of no more than eighteen came up to William and, using his forearm as leverage, reached up to kiss his thin cheek.

William scarce noticed her. He was still staring at me. 'It *is* you.' He came closer, dragging the young lass with him. She pouted but allowed herself to be pulled forward. 'What are you doing here?' he asked.

Then he scanned the people behind me, sizing up Tam and the rest of the lads. Undaunted, he looked carefully at Torrie, lingered over Peigi. No-one spoke or moved, except Tam, who leaned forward and whispered in my ear.

'I choose you.'

Then the expression I knew all too well seized William's mouth, lit up his eyes, not with joy, but triumph. 'You're the Aberdeen lot the country's searching for – well, most of them,' he said, taking a quick count. He guffawed. 'And here you are, gracing my port. How bloody convenient.' As he was about to issue orders, I gripped his arm.

'Wait.'

William stared at my fingers closed around his sleeve and raised a brow. 'Unhand me now, wench, or I'll have you arrested.'

I didn't let go.

'How dare you touch my husband,' snapped the young lass. 'Let him go!' She gave my hand a sharp slap. My, my, the kitten has claws. I still didn't let go.

Use this to our advantage, Tam had said. Our *advantage*. William thought that was his domain. I would prove him wrong.

'Your husband, you say?' I said with a beaming smile, all too aware of the lass's huge eyes, the golden locks peeping out from beneath her

fashionable bonnet, her cloying scent. I chose to maintain eye contact with William. I released my grip on him very slowly.

The lass insisted on my attention. ‘Yes, *my* husband. We’ve been wed these last seven months.’ As she spoke, her hand travelled over her stomach, tracing the outline of an unmistakable swell.

Och, William *had* been busy.

‘Congratulations,’ I said, smiling as sweetly as I could. This time I looked directly at her; uncertainty bloomed in her azure eyes, and she sidled closer to William.

‘Elise,’ snapped William. ‘Go and wait in my office. I’ve some unpleasant business to attend here and I don’t want you witnessing it.’

I’ll bet he didn’t.

‘But it’s draughty, Willy,’ whined his wife. ‘And I promised Rosie she could make a start on my new dress.’ She glanced at the other young woman waiting a few steps back, clearly her maid.

Behind me, the low murmurs of the men turned dark. They weren’t prepared to have come all this way just to be arrested again by a Sassenach arse.

As William sent Elise reluctantly on her way, I turned to Tam.

Do you trust me? I asked him, using finger-talk.

With my life.

Do you trust me? I asked the others. Confused, they looked at each other, then me, and nodded.

‘It seems the felons from Aberdeen have arrived on our shores,’ announced William loudly.

There were gasps; bales thudded onto the pier, ropes and nets were stilled. Creels dropped. The redcoats advanced, muskets primed for his command. All eyes were upon us.

‘Before you make a terrible mistake, collector,’ I began as calmly as I could, even though my stomach was in knots and my knees shaking, ‘there’s something I need to show you.’

‘Oh, I’m not mistaken,’ said William. ‘Guar—’

‘You asked to see everyone’s papers.’ I swooped up my burlap and began rummaging through it. ‘If you would just examine these, you’ll see they’re in order.’ I pulled out some pieces of paper and thrust them in his direction.

‘These documents will prove to you, sir,’ I continued before he could interrupt, ‘that I’m just a humble lass from Edinburgh, who has travelled here with her family to start anew.’

William snatched the papers and began to examine them, flicking from one page to the next.

‘These aren’t official papers—’ he began.

‘Not so long ago …’ I dared to rest my hand on his forearm again, quieting him. My ring – *his* ring, which I’d continued to wear in lieu of a ring from Tam – flashed in the grey light. I raised my voice. I wanted everyone to hear what I had to say. ‘I lost my husband. Aye, it was very sad. Very hard. He was an excise officer, just like you.’ I paused. ‘It’s funny when you travel, you meet other women who’ve also lost their husbands. It makes grief a shared thing. Something we all hold in common no matter where we’re from. Not husbands of course,’ I said, giving a little laugh. Some of the men chuckled. ‘But the sadness, the terrible consequences of losing them.’

There was agreement from a couple of the women who’d wandered down the pier to see what was going on. William clicked in exasperation and tried to pull away from my hold. I tightened it.

‘In fact, just recently, I met a lovely lass in Montrose.’ I figured some poetic licence was justified. ‘Ava Tailyour. She too had lost her husband, and her two wee laddies their da. He was also an excise officer, drowned, just like mine had. Fancy that, I thought. But it’s such a dangerous occupation. Enemies on all sides ready to expose you …’

William froze. I withdrew my hand.

‘Sir, I beg of you.’ I raised my voice, playing to the growing audience as more folk thronged onto the pier, drawn to the commotion. ‘Pay these papers close attention and you’ll see you’re wrong. They’re as official as they need to be to prove we aren’t the felons you seek.’ I gestured behind me and made a scoffing noise. Tam and the others laughed obligingly, innocence personified.

‘We simply came here to forge a new life, forget the old one and *everyone in it*.’ I looked meaningfully at William. ‘Anyhow, once you speak to the captain, you’ll learn we were already at sea when the breakout in Aberdeen occurred. We cannot be your criminals.’

Much to my relief, the soldiers lowered their weapons.

‘You should also know, sir, if you need further proof, my friend, Captain Neville of His Majesty’s navy– you’ve heard of him? He’d happily vouch for me – us – and everything I’m saying. He knows *everyone* involved.’

I let that sink in.

‘You should also know that, from here, we’re travelling far, far away. You’ll never see us again. Not unless you give us cause.’ I paused and let the threat hang. ‘Please, sir, imagine if you will if I was your wife, or rather, widow. Would you not want some kindness shown to me? To any wife who loses her husband and is left to fend alone?’

It was always hard to tell what William was thinking. But I saw him turning over what I’d said, what I’d implied. He wasn’t a stupid man, just a cruel one. He was also proud and ambitious. As collector, he held a prestigious position. Would he risk all that for whatever punishment he might be able to inflict on me?

I wasn’t sure.

Tam rested both hands on my shoulders. He gave a gentle press.

William made a show of reading the papers, exchanging one page for another, scanning what was written. ‘You’re leaving?’ he asked finally.

‘Never to return,’ said Tam, meeting William’s eyes. A quiet battle was fought.

William folded the pages and handed them back. ‘Never to return.’ It was his final decree.

To us. To me.

He lifted his hands in the air. ‘My apologies, madam, sir. Seems I’m mistaken. The papers are in order. Take your belongings and be gone. Come,’ he turned to the soldiers and excise officials, ‘we’ve cargo to inspect.’

With that, we were dismissed.

Determined not to hurry, not to let William see how close he came to undoing me, I took my time putting the papers back in the burlap, rearranging my plaid and making sure Peigi’s and Torrie’s were pinned. I ushered Big Billy, Spinney and the others ahead, and waited while the lads retrieved the trunks containing the ankers and hoisted them onto their shoulders. The entire time, I had one eye on William. I wouldn’t put it past him to change his mind and somehow turn events to his favour.

Then I too was departing the pier and walking towards an inn where a meal could be had, horses hired, supplies bought. We would soon be on the

road to Glasglen.

‘I think you and I need to have a long talk,’ said Tam, walking beside me, a trunk on his shoulder.

‘Only if it’s over a dram … or two.’

‘I was thinking larger quantities.’

The street was rocky, full of small potholes and divots. A few warehouses lined the streets, some ramshackle houses gripped between them. Men sat outside on upturned barrels, mending nets, repairing creels. An old woman with a potato face and kind eyes had set up a cart from which she sold mussels. The smell was terrible. Chickens raced back and forth underfoot, a few scantily dressed bairns ran about throwing stones at some poor creature till a shout came for them to ‘git inside’.

But my eyes were constantly drawn to the swell of hills behind the houses, and, beyond those, to the craggy peaks rising in a purple haze in the distance. That way lay Glasglen.

Home. Fen.

‘That was a brave thing you did back there, *leannan*.’ Tam lowered his voice so no-one else could hear. They were all talking about it, though. They might have been using their native tongue, but like William, the sound of my name made my ears prick.

‘Or foolish,’ I replied. After all, I couldn’t guarantee how William would react.

‘They’re one and the same,’ Tam said, and with his free hand, pulled me under his arm and kissed me soundly on the temple. ‘So,’ he said, as the inn drew closer – a two-storey place that had been freshly painted, ‘that’s the man I replaced.’

‘You didn’t replace *anyone*, Tamhas Gordon, and you know it.’

‘Tell me, if William Reed is alive, does that mean we’re even married?’

I raised my eyes to his. ‘Does it matter?’

He stopped in the middle of the road. ‘Not to me.’ He smiled.

‘You’re my wife. I don’t care whether God or man deems it – only you.’

I returned his smile. ‘Then I *am* yours, Tamhas Gordon. Always. Just as you, I hope, are mine.’

‘Always,’ he said and, carefully putting down the trunk, swept me into his arms and planted a long, hot kiss on my mouth.

For a moment, I forgot where we were as heat raced through me, heat and something else, something comforting, but also barbaric and dangerous.

The sun rose and set, the moon waxed and waned, the rain fell and dried as we held onto each other, soldered our promises onto our bodies and into our souls.

Eventually, he raised his head and pushed my hair back, nuzzling my cheeks with his nose. I stroked the face that had become so very dear, so beautiful to me, before bringing his mouth back to mine.

‘The sooner we get you two home, the better,’ said Torrie, who had come back with Peigi to hurry us along.

With a laugh, Tam released me and picked up the trunk. We fell into step, Tam, me, Torrie and Peigi.

‘I didn’t know you had papers, Greer,’ said Torrie as we neared the inn. We paused on the road outside. Con was supervising the men stacking the trunks near the corner of the building. We could hear Big Billy bargaining for food and horses.

‘I didn’t – not the kind William meant.’ I found the papers and passed them to her. She took one look and snorted before handing them to Peigi, who, after a quick flick through and an exclamation of incredulity, passed them to her da.

They began to laugh.

I smiled. What I’d given William were our rough plans for breaking the men out of the tolbooth and retrieving the whisky. Everything was written down, from the moment we left Glasglen to escaping Aberdeen – ideas, alternatives, what we’d do in the event of capture or failure. Between each idea I’d written, *Tam is innocent. Tam is innocent*, in bold letters. Included among them happened to be my marriage certificate and William’s death notice. I’d hadn’t removed them since Montrose.

Torrie looked back towards the pier. Another ship had come into port and the dock area was crowded. The rain began to grow heavier. ‘Well,’ she said, indicating we should find shelter, ‘if that dead husband of yours wasn’t sure we were the escapees before, he was after reading those.’

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘He was.’

‘Wasn’t that risky, giving them to him?’ asked Peigi. We huddled together beneath the inn’s roof. Water dripped incessantly from the eaves forming a massive puddle.

‘It was, but it was a risk I had to take,’ I said. ‘What I know about him was never enough to guarantee our safety. He could have declared me

doolally, denied everything.' I flashed a smile at Tam. 'It was your da who gave me the idea.'

'I did?'

'You said, we had to turn the situation to *our* advantage. That's why I handed him *all* the papers in my burlap. Not only did he see proof of my marriage to him and legal notification of his death, when I named Ava Tailyour and Captain Neville, he knew then that I could call on witnesses to prove that William Rogerson was, *is*, in fact, William Reed. If word should ever get out that he was a bigamist – worse – that he'd faked his own death to escape not one but two wives and three bairns, he'd not only lose his position and reputation, he'd also be flung in gaol. William will always look after his own interests first. Like the obedient wife I am—' I held Tam's gaze, 'I took the advantage from him and made it ours. Everyone on that pier saw him read what I handed him then claim we weren't the Aberdeen felons. That alone implicates him in our crime – he knowingly set us free.'

There was stunned silence.

'Now, I hope, we'll be safe.'

'From him at least,' said Tam.

We still had to avoid troops of redcoats and the excise, including a vengeful Gillespie, and not just as we travelled back to Glasglen. It was the way of life in the Highlands. God, it was wearying.

'I didn't know you had such a clever wife,' said Torrie.

'I didn't only marry her because she was bonnie,' said Tam. 'I have standards.'

I punched him in the arm. Tam chuckled.

'Nor did I ken that Peigi and I had such wise and brave kin,' said Torrie. 'If I had, maybe I'd have spoken to you differently the first time I met you.' She studied me carefully. 'Nae. Maybe not.' She waited. Smiling.

Kin. I took a deep breath, my ribs expanding to accommodate a swelling heart. Damn if tears didn't begin to bank. 'There's a lot you don't know about me, Torrie Dorward.'

This time, it was Torrie who opened her arms, beckoning me to enter them. 'Aye,' she said huskily. 'But fook am I going to have fun finding out.' She held me tight. Peigi wrapped her arms about both of us. My eyes overflowed.

Before we could move, Tam folded us all in his giant embrace.

'You hear that? You're kin now, Greer Gordon,' he said.

‘One of us,’ said Peigi. I could feel her wet cheeks against mine.
‘Kindred spirits,’ I whispered.

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EPILOGUE

Glasglen
Late summer 1781 to spring 1784

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In the years that followed, I would sometimes wonder if the rash promise I'd made to William on the pier at Inverness, which Tam repeated, sealed our fate. *Never to return* …

Before we left Inverness, we sold the ankers to Tam's agent for a good price (the whisky had aged and the taste, according to the agent was 'incomparable' – Robbie Macpherson was onto something after all). Con and one of the lads were dispatched to Gordon Castle to pay the duke a portion of the overdue lease monies. We were in terrible debt.

Finally, we rode into Glasglen a week later to find Ishbel and the others had beaten us by a few days. Not that it stopped those in the village celebrating again. A ceilidh was held – a few, in fact – including one to celebrate Tam's and my marriage. After all, I'd never been wed to William Rogerson. As far as everyone was concerned, William Reed was dead.

May God rest his fooking soul.

A month after we came home, Torrie, Hamish and the bairns finally abandoned their cottage and moved into the Folly. The infields, which had looked so promising last year, had been grossly neglected at a time when they most needed tending. Torrie and Hamish worked hard towards their recovery, to ensure the crops thrived, spreading dung, repairing a watercourse, enclosing the sheep in folds each night. Ploughing, sowing, milking, even shearing. We all helped when we could, but it was mostly a lost cause.

The Folly itself was as unfinished as when I left it. I still recall how glad I'd been to see it looming in the distance and how despondent when I saw the state of the interior. Mary had tried everything to keep the few remaining stent workers on task, but without the threat of Tam, me or Con to goad them, never mind Jon Boyne, they'd reneged on their promises. As Tam said, it mightn't have been so bad had the remaining villagers chosen to look after their own crops or livestock, but too many had been idle.

Rooms that had almost been ready to welcome furniture were riddled with mould, plaster was falling off the walls. The beautiful drawing room that Tam had always envisaged would accommodate his entire family and host many a ceilidh remained as I remembered: four damp walls with a hearth that wouldn't draw and a crumbling chimney. The gardens were either overgrown or the chickens and sheep had been left to wander and eaten everything. Again, Mary and the bairns had done what they could, but without the help of the tenants and their stent labour, it was too much. It was a bitter pill for Tam to swallow. He and the lads had risked their lives so the villagers could remain on clan lands, yet there were those who refused to look beyond their selfish needs.

Others had left altogether. Though we'd only been gone a few weeks, three families had up and left: Ronan and Helen Gordon went north, Old Hugh Steele the smith was tempted by an offer from Kildrummie, while the Dorward cousins headed west, where they believed prospects would be better.

Something told me this exodus was just the beginning.



As the months passed, the kine that had been fatted in the shielings over summer were sold. The barley was reaped and milled but yielded just a fraction of what it had in the past. There wasn't enough to make the quantity of whisky we needed and feed the livestock and ourselves. We'd no choice but to use what coin we'd earned at the trysts to buy more grain so we could at least produce spirit. Consequently, we failed to pay what was owing to the duke either in coin or in kind.

Our debts grew. It was even worse for the crofters. The only semi-reliable source of income was the peatreek.

Then, two things happened that altered everything. First, Mr Gillespie was arrested and hanged. Apparently, he'd not only taken part in an insurance scam, but he'd been forging Treasury bills, earning a tidy sum. When the news reached us, I was stunned until Tam pointed out what was more surprising was that gaugers didn't do it more often.

'It's not like they're trying to make a good life more comfortable. Like us, they're simply trying to feed their families. It's why Scotsmen take the

bloody job in the first place. It's why some are sympathetic towards us. Should have guessed that one of the most vicious was breaking the law too. Almost as if he was punishing us for his crimes.'

The second was the passing of a new law that gave the excise more power than ever. They now had permission to destroy any distilling equipment, which meant even the small household stills in every cottage in Glasglen became illegal. Excise officers could also seize any horses and carts suspected of being used in the transporting of spirit. No proof was required, just a suspicion. Villages and clachans, communities and families were torn asunder. Reports reached us of how nearby settlements, unable to support themselves without transport, or being able to make peatreek, were there one day and gone the next. Some moved to the coast, lured by the promise of a living from the sea. Others went to Ireland or America. Most went south, pouring into Edinburgh and Glasgow. Some ventured further into England.

The cities began to choke with humans, drown in despair.

I sometimes wondered if we lived in a kind of alternate world at the Folly. We barely managed – the land, the villagers, especially those who made it clear they'd brook no interference from Tam or me. Yet, the children thrived. I'd never seen Fen more content and it made my heart sing. Ever since we'd come back and everyone learned the role finger-talking had played in our mission, she'd grown in confidence. She was almost as tall as me and such a bonnie lass. Something the lads were noticing.

Each evening we'd sit around the kitchen table or, if we'd had an early dinner, in the study, and I'd look at the glowing faces, listen to the hum of conversation, the spats when we'd have them (and we had many), the passionate opinions about the war in the colonies, the lairds' growing reliance on sheep, about what were now being called the Clearances – the removal of families from their ancestral lands – and marvel that this was *my* family. That I belonged here.

And I did.

Gaelic may be something I was yet to master, but I understood these people in ways I never thought possible. Like Fen's finger-talking, it wasn't so much what was said, but it came through the gestures, the silences, the raised brows, ready smiles, blazing frowns. The joy, the despair, the grief, the anger, the small victories. The love. How, together, we'd stride over

mountains, work the fields, tend the livestock, operate the (illicit) stills, laugh, weep or argue over a dram, or stare with unseeing eyes into tranquil waters or past mountain peaks.

These were my people. My kin.

While the rest of the family lived beneath the Folly roof, Peigi chose to remain down in the farmhouse to help Mabelle look after an increasingly frail Ishbel and the farm. Torrie and I made sure to visit daily, Tam whenever he was in Glasglen. But it was evident her time on this earth was ending. Sometimes I'd just sit with her and she'd watch me weave or spin, crafts Fen and I had begun to perfect under her impatient tutelage.

Tam and the lads would travel from Glasglen regularly, taking any excess peatreek to the coast or inland. Twice a year, Tam would make the trip to see the laird at Gordon Castle, negotiating the lease and our ever-growing debt.

Each time, Tam would press the duke about getting a licence to make whisky legally, and each time the duke told him that while he continued to plead the case in Westminster, so far the influence of Ferintosh remained strong and licences elusive. One time when Tam expressed his frustration at the growing debt and increasing difficulty of making lease, the duke's response was, 'Tough times call for tough choices.'

What did he mean by that? Was he about to give our land over to the sheep the English so loved that poured money into lairds' coffers?

As if to drive the point home, that winter Ishbel died. On a cold night, when a haar rose from the loch and wrapped the entire glen in its spectral clasp, she went to sleep and never woke. Peigi found her. It was a blessed relief in a way. Sorrow hung over the house, the glen, for days. Her funeral was a sombre affair. Peigi was inconsolable, as were the bairns. Fen was distraught. She'd already lost her grandparents, and the last three years had seen Ishbel take their place. Fen would miss her greatly. We all would.

While we were still making the decision about what to do with Ishbel's house, Patrick asked Peigi to marry him. Ever since they'd travelled to Aberdeen together and shared that mighty adventure, they'd been close. It was Peigi who helped Patrick find joy after Alice and Ceana and so it seemed fitting that it was Patrick who brought joy not only to Peigi, but to all of us in the wake of Ishbel's passing. Tam granted them Ishbel's cottage and so death ceded to life again.

I was so caught up in the events orbiting around us that, for a while, I failed to see what the land could no longer hide. Or was I wilfully ignorant?

The year William Pitt the Younger became prime minister of Great Britain, famine struck the glen. Not just our lands, but all the Highlands. Crops failed, cattle and sheep died. Vegetables withered in the ground, and the lochs that had always been so generous with their bounty, denied a harvest as well.

Weans died in the womb. Bairns were unable to thrive and perished. Husbands keeled over in the fields, women in the byres, by wells and in beds. Weeping filled the glen for days on end. The men coped by getting blootered.

Then the commissioners of supply raised the price of barley to prevent us distilling. No longer were we able to divide the grain between domestic use and whisky-making. All grain had to be given over to food. We tried to distil what we could, we had to, but we were producing less than half of what we'd done over a year earlier.

In 1784 we failed to pay anything towards the lease. The duke sent word from his London abode that such a situation couldn't continue.

Before winter was even over, families left with no choice began to leave the glen. Simon and Lucinda Geddes and their lads, along with Gap-Toothed Rupert, who'd lost his ma, poor grieving Maire, at the beginning of the year. He went to Edinburgh. In short order these departures were followed by the Morrices, the Browns and even the Harpers. Walking past their darkened homes was a constant sad reminder of what we'd worked so hard to prevent.

Tam and I determined to remain, to fight for the land, the people, our family. That was, until the day the family came to us.

'It's no good, Da,' said Fionn. He'd grown into a tall lad of seventeen. 'We've done all we can and more. The barley is mostly rotted in the ground. The rain is relentless and the potatoes have a blight. The sheep are dying in the fields and the kine we took to the shielings aren't worth the trip to Falkirk. The prices are too low. Not even the peatreek we sell is enough.'

It wasn't the first time the bairns had spoken like this to their da. Torrie had broached the subject the year before. Peigi and Patrick had raised leaving as the land around Ishbel's farmhouse (we still thought of it that way) was unable to grow anything. Auld Artur was struggling, as were the Duffs, Larnachs, Boynes, Molly and Dom.

‘Where would we go?’ asked Tam quietly. We were together in the study after sharing a scant meal. Peigi sat next to Patrick, who had his arms wrapped around her. Fen was playing cards with Elspet and Pol, the dogs stretched out next to them. Torrie bounced Caitlin on her lap while the twins played a game with sticks. Hamish was trying to amuse Aoife. Mary sat by a cruisie lamp, attending to some mending. I could see the outline of her fingers through the thin fabric. Even our clothes were struggling to stay together.

‘Nova Scotia,’ said Torrie. ‘We’ll go to Ciaran.’ She paused and waited as we absorbed her words. A letter had arrived from Ciaran a few weeks earlier. The war was finally over – the colonists victorious. Many British soldiers had chosen to remain, Ciaran among them. ‘He says it’s a new world over there, with land aplenty, held in common. There are opportunities for those who wish to find them.’

‘There’s also many Highlanders and, better still, nae bloody lairds,’ added Hamish.

Tam inhaled deeply, then looked at me. His eyes were laden with sorrow and what I realised, with no small level of shock, resignation. ‘What do ye think, *leannan*? Is it time to leave?’

I felt the weight of the bairns’ anticipation. I tried to read their gaunt faces. God, I could even count the ribs on Bran and Sceólang. When had that happened?

Did I admit to my husband that I too had been thinking about leaving? About starting again somewhere else? Somewhere where hard work reaped at least some rewards. I’d done it once before and never looked back. I could do it again. We all could.

‘Your da once said to me something I’ve never forgotten,’ I began. The twins stilled. Aoife looked at me with her beautiful cat eyes, so like her ma’s. Fen paused, watching me carefully.

Me? mouthed Tam.

‘It was after he hired me to be housekeeper, or house-maker.’ I looked at the peeling paint, the mould in one corner, aware of the room across the hall still, after all this time, unfinished. ‘I wasn’t very good at that, was I?’

‘Och, *mo ghràidh*,’ said Tam, reaching over and grabbing my hand. ‘You made a *home*.’

‘Nae, my love. That wasn’t me – not in the sense you mean it.’

He began to disagree, the others too, bless them. I waited for them to hush and then pried my hand out of Tam's and, as I spoke, I also signed.

'See, what your da said to me was that a house, or place, even Glasglen, isn't a home. Walls and a roof, or a village, don't make a home. Home is where the people you love most are, whether that be here, in a mountain bothy, a shieling shack or somewhere else entirely. What I'm trying to say —' Tears began to well as I gazed at each and every one of them, 'Is that as long as you are with me, I could live anywhere in the world. *You* are my home.'

Tam's gaze was intense. He remembered. He slowly began to nod. Torrie inhaled sharply. The hounds tilted their heads to regard me. Fen made a noise suspiciously like a sob and came and threw her arms around me. Pol followed, burying his face in my neck.

'Nova Scotia. New Scotland,' said Tam, filling the uneasy silence. 'It has a certain ring to it, don't you think?'

Everyone began to talk at once. Cautiously at first, but then with growing fervour as excitement took hold.

'You do realise,' I said after a while, waiting until the blether eased, 'that if we decide to go, there's a terrible hurdle you're all going to have to overcome? One that you're going to need to consider very, very seriously.'

'What's that?' asked Elspet breathlessly.

'What?' asked Torrie, worry flashing across her face.

I winked at Fen. 'You'll all be *incomers*.'

There was a beat, then everyone began to laugh.

Nervously.



It was a cold but sunshiny morning the day we left Glasglen. Frost coated the ground, our breath plumed in vents of snowy white. The loch glimmered as the first rays struck its surface and I imagined the selkies and kelpies tumbling and gliding just beneath, their eldritch eyes watching us carefully.

We were a long pony-train laden with clothes, bedding, looms, spindles, some furniture and books, as well as ankers and barrels of whisky. How were we to pay for passage for all the villagers otherwise? We were still

smugglers at heart and knew the places to do business as we wended our way south and west, dodging any excise, towards the port town of Oban.

I turned at the last minute to look upon the place that had, not exactly made me welcome, but where I'd found love and Fen and I a family – an ever-growing one, I thought, placing a protective hand over the swell of my belly. After years of believing my fecund years over, I was overjoyed to find I was with child. Tam saw where my hand rested and gave a silly grin. Fen caught our shared look and gave a beautiful smile.

It's you, me, Tam and all my brothers and sisters, Ma. Always.

My heart filled and yet, as I left Glasglen behind, disquiet plucked at my contentment.

When I travelled here all those years ago, I'd passed by so many abandoned villages and clachans. It had made me sad and a little curious, but I hadn't really thought about who had dwelled there, what their dreams and hopes had been, how they'd loved, lived and died. Now Glasglen would become like those empty places, a memorial to once-upon-a-time. Would we be remembered? Or would we too be forgotten as nature claimed the land back?

Would I miss Glasglen? I'd miss the sight of the snow-capped peaks of Ben Dhàphen and its mist-covered crags, the haar that rose from the loch and hid the village in a ghostly veil. I'd miss the smell of peat every morning, the pine-scented forest in summer, the crackling burns in winter. The cheeky hares, the noble deer and stags, the Clan a' Cheo, or Children of the Mist that would stand atop a crest and roar into the valley. I would miss the moon rising in argent splendour and the stars that pierced the firmament reflected in the loch. But I wouldn't miss the hunger, the frustration, the growing threat of authority, the never-ending battle to survive – all of it made bearable by the very folk who rode beside me, including Bran and Sceólang, who loped alongside, sensing adventure.

That's what this leave-taking was. An adventure. It was a Clearance, too, but it was our choice. The duke hadn't forced us off the land, nor had he surrendered it to sheep. At least, not yet. The land had called time on us, and we'd heeded its call. Would Nova Scotia be any better? I didn't know. At that moment, I didn't care, either, so long as whatever it offered, I had these people beside me.

Tamhas Gordon, Fen and our family. Always.

Big Billy chose that moment to ride up, holding out a cup brimming with whisky, much of it spilling over the lip as his garron bumped along and he held the reins with one hand.

‘Here,’ he said, trying to pass me the cup. ‘We’re having a *doch-an-dorris*. A drink for the road, to celebrate.’

Lost in thought, I’d failed to notice that everyone, even the bairns, had something in their hand. There were small gills or horn cups, some had entire jugs held aloft, ready to toast.

‘To new beginnings!’ cried Dom.

‘To Nova Scotia,’ said Big Billy.

‘To New Scotland,’ corrected Mick.

‘To kith and kin,’ added Auld Artur, his arm – and a decent splash of whisky – describing an arc.

‘To fooking fine spirit,’ said the reverend, looking down in despair at what Artur wasted.

‘To love,’ I said quietly, so only Tam heard.

‘To love,’ he said and, leaning over, touched his cup to mine.

We drank, and as the fiery whisky burned its way down my throat, leaving a satisfying warmth, I wondered if we would ever return.

Part of me hoped not, while another, deeper part of me, the part that will remain forever in the Highlands, prayed it would be so. Maybe not me, maybe not Fen or her bairns, but sometime, in the future, one of my kin, *our* kin, would return and call this beautiful, savage and unforgiving place, this place I loved with all my heart, home.

I began to imagine who that might be: a bonnie brave lass with a large family, a lad with his. Or would it be someone yet to find theirs?

Or, maybe, just maybe, I thought, as my cup was refilled, it would be a distiller, a lass or lad who no longer needed to make whisky in secret stills high atop a mountain or beside a bubbling burn, but who could share their spirit with not only their community, but the world.

I raised my cup to the heavens, to the future. I raised my whisky to our successors. May they be worthy to call themselves so.

‘*Slàinte*.’

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



Women have always been a part of whiskey history, they just never received the credit.

Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch and Irish Whiskey*

Now is my chance to explain not only my inspiration for the story you've just read, and the research I undertook, but also which episodes were based on fact, which characters were real historical figures, and what was created from my imagination.

For some years now, encouraged by my husband, son and our dear friend, Bill Lark – known as the 'godfather of Australian whisky' – I've toyed with the idea of writing a novel about whisky and the politics surrounding a drink that has exploded in popularity, not just in Australia and my home state of Tasmania, but around the world. I should declare at the outset that we own a small artisan brewing and distillery business in Hobart called Captain Bligh's and make beer, whisky and other spirits and liqueurs.

Despite this connection, I was completely daunted by the prospect of writing a book featuring whisky. While I've always enjoyed the drink, and thought I knew something of its origins, I'm aware how passionate its makers and connoisseurs are, how they understand, respect and appreciate whisky, and if I wrote a novel where whisky was almost a character, I ran the risk of treading on some very big toes – or, worse, alienating friends and colleagues. Nevertheless, nervous but also excited, I began my research.

What I didn't anticipate was just how immersed I'd become in the absolutely fascinating history of the spirit, and especially its part in

Scotland's tumultuous and endlessly captivating past. Naturally, this required me to draw on my few trips to Scotland, read numerous books, watch wonderful documentaries and explore dozens of websites, visit distilleries, learn to distil, and to drink a number of delicious drams from the region where the novel is set (a tough job).

Scottish history is rich, layered, full of conflicts, loyalties, betrayals, great sorrow and triumph. Heroes emerge and fall, and while certain names are remembered and celebrated or reviled, it's what the ordinary people were up to that piques my curiosity and sends me down twistytwiney rabbit holes.

What was equal parts intriguing and frustrating was learning the role women played in the history of whisky production. They scarcely rate a mention in the records, and yet, as is usually the way with any history, when you delve deeper, when you look at things like court or parish records, read contemporary diaries, letters and novels, learn the stories passed through generations, you find them. More recent histories do mention women in whisky, but again, the information is scant. Yet the women *were* there. They were not only distillers in their own right – mainly but not exclusively on home stills – they were also bold, canny and brave guardians of the 'black economy'.

Some of the books I mention in the following pages tell terrific tales of what these women did and, while they'll arouse admiration and often a laugh, they fail to really tell the story of what else the women achieved. After all, when the men were absent – either travelling the whisky trails to sell their contraband, away in the bothies distilling, or arrested, incarcerated, transported, killed or off fighting wars – who maintained the supply? Who cared for livestock, crops, family, home and the damn whisky? It had to be the women. Resilient, strong ones. And if you look into the gaps of the official records, you can see them waiting impatiently for their contribution to be acknowledged. I hope this book, though ultimately a work of fiction, albeit deeply rooted in the facts of history, goes some way to redressing this.

As I hope this novel demonstrates, whisky was the lifeblood of so many communities throughout Scotland and essential to their survival. For the Scots of the period – a time when the Highland Clearances had begun but not yet reached their zenith – it was also a middle finger to the English authorities that set laws around what the Scots, especially Highlanders, saw

as a God-given right – the right to make, drink and sell the peatreek and thereby make a sustainable (barely) living and be able to remain on clan lands. As Gavin D Smith writes in his marvellous book (which was such a valuable resource), *The Secret Still: Scotland's illicit whisky makers*:

> Successive generations of Scottish historians have failed to stress just how significant it [the trade in illicit whisky] was to the 'black' economy of the country during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and particularly to the black economy of the Highlands and the Islands.

Little did I know when I opened Smith's book how much more I would appreciate not just the complex and fraught history of whisky-making in Scotland, but the politics – social, cultural, gendered and class – underpinning it all.

Like ale- or beer-making, once upon a time distilling whisky was a domestic job, done mainly on small stills for a family's consumption with any excess sold or bartered.

In his *A Short History of Distillation*, AJ Forbes states that with the dissolution of the monasteries in Henry VIII's time, monks found themselves forced to take up other professions, becoming apothecaries, doctors, brewers and distillers, using the skills they'd learned in the monasteries to make a living. You can see where this is heading, can't you?

I'm once again reminded of what Judith Bennet wrote in her fabulous book about the history of ale and ale-wives (invaluable when I was writing *The Brewer's Tale*): 'when a venture prospers, women fade from the scene'. This happened with ale and beer – the moment it expanded beyond the home (initially thanks to the monks, though they were just the beginning) and made money, women were pushed out. Likewise with whisky. It won't surprise you to learn that many Scottish female distillers were accused of witchcraft, and apparently in Ireland tax collectors targeted women whiskey-makers.

The role of women in the production of whisky may have initiated my writing of this book, but it was the importance of the spirit as an essential part of the 'black economy' and the lengths taken to protect it that captivated and perturbed me. Men and women risked life and liberty for it. What social and political factors caused this?

As I swiftly discovered, there was no one cause. Whether it was lingering resentment towards the English after the Union of Crowns in 1707, when an excise board was appointed and heavy taxes began to be levied, or the impact of the Jacobite rebellions and subsequent brutal efforts to stamp out any last pockets of resistance – these were all important to Scottish cultural identity. But making whisky, while an overtly political act, was also a means of survival, a way of putting food on the table, paying lease, and avoiding exile. Take, for example, this quote from the 1798 *State of Facts, Relative to the Scottish Distillery*:

> It is in general in the hands of poor illiterate farmers, six or eight who engage in a thirty- or forty-gallon still, merely for the sake of converting the produce of their farms and that of their neighbours' into a more saleable article.

Whisky production was so policed by government officials and heavily taxed because it was extremely profitable for the Privy purse. The amount of alcohol consumed per capita was huge. Smugglers, by evading taxes, deprived the English government of their 'rightful' dues. Excise, the name given to the tax, was considered evil and unjust and avoiding paying it an almost righteous duty.

Dr Samuel Johnson, in his *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1755, captures the feeling against this forever increasing charge:

> *Excise*: A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and judged not by the common judges of property, but by wretches hired by those to whom Excise is paid.

Whisky smugglers were relentlessly pursued by men employed for just that purpose: excise officers or gaugers (because they gauged the amount of spirit). Yet the taxes were so disproportionately high, the average Scot couldn't even consider paying them. And so people defied the laws and those who upheld them simply to survive.

In some places in the Highlands, eking out a living from the land was practically impossible. In other parts of the country, the fields were fertile and lush. Vast tracts of land were bought by or gifted to wealthy Englishmen who had no allegiance to the clans or the land and cleared the

people off it to run the far more profitable sheep. It wasn't only the English who did this, either. Native Scots, clan leaders, also cleared the people off their pastures. After touring Scotland with his great friend James Boswell in the 1700s, Samuel Johnson wrote that clan chieftains had 'denigrated from patriarchal rulers to rapacious landlords'. In other words, they too wanted the land to make them wealthy. If that meant forcing their own people out of villages and clachans and replacing them with sheep, so be it. It was a shocking state of affairs that contributed to the dislocation and immigration of tens of thousands of Scots – many unwillingly – to the cities and other countries, including, after colonisation, Australia.

As you can imagine, this also created a tinderbox environment, pitting Scottish men and women and children against those they regarded as representing oppressive authority (militia, excise men or gaugers, even their lairds) or worse, traitors. Often whisky raids resulted in bloodshed and death. By the time the book ends, authorities in Scotland were legally able not only to conduct raids and seize contraband spirit and stills, but to destroy anything they believed was related to production and distribution, including carts, horses, donkeys and other items. Taking the very means struggling Scots needed to eke out a living forced many to leave their ancestral lands.

Women played a significant role in every aspect of this risky and dangerous enterprise – whether it was making the spirit (on home stills or in bothies), jinxing the gauger by alerting the villagers to the presence of excise and soldiers, distracting the same to allow any illegal activity to be concealed, or being part of the networks that distributed and sold the products. Women were vital to every step of the whisky-making process – even down to growing the grain or making alternate products that could be traded. They knew their spirits and were renowned for the flavour combinations they'd create with their punches and the addition of herbs to make usquebaugh. Women's involvement was critical not just to the business of smuggling, but to family, village and Highland life.

The more I learned, the more I understood how collaborative whisky smuggling was: between men and women (and often children) yes, but also between villages, clachans, the mysterious whisky roads that developed over time to avoid officials, and the various networks that grew up, both legal and illegal. Even the relationships between authority figures, lairds and their tenants, magistrates and 'criminals', often saw those on the right

side of the law turning a blind eye and even aiding and abetting those deemed felons. It's a fact that lairds often paid court fines, judges dismissed cases despite overwhelming evidence brought by gaugers, and that these same law-makers sometimes left court with jugs and casks of whisky as payment. Often, someone in excise or even a sympathetic soldier would help the smugglers too, and not merely because they were Scottish themselves.

One of the most famous excise officers was none other than the great Scottish poet Robbie Burns. Appointed to the role in 1788, he was an excise officer until his death, a profession he referred to as the 'curst horse-leeches o' th' Excise'. Born to a very humble family, Burns wrote several poems about excise, whisky and smugglers, and was able to empathise with the smugglers while also policing them. His poetry, which was overt in its distaste for his official role and the various laws that turned illicit whisky-makers into criminals, saw him warned about his 'political conduct' but not dismissed. He died young, at thirty-seven, but because he'd been an excise officer, his bereaved family had the financial security of a government pension. It would be ironic if it wasn't so sad.

It wasn't just authority figures and laws that created conflict among Scots. What surprised me was the prejudice that existed between Highlanders and Lowlanders. I found this fabulous passage in Anne MacVicar Grant's *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland*, written in 1811, which sums up the bigotry, misconceptions and distrust that often coloured relationships between those in the north and those in the south:

> The lowlander considered the highlander as a fierce and savage depredator, speaking a barbarous language, and inhabiting a gloomy and barren region, which fear and prejudice forbid all strangers to explore … [The highlander] regarded lowlanders, as a very inferior mongrel race of intruders; sons of little men, without heroism, ancestry or genius.

This passage (and others) inspired the conversation that occurs between Reverend MacAdam and Greer not long after she arrives in Glasglen. The suspicion she encounters is a mere reflection of what contemporary letters

and diaries confirm: Highlanders and Lowlanders were not, generally speaking, in accord. Like any country, the people were not homogenous.

This fact is also reflected in the language spoken; in the Highlands it was Scots Gaelic, in the Lowlands, it was predominantly what we'd usually refer to as English. However, there's much debate about whether the language spoken in the Lowlands was a distinct language ('Scots') or a dialect of English ('Scots English'). In order to distinguish the language Greer, a Lowlander, speaks from the Scots Gaelic spoken in the Highlands, I've simply referred to it as 'English' throughout the novel.

While whisky was consumed in heavy quantities by all classes, this reflects the times. There were those who could 'hold' their drink, and those who could not. There would have been the concomitant alcoholism, violence and abuse that can come with excessive drinking. The novel also, I hope, reflects the many ways whisky was consumed within these small communities – with positive and negative consequences – as an essential part of the economy, as a festive drink to mark an occasion, as a form of barter, as payment for workers and other business transactions, as a portion of lease, as bribes, as a joyous tipple to be shared and enjoyed, but also as a destructive element that could undermine relationships and cause great pain. It's both dangerous and delightful depending on the user and its purpose. There's no doubt whisky has been romanticised and, when you look at its history, especially its Scottish history, it's easy to see why, but it would be irresponsible not to note the darker side of the peatreek coin.



Unlike some of my other novels, which feature real places or an actual historical figure, neither is the case here. Most of the characters are fictional. However, the history in the story – the politics, the social, cultural and gender portraits, the living conditions, houses, land, cities and towns, even ships (and their names) – is authentic. Glasglen, however, is a fictional construct.

I based Glasglen on the many villages that did exist at the time but disappeared completely between the years after Culloden and the last of the Clearances. I was shocked to discover just how many of these small settlements, some of which had existed for hundreds of years, simply

vanished. I saw the scant evidence with my own eyes – ruined cottages, overgrown cemeteries, tracks, the suggestion of crops. Sadly, there are hundreds of such places in Scotland. So, rather than find a village that once existed and try and weave a story around it, I invented an amalgam of those I had read about and seen, and in doing so, I hope, paid tribute to them and their people. If you want something more geographically specific, I envisioned Glasglen being east of the River Spey and somewhere in the Cabrach and Glenlivet regions of Scotland – territory then owned by the Duke of Gordon. In fact, it was a tenant of Alexander, the fourth Duke of Gordon, George Smith, a former smuggler, who was the first distiller in what's now known as Speyside to be granted a licence in 1824.

The making of whisky in bothies, barns, kitchens and out in the open as depicted in the novel is also accurate to the times – the process, equipment and, of course, the way it was sold. Likewise, the idea of the smuggler/distiller as a hero was very real, and to 'jink the gauger' a triumph. All the information regarding excise laws and customs, when they were enacted, how and by whom, including the regulation of stills and the amount of whisky that could be made, are precise, as is the behaviour of the excise and soldiers.

The gauger in the novel, Malcolm Gillespie, was a real person. What I've done is adjust the period in which he was active. The actual Gillespie worked at least a decade after this story, but he was too important and notorious a figure not to include. He was a piece of work. His dog was also real (its name is my invention) and renowned for latching onto horses' noses in the pony-trains to prevent them bolting. He did have a wife and four daughters, and he was finally arrested and hanged for his involvement in an insurance scam and forging Treasury bills.

Stories of the ways in which women (most in the following century) outwitted the excise appear in Smith's book and others. However, Margaret Macpherson, Robbie Macpherson's wife, was a genuine historical figure (as was her husband) and Robbie did age his whisky in the barrel and was thought to be wasting time doing that when he could be selling it! Ageing whisky as a general practice and, later, as a legal requirement before it could be called whisky, didn't come into effect until some time later.

Other real people in the novel include Alexander, the fourth Duke of Gordon, who did fight to have more distilleries licensed – the story about the granting of generous licence conditions to Ferintosh is also true. (No

wonder certain folk set fire to their distillery a few times!) His hard work finally paid off in the 1820s. Greer's ma's friend, Margaret Watt (who did take over her husband's Edinburgh distillery after his death – unsuccessfully), and various politicians and such that are mentioned also existed. Likewise, the books and authors mentioned are true to the era.

The story about the brave Winifred Maxwell, the Countess of Nithsdale, who rescued her husband from the Tower of London is also true. A terrific novel that retells this wild tale is *A Noble Cunning: The Countess and the Tower* by Patricia Bernstein.

The Deaf and Dumb School in Edinburgh run by Dr Braidwood really did exist and the language invented there was called 'finger-talking'. Terrible stigma was attached to anyone seen as different and their lives were often very, very difficult. Sign language as we know it has evolved so much from what it was and differs from country to country. It's a fascinating history, a fraught and courageous one too, something I hope Fen and Greer, in some small way, represent. It's believed smugglers may have used a type of sign language to communicate at times. For me, it wasn't a big stretch to have Fen be integral to the development of that.

To ensure I understood the various steps in the distilling process (which I then reimagined with far less sophisticated equipment and in completely alternate scenarios), I'm indebted to my son, Adam Brooks, our talented distiller at Captain Bligh's Brewery and Distillery. Adam was knowledgeable, patient and handled my endless (and sometimes strange) questions and phone calls about 'How would they have done a transfer without …' or 'What would the feints have smelled like?' (He allowed me to smell those for myself – a smell I won't easily forget.) He also encouraged me to try the whisky at various (safe) points of the distillation process. It's remarkable how different the spirit can taste – whether it's a low wine, the heart, or the feints. I'm also grateful to Bill Lark for answering many other questions about how to tell when the first cut should be done and giving me some smoking peat to smell. And I am beyond grateful to Lyn Lark, an amazing distiller and parfumier (and an inductee to the Whisky Hall of Fame, as is Bill), who actually cemented my love of whisky years earlier when I tasted her whisky liqueur – *Slàinte*, or, as I call it, 'nectar of the gods'. Her knowledge and experience are bar none.

As usual, I am completely indebted to the incredible historians, journalists and authors who chose Scottish history, literature, art, whisky,

smuggling, the sea, landscapes or an amalgam of all of these as their subjects. While I cannot list everything I read (well over a hundred books), I will mention those I returned to again and again – not just for the information they provided, but the pleasure and beauty of the prose, which was transporting.

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I also listened to marvellous music of the era, soundtracks, read poetry, diaries and recollections, scrolled through the photos from my various trips continually and took inspiration from those and my memories.

Scotland is quite literally in my DNA, and I like to think whisky is in my blood. Both are certainly in my heart. I loved writing this book and the high and low roads it took me on. I hope you loved reading it.

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Any mistakes in the book are entirely mine and I apologise and cry creative licence. And maybe blame the whisky too.

Slàinte mhath!

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GLOSSARY

Atholl brose: Scottish drink made from oatmeal, whisky, and cream or milk
Attery: hot-headed, fretful, irritable
Bean-tuirim: keening/wailing woman
Begowk: fool; make a fool of
Blethermen: those who carried the bladders and ankers of peatreek to the cities and other parishes for sale. Mostly men, but also women.
Blowder: sudden gust of wind
Birleyman: person who settles local disputes
Bodhar: deaf
Bulfie: fat
Caoineag: a Highland banshee
Cheatry: fraudulent
Clachan: small village
Clyte: strike, hit
Coronach: funereal song, a dirge
Deiseil: clockwise
Doch-an-dorris: a last drink before parting
Doolally: out of one's mind
Dook/ing: dunk/ing
Dùn do chab: shut up
Dùthchas: the inter-connectedness of people, land and culture; sense of home
Fuarang: a mixture of toasted oats, sugar (optional) and whipped cream in which tokens are placed
Gaupit: stupid
Gawpus: foolish person
Gilly-gawkie: silly young person

Ghràidh: love (mo ghràidh – my love)
Haar: cold, thick mist – sometimes called a haarl
Halfin: essentially a teenager – half child/half adult
Haud ye wheest: shut up!
Hearkener: eavesdropper
Howder: gusts of wind
Keep the heid: keep your head, stay calm
Kelpie: in myth, a shape-shifting water creature that can appear on land as a horse that entices humans to ride upon it, then carries them to a watery grave
Kertch: triangular head dress made of linen and worn by married women
Leannan: my darling, love
Madainn mhath: good morning
Mammie-keekie: spoilt
Muckle-sumph: stupid person
Neeps: turnips or swedes
Oidhche Challan Shona: Happy Hogmanay
Oidhche Shamhna Shonadhut: Happy Halloween
Per verba de future subsequente copula: in Scotland this was an 'irregular marriage' recognised by law – a promise to marry in the future followed at a subsequent time by intercourse.
Pintle: penis
Quaich: two-handled traditional Scottish drinking bowl
Rowdies: bullies, louts
Runagate: vagabond, deserter
Saftie: a softie
Sappie-headed: simpleton
Selkie: mythic creature, part human, part seal who shed their skin to walk on land
Sgian-dubh: single-edged knife
Shebeen: an informal, unlicensed venue (usually, a house) that sells drinks. Most oft run by women.
Slàinte: cheers
Slàinte mhath: good health
Smatchers: rascals
Sooking: sucking
Tir nan Og: land of the forever young

Uisge-beatha: water of life; another name for whisky. It generally has flavourings added – herbs, honey, etc.

Usquebaugh: (pronounced, usk-wi or wa-baw): another word for whisky. Often had flavourings added.

Waul: wail

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