



The  
Highlander's  
Thief

CHARLOTTE  
ANNE

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## Chapter One

*22 April 1739*

Why the hell did every story ever told make shinning up a drainpipe sound easy?

‘Bull,’ McWilliam cursed under his breath as his hand slipped for the third time, and he grazed his knuckles on the wooden wall. Deserting the drain, he slipped his foot to the right, shifting to the windowsill. The ledge creaked under his weight, but held.

Pressing tightly to the wall, he stood, reaching above his head with one arm. Despite his height, he was too short to reach the third storey.

Half clambering, half jumping he just managed to find enough of a handhold to climb to the next sill.

A dog barked, and he glanced down—the dark alley remained deserted. An image of himself flashed through his mind as if he stood below looking up: a six-foot tall, tartan-clade Scot clinging to the outside of an English pub like a giant spider, dammit, in the middle of the night. God help him. What was he doing?

His heart tightened.

Justice.

He sought justice.

Rosa woke with a start, the coarse woolen blanket pooling at her waist as she sat up. Her heart raced. This wasn't her bedchamber.

No. Her shoulders dropped as memory returned. Through the gloom she could just make out the claustrophobically small room of the

coaching inn, barely large enough to fit a single bed. A crack of light leaked under the closed door, and the floorboards of the landing creaked as though the Bow Street Runner standing guard shuffled from foot to foot.

How had her life come to this? Arrested for theft and currently being escorted to prison by a truncheon-carrying, hatless Runner, who was basically the equivalent of a bounty-hunter.

Rosa lay back down as a light breeze pulled at the fine hairs at her hairline. She hadn't left the window open, had she?

A hand clamped down over her mouth, large fingers blocking her nose. She kicked out, but the blanket tangled between her legs. Her hands jumped to her face, and she pulled at the fingers over her mouth with a grunt of effort. Nothing happened.

She couldn't breathe.

Where was the dunce of a Runner when she needed him?

"Stop struggling, wee lass," said a deep, brogue voice beside her ear.

A Scotsman! Rosa redoubled her efforts.

"That's enough." This time his whisper was deadly calm; his voice filled with darkness and the promise of pain.

She froze.

Her head spun, and her lungs burned.

This lunatic was going to kill her. Her eyes darted frantically around the room seeking a fire poker or hairbrush or anything she could use to hit him. The room was empty but for the bed.

"Better." He leant half an inch closer, bringing his face into her peripheral vision. She could just make out his silhouette against the backdrop of the open window and the faint moonlight. Broad shoulders, a light scattering of hair over checks and chin, and a white cotton shirt. And big—bigger than the average Englishman. He loomed over her like a mountain.

She bit down on his palm, hard.

He barely flinched, but moved his hand down, freeing her nose. She pulled in a breath of air, filling her lungs.

"Let go!" she demanded against his hand, but her words were indistinguishable.

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The floorboards outside the bedchamber creaked again, and the Scotsman grimaced.

“Keep quiet,” he hissed, his lips pressed so close to her ear she could practically feel them move with each word. And, as he slipped back into view, she saw the truth of her fears reflected in his eyes. He wasn't here to save her from prison. He was here to punish her.

A tremble raced down her spine.

With lightning speed she hadn't expected possible from such a giant, he tore a strip of cloth from the bottom of his shirt and stuffed it into her mouth. He then wrapped a second piece over her lips, tying the ends firmly at the back of her head.

She couldn't talk. She couldn't make a sound.

Time was running out. If the Runner caught McWilliam in here, his whole mission would be ruined, and he'd never get another chance.

They had to get out of here before she made another sound.

He scooped up what seemed to be a ladies' traveling cloak from the end of the bed. Her eyes darted towards the abandoned stays, petticoat, stockings, garters and gown, but he ignored her. It would simply take too long to dress her in all those layers and McWilliam was anything but impractical, especially when he finally had his eyes on the end prize.

Shoving her arms through the sleeves, he attempted to button the mantle but his fingers fumbled with the minute buttons that fastened the garment around her neck. He shrugged—it mattered little. It was a relatively warm spring and a little brisk night air wouldn't kill anyone.

She tried to pull back, but he kept a tight hold of her wrist with one hand as he shoved on her serviceable ankle boots. Skin to skin he could feel the shivers racing through her body. The lass was afraid of him. Good.

Standing back up, he wrapped his hands around her petite waist and flung her over his shoulder. She barely weighed anything—the girl who'd nearly bankrupted his entire estate, again, was nothing more than a wee slip of a thing.

McWilliam ground his teeth, holding her legs with one hand and

using his other to navigate his way to the open window.

She kicked against his chest. Her feet barely made a dent, but if he made one false move, dammit, they'd both fall to their deaths.

"Did ye really want to kill us both?" he hissed, turning so he faced the room and giving her a perfect view of outside and the way down.

She stilled, her body tightening and her hands gripping the back of his shirt.

Down was a little easier than up. Even with the thief slung over his shoulder, McWilliam was able to navigate alternately between the windowsills and the drainpipe until his feet touched solid ground once more.

His horse nicked softly at him, the reins dangling loosely over her neck.

McWilliam tried to lift the lass onto the saddle, but she wiggled from his grasp, slippery as an eel, attempting to dart away down the alley.

As he grabbed her upper arm, she spun around to slam both her fists into his chest and, from the flicker of the oil lamp at the end of the alley, he got his first proper look at the English criminal that was Miss Rosa Blair.

Soft strands of hair had slipped from the simple braid that lay across one shoulder coming to a stop at her waist. Her face betrayed her fear from the flush of color high on her cheeks to the fluttering of her eyelashes. The traveling cloak did nothing to hide her curves—if anything, the knee-length article accentuated the contrast between waist and hip.

Perhaps dressing her only in a nightdress and mantle had been a bad idea after all.

Then again, he reminded himself, he wasn't attracted to criminals no matter how alluring their flawless skin or the tempting flick of their tongue over their lips.

*Rosa.* He let out a huff of air. How could anyone name their child after a plant with such a sharp bite? Sure, the flowers were considered beautiful, that was until you tried to touch them and then your fingers bled from the sharp prick of the thorns.

Perhaps it had been a prediction. Perhaps her parents had known

just how hard she'd learn to bite. His gaze darted to her fingers. Did she have the claws to match? She certainly hadn't been afraid to lash out at him.

She faltered under his unblinking gaze, and he seized his opportunity, lifting her up onto his horse.

Rosa glared down at him, the strips of his shirt masking her fiery words. And he was under no misconception that they were anything but fiery. Despite her obvious fear, her sky-blue eyes were practically shooting daggers at him.

He mounted behind her, reaching around her waist to the reins. "Buckle up, Thistle," he breathed into her ear. "It's going to be a long ride."

Rosa's captor nudged the horse into a trot, leaving the damp alley and dingy coaching inn behind.

She shook her head, her braid catching on his shirt buttons. Pinpricks of pain spiked along her scalp; although she hardly noticed. She couldn't leave. This had gone too far. She needed to get back! She couldn't abandon her cousin. Not again.

She jammed her elbow back, catching him in the ribs. He grunted, then silent laughter vibrated down his chest and along her back. She did it again, but this time he leant to the side so her elbow brushed by harmlessly.

She was no match against his strength.

He wasn't confining her hands anymore, so she ripped off the gag. "I need to go back! You cannot take me with you!"

"I should have tied your hands as well."

"I have to go back!"

His chest was hard and hot against her back. Her nightdress didn't do anything to block the heat of him from burning her skin. She leant forward, trying to put as much space between them as possible. If she couldn't out-muscle him, then she'd have to out-think him.

Her first priority had to be getting back to the coaching inn before morning when Runner Smith would check on her again. She glanced

skyward. The moon had just crested the sky and was beginning its downward descent which meant it couldn't be any later than two in the morning. That gave her approximately four hours. But with every minute that passed, the horse took them further from the inn.

She had to make her move, and she had to make it fast.

Surely it couldn't be too difficult escaping a Scot. He was in foreign territory. He didn't know the nature or the manner of the English streets like she did. Rosa had grown up in London—Bradford was a just a baby in comparison and would be no match for her.

Once she'd made her way back to the coaching inn, she'd climb the drainpipe—he'd made it look so simple, and what a Scotsman could do, she could do better—and then slip back into bed without anyone being the wiser.

*What's going to stop him from stealing you back again?* her common sense seemed to ask.

Rosa's shoulders dropped. She'd have to tell the Runner—that is, if he didn't already know. She'd be punished—her sentence would probably be increased—but it would be worth it.

As they rounded another corner, one of the streetlamps spluttered, and Rosa felt his arms loosen ever so slightly as he threw a glance towards the cast iron lamppost. She let her body fall limp, slipping to the side in a 'faint'.

Muttering in Gaelic, he jumped from the horse, keeping a hand on her waist as if intending to help her down after him.

Rosa grabbed the reins and kicked the horse forward. For Amelia!

The mare took a couple of halfhearted steps forward, then turned to look back over her shoulder at her Scottish master.

"Really!" Rosa demanded of the horse as her captor tugged the reins back out of her hands.

The lass was determined, McWilliam would give her that. Though why she'd thought stealing Mist had been a good idea, he didn't know.

Maybe, he told himself, because she had no understanding of loyalty.

Well, it didn't matter. She was his prisoner, and he wasn't going to

let her pull another stunt like that again. Ignoring her clenched fists, he pulled her from the horse, grabbing her by the shoulders and trying to shake some sense into her. "There's no point trying to escape. You're mine now."

"What do you mean?" she asked wildly, glancing over her shoulder, back the way they'd come.

If she was hoping someone would come to her rescue, she was sure to be disappointed. This early in the morning, the streets were deserted and if the guard at her door hadn't found them by now it was obvious he hadn't yet realized his investment had been taken.

"I demand you tell me why you've taken me!"

So God damn self-righteous.

"Haven't you guessed it yet, Thistle?"

Her eyes narrowed as she raked her gaze up and down his person. "If you're after the money, I don't have it."

"I'm not here for the money," he growled. "I'm taking you to Scotland where you'll be tried for your crimes against my family."

"Your family?" She slipped one foot behind the other as if preparing to run although he still held her firmly by the shoulders.

"My name is Laird Anndrais McWilliam. And ye, wee lass, stole 3,000 pounds from my estate."

She shook her head. "You're not the laird. The laird of Uilleim Estate is old. He's—"

"Dead," McWilliam interrupted. His father was these three weeks gone. The shock of losing that money had done nothing to help with his poor health.

She shook her head as though gathering her thoughts. "But...I still don't understand. Why kidnap me when I was already on my way to prison?" She wet her lips with another nervous flick of her tongue. "There was a Runner guarding my door. Tomorrow we were leaving for Leeds and in thirteen days' time I was going to be up before the magistrate."

It was his turn to shake his head. "I'm not letting a corrupt English judge give you an easy sentence because he doesn't care anything for Scottish money. I'm taking you to Scotland where you'll face the

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judgement you deserve.”

Color drained from her face, and he smirked. “That’s right, wee lass. You’re going to prison for a very long time.”

## Chapter Two

“My lord, I didn’t do it,” Rosa declared, and even she could hear the desperation creeping into her own voice.

“Right.” The Scot giant practically rolled his eyes.

“I’m not guilty. You have to believe me.”

“The only thing I *have* to do is take you back to my estate.”

“No!” She shook her head. Stupid, judgmental man. Why wasn’t he listening to her? “I’m innocent.” She tried to step out of his hold, and he let go her shoulders only to grasp her waist as if in preparation to lift her back into the saddle. In doing so he shifted forward a step, leaving barely a hand’s width between them.

There was a hardness to his mouth as he stared down at her, and a small furrow between his brows. Stubble covered his cheeks and chin as though he hadn’t had the time or the inclination to shave these last few days. It lent him an air of wildness that English gentlemen, with their wigs and groomed three-piece suits, lacked.

This close she could see a small scar at the corner of his right eye, and she imagined someone’s sword slicing downwards, just skimming his temple. Her hand drifted up, and she realized with a jolt that she’d subconsciously moved to touch the imperfection. She crossed her arms over her chest instead, her gaze sliding away from his face. Of course she didn’t want to touch the man who was snatching her away from Amelia, the man who’d pulled her bodily from her bed in the dead of night, and the man who still, indigently and indecently, had his hands about her waist.

Her body alert to his every move; she could feel each one of his fingers through the fabric of her clothes. He radiated heat. She’d never

met anyone else in her whole life so naturally warm-blooded. He was like fire: hot, angry and without mercy. And if she stood still for too long he'd burn her.

"Let go," she said with as much authority as she could muster. "I'm innocent."

"Thistle, if you're innocent then I'm a haggis," and he lifted her onto the horse as though she weighed nothing.

In another second, he'd mount up behind her and they'd be on their way again, moving further and further from Runner Smith. She had to make him understand.

"Please, my lord." And she pushed her hand against his shoulder to halt his progress. "Just listen to me for a second."

He eyed her but stayed in place.

She hurried on before he could change his mind: "Two days ago I received an anonymous letter saying that if I didn't take the blame for the McWilliam heist my cousin would be killed. That's why I handed myself in. I had to let the Runner arrest me. I have to face the magistrate at the next court hearing in Leeds or Amelia is dead."

A crease appeared between his brows. "Show me the letter."

"You believe me?" Her mouth dropped open.

"Show me the letter."

"I cannot. I don't have it anymore."

The muscles in his forearms twitched, and Rosa swallowed. If he attacked her there'd be no way she could defend herself. Her strength was nothing when compared with his. She had no knife, no weapon to defend herself with, just her words.

"I didn't want the magistrate to find the letter so I burnt it," she said attempting to keep her voice even.

"Then you have no proof." A statement, not a question. And his gravelly voice sent a rush of goose bumps over her skin.

She couldn't lie, he'd spot it in an instance and she needed him to believe her. "No, my lord. But I'm telling the truth. There's no way I could have stolen that money. I've been working as a governess here in Bradford for the last two years. If you talk with my employers, I'm sure they'll vouch for my whereabouts during the time of the theft."

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He growled. "I have no time to talk with more liars and thieves. You could've easily paid someone to vouch for you."

"The Wrights are not liars. They're respectable members of society." But he obviously didn't care, so she rushed on. "Maybe we could come to some sort of arrangement? You could kidnap me again, after the trail. After I've saved Amelia."

He raised his chin a fraction higher and even though she was sitting atop his horse, they were near enough at eye-level. "I don't think so." And he mounted up behind her.

This time McWilliam took the reins in one hand, keeping his other firmly around her waist. This way, even if she pulled another stunt, he wouldn't be letting go. The creature before him was more vixen than woman. She spurted lies like they were truths, and she happily played on her feminine sensibilities to get what she wanted, but he wouldn't fall for any more of her tricks. He wouldn't let her out of his sight until they were safely back in Scotland.

As he nudged Mist forward, Rosa let out a little gasp of air that sent tingles down his spine. He should have retied her gag and bound her hands before he'd mounted—it would have been no more than she deserved.

"Please," she whispered so pathetically his resolve almost broke. "Don't do this."

Gathering his wits, he breathed into her ear, "Speak again and I'll cut out your tongue."

She stiffened, her back rigid against his chest, then leant forward as if trying to distance herself from him. But McWilliam only tightened his hold, forcing her to rest against him. This vixen wouldn't be getting the better of him. Not a second time. Not ever again.

He didn't stop all night. With Rosa's added weight, slight as she was, Mist couldn't travel as fast as McWilliam would've liked. Either way, they were well clear of Bradford before the sun rose the following

morning.

Beyond the town, hamlets, hedgerows and farmhouses littered the landscape. Quiet cows grazed in the paddocks, while folk tended their crops. It was too gentle, McWilliam mused. Where the Lowlands was rugged wilderness, England was tame country. Even Mist seemed bored—her head dropped towards the road and her ears barely flicked when a horse-drawn cart furbished with straw and a doleful-looking driver passed them by.

McWilliam nodded a greeting and was pleased then the driver acknowledged them with nothing more than a blank stare.

Rosa was a criminal, and as soon as the Runner realized she'd left Bradford, she'd be a wanted woman. As it was, he couldn't risk someone recognizing her and reporting them to the authorities. And now McWilliam, himself, had broken English law by stealing her from custody and was under no delusion that if captured, he'd be locked away for a very long time. The English needed little persuasion to capitalize on the faults of the Scots. The sooner they crossed the border the better.

As the sun crested the horizon, Rosa was stifling yawns. He could feel the pull of sleep on her body despite her continued determination to remain stiff in his arms. Nevertheless, it wasn't until the sun had moved overhead that she slipped into sleep, her head coming to rest on his shoulder, her upper body supported by this arm.

He stared down at the top of her head. More strands of hair had slipped from her braid to frame her face, and what he'd taken for brown in the dingy light of the oil lamp, he now realized was more a bronzed-red. With the sunlight had also come her freckles. They were scattered lightly across her nose and checks. And there, nestled on the side of her neck, about half the size of his fist, was her dark-purple birthmark. From a distance, it could be described as nothing more than a semi-circle, but this close it was distinctly moon shaped, almost perfect in its individuality.

She was a bonny lass, more beautiful than a criminal ought to be. His arm around her waist dropped so the back of his palm rested against the curve of her thigh. Heat flooded his blood, pooling in his groin. Aye, he silently agreed, too damn beautiful for her own good.

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He snatched his traitorous hand back from her leg, shaking her awake. She murmured incoherently, then froze as consciousness returned.

“I’ll not have you falling asleep in the saddle. I’m not here to hold you up,” he said, letting coldness seal his words.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, and a breath of cold air slipped between them. Her eyes were narrowed again, making her look more angry than scared, but she didn’t speak.

Perhaps she’d believed his threat about cutting off her tongue. Good, a little fear wouldn’t go amiss.

They continued on.

Letting the reins rest on the saddle, McWilliam pulled out some oatcakes from one of the saddlebags. It took a little maneuvering but there was no way he was letting go of Rosa. Now she was awake and upright, he couldn’t see her face anymore though he could practically hear her thoughts as she contemplated the reins.

He almost wished she’d dare. He almost wanted her to try escaping again just so he could foil her plans. He was in control here. And there wasn’t anything she could do to stop him.

He was temping her, Rosa knew it. She wasn’t that naive. She knew the horse wouldn’t do anything she asked. The docile beast was blindly loyal to a master who was nothing but a blackguard.

She pointedly crossed her arms, turning her face away from the reins. She wasn’t going to make a fool of herself again. “I didn’t steal your money.”

“And yet I still don’t believe you.” He hadn’t bothered picking up the reins again. It seemed his horse walked on for the Scot regardless of encouragement.

“This is becoming ridiculous, my lord. I’ve only ever been to the Lowlands once, and that was four years ago with my uncle.” With her back to him, she could almost forget just how tall he was, and some of her courage was returning. There was no way she was going to let this man take her back to Scotland when Amelia was likely locked in

someone's cellar, awaiting death.

"You have no authority to take me across the border. The Bow Street Runners will be looking for me by now. You won't get away with this. When they find—"

"The Runners won't follow you this far. I'm surprised one left London long enough to chase you to Bradford."

"Smith was an... acquaintance of my father's. I messaged him in London when I first got the note about my cousin."

'Acquaintance' was probably the snobby English way of saying that her father had also been dragged before a magistrate by Runner Smith. Theft probably ran in Rosa's family. She'd probably been brought up on it like milk from her mother's breast.

"Nevertheless, I'd prefer not to take any chances," he said. "Once word gets out that you're missing everyone will like be looking for you. Lucky for me, they'll all be looking for a single woman, trailing alone, not a happily married couple." He reached round with the hand not wrapped around her waist to intertwine their fingers.

She wrenched her hand from his grasp, spluttering. "I would never marry you!"

"Luckily for me, lass, ye don't have to." And before she could blink he'd pushed a ring onto her fourth finger. "Now, if anyone sees us, there'll be no question of our traveling together."

"You're insufferable." She moved to rip the ring from her finger.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Or what, my lord?" What could he possibly do to her that he hadn't already?

"Or I won't feed you."

Her mouth dropped open as her stomach rumbled with the thought of food. She hadn't eaten since dinner last night, and Runner Smith hadn't been particularly generous with the food.

She took a deep breath, calming her raging thoughts. Two years as a governess tending to three young, brutish boys had taught her patience if nothing else.

If she wanted to escape, she'd need to keep a clear head. She'd also need to keep up her strength and if wearing this ring was the only way

to do that so be it.

“Fine,” she relented. “Then feed me.”

He passed her what she could only describe as a chalky biscuit that appeared to be made of oat flour, water and a little fat to set the mixture.

“That is it?”

“Be grateful for what you’ve got, Thistle.”

“That’s not my name.”

He didn’t grace her indignation with a response.

She took a bite. The biscuit was tough but surprisingly chewy, and someone had added some sugar making it sweeter than first appearance had led her to suppose.

*Thistle*, she huffed silently. The nerve of the man! Well, if that was how Anndrais McWilliam wanted to play it... She might have only been to the Lowlands once before and talked with less Scotsmen than she could count with the fingers of one hand, but she could easily guess what would annoy him more than anything else.

“Andrew,” she said with a devilish smile.

The hand about her waist clenched, the muscles tightening rock hard. “What are you doing, wee lass?” he asked, his voice low; more animalistic growl than human words.

Her heart skipped a beat. “Andrew.”

“That’s not my name.”

“Yes, it is. That’s your name in proper English. Andrew William.”

He tugged at her waist until she was forced to look over her shoulder at him again. More than a head taller, he towered over her. His broad shoulders were tense, and his eyes narrowed on her face. She’d thought him fire before, but then he’d been nothing more than smoldering ember. Now he was fire. Now he was angry.

“Do ye really want to go there?”

A shiver stole down her spine. The strength in just one of his arms was enough to crush her and the look in his eyes warned that he was considering doing just that.

Perhaps prodding the beast was not her best idea. She shook her head.

“It’s McWilliam. Only ever McWilliam. Understand?”

She nodded. Once.

“Good, Thistle.” And he let her turn back to face the front.

She finished off the biscuit. It did little to stifle her hunger. She opened her mouth to ask for another when a thought struck her. If she wanted to be free of her capturer, first she had to escape his embrace.

“I need to get down,” she said.

“Nay.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Nay.”

She ground her teeth. How explicit did he expect a gentlewoman to be? “I need to use the privy.”

A pause. “Fine.” He swung down, bringing her with him. Keeping one hand about her waist, he untied the leather reins from the horse’s halter, knotting one end around one wrist and grasping the other end. He surveyed his handiwork with a confirming nod.

“You’re surely not serious?” Stretched out, the reins were no longer than eight feet. That would barely get her behind a tree and out of his sight, let alone his hearing.

“Deadly serious.”

“I’m a lady. Not a dog. You cannot treat me this way.”

“You’re a thief.” And he tugged her into a corpse of trees between two hedgerows. He then tied his end of the reins to a branch, clearly planning to give her more privacy than she’d first suspected. Her relief must have shown on her face for he grunted: “I might have kidnapped you, but I’m not a barbarian.” And he headed back towards the horse, out of sight and sound.

A moment later, Rosa had adjusted her nightdress and mantle back into position.

McWilliam hadn’t tied the rope so tightly it would be impossible to dislodge. Once she had her wrist free, there was nothing stopping her from running. Nothing but the fact that she didn’t have a horse and they were miles from any town. She could probably throw herself on the mercy of a farmer, but she’d had little experience with country folk and didn’t think they would take too kindly to a wanted woman.

A twig snapped.

Rosa jumped. "Who's there?"

Silence met her words.

No, not silence—the wind rustled the tree leaves and two branches rubbed against each other emitting a low groan.

She shivered. Trees weren't at all like buildings, and the leaf litter underfoot wasn't anything like cobblestones. She was a long way from her old family home in London, even the Wright's townhouse back in Bradford seemed a decade away.

She tapped her fingers against her forehead, trying to keep her thoughts on escaping. She clearly couldn't out-run the Scot, and she certainly couldn't out-muscle him, but maybe her original plan of out-thinking him could still work.

Technically, she wasn't due to face the magistrate for thirteen days. Runner Smith had orders to transport her to the Leeds's prison where she was to be held until the trial. That meant she had thirteen days to get to Leeds before Amelia was killed.

Rosa let out a huff of air. Thirteen days wasn't too bad. She knew from questions she'd asked after receiving the anonymous letter that Uilleim Castle was in the Southern Lowlands, little more than a day's ride from the English-Scottish border, and the border itself was only about five days from Leeds.

She picked at the leather, pulling the reins free of the branch. That was thirteen days to convince the laird she was telling the truth. If she could convince him of her innocence, he'd have no choice but to return her to England.

True, it wasn't the world's most perfect plan. But it was her best hope.

She trudged back to the horse, and McWilliam's eyes widened when he saw her approach.

"You're back," he said, stating the obvious.

"I'm telling the truth," she said, pressing the free end of the reins into his hand, the other end still knotted around one of her wrists. "I didn't steal your money, my lord."

"It doesn't matter what you say," he said with a shrug. "I don't believe you."

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“You will. You’ll see I am right because I’m promising you here and now never to lie to you.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You will see that I am telling the truth,” she reaffirmed. He didn’t believe her now but thirteen days was a long time, and she had the patience of a governess. She would wear him down. She would win.

## Chapter Three

Clearly the lass wasn't nearly as smart as she thought, McWilliam mused as they continued on. Not if she thought a declaration like that would instantly change his mind. She could claim to be telling the truth until her face turned blue, he wasn't ever going to give her the benefit of the doubt.

She was feisty, sure. Spirited, even, but a liar and a thief most definitely.

The day dragged by, and Rosa wiggled the entire time. He handed her another couple of oatcakes as he contemplated their sleeping options. If it was up to him, they would travel through the night, but Mist was beginning to tire and, in truth, so too was he. It had been a long day.

When darkness came, sleeping rough wasn't ideal but being arrested and sent to prison was even less desirable. Nevertheless, a warm bed, bath and shave wouldn't go amiss. Perhaps one of the hamlets they kept passing housed a suitable coaching inn. If they only stayed one night and left early the next morning there'd barely be time for questions to be asked. And he hadn't been lying when he'd told Rosa everybody would be searching for a single woman, not a married couple.

McWilliam glanced over Rosa's shoulder to the simple band on her finger. It suited her—the gold brought out the warm tones of her skin and seemed to amplify the soft pink of her nail-beds.

He nodded contentedly to himself. The ring would work.

By sundown, Mist was beginning to tire, so he brought them to a stop before a pub nestled between a couple of farmhouses and a large storage barn. Rosa raised a questioning eyebrow but remained silent.

“If you talk to anyone,” he threatened. “We’re leaving, and you can spend the night sleeping in a ditch.”

He helped her down, Rosa brushing away his hands as soon as her feet touched the ground.

The ring would work, but if anyone caught sight of the nightdress beneath her mantle people would definitely be suspicious. At least the mantle hid most of the nightdress, and if he stood in front of her nobody should get anything more than a glance at her dirt-splattered hem.

McWilliam tucked Rosa’s hand into the crook of his arm and strode inside before he could change his mind.

They were greeted by a middle-aged woman who sent someone outside to care for Mist with a jerk of her head. Her greying hair was tied back in a tight bun, not a strand out of place and, while her shoes were almost worn through at the toe, they’d been shined so black they practically reflected the roof rafters overhead.

She barely glanced at Rosa, her gaze caught on McWilliam’s kilt.

He straightened his shoulders. “A room, Mistress, if ye have one to spare.”

She narrowed her eyes at his words, her displeasure at hearing his Scottish accent almost palpable. “I don’t think—”

“Ye don’t think what?” His hand dropped automatically to the dirk hanging from his belt, although he made no move to draw it.

“It’s getting cold outside,” Rosa interrupted. “I’m sure you have two rooms to spare.”

So much for keeping her mouth shut, and like hell he was letting her stay in her own bedchamber.

The women finally looked to Rosa. “Is that a London accent I detect?”

Rosa glanced towards him and something about his face must have silenced her for she clamped her mouth shut again.

“My *wife*,” he emphasized, “and I are newly married. While she’s English, we’ll be living in the land of my ancestors. That’s where we’re headed. But it’s been a long day and we’re both tired.”

That last bit wasn’t a lie. Dark circles lined Rosa’s eyes. He let her hand fall free to wrap his arm about her waist once more for fear

she'd otherwise sink to the floor. Maybe he shouldn't have pushed her so hard—she obviously wasn't used to spending so much time in the saddle. Her muscles must already be tightening. He wasn't paying for two separate rooms, but he could order her a hot bath to help relax.

Not that the thief deserved one, he quickly reminded himself. But they still had a long way to travel and he needed her healthy, at least until they reached his estate.

"I suppose I have a room free," the woman relented. "Follow me." She locked hands with Rosa, pulling the lass from his grasp and turning her back to him.

McWilliam followed the two of them up the stairs to a room above the pub. With no more than a bed and a single heavy wooden chair by the fireplace, it was so dreary—although spotlessly clean—it couldn't have been anything else but a room for rent.

He ordered a bath be sent up along with their dinner and snapped the door closed on the Scot-hating woman.

Rosa immediately crossed the room to stare out the window. The sun had finally fallen beyond the horizon and darkness caressed the landscape.

McWilliam reached past her, locking the shutters and tucking the key into his pocket. He wasn't taking any chances.

"It wasn't me scrambling through windows in the middle of the night," she snapped, meeting his eyes with another glare. Weariness dragged at her words.

Before he could answer there was a knock at the door.

It didn't take long for the iron tub to be brought up and filled with hot water from the kettle. The innkeeper even managed to find a modesty screen, and McWilliam was positive she believed that without it his 'uncivilized manners' would have him ravishing his 'wife' at the first sight of her creamy skin moistened by the steamy water.

He clicked his tongue disapprovingly, but he didn't refuse the screen entry into the room. Rosa in the bath was a sight he couldn't think about, dammit. The thief was strictly off limits.

The door snapped shut, and Rosa once again found herself alone with her capturer.

Immediately, he locked the door, tucking that key in his pocket along with the window key. With all exits barred and the flickering flames coming from the fireplace in the corner by the door the only light source, the room couldn't have felt more prison-like if she was standing in Newgate itself. It couldn't have been more than eight steps from one wall to another, and right now there was only two between her and the Scotsman.

The dressing screen set up in the far corner did little to amend the situation.

She crossed her arms. She might only be a governess with no social prospects and wanted by the Bow Street Runners but there was no way she was climbing into that tub with him in this room.

"There's no point arguing," he said as though he'd read her mind. "You're having a bath." And he crossed his arms over his chest—his muscular frame lending the stance more determination and dark menace than she could ever hope to accomplish.

She shook her head suddenly feeling exceptionally small, and the fact that McWilliam's head came close to brushing the ceiling intensified the feeling. "Not while you're in the room." She didn't back down.

They regarded each other with tense silence.

"I canna see through walls, wee lass," he breathed, indicating the dressing screen, then sat in the chair by the fire as though to prove that was the end of the discussion.

At this angle she could clearly see one side of his face while the flicker of the flames cast shadows over the other. He couldn't be more than ten years older than her, maybe thirty or two and thirty.

He didn't move. He could have been a statue in another life.

She stepped behind the dressing screen. Steam rolled off the hot water in inviting waves, and there really was no way he could see through the screen.

With lightning speed, Rosa stripped, sinking low into the deliciously warm water until only her head and shoulders were above the edge

of the tub. She scrubbed soap through her hair, loosening the dirt. Everything ached after riding all day and part of the night. As a city girl and proud of it, she'd spent little time on horseback. In fact, the last time she'd ridden had been during her family's one and only holiday to the countryside when Emily—

She tapped her forehead with her fingertips, banishing the memory. Not now; not here.

Water lapped at the tub's edge and she stilled. The light from the fire barely penetrated the dressing screen. Even still, the gold band on her finger glistened. She spun it around and around her slippery finger. She'd never thought she'd wear a wedding ring even in jest. As the only daughter of a dependent second son, her prospects had been low at best. Now, as a wanted criminal, her reputation was in tatters, not to mention she was bathing with a Scotsman in the room.

She pushed her hands under the water and out of view. The ring was a cruel joke; mocking her for a life she could never have. Even if nobody found out about the Scotsman, her time in prison would mean no respectable man would ever marry her.

She snorted. Forget about marriage, no family would ever employ her as a governess again. She was a ruined woman.

No wedding and no job prospects, she might as well spend the rest of her life in prison. That would be better than starving on the streets or in a poor house. Unless...she'd heard of people moving to the New World to start afresh. Perhaps, if she raised enough money for the passage over, she could find a job in the Americas where nobody knew who she was.

The room was completely silent except for the gentle splash of water with each slight movement and the laird's soft breathing from across the room. Rosa closed her eyes.

“Lass, are ye going to leave me any hot water?”

Rosa jumped, her eyes snapping open. She must have drifted asleep and, judging by the cooling temperature of the water, some time had passed.

The stiff horse-hair chair creaked.

“Mistress Thomas has sent up a towel, and I persuaded her to part with some of her older clothes for you.” It sounded as though he’d moved closer and stood just on the other side of the screen.

She drew her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs, and prayed the soap bubbles hid her from view. “Don’t look,” she begged as he stepped around the screen.

He didn’t bother turning his face away.

Rosa narrowed her eyes, glaring at him over her shoulder. “No closer.” Heat flooded her face, and her heart thumped against her chest.

Wrapped in shadows as they both were, Rosa could barely make out the finer features of his face, but she could practically feel his eyes on her. His gaze brushed over her exposed back, lingering on her shoulders where her damp hair had stuck to her skin.

He dropped the towel and the hand-me-down clothes by the tub, lifting a bucket of clean warm water left to rise her hair and raised it above her head.

“Please—” She was trapped. She couldn’t get up because then he’d see her, so she sat as still as possible.

“Tilt ye head back.”

“No—”

The first drops of warm water tumbled onto her head, running into her eyes and down her face. He wasn’t going to stop. She tilted her head back, keeping her knees firmly pressed to her chest.

A stream of water ran through her hair and down into the tub.

His gaze raked her body, and she realized the water must not only be washing the soap from her hair but pushing the blanket of bubbles away from her body.

Fire burned her face, and she pressed her eyes closed. “Hurry up.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, dropping the empty bucket by the tub with a clash. I’m not interested.” And he stalked back around the screen.

*Not interested.* A lump formed in her throat. It wasn’t like she’d expected anything else—especially not from him, but the gibe still stung. It was one thing to know you were undesirable and compromised beyond all respectability, it was another thing to actually hear the words

spoke aloud by another person.

She stood up, not caring that she splashed more water on the wooden floorboards.

While Mistress Thomas had provided McWilliam with a complete outfit in the very serviceable colors of brown, and mustard yellow, Rosa put her own nightdress back on. The hem was a little stained, but her mantle had protected it from the worst of the road's dust and horse sweat, and she couldn't very well sleep in her stays.

The Scot wasted no time bathing. He was clean and dressed by the time Rosa had finished her salted fish and potato stew.

When he stepped back around the modesty panel, Rosa bit back a gasp. He'd buckled his kilt back on but hadn't bothered with his shirt. The excess fabric of his plaid hung haphazard around his knees as he hadn't pinned it across one shoulder as usual, and water dripped from his wet hair, sending droplets running down his broad neck. He ran one roughcast hand over his clean-cut checks and chin as though lamenting the loss of his stubble.

Shaved, he was altogether cleaner cut, but it took nothing away from the wildness of him. Not when every single stomach muscle rippled with each step, making it very clear that Anndrais McWilliam was made for fighting and loving, not idleness.

She pressed her mouth shut and rose to her feet, expecting him to sleep in the chair. But he threw back the blankets and climbed into the bed.

She blinked.

"Stop acting coy," he growled, tucking both hands behind his head, his elbows outstretched. "There's plenty of room."

"I can't sleep there." She averted her eyes, even as her traitorous feet took half a step closer. "It's not proper, my lord."

"Naught about this is proper," he said, and she caught a hint of repressed amusement.

"I'm a respectable lady." Even if nobody else thought of her as such.

"Is that what thieves are called these days?"

"How many times do I have to tell you I didn't steel your money?"

"Liar."

She shook her head. "I've never lied to you!"

"So you're a governess?" His tone did nothing to disguise his disbelief. "You're unlike any governesses I've ever met."

"And you've met many governesses?"

He snorted and turned his back to her.

Rosa let out a deep breath. Patience. If her plan was going to work, she needed him to trust her and the only way to do that was to fulfil the promise she'd made to him and always tell the truth.

She perched on the furthest edge of the bed from him. "I am a governess, but I guess you could say that I didn't have the most usual of childhoods."

He didn't turn back to face her, but nor did he tell her to stop.

She continued: "My mother died when I was very young. I don't really remember her. My father was heartbroken and took to the drink. He was only the second son of a dukedom, so money was always a little scarce and it became ever harder with his drinking."

Rosa could practically see her father's face before her now—every line and wrinkle etched into her memory. With the drinking had come the gambling and with the gambling had come the debt collectors. Runner Smith had always kept a close eye on them—just in case.

"For some years my uncle took me into his home. He said he liked the extra company, though, in truth, I think he mostly felt sorry for me. It was during those years that I was educated. You mightn't know it to look at me now"—she glanced down at the off-white nightdress with the tatted hem—"but I know how to read and write, dance, and even play the pianoforte a little."

Who was she trying to trick? Rosa wasn't a lady. Not in the truest sense of the word. Sure, she was educated, but she'd spent most of her early childhood with only her father for company in a two-bedchamber boarding house not suitable for the likes of the Wrights or any other well-mannered members of high society.

But it was from her father she'd inherited her love of newspapers and had learnt about the thrill of reading true crime. No truly respectable lady could recite the names of every murderer currently locked up in Newgate Prison. She was more boring bluestocking, than

accomplished lady.

Her shoulders dropped, and she lay down on the top of the blanket scandalously close to the Scot. How did that old saying go? Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Lumps stuck into her back; the mattress hard and unfriendly.

It had been such a long time since she'd talked of her family. The Wrights had never asked about her childhood, preferring to keep Rosa at arm's distance. They were firm believers that the governess was to be seen and not heard, at least when in the presence of adults.

It was almost a relief to speak of her family now. They were never far from her thoughts. She continued: "My uncle was a kind man. He really did seem to care for me even though I wasn't his child."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Her uncle had been the perfect picture of a gentleman—crisp cravat, top hat and the most exquisite hand-tailored trousers.

And then, in the space of a few heartbeats, everything had changed. "When I turned sixteen," she continued, "I moved back in with my father. He hadn't stopped drinking and died by the time I was eighteen."

"I didn't ask for your whole family history." The bed squeaked as he rolled onto his back, and his side of the mattress sagged. She slipped towards him.

He grunted, put a hand against Rosa's shoulder and effortlessly pushed her back to her side of the bed. It didn't hurt but it was a stark reminder of the power in his body.

"You mightn't have asked, but I promised to always tell you the truth." She slipped back towards him.

He raised an eyebrow.

She shuffled back, pressing a hand against the headboard to keep herself in place.

"Ye didn't move back in with your uncle when you father died?" His voice was no more than a whisper; a soft grunt.

"I couldn't." The words caught in her throat, and tears pricked at her eyes. This time she turned her back on him.

A scream broke the silence.

McWilliam jumped up, grabbing his dirk from the under his pillow. He blinked in the darkness, trying to clear his vision as another scream pierced the air.

“Rosa!” He groped across the bed with his free hand, seeking her petite form. She thrashed against his touch, rolling away from him.

He dove across the bed towards the door, but there was nobody there. The room was empty but for himself and his thief.

She lay on top of the blanket, twisting and turning. The last of the fading light from the dying fire cast shadows over her face and he saw a sheen of sweat glistening on her forehead.

She was dreaming.

“Emily. Emily!” she called.

Tucking his dirk under the bed and out of sight, he took Rosa by the shoulders, shaking her awake.

She blinked up at him, fear and confusion flying across her face. “What—” she mumbled, her words slurred with sleep. “What are you doing?”

“You were shouting in your sleep.”

“I’m sorry.” She struggled upright, and McWilliam let his hands drop back to his sides.

“What were you dreaming about?”

“My cousin.”

“Ye lie.” He crossed back to his side of the bed. “You were shouting for someone called Emily. Your cousin’s name is Amelia.”

She rubbed a hand over her face.

His eyes were as dark as a graveyard. “You promised to always tell me the truth, but apparently that was a lie also.” Of course it was.

“I have more than one cousin.” Her shoulders dropped and she looked at him through the cage of her fingers. “I had more than one cousin.”

## Chapter Four

The rest of the night crept by at a snail's pace. Rosa lay stiff beside him, her arms crossed over her chest, her breaths coming in short huffs. The longer the silence stretched on, the more her sadness seemed to retreat and the angrier she became.

*I had more than one cousin.* Rosa's words echoed, unbidden, through his mind.

McWilliam rolled over, once again turning his back to her. He wasn't apologizing, dammit. She probably didn't have any cousins. She was probably the only child of an only child.

Or maybe her cousin had died. And maybe her father had been a drunk.

He pressed his eyes shut. Many people's cousins died. This wasn't any of his damn concern. He was taking her back home to face retribution for her crimes; getting involved in her personal life, truths or lies, had nothing to do with it.

He must have eventually slept for weak sunlight flittered in through the closed shutters, casting strips of muted light across the whitewashed walls. Rosa's breathing had also calmed, and she had slipped back to his side of the bed. Her cheek was pressed against his bare back and one arm was draped, possessively, over his chest.

He scowled down at the hand. Her fingers were loosely curled towards her palm, her nails filed to a perfect oval, her skin unblemished. Right at the point where palm met wrist was another freckle. Unobtrusive, it did nothing to mar the beauty of her hands. What would it feel like to press his lips against the imperfection?

His body twitched in eager response.

*Thief's hands*, McWilliam reminded himself.

Not that it did any good. This body didn't seem to care one straw that she was a thief. To his body, she was a woman, and a mighty fine one to boot.

He rolled onto his back. Apparently he'd been rather obliging in sleep and had tangled one leg around both of Rosa's. His belted plaid had knotted around his thighs, leaving the rest of his legs exposed. He lifted his arm up and over her head to rest on the pillow. Muttering incoherently, she willingly adjusted her position to accommodate his arm, tucking her head onto the crook of his elbow.

His groin strained.

Rosa's own nightdress had also become dislodged in sleep, its hem pushed up towards her calves. Creamy skin lightly colored with faint freckles met his gaze and the fingers of his free hand itched to brush against her leg. Surely her skin was as soft as it looked.

*Hell.* What was he doing?

He snatched his blasted arm back, and Rosa's head fell a few inches to land on the pillow. Her eyes jerked open, and she scuttled backwards, dragging the blanket with her.

"I've seen your nightdress before," he snapped, swiftly pulling on his knee-high wooden stockings and shoes. "Hurry up and get dressed. We can't stay here any longer than necessary."

She rose, stifling a yawn with such ferocity she looked a little like she was sucking lemons.

"You can't still be tired."

"I'm a very light sleeper," she huffed. "And I'm certainly not used to sharing a room with a man."

"A light sleeper?" He raised an eyebrow as he returned his dirk to its sheath hanging from his belt. Like hell she was. A light sleeper didn't coil herself around him.

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you calling me a liar, again?"

Evidently, she was still angry about the whole 'cousin' thing. He wanted to scoff. Instead, he said, "Get dressed. We're leaving."

"What about breakfast?" she asked, disappearing behind the screen.

"We'll eat on the move."

Rosa dressed quickly, her fingers flying with the confidence of a woman long used to dressing herself. Although Rosa couldn't manage to fasten the straps as tight as she would have liked—the previous owner being a woman of rather flat proportions—she couldn't complain. Mistress Thomas's second-hand clothes were simple but neat and clean; they were as good as any clothes gifted to her by Mrs Wright during Rosa's two years as governess to her children.

Despite her speed, Rosa could hear the Scotsman standing on the other side of the screen clicking his tongue with impatience. And rain tapped at the windows and the roof with increasing persistence until the air hung heavy around Rosa.

She ran her hands down her stomach as a sudden rush of panic speared her chest. How could she trust him? All she knew about him was that he'd kidnapped her from custody. He said he was the McWilliam laird, but how could she know he spoke the truth? He could be lying to her.

She froze, her feet refusing to make the three steps around the dressing screen and back into McWilliam's view.

The Scotsman could be planning to harm her. She knew from her father's daily subscription to London's *Gazetteer* that the paper had never been short for grizzly news.

She could see the headline now: *Suspected thief Rosa Alice Blair murdered in vengeance killing by Scottish lunatic.*

Oh, sweet heaven, she couldn't go with McWilliam. She couldn't let him take her across the border. She had to get back to Leeds. If she died, her cousin died too.

"Come on," he barked.

Rosa pushed her left foot forward, but her right didn't want to follow.

McWilliam stepped around the screen. Power rolled off him. He stood straight with his shoulders level, but there was an ease about his body that gave the appearance of supreme confidence and self-assurance as though he wasn't used to being disobeyed. His gaze raked

her body. "I can see no reason for the delay."

"No." She glanced at the door over his shoulder.

"Then come." He turned, obviously fully expecting her follow. Unlocking the bedchamber door, he strode out onto the landing.

Rosa darted forward, slamming the door shut. Her fingers groped for the key but it wasn't in the lock. McWilliam must still have it.

For an instant, her heart stopped beating. She could hear the Scot turning around on the landing, the heels of his worn shoes scrapping against the wooden floorboards as he stared at the closed door. She could almost feel his anger burning through the wood.

She grabbed the heavy chair by the burnt-out fire, dragging it with panic-fueled strength and jammed it under the door handle.

The handle rattled and the door shook as McWilliam swore loudly in Gaelic. She stepped back, biting her bottom lip. This might not have been the best idea. It seemed, when it came to McWilliam, she had trouble thinking her plans through.

She couldn't stay in this room forever. Eventually, the chair would break under the sheer pressure of his assault and she'd be back under McWilliam's command.

"Open the door, Thistle."

"I'm not going with you."

Bang.

"I said, open the door." More swearing.

"What is going on?" came Mistress's Thomas's voice.

Rosa's eyes widened. She'd completely forgotten the buffer.

"Goodwoman," she called through the closed door. "You cannot let him near me. You cannot let him take me!"

"This is none of ye business," replied McWilliam.

"Really! This is my establishment."

Rosa opened her mouth, but McWilliam spoke over the top of her, "My wife isn't feeling too well and has *accidentally* locked me out of the room."

"I should have known something like this would happen," Mistress Thomas scoffed. "I should never have let a Scot in."

"I beg your pardon." McWilliam said calmly, but he sounded

anything but sorry. His voice had again taken on the dark edge that sent shivers down Rosa's spine.

There was a moment of silence, then Mistress Thomas cleared her throat. She, too, had clearly not missed the undercurrents in McWilliam's words. "I...I have a spare key, if that would help," she said eventually.

"Nay, thank you."

Rosa didn't think she'd ever heard such a polite comment spoken with such cynicism.

"Right." The buffer's voice faded into silence, and, a second later, her footsteps retreated.

"No!" Rosa's heart sunk. "Mistress Thomas!"

"You won't get any help from that quarter," McWilliam said. "Now open the door, wee lass."

She clutched her hands behind her back.

"There's nowhere for you to go."

She shook her head.

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you: open the door."

If she opened the door, she'd have no choice but to go with him to Scotland. Her breath hitched.

Bang!

She jumped.

"Fine." He drew out a deep sigh, as if bracing himself. "At least tell me why you're doing this. A moment ago you were acting perfectly rationally."

Rationally! She would have snorted in disgust if she wasn't already finding it so hard to breath. Agreeing to travel unescorted with a complete stranger—a man—was not rational. If she hadn't already been in such trouble with the law, she would have thought herself insane to have come this far. Her escape plan to lull him into a false sense of security before escaping back to Leeds was laughably simplistic in the dawn of a new day; a child's plan, one likely to fail before it had begun. "You kidnapped me."

"You stole money from my business, from my clan and my family. Nobody steals from the McWilliams."

“You kidnapped me,” she repeated. Her words seemed to echo around the room. Until that moment, it hadn’t seemed real. None of it. Not the midnight hustle out the window or the long ride through the country or the night spent sleeping beside a Scotsman.

Trembles took a hold of her body as if a sudden fever had struck. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t possibly survive the Scotsman with fire in his eyes.

“Thistle. Thistle!” A man’s strong hands grasped her shoulder, shaking her. She blinked, clearing her vision. McWilliam towered over her.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

Creases marred his forehead. Over his shoulder, the wooden chair lay haphazard on the floor, two legs broken right off and one of the arms twisted out of shape.

“What?” he said, more demand than question.

“How can I be sure you really are the Laird McWilliam?”

“I do not lie.”

Through the panic and the fear, she felt a stab of anger. “Neither do I.”

“Bull.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, tucking her hands beneath her elbows to hide the shaking. “I didn’t—”

But he held up a hand, his eyes trained on the closed window. Voices sounded outside as though several people approached the coaching inn. He cursed under his breath. “Looks like Mistress Thomas sent for help.”

“Runners.” Rosa straightened. They were still on English soil even if they weren’t in London. Was it possible that Smith, the hatless wonder, had followed them this far?

Her eyes darted between McWilliam and the door. There was a fist-sized hole in the wood as though he’d punched his way through to reach the chair.

She shifted her weight onto her dominant leg, preparing to make a run for it, but he wrapped an hand around her upper arm.

“I’m not letting you go so easily.” And he strode across the room, pulling Rosa with him. She stumbled behind, taking several steps for

each of his.

McWilliam took the stairs two at a time, not bothering to slow even when Rosa stumbled.

Mistress Thomas scowled at him through the crack between kitchen door and wall before snapping the door shut. The bolt clicked into place as she locked herself out of his sight.

He swore again. They couldn't leave by the front. They'd be stopped before they made it two steps. He turned towards the back door. If they could reach the stables without being seen, they might have a chance to escape.

He ducked out the back right as a man stepped around the corner of the building. He wasn't a Bow Street Runner, but he was holding a pitchfork as though Mistress Thomas had called him over as he'd passed the coaching inn on his way to tending the fields.

Rosa wrenched open her mouth, but McWilliam pulled her against his chest, covering her mouth with his free hand.

"Hey!" the farmer called.

McWilliam ignored him, pulling Rosa into the stables.

Mist raised her head, blinking docilely at him. Abandoning his saddle and saddlebags, McWilliam threw on a blanket before wrenching open the stall door, lifting Rosa onto Mist's back and mounting up behind her.

"Keep your mouth shut," he hissed into her ear and nudged Mist forward.

The horse needed no reins. She headed straight for the open door, moving effortlessly from trot to gallop.

McWilliam let his body rock with the steady movement of the gallop, an arm wrapped tightly against Rosa's waist, his other hand tangled in Mist's mane.

He would not let the English take back his thief. He would not fail his clan a second time.

## Chapter Five

“No!” Rosa kicked out with her feet, twisting back around towards the disappearing coaching inn. Dark rain clouds still hid the sun from view so that everything lay under a blanket of water and shadows. “I’m an escaped criminal!”

“Shut it,” he said but without much force. The men Mistress Thomas had managed to gather together hadn’t bothered to pursue them, most likely because they didn’t have horses of their own. Their escape had gone better than expected.

“I’ve been kidnapped!” Rosa dove to the side, attempting to throw herself from Mist.

McWilliam hauled her upright, her lithe body easily manipulated. Her fear had apparently evaporated in the face of a possible rescue.

She hissed in the most unladylike fashion, digging an elbow into his stomach.

He grunted but didn’t relent. Her elbows were boney, but the jab had little strength behind it. To him, she was tiny. A will o’ the wisp; almost insubstantial. And yet, her back pressed against this chest certainly wasn’t an apparition, nor was the smooth curve from waist to hip. Traitorous heat rippled through him.

Rain drops splattered her face, darkening her bronze hair almost black.

“Let go of me.” She flashed a scowl over her shoulder. “I’ve had enough of this. You cannot take me across the border.”

Strands had fallen loose from her simple braid and stuck to her forehead and cheeks in wet clumps, framing her face. Her half-moon birthmark was clear to his sight, even partially covered by the folds of

her mantle.

Clenching his teeth, McWilliam trained his eyes on the side of her face. "That's funny," he said, barely moving his mouth, "because we should be crossing the border late this evening."

"No. No, no!" Again she tried to throw herself from Mist. Her efforts made little progress; his arm locked around her waist meant she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. "You're..."

Her mouth opened and closed as she struggled to find the sourest epithet. She was play-acting of course. A thief of her caliber surely knew a few choice words for a situation like this. Even if she had been brought up in her uncle's household, with a drunk for a father and fellow criminals as associates, Rosa couldn't possibly be as innocent as she pretended.

"Bastard?" he suggested.

She sucked in a quiet breath.

For a second he thought she wouldn't take the bait, but then she flicked her braid over her shoulder, slapping him in the face with its wet tail. "Bastard."

"Now that's the first true thing you've ever said to me." The corner of his mouth twitched up. Rosa might have thought a simple promise to always tell him the truth would be enough to make him believe in her innocence, but she'd chosen the wrong man to mess with. Scots were notoriously stubborn and his family even more so than usual. She wouldn't be able to wear him down.

He brought his mouth to her ear, "You don't fool me, Thistle," he murmured.

The smell of lavender bathwater brushed his senses and something else. It was a scent he couldn't quite put his finger on, something he'd never smelt before. Something entirely Rosa Blair.

"You made me a promise, now I'm making you one. You'll admit you stole that money from me. And you'll admit to your theft before Whitsunday." Twelve days hence.

Aye, he'd make Rosa confess to her crime, and, when that moment happened, he'd pounce. She wasn't the ordinary governess she claimed to be. She had her secrets. Last night's nightmare had shown him a

glimpse of her dark past.

“Bastard,” she breathed again, her voice almost lost to the rain.

Silent laughter rumbled through his chest. It wouldn’t take much to crack Rosa Blair.

Rosa’s ear tingled from the closeness of his mouth, the hair on the back of her neck rising. She’d never admit to having stolen his money because the instant that she did, he’d lock her away. Not to mention the fact that she actually was innocent. She’d never stolen anything in her whole life; not a single length of satin ribbon let alone 3,000 pounds.

But he wasn’t going to give up. She now knew that about him. His callused hand on her waist, his determination to keep her on his horse and his flat-out refusal to believe she spoke the truth all pointed to a single-mindedness of character she’d rarely come across before. He was like the rain currently soaking its way through the layers of her clothing: persistent and relentless. Combined with the sheer strength of his body, it was a miracle she hadn’t given in to him already.

Rosa straightened her shoulders, her back rubbing against the iron block of his chest. She couldn’t give in. She couldn’t abandon Amelia.

*What can you do against the strength of the Scot? a voice hissed at the back of her mind. You’re nothing more than a governess.*

A governess, yes but not a thief. She clung to that thought like it was a lifeline. She’d survived two years with the Wrights, and their three boys certainly hadn’t been little angels by any stretch of the imagination. If she could survive two years of mud in her bed, snails in her shoes and rocks in her pockets for less than two guineas a month, she could survive thirteen days in the company of a Scotsman.

Twelve days now.

She turned her head to the right until she could see his face in her periphery. He had a warrior’s physique—well over six feet, with broad shoulders, a wide chest and long muscular limbs. He didn’t conform to English fashion with his hair cut short and not covered by a wig, and his belted plaid was unlike anything worn in London, or even Bradford for that matter.

Yesterday, thirteen days had seemed like a lifetime, today it felt like the sand was slipping through her fingers. If she was going to beat McWilliam at his own game, then she'd need every minute she could muster to argue her defence.

"How actually was I supposed to have stolen your money, my lord?" she asked as the horse slowed to a trot.

"Nice try." Blunt and boorish.

"Why don't you be a gentleman for just one moment and answer my question?" She would have more of a chance to prove her innocence if she actually knew what she was supposed to have done. The letter threatening Amelia's life if Rosa didn't take complete responsibility for the heist had given few particulars, listing only the date and time that the robbery had taken place. And while she'd done a little research about his estate, details had been scarce.

"I'm no gentleman."

A trill of something like fear and excitement rippled down Rosa's spine.

*I'm no gentlemen.*

It sounded more like warning than threat. If she was smart, Rosa thought, she'd keep her mouth shut, but she'd just decided to stand her ground, and she wasn't going to give up so easily. "Humor me."

Silence descended. Then she heard a creak as though he was grinding his teeth.

"My father warned me that trading with the English would get us into trouble," he said, eventually. The calmness of his voice suddenly seemed for show, as though there were deep things beneath the surface. "But I disagreed. We needed the money and trading in England was so much faster than sending a shipment to France or Spain."

"A shipment of what?"

"Wool." He ran his free hand down the side of his woolen plaid. "We have a couple of large flocks on the estate. Everyone's livelihood is linked with my family's business. Most of my clansman are shepherds, shearers and weavers. Wool provides us with food, shelter and warmth."

"What happened?"

He grunted in annoyance but answered anyway. "We received word

that the ship carrying a year's worth of cargo had sunk."

"But that can hardly be my fault." She let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. No magistrate, English or Scottish, could convict her for the sinking of a ship. It wasn't like she could control the waves. The ocean was more unfathomable than any laird.

"But the ship didn't sink. You know it didn't." The arm around her waist tightened. She doubted even an earthquake could knock her from the horse. "That was all a lie. The ship reached port at London, and the money from the sale was stolen."

"How do you know?" The sea was a dangerous place. The newspapers were always reporting tragic shipping accidents.

"Two of my own men were on that ship. Murray was killed, but Rodd made it back. He was badly wounded from a sword cut to his arm, but he told me about the English thieves who'd attacked him." His tone of voice made it perfectly clear he thought Rosa completely and utterly responsible.

"Me? I didn't attack him. I couldn't hurt anyone." She raised an arm, indicating the lack of muscle needed to kill and injure two burly Scotsman.

"If you want to name your accomplices, I'm sure the magistrate will be very pleased to issue a warrant for their arrest."

"I don't have any accomplices. I didn't steal your precious money."

"Then tell me why a woman matching your description was seen at the docks just after the sale was made?"

She shook her head. She'd never been to the docks. She hadn't even been in London during the heist. She'd been in Bradford looking after the Wright boys.

"I wasn't there," she said, shaking her head more firmly.

"Bull."

"What about the man who made it back to Scotland? He could have easily lied about seeing me there."

"My clan doesn't lie." The fire had returned. He burnt hot and hard. Rosa swallowed. It wasn't just his voice the fire claimed, his whole body seemed to burn against her back. His anger: palpable.

"Alright. I can't be the only woman in all of England with brown

hair and..." she waved a hand at her body, "last season's clothes."

"Bronze," he returned quickly, as though the words had been unthinking.

"What?"

"Your hair is bronze."

She didn't know why the distinction was important. "All right. I can't be the only woman in all of England with bronze hair and last season's—"

"Aye, wee lass, it was you. He could describe your birthmark." He brushed hot fingers against the side of her neck.

That wasn't possible. The likelihood of someone else sporting the same birthmark in the same place was almost incalculably small.

Which would mean only one thing: someone had gone to great lengths to set her up. Probably the same person who'd written the threatening letter and kidnapped Amelia.

She clenched her fists. The culprit had always planned, from the very beginning, to have Rosa take the blame for their crime.

But what had she ever done to make them hate her so much? She didn't know any thieves. And she'd never ventured into society. Neither the daughters of drunks nor governesses were very welcome by the ton.

"It's obviously a set-up." She struggled down from the horse, and this time McWilliam let her. She turned to face him as his own feet touched ground. "Someone has set me up, my lord. Don't you think I would have hidden my birthmark if I hadn't wanted to have been recognized?"

"It was dark. You probably thought it was worth the risk." He let out a hard and fast huff of air. "It's not like you expected any Scotsmen to survive to tell the tale."

"I can't believe you think I'm lying." Why wasn't he listening to her? Why couldn't he see she spoke the truth? "If I'm guilty then why did I hand myself in to the Runner?" She poked an accusatory finger to his hard chest.

He didn't budge. "You didn't hand yourself in."

"I did." A tight ball of anger was growing in her chest. Breathing was becoming hard, and her mouth ached as if she'd been clenching her

jaw. “Ask Runner Smith,” she demanded.

“And how am I going to do that?” he raised an eyebrow, apparently finding her anger amusing.

“This isn’t funny.” She was innocent, and she was going to make him see that.

“It’s heading that way.” He crossed his arms, a ghost of a smile now tugging at his lips.

“Take me back. We can find Smith, and he’ll collaborate my story.”

“We’re not going back to the Bow Street Runners.”

“Fine. Take me back, and I’ll prove to you that my cousin was kidnapped.”

“Nay.”

“Yes.”

“Nay.”

“Come on.” She grabbed at the horse, trying to turn her around. “My uncle will be devastated by Amelia’s kidnapping. Send him a message, and he’ll verify her disappearance.” Proving Amelia’s disappearance would prove Rosa had always been telling the truth, and when McWilliam realized that, he’d know she was innocent. “He lives near Manchester. That’s not too far from here. It wouldn’t take us long to reach him.”

The horse flicked her ears. Without reins or a saddle, she seemed even less inclined to do as Rosa instructed as the last time.

“Thistle.” He grabbed her hand, his fingers practically swallowing her own. “No matter how often or how forcefully you protest, I will take you across that border.”

“Don’t touch me.” She tugged her hand backwards, and he relented with another teasing raise of an eyebrow.

Fury raged through her. “You’re baiting me!”

“I don’t know that you mean.” This time he didn’t even bother suppressing his smile.

“You’re trying to make me say things that aren’t true by making me angry.” She poked his chest again. “I’ll never say what you want me to because I didn’t steal your money.”

“You’re being unreasonable. The sooner you admit—”

“No.” She didn’t bother letting him finish. She stamped her foot. And she never stamped her foot. Not once in two years as a governess. “You listen to me, Anndrais McWilliam. You’re obviously a man who’s used to getting his own way. Well, not this time. You’ve kidnapped the wrong woman. I will get to Leeds before time is up, and I will save my cousin.”

He leant forward, his forehead almost brushing her own, and whispered a single heartless word: “Liar.”

## Chapter Six

McWilliam could practically feel Rosa bristling with indignation. She stood before him, her back perfectly straight, her shoulders stiff and her head tilted up so she could stare directly into his eyes.

Around them, everything was still—the countryside deserted except for the occasional grazing sheep. For now, the rain had relented.

He stood his ground. He'd stared down a damn battalion of English soldiers, armed with nothing more than his dirk. Miss Rosa Blair didn't frighten him.

He stepped into her personal space. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, but she didn't back down. Not Thistle, not his feisty vixen.

His hand was on her waist, the other behind her neck before he could draw breath or form a coherent thought. And then he was kissing her.

She stiffened, resisting him for a few seconds, then, with a small sigh, her mouth softened beneath his. She parted her lips for him as his blood surged with possessive need, and he deepened the kiss, claiming her mouth with his own.

A shudder ran through her, and she pressed herself against him, her own hands grasping at the front of his shirt. With a pop, his top button dropped to the ground, and the collar of his shirt opened, cool fingers of air stroking his burning skin.

His blood was on fire with need even as his mind tried to stop him, telling him that he shouldn't be doing this, that she was off limits.

Dammit. He pulled back, dropping his arms back down to his sides.

He really absolutely shouldn't have done that. He hadn't been thinking.

“Never again,” he promised her, as Rosa’s hands moved to cover her swollen lips.

He grasped her around the waist with both hands, and lifted her onto Mist. She flinched at his touch, and he snatched his hands back.

The horse shuffled a few steps to the side, as if sensing the tension between them.

McWilliam didn’t mount up behind Rosa. Instead, he pressed a hand to Mist’s neck and started forward once more.

McWilliam set a grueling pace. Mist trotted, and he jogged along beside her. They didn’t stop for lunch, not that they had any food to eat anyway.

Rosa sat stiff in the saddle, but as the hours wore on her shoulders began to droop. He spared her little sympathy—it wasn’t like she was the one jogging.

As the sun crested the sky and began its descent, McWilliam knew they were approaching the border. He could feel it in his very bones. It was like the Lowlands called to him. Soon, the smooth undulating hills of the English countryside were replaced with the ragged mountains so reminiscent of his homeland; the soft, springy grass replaced by spiky thistles; and the light, gentle rain with thunder clouds that threatened a night of storms not to be reckoned with.

A smile tugged at his lips, and he closed his eyes for a second, breathing in the almost-Scottish air. *Soon.*

And if he had any say in the matter, he’d never step foot onto English soil again. This land spawned liars and thieves and killers. And redcoats.

He slowed, surveying the landscape. Farms were few and far between—few farmers choose to live this close to the border, not after more than fifty years of unrest and war between the two nations. Rather, brambles, nettles and gorse covered the foothills and rocks jutted out of the ground at peculiar angles, moss and lichen turning them grey, yellow and green.

This close to the border there were bound to be patrols of English

soldiers. While McWilliam had continued traveling along minor roads, used only by country folk moving from farm to farm, he decided now was the time for even more caution. It was unlikely Mistress Thomas had sent word ahead of a Scotsman traveling with his reluctant—possibly kidnapped—bride, but that wasn't all he was afraid of. If Rosa caught sight of a redcoat, she'd very possibly turn him in. Just one shout from her and they'd have half a garrison on their tail.

Turning Mist from the drovers' road, McWilliam picked his way around the rocks, until the hills blocked them from view of the drovers' road.

"Where are you going?" Rosa asked, a touch of panic marring her words. "The road is back that way." She gestured over her shoulder.

"I know."

"We'll get lost."

"We won't."

"The road is there for a reason. You can't just go traipsing off through the forest." More panic.

"This is hardly a forest," he said with a cool laugh.

This seemed to spark her anger once again. She leaned forward to grab at his shoulder. "Go back to the road," she snapped as a teacher would snap at a misbehaving child.

"I'm no English servant to do as ordered," he said. "This way will suit us better."

"You're being unreasonable." Her fingers tightened. He could feel her nails digging at his skin through his shirt.

"Thistle, cling to me all you like, we're going this way."

She snatched her hand back, tucking it under the elbow of her other arm. "I wasn't clinging—"

"I know where I'm going," he interrupted. "I grew up about a day's ride from here. I can navigate through the wildest of Scottish terrain. You're safe with me."

The irony of that last sentence wasn't lost on him. Nor, it seemed, on Rosa, for she let out a huff of air.

"Safe," she repeated, contempt oozing from each syllable. "I haven't been safe since you first stepped through my bedchamber window, my

lord.”

“Let me make one thing very clear.” He turned to stare at her, all humor gone. Rosa was a criminal. She’d stolen from him and nearly ruined all his father’s hard work. She deserved to fear him. He was her retribution in human form. He was her punishment, but he wanted her under no misconception. “I’ve never once put you in danger.”

McWilliam’s voice seemed to thunder through Rosa like the deep rumblings of an avalanche.

“What about back at the coaching inn when we were being chased by farmers with pitchforks?” she asked, determined not to let him dominate her. If she backed down now, he’d trample all over her and, heaven above, she wasn’t going to let that happen, not now, not with everything she had to lose.

“As I recall, it wasn’t me who locked myself in the bedchamber screaming bloody murder. And it certainly wasn’t me trying to throw myself off a galloping horse.” He continued forward, leading the horse around a clump of waist-high thistles, their purple flowers just beginning to open with the approaching summer.

Minor details. Since she’d met McWilliam she’d been kidnapped, threatened, chased and...ravaged. She pressed a hand to her mouth as memories of the kiss stirred in her stomach. She’d never been kissed before, not like that. McWilliam hadn’t been gentle. He’d been demanding, his own lips consuming all her thoughts and feelings until she’d been nothing but wanting and needing.

But kidnapped was kidnapped. It was that plain and simple.

He’d broken the law, and he deserved to be punished. She stilled as that last thought reverberated through her mind.

“So, Mr. High and Mighty,” she began, breaking the short silence. “If capturing me is all part of your crusade for justice, then when are you planning on handing yourself in to the magistrate?”

He didn’t privilege the question with an answer.

“Kidnapping is a punishable offense,” she continued. “Any self-respecting gentleman—”

“I’m no gentleman,” he repeated his words from last night.

“Any self-respecting man—”

“I’ll not lie to anyone about how I came to have you, if that’s what you’re hinting at,” he said, not bothering to glance her way. “But I’m sure my kin and clan will understand that I had no other choice. Justice would otherwise not have been administrated.”

“Justice,” she breathed. An Englishwoman would find no justice in Scotland. Though she’d been born a year after the last great battle, the ’15 Rising, Rosa knew something of the trouble between their two countries. The Jacobites refused to bow down to the rightful King George, preferring instead to throw their weight behind the Pretender, James Stuart.

She tensed. Was McWilliam a Jacobite? His estate was in the Lowlands, and while the people from that area were a little more subdued than their Highlander cousins, there were still many Lowlander Scots who’d take pleasure in her misfortune.

That would explain McWilliam’s desire to cross the border back into Scotland as quickly and quietly as possible. Any Jacobite supporter found in England would be arrested and whipped, sure as the day was long.

She examined the back of his head where his hair curled a little at the nap of his neck, the short strands just brushing his skin. His white collar was upturned and the point where fabric met skin was brown with traveling dust. This close, she could see dust lining the ridges of his skin along the back of his neck. He turned his head slightly, glancing to the left, and she was rewarded with a glimpse of his cheek. It hadn’t taken long for day-old stubble to once again tickle his face, rough and prickly.

As if sensing her eyes watching, he rubbed a hand over his cheek and chin. She heard the stubble scraping over his calluses like the tiny bristles of an iron brush against granite.

There was nothing to mark him as a Jacobite. No scar or tattoo that couldn’t be explained away.

Did the radicals even distinguish themselves apart? Perhaps it wasn’t a mark, but a secret gesture or code word that alerted others to his presence.

She glanced down at his plaid. Perhaps the pattern of the weave

indicated where his loyalties lay, or maybe it was the way he wore the folds? The extra length of fabric thrown over one shoulder and tucked into his belt could be important. Over the left shoulder—as McWilliam wore it—might mean supporter of James Stuart, the Pretender, and over the right could be a defender of the rightful King.

She could be in more trouble than she'd first realized. Her heart skipped a beat and her breathing quickened. She'd never met a Jacobite before.

She eased herself backwards, sliding along the horse's back towards her rump until she sat closer to her tail than her head. Anything to put a little space between herself and the Scot.

McWilliam must have caught the movement from the corner of his eye for he shot a look of disapproval her way.

"Sit still," he said, tugging at her knee, pulling her back into position.

She sucked a sharp breath in between her teeth, his hand hot on her leg. "Don't touch me." Fire speared through her, and color flooded her cheeks.

She pulled away, tugging at the folds of her mantle over her knees.

"My apologies." He touched his hand to his forehead as if he wore a top hat and bobbed his head as a dandy might when passing a lady and her family riding down Rotten Row. A grim smirk played with his lips.

A shiver stole down her spine. One moment he was angry, his voice like musket balls, and the next he was teasing. But always he was fire—intense and powerful—and directed straight at her.

He faced front again, striding forward with an easy confidence that seemed to echo around the gorse- and heather-covered hills with each step. The fact that the road was somewhere behind them, long lost to sight, did nothing to slow him down. Rosa stared at the point where the muscles of his shoulders met the muscles of his back, contracting and expanding with each swing of his arm visible through his shirt.

It was incomprehensible for anyone to be able to find their way through this scrub. By the time night came, they'd surely be lost.

She glanced skyward at the looming storm. Lost, cold and wet. McWilliam's confidence could not stop the rain from falling, nor could

CHARLOTTE ANNE

the heat of his body stop the darkness of night from coming.

Rosa tugged up the hood of her mantle. It was going to be another long night, and she hated him for it.

## Chapter Seven

The exact point where England met Scotland was marked by the River Esk. They crossed sometime before the sun had reached the furthest western mountaintops. Back on the land of his ancestors, heather and thistles crunched underfoot.

They'd made good time, crossing from Bradford into Scotland in just under two nights and two days.

Rosa was hunched over, the hood of her mantle covering her neck and blocking her birthmark from view. In another life, the mantle had been rather fine with a small row of tiny pearl buttons fastening the garment around her shoulders. The washed-out pink suggested it had once been a vibrant red, and the black band that ran along the entirety of the hem while patched in places was obviously velvet. Like the clothes she wore underneath from Mistress Thomas, it was most definitely second-hand.

He'd have thought a thief such as herself wouldn't wear hand-me-downs. Five hundred pounds could buy a lot of brand-new, height-of-fashion gowns and cloaks.

Then again, what better disguise for a thief was there than the jacket of a governess. Clever.

"I'm hungry." Rosa's stomach grumbled. She hadn't eaten since last night and that was almost twenty-four hours ago. The sun had long since disappeared, and the last of its light had just now faded into darkness. Overhead, the stars were hidden by low-hanging cloud, and distant rumblings of thunder rolled over the hills and along the valleys.

This time yesterday, she was eating dinner.

“We don’t have any food,” he said, pocketing the ring. “In case you’ve forgotten, I was forced to leave the saddlebags behind when you threw a tantrum.”

So much for wearing the wedding band in exchange for food. She tugged it off her finger, tapping his shoulder until he opened his hand to take it back.

Hungry and grumpy. She crossed her arms, using her knees to keep steady in the saddle.

“It wasn’t a tantrum. It was a calculated strategy to...” No lying. Right. “It wasn’t a tantrum. It was a moment of panic.”

“Because you finally realized there’s no escaping justice.”

“Because I suddenly realized I was alone with a strange Scotsman who could be planning to murder me.”

His shoulders tensed, but he didn’t turn round to look at her. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“No, you just want to lock me away for the rest of my life. What’s the going punishment in Scotland for stealing 3,000 pounds?” she asked.

He held up a hand, his head turned towards the right.

“Actually, don’t answer that.” She didn’t want to know. Besides, he couldn’t possibly keep refusing to believe she was guilty forever. “I didn’t steal—”

“Shut it.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’re not a magistrate. You have no right determine my—”

“Shut up!” He grabbed her knee, squeezing.

She jerked her leg to throw off his hold. “Don’t touch—”

“Someone’s coming.”

She clamped her mouth shut. Who? Another Scot? Or an Englishman? Perhaps a highwayman! She’d read stories of people attacked on roads when they were traveling in the middle of nowhere. And right now, she and McWilliam were certainly in the middle of nowhere. If someone attacked them now, there’d be no soldiers or Runners or even a farmer to help.

This was getting ridiculous!

She glanced down at McWilliam's dagger hanging off his belt. Rosa wasn't going to let any old highwayman make life any harder for her. Amelia was depending on Rosa, and Rosa couldn't save her cousin if she was dead in a ditch.

She jumped down from the horse, tugging McWilliam's dagger from its case.

The Scot grabbed at her wrist, but she darted backwards, glancing around.

No one appeared. Coward.

"Show yourself at once," she demanded.

"What are you doing?" McWilliam hissed under his breath.

"We have absolutely nothing worth stealing so you might as well leave—"

One of McWilliam's hands wrapped around her mouth, the other gripped her waist. He dragged her backwards.

Rosa kicked back, her feet barely touching the ground. The Scot's grip remained taut, locked around her like the bars of a cage.

"Do you want to get us both killed?" he hissed.

She shook her head. Her heart thumped against her chest.

He relinquished her mouth, pulling his dagger back from her grasp. Pressed as she was close against his chest, she could feel him looking left then right, scouring the landscape.

She mimicked his movements, surveying their surrounds and seeking any sign of an approaching attacker. Darkness and shadows met her gaze, ragged rocks hiding anybody from sight.

McWilliam backed up a couple of steps, tugging Rosa with him. She stumbled on the uneven ground, his hand around her waist the only thing keeping her from falling.

Time slowed; the passing of it marked only by the occasional rustle of the wind in the long grass and the steady beat of his heart. Nothing else moved—not an animal or person.

Eventually, McWilliam let her go. He pointed over his shoulder, indicating they should keep walking.

Rosa stepped away and cold air rushed into the space between them.

“We can’t stay here,” he muttered, his mouth barely moving. He started forward, his horse picking its way carefully along behind him.

“What happens if they find us?” Rosa whispered, rushing forward to match this long strides.

He didn’t answer, pausing for the briefest of moments for her to catch up. For a man of his size, McWilliam moved like a predator. He reminded her of a cat stalking a bird.

On the contrary, Rosa stumbled along, her skirts twisting between her legs. Dignity be damned. She wasn’t going to die because Mistress Thomas-no-meat-on-my-bones’ hand-me-downs restricted her movements. She hoisted up the skirts, freeing her ankles and knees.

Footsteps sounded behind. Her heart leapt into her mouth. Whoever had been hiding from view was giving chase.

McWilliam sped up. Rosa followed.

The footsteps behind quickened.

“Come on, lass!” McWilliam grunted, giving up any pretense of silence. He grabbed her under the elbows, hoisting her unceremoniously back onto the horse.

McWilliam strode along beside them, one hand resting on the horse’s rump. Transferring his weight onto a foot-high rock sticking above the uneven ground, he hoisted himself up behind her. Leaning forward, he pressed his chest to her back, both his arms reaching around her to rest on the horse’s mane. He didn’t pull, the horse seemed to instantly know what he wanted and broke into a trot.

“Faster,” Rosa urged. It didn’t sound as if the highwayman rode a horse, but she’d read the newspapers, she’d seen the black and white illustrations. She knew exactly what highwaymen were capable of. And it wasn’t anything a respectable lady or otherwise wanted to happen to them.

“We can’t,” was all he said in reply.

“I don’t want to be plastered all over London’s front page news. Go faster.” The heading of the article flashed before her eyes: *Thief killed by murdering marauder*, with the byline: ‘Escaped criminal Rosa Alice Blair killed by highwaymen when attempting to cross the border into enemy territory’.

*The Highlander's Thief*

“There are too many rocks,” he snapped, and she felt him twist in his seat to glance behind them. “Mist could break her leg if we go faster.”

Rosa twisted too, trying to catch sight of their follower. A flash of red caught her eye, then Mist started down one side of a hill and the highwayman was lost from view.

Another roll of thunder rumbled across the sky, followed by a flash of lightning. Rosa jumped. The storm was nearing. And all around them the darkness pressed closer. She could hear her own heartbeat and it was like the footfalls of a hundred highwaymen charging ever closer. She snapped her eyes closed.

“Are we still going the right way?” she asked, between gritted teeth.

“Not long now. We’re almost there.”

Almost there. She practically sighed in relief—her Scottish prison possibly her only haven from the terrors of the Scottish countryside.

If the rest of the country was half as bad, it was no wonder Scots were notoriously angry and violent people—they were clearly a reflection of the country that bore them.

And if McWilliam got his way, as he seemed accustomed to, she’d be stuck here for a long time to come.

Rosa shuddered.

She couldn’t think this way! There were still twelve days—almost eleven now—before the trial. Eleven days to convince McWilliam she spoke the truth. For Amelia’s sake and for the sake of her own conscience, she couldn’t afford to fail.

Rosa’s eyes snapped open.

Failure was not an option.

A large raindrop hit McWilliam’s cheek, quickly followed by an onslaught of thunder and lightning. A second later, he was soaked, the water drenching his shirt.

Between his arms, Rosa shuddered.

Keeping one hand on Mist’s mane, he unhooked the long folds of his belted plaid from over one shoulder, wrapping the excess wool around Rosa.

She stiffened before sinking closer to him.

It felt more intimate to have her tucked beneath his plaid, more like an embrace of lovers than that of prisoner and capturer. He didn't drop his arm, not because he liked the feel of Rosa pressed as close as possible to his chest, he assured himself, but because the rain was bitterly cold and it would be no justice if she died of a chill.

The one good thing about the rain was that the redcoats following would be hard pressed to see them through the sheets of water. They didn't seem to have been riding horses, but Mist wasn't traveling fast enough that a determined man on foot couldn't have caught up. And the soldiers didn't have to come that close, for the instant Rosa called out to them would be the instant they realised what was really happening.

If he'd been traveling by himself, the soldier would likely have questioned his movements as he was so close to the border. A simple lie could have solved that problem.

Then they probably would have demanded to know why he was carrying a dirk because, with the introduction of the Disarming Act twenty-three years ago, it was illegal for a Scot to carry a weapon. That would have been harder to wiggle out of for his dirk hung from his belt, clear as day. He probably would have been whipped for the infringement.

But kidnapping an Englishwoman and dragging her over the border was a serious crime. He'd be locked up for the rest of his life. And Rosa's status as a wanted criminal wouldn't do him any favors. He'd probably be killed for aiding a known thief—hung from the nearest tree and left to rot.

He ground his teeth. That wasn't going to happen. They weren't going to get caught. The harsh Scottish rain would create enough cover for them to reach the safety of his estate. Besides, Rosa seemed afraid of their followers, almost as though she hadn't realized who they were.

For a thief, she was awfully naïve. *She's just a city girl*, he thought, contemptuous. He'd never liked city girls. They'd always thought themselves too high and mighty for the country. Well, he loved the country, and he loved his estate.

McWilliam glanced behind again and saw nothing but rain and clouds, the redcoats having either abandoned the chase or become lost

to the wilderness.

“Are we nearly there?” Rosa asked. She sounded smaller; her voice muffled by his plaid and her own fear.

Around them, sheep stood sleeping, stirring only when Mist passed close-by. McWilliam recognized this field. These were his sheep. His land, and his home.

“Almost.”

She tugged at his plaid, pulling it more firmly about her shoulders. With the hood of her mantle turned up, he couldn't see anything of her face to judge her expression. He imagined she'd be experiencing mixed feelings—joy at finally reaching shelter out of the rain and fear because his house was to be her prison for the foreseeable future.

“It did not take us very long,” she murmured, almost to herself.

“No,” he agreed. It was easy to see what she was thinking—there was only a day's travel between his estate and England. “But only a true Lowlander can find their way through these fields. You'd be lost in an instant if you tried such a journey on your own.”

“You can't know that, Laird High and Mighty,” she snapped.

He suppressed a smile. That was an easy lie to spot. She was losing her touch. “Your shaking gives away your fear.”

“It's cold.”

“Says the woman pressed so close to my chest she could be my lover.”

Rosa pulled forward, trying to throw off the arm McWilliam had wrapped around the front of her chest.

Surprising her by obliging, the Scot dropped back and his plaid fell away, letting in the biting cold.

“Is that better?” he growled.

She froze. It wasn't an angry growl, but mocking and playful. Rosa didn't know which one she should fear more: his wrath or his teasing. Either way, he was dangerous.

“I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself,” she said, after a slight pause.

CHARLOTTE ANNE

“Oh, I know. That’s what I’m worried about.”

She twisted at the waist, trying to look over her shoulder and into his face. He smiled, and shadows darkened his eyes.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

The Scot raised an eyebrow, his lips pressed closed.

“I didn’t steal your money,” she said, sick to death of repeating herself. But she would keep on saying it over and over again until her voice ran dry and McWilliam’s resolve finally faltered.

She owed it to Amelia. And she owed it to Uncle Oliver. He’d already lost one daughter, losing another would break his heart.

Rosa pressed a hand to her mouth. How had she not thought of her uncle sooner? How had she not considered the panic and pain he must be suffering right now not knowing where Amelia was?

As soon as she’d thought the question, she knew the answer.

Because she was selfish.

It was easy to tell McWilliam that she’d handed herself over to the Bow Street Runners to save Amelia. It was much harder to admit she wanted to save Amelia to atone for her own past mistakes. It was Rosa’s fault she only had one living cousin.

It was her fault Emily was dead.

“We’re here.” The Scot’s voice cut through her thoughts.

Rosa blinked, looking round.

Embedded in the foothills and seeming to rise out of the very earth itself was a fortress. It loomed overhead, at least as tall as five storeys and surrounded by a thick stone wall. Candlelight still flickered at some of the windows of the four, even taller, tower houses.

Her heart sank into the pit of her stomach. It looked exactly like it was from a nightmare.

With a shout in Gaelic, McWilliam called out over the storm.

Somebody answered, their voice almost lost to the thunder, then the spiked metal gate of the portcullis trundled upwards with a creaking of gears.

“Welcome to the Uilleim Estate,” said the laird. “Welcome to your retribution.”

## Chapter Eight

The clip-clop of the horse's hooves against the drawbridge echoed eerily as Rosa and McWilliam crossed under the portcullis. There was just enough moonlight to see the metal spikes hanging threateningly over their heads, and a trill of panic surged through her stomach before they stepped clear into a large, shadowy courtyard.

Rosa had read about these old-fashioned castles, but she'd never realized people actually still lived in them. The looming tower houses with their conical spires and narrow windows looked terrifyingly gothic and not at all like the drawing rooms of the Wrights' townhouse and absolutely nothing like the houses she'd seen on Mayfair.

Headline: *Kidnapped thief stolen back in time to rat-infested dungeon.* London journalist Bennie Cooke would be having a field day if he could see this.

"Nothing to say?" McWilliam asked "You've hardly shut up for the last two days."

"I've plenty to say," Rosa snapped. "But nothing you'd like to hear, my lord."

"You find my home displeasing?" he asked, humor instantly replaced with anger. He raged from hot to hotter with nothing in-between.

"It's not what I was expecting."

He let out a deep breath—she felt his chest heave against her back. "Now that I do actually believe."

Stopping under the eaves of a low-hanging roof of what could only be a blacksmith's workshop, McWilliam reached up to help her down. Rosa rested her own hand on his shoulders, her mind preoccupied as it

repeated his words over and over again—*that I do actually believe.*

“You’re back.” Another kilted man strode across the cobbled courtyard, leaning heavily on a walking stick. He was older than McWilliam by at least twenty years, although there was an air about him that reminded Rosa of her kidnapper. He stood only half a head taller than her, smaller than McWilliam, but he had McWilliam’s angled jawline and square shoulders.

The laird nodded in greeting, a full-blown smile capturing his mouth. Rosa blinked. She hadn’t known he had it in him. The older gentleman must be a relative.

Rosa was intrigued. If this man could make McWilliam smile, then he might hold some sway over the laird. If she could get him on her side, he could help convince McWilliam of her innocence.

She forced herself to also smile in greeting.

“You’re up late,” McWilliam said.

“You mean early. It’s almost morning now. I’ve been busy looking after everything since ye rushed off without a word of goodbye.”

“I know.” McWilliam’s smile softened, and he ran a hand through his hair. “There was something I had to do.”

The older man’s gaze moved to Rosa, and she felt distinctly as though she were under examination. Even in the darkness, his eyes glinted keenly, his gaze sweeping over her too-tight bodice and muddied hem. She widened her smile.

*Read all about it: English governess seeks ally amongst enemies.*

For a moment there was only silence except for the sound of rain hitting the wooden shingles overhead. Then, with his eyes still on her, the older man said something in Gaelic.

McWilliam said something in return with a slight shrug of his shoulders. Rosa heard her name.

The older man shook his head, anger flashing in his murky brown eyes.

It was blatantly obvious McWilliam hadn’t told him about his plan to kidnap her.

Rosa’s smile halted. If she didn’t act swiftly her chance at persuading the older man of her innocence would be lost. First impressions and all

that.

“I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced, sir,” she said, curtsying with a bob of her head as a lady would when being first introduced to a gentleman.

Both men stared at her.

“My name is Miss Rosa—”

“Oh, I know who ye are, *Sassenach*,” he snapped.

“I’m afraid you don’t. I’m not a thief or a murderer or a criminal. I’m a governess from a respectable household.” She twitched her hand to show she was still waiting. In that moment, she reminded herself of Amelia. Her cousin would never let anyone ignore her. She was always the center of everyone’s attention.

The older man tucked his thumbs into his belt.

“Sooner, rather than later, you’re going to realize I’m innocent.” To disguise the insult of leaving her hand waiting, she brushed her hands down her shirt, dusting away an invisible crease. “It’s been a long day. No,” she corrected herself, “it’s been two long days. I’ve been kidnapped, have spent more time atop that blasted horse than on my own two feet, have barely eaten a decent meal and have been wet through since this morning.” She looked up—already a faint glow was beginning to illuminate the clouds. “Since yesterday morning,” she amended.

The wash of anger that had descended upon the older man at the first mention of her name seemed to have been interrupted by a touch of confusion. More wrinkles had gathered at the corners of his eyes, and he watched her with a slightly startled expression as though he was actually half considering the possibility that she might in fact be a governess and not a hardened criminal.

He still didn’t offer to shake her hand, but at least he wasn’t glaring anymore. “Cameron,” he said eventually. “McWilliam’s uncle on his father’s side.”

“It’s a pleasure—” She shook her head. Nothing about this was pleasurable. “Good morning,” she finished rather lamely.

McWilliam glanced between Rosa and Cameron then said something else in Gaelic.

Cameron raised a hand. “Perhaps, my laird, we could continue this discussion inside. In private.” His tone suggested he wasn’t used to being disobeyed, a quality McWilliam had obviously inherited, and an image of two bulls head to head flashed through her mind.

“Perhaps you’re right,” McWilliam conceded.

Rosa blinked. Cameron would actually get McWilliam to do as he asked. Her first impression had been correct—he could be a valuable ally.

“Miss Rosa, let me show you inside,” Cameron said. “I’ll get the housekeeper to find you some dry clothes and tea.”

McWilliam cut between them. He grasped Rosa’s wrist in his vice-like grip and tugged her forward. She stumbled to keep up, her shoes squelching in the inch-thick mud covering the cobblestones.

“Let me go,” she snapped, bowing her head against the rain as they left the shelter and crossed the courtyard.

He didn’t relent. A show of dominance. He wanted to make sure both she and Cameron knew exactly who was in charge. McWilliam wasn’t a bull locked in battle with his uncle, he was wildfire, burning his way through anything that stood in his path.

The laird led her to one of the tower houses, kicking open the great wooden door to reveal a shadowy entrance hall. No plaster, paint or brightly colored wallpaper covered the stone, leaving the walls bare and cold. The floor, too, was uncovered, and Rosa’s shoes tapped on the flint tiles like the clicking hands of a pocket watch. It looked just like the drawings she’d seen in the popular press of Newgate Prison in London—dark, scary, hopeless.

Her breaths came in rapid pants.

Rosa was going to be imprisoned and the moment the cell door closed all chances of saving Amelia would disappear.

She twisted around to Cameron. “I’m not a thief, my lord,” she said, her voice rising. “I didn’t steal your money.”

Another furrow appeared between his brow, but he didn’t answer.

Rosa glared up at McWilliam. “You can’t lock me up. You have no proof I’m your thief. Where’s your evidence?” She wrenched her arm from his grasp, but he just caught her around the waist, pulling her side

close up against his own.

“You’re not a Runner. You’re not a magistrate. You’re have no right to lock me away!” Her cry raced up the stairs and reverberated around the upstairs rooms. “Let go!” She hit at him, but at this angle it was almost impossible to put any force behind her blow—not that it probably would have made a difference. Her hand touched his rock-solid chest making it startling obvious that she hadn’t a chance in heaven or hell of breaking free from his hold if he didn’t want her to.

McWilliam instantly felt the moment when Rosa’s fear boiled to the surface. She stiffened against his side, her body slight in comparison to his own and, again, he was reminded of the will-o’-the-wisp folktales from his childhood. Rosa was almost as insubstantial as a spirit or ghost, and his arm about her practically engulfed her entire waist.

If she’d been any other woman he’d never have dreamed of touching her so intimately, nor would he have remained silent at her protests, choosing instead to offer words of comfort. But this was Rosa Blair, thief and deceiver extraordinaire. She couldn’t be trusted, so he didn’t bother answering as he tugged her up the stairs to the second-floor landing.

“I didn’t steal your money,” she cried, dragging her heels.

Rosa’s resistance spurred a sudden urge to toss her over his shoulder. It would be so easy. One hand on the back of her knees, the other cupping her backside, completely at his mercy.

He clenched the fingers of his free hand, cursing his traitorous imagination.

Despite the early hour and despite the fact he’d given her no warning, Mrs Fenella seemed to have known he’d returned with a woman in tow and had opened up one of the spare guest bedrooms close to the family quarters. She ushered them into a well-lit room where she’d placed a bowl of what appeared to be last night’s reheated mutton stew on the bedside table.

With startling amber curls that looked more like fuzzy sheep’s wool sticking out from beneath her spotlessly white cap, Fenella had been housekeeper of the Uilleim Estate for almost as long as McWilliam

could remember. She was much older than his uncle, probably older than anyone else on the estate, and, in all that time, had never learnt how to mind her own business.

His uncle, McWilliam realized, hadn't followed them into the room. He had a knack of disappearing whenever Fenella was around. Cameron's own sense of caution clashed terribly with Fenella's enthusiasm. Nevertheless, McWilliam had never considered letting Fenella go—she'd been as much a mother to him as Lady McWilliam.

“And who do we have here, *Laverd*,” Fenella asked, using the old tongue for ‘laird’. She wrapped a towel around Rosa's shoulders and rubbed her hands up and down Rosa's arms, warming her.

“I'm—” Rosa began, attempting to rise a hand in greeting as she had when introducing herself to Cameron.

“The thief,” McWilliam interrupted before she could get Fenella on side as she had almost succeeded with his uncle. “Miss Blair.”

Fenella backed up, her eyes flicking to the roaring fire in the grate as though she now regretted suppling Rosa with such luxury comforts.

He smiled—one point to him.

“No, no!” Rosa stepped towards the housekeeper, her arms outstretched, the towel falling from her shoulders. “I'm not the thief. I didn't steal any money.”

“I'm sure I wouldn't know,” Fenella muttered coolly. “Eat the stew while its hot. I'll send up some dry clothes,” and she backed out of the room quicker than McWilliam would have thought possible for the busybody.

Rosa turned her steely gaze towards McWilliam, icicles practically dripping from her glower. He couldn't help but admire how quickly she could master her own fear, turning it into a weapon of attack. She called herself a governess, yet she acted more like a lioness.

“This is getting ridiculous,” she snapped. “You cannot go around spreading these lies about me.”

“I don't have to spread lies. Every person on this estate—every man, woman and child—has heard your name and knows what you've done. You'll find no allies here, lass.” And he followed Fenella out, locking the door shut behind him.

“How’d you find her?” Cameron asked, resting both his hands on the polished wood desk.

“It was easy,” McWilliam replied calmly.

He sat at his father’s study desk, shuffling papers from one pile to another. He wasn’t really one for paperwork, but he knew how important it was to keep a business running smoothly.

He sighed. Sometimes it felt as if all he ever did these days was paperwork. Restoring his family’s reputation as one of the Lowland’s most prestigious wool manufacturers since his grandfather’s almost bankruptcy had been a long, uphill battle. And it was a battle he was still fighting thanks to Rosa.

“Easy?” Cameron huffed. “The *sassenach* just fell into your arms, did she?”

“Something like that.”

His uncle huffed again.

“I didn’t have to find her. She’d already confessed to the crime and had placed herself into the custody of a Runner.”

McWilliam didn’t think he’d ever seen Cameron so shocked, not even when he’d realized who Rosa was, not even fifteen years ago when Elspeth had broken all social protocol and asked Cameron to marry her. Aunt Elspeth—God rest her soul—would have laughed to see her husband’s face frozen in shock.

“You kidnapped the *sassenach* from custody?” he mumbled, eventually finding his voice.

“It wasn’t like she was in prison or anything. They’d put her up in a coaching inn in Bradford.”

“But you kidnapped her. From the custody of a Runner?”

Trust his uncle to take the side of caution. He’d always been the careful one, completely opposite to his spontaneous wife.

“There was only one Runner, and he wasn’t even in the room. But, I suppose, if you were being strictly honest, aye. I did kidnap Rosa from the custody of a Bow Street Runner.”

Before Cameron could pounce, McWilliam hurried on, “It’s not

like an English magistrate was really going to do anything about stolen Scottish money. Hell, he probably would have offered her our silver candlesticks as reward for stealing from us.” Not that they had any silver candlesticks left. All the good stuff had been sold long ago.

“Even so,” Cameron said, pacing back and forth across the room as if he owned it, “if anyone realizes what you’ve done, you’ll be sent to prison for the rest of your life. They might even hang you. Then what are we going to do?” He shook his head. “You’re the laird, McWilliam. You have too many people relying on you to do something like this.”

“I know, dammit.” McWilliam stood up, straightening to his full height. “And it’s for all those people that I did this. They need to know that when someone steals from us, the thief will get what’s coming to them, regardless of her—” He bit his tongue. He was about to say ‘regardless of her appeal’. But of course he didn’t think Rosa appealing.

Well, maybe he did. But he certainly wasn’t attracted to her.

Well, maybe he was. But he absolutely wasn’t going to act on those feelings. They were nothing more than desire and lust, and lust he could ignore. Especially when it was lust for a lying, stealing, manipulative Englishwoman by the name of Rosa Blair.

Cameron paused, his face softening. “Nobody’s expecting you to perform miracles. They know how hard you and your father have been working to restore the business.” He moved closer. “They know you’re not your grandfather.”

“Do they?” He hated that he shared his grandfather’s name—McWilliam. He even looked like him, more so than his father had. He shared his grandfather’s height, his broad shoulders and his brown, almost black hair, rather than his family’s customary red locks.

“Of course.” Cameron glanced towards the empty fireplace, and McWilliam knew he was looking at the spot over the mantle where his grandfather’s portrait used to hang. “You are your father’s son, not your grandfather’s.”

If that was true, then why was it his greatest fear?

## Chapter Nine

*27 April 1739*

Rosa paced from one side of the room to the other. She knew, even with her eyes closed, that it was eight steps between locked door and locked window, four steps from the end of the bed to the creaky desk and half a step between the bed and the battered bedside table.

Three days she'd been locked in this room. It might not have been a cell like Newgate Prison's she'd read about, but it was a cell nevertheless.

She pressed her ear to the door. Footsteps sounded as someone made their way up the stairs, but they quickly passed her by, disappearing into a room further down the narrow corridor.

Nobody had come to visit her since she'd been locked up except for the grumpy housekeeper who brought her breakfast and dinner each day. She also supplied Rosa with another secondhand dress, just as ill-fitting as Mistress Thomas's had been.

McWilliam hadn't been lying when he'd told Rosa that she'd find no allies amongst his people. Rosa had given up trying to talk to Fenella after receiving a continual stream of cold-shoulders and threatening glares. Even Cameron hadn't shown his face. (He'd called her a 'sassenach'—what did that even mean?)

It wasn't hard to imagine the headline. *Governess fades away, alone and friendless.*

Followed by: 'Locked in her bedchamber for three days without a single book, Rosa Blair, aged 20, dies in her sleep of acute boredom.'

"Miss Blair was kidnapped by Scottish laird Anndrais McWilliam in

the wake of her surrender to a Bow Street Runner.

“She pleaded guilty to the theft of 3,000 pounds from the Uilleim Estate earlier this year. But Blair has since retracted her statement, claiming she only admitted to the crime after receiving letters threatening the life of her cousin, Miss Amelia.

“Six days on, Blair passed away in her sleep from acute boredom brought on by a complete lack of any reading material supplied by her kidnapper.

“She is succeeded by her uncle, Viscount Oliver Blair, and cousin. However, Rosa’s untimely death prevented her from attending the magistrate in Leeds on the 15 May and, subsequently, Amelia too is now dead.”

She ground her teeth. Locked up here she couldn’t work on persuading McWilliam of her innocence. Nothing was going according to plan, and she didn’t even have a back-up.

*Governess fails to out-think her Scottish capturer and is imprisoned for the rest of her life.*

It sounded just like something she’d read in The Public Ledger—a story of betrayal, pain and sacrifice. Bennie Cooke would lap up a story like this.

Counting out the days on her fingers, it became increasingly obvious that five of her precious thirteen days had passed. That left only eight, including today.

That was it. If she couldn’t get out of here by only telling the truth, then she had no other choice but to escape.

The instant that thought flashed through her mind, her shoulders dropped. She couldn’t get out of here. It was a fortress, and she wasn’t a fighter, she was a governess, her only assets being an over-creative imagination and a taste for grisly true crime. Sure, she could practically recite every murder that had been reported in London’s popular press since 1728, but that wasn’t exactly a useful skill when it came to picking a lock or sneaking over a drawbridge.

Rosa made the eight steps across the room to the window. The window’s glass had broken and instead of being repaired someone had boarded it over, blocking out most of the light. With her face pressed against a gap in the wooden boards, she could see part of the courtyard

and even a little of the open fields beyond the great wall.

Scaffolding had been erected against the eastern wall, but there didn't seem to be anybody working on repairs. The Uilleim Estate must really be almost bankrupt. It would certainly explain the boards over the window. Broken glass was expensive to replace.

Her eyes settled on the kilted soldier guarding the front gate and, while open, the portcullis hung threatening over the entrance, ready to snap shut at a moment's notice. Only a soldier or a spy would have any hope of stealing a horse and escaping the clutches of Fortress Doom.

Or perhaps, she thought with a thump of her heart, a journalist. Last year, she'd read about how Bennie Cooke had bravely snuck into Fleet Prison, London's notorious debtors prison, for an exclusive interview with several inmates, and two years before that Bennie had crept into Bethlem asylum after dark to see if it really was haunted. If Bennie Cooke could brave criminals and madmen and all the while avoid capture by the Bow Street Runners, then surely Rosa could escape the throes of Laird Anndrais McWilliam.

That was it. She had no other choice. She was going to have to run away.

*Oh, sweet heaven.*

She didn't want to run away. She really didn't want to travel through Scotland all by herself with the highway robbers and thieves around, but McWilliam hadn't left her with any other option. If he wasn't even going to hear what she had to say, she couldn't very well convince him of her innocence. And if she couldn't convince him of her innocence, then he was never going to take her back to Leeds. No, it was up to her.

If she wanted to save Amelia, Rosa was going to have to take things in hand.

She tapped her forehead, marshaling her thoughts. If she was going to escape, then she'd need supplies—food, water, extra clothes and, most importantly, a horse. She'd also need to work out how to break free of her bedchamber and cross the drawbridge without being seen. With an hour or two head start, she might be able to make it back across the border before McWilliam caught up with her. And once she was back in England, everything would be all right.

Sure, she'd have to keep attempting to persuade McWilliam of her

innocence. If she stopped now, he'd get too suspicious, but her future no longer rested in his hands. Even if he never believed her, Rosa would get back to England, and she would save Amelia.

"McWilliam." she mused, taking his name on her tongue. He would come after her, there was no doubt about it.

While Rosa had kept an eye on the comings and goings of the courtyard through the gap in the window boards, she had yet to catch sight of the elusive laird. It was almost as if she'd imagined him.

She smiled at that thought. He was more annoying and stubborn than any man she could have dreamt up. More masculine, muscular, commandeering and certainly more handsome than anything her imagination could conjure.

In short, Laird Anndrais McWilliam of Uilleim Estate was unlike anyone she'd ever met—or read about—in her entire life.

Rosa took a deep breath. She could manage McWilliam. She'd have to if she didn't want to spend the rest of her life locked up in this tiny life-sucking room or worse.

McWilliam's feet stalled as he neared Rosa's room. He hadn't once been to see her since they'd arrived back at the castle three days previous. He'd told Cameron he didn't want anyone near Rosa, that he wanted her to stew in thoughts of her complete and total surrender.

Fact. But he also needed some space from her. They'd spend two days and three nights traveling together, with almost no other human contact. Rosa was out of bounds, but over the course of those days his body had begun to forget she was a thief and had begun focusing on her many feminine qualities—the curve of her body from shoulder to breast and waist to hip.

Just the idea of her slim but curvaceous figure appealed to him. Or, rather, to his body. When she looked at him with fire in her eyes, looking fit for battle, his body snapped to attention like a goddamn soldier ready for action.

It was perfectly understandable, he reassured himself. She was a beautiful, young woman with a temper to match. Any man would find

her damn-near impossible to resist.

She was, without doubt, much too beautiful for her own good or, more to the point, for his good.

If he was going to uncover Rosa's guilt and prove to everyone of his household, and two hundred tenants, that he was fit to be their laird then he needed to focus on Rosa the Thief, not Rosa the Stunning Temptress. Or Rosa the Vixen.

He strode on, ducking into his sister's bedchamber at the end of the hallway instead.

Rhona let out a squeal, a smile lighting up her face. "Andy!"

She was the only one who called him that. She was the only one he let call him that.

"How's the patient?" McWilliam asked as she shuffled over to give him room on her bed. He sat beside her, letting his legs dangle off the side.

"I'm bored!" she exclaimed, throwing a look of longing towards the window.

It was one of those rare days when the sun was almost showing its face, making it impossible not to want to go outside.

"You should have thought of that before jumping off the stable roof," he scolded. She was lucky it had only resulted in a sprained ankle. It could have been so much worse.

"I wasn't in the mood for common sense that day." She crossed her arms, pouting in a way that he knew would have the local lads panting in her wake. It was a strange sight he was not yet accustomed to seeing. Rhona with her womanly curves and a porcelain face that would be able to melt the coldest ice. Their mother had always called her a 'heartbreaker' and McWilliam was beginning to agree. He'd have to start keeping a closer eye on her now that she was approaching her sixteenth birthday. He didn't want anyone getting any ideas.

He glowered. "I'm away for a week and you throw your common sense off the stable roof. What am I going to do with you?"

"Is this the beginning of a lecture?" Her pout deepened as she eyed him warily.

He sighed. "Ach nay." Cameron had probably scolded her when it

first happened. His uncle had always had a soft spot for Rhona, but he also practiced tough love, especially when it came to propriety.

“What are you thinking about?” Rhona poked his cheek with a finger as she made a popping noise with her mouth.

He swatted away her hand. Rhona had more energy than anyone else he knew and being cooped up in her room while her ankle healed wasn't helping.

Wrapping an arm about her shoulders, he pulled her roughly against his side. She laughed, swatting at him. If their mother could have seen them now she would have had a fainting fit.

“That's not how you treat a young lady,” she would have snapped, ordering McWilliam off Rhona's bed and away from her bedchamber. He didn't care. Now their father was gone, Rhona and Cameron were his only family, and he intended to make sure his baby sister never wanted for anything. Even if the estate was almost in ruins.

“What's wrong?” Rhona pushed his cheek again, the smile fading from her face. “What are you thinking about now?”

“Athair,” he said, using Rhona's pet name for their father.

“Don't.” She shook her head, sadness suddenly ageing her appearance.

“It's been three weeks. We have to talk about him sometime.”

“Nay, we don't.” She crossed her arms, turning her head to stare back out the window.

“Ye know I went away for a couple of days,” McWilliam continued. His heart ached for her pain, but he couldn't put this conversation off any longer. Rosa had been in their house for three days already and Rhona couldn't keep pretending anything different. “I went to England. To Bradford.”

“Maybe if I ask Mrs Fenella she can set up a seat for me in the courtyard,” Rhona said, ignoring him. “I'm sick of being stuck inside.”

“I went to Bradford because I'd heard news of Rosa Blair.”

“Ye could carry me down the stairs.” Her voice cracked. “I'm not very heavy.”

He rested his hand on her knee through the blankets, speaking slowly and clearly so there was no way she could pretend she hadn't heard.

“Rhona, I brought Rosa back with me. She’s here.”

“Don’t.” A tear slipped down Rhona’s cheek, catching at the bottom of her chin. “Please don’t.”

“Lass.” He stood up so he could better see her face. She was flushed, and her bottom lip wobbled. He understood how much effort it was taking her not to cry. “I had to bring Rosa here. It was the only way I could make sure justice was carried out. An English magistrate would never have punished Rosa the way she deserves. It has to be Scottish justice.”

Rhona wiped a hand across her face. “Where is she?”

“In the spare room, three doors down.”

“In our tower!” Rhona struggled off the bed, ignoring her bandaged ankle. “I’m think I’m going to be sick.”

She doubled over, pressing her hands to her knees. All color leaked from her face.

“Rhona.” McWilliam caught her around the waist, keeping his sister balanced and gathering her red hair up in one fist away from her face.

“Why?” she demanded, between deep, ragged breaths.

“It’s complicated.”

A bucket was sticking out from under the edge of her bed. He frowned. How many times had she been sick? Was it grief making her feel this way or the pain of her ankle?

“Nay. It’s not.” Rhona straightened and tried to pull from his arms, reminding him of Rosa’s many attempts to free herself from his grasp. He let her go, and she wriggled back an inch or two.

“Are you all right, lass?”

“She killed Athair,” she said, using the Gaelic for ‘father’. “She stole our money. To me, it’s perfectly simple.” She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand but otherwise the sickness seemed to have passed for now.

“Everything has to be done properly.”

Their family used to be trusted by all their tenants and neighboring clans to hand down just the right amount of humility and retribution to those who’d broken the law. Now it was just another thing his grandfather had destroyed.

But not for much longer. McWilliam wholeheartedly intended to revive that family tradition and prove to everyone that his family was worth trusting.

Rosa was his first big magisterial case as laird. Just because he already knew her to be guilty it didn't mean that he didn't want to be seen to be doing the right thing. If he got a full confession, then there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that he was right to hand down punishment.

"Everyone has to see that you and I are treating her with respect until she has been formally pronounced guilty at the hearing," he continued. "We cannot be seen to be taking sides."

"Of course we're taking sides. She's guilty. Rodd saw her birthmark."

"I know. But you and I aren't like everyone else. We're Clan McWilliam. We're leaders, and we have to lead by example."

"Lead by locking her up for a very long time."

"I will, but everything must be done properly. You cannot expect anyone to trust me with their problems if I cannot even fix my own with a clear head."

Silence fell.

Her room was warm and cozy. She'd hung a couple of tapestries and cross-stitch samplers on her wall while the floor was covered by a great woolen rug. Glancing around McWilliam thought the room looked like a mish-mash of childish toys and grown-woman's furniture. A little like Rhona. She was quickly growing into a beautiful young woman, but whenever McWilliam looked at her he continued to see the bairn she once was.

"Lass," McWilliam said, unable to stand the silence any longer. "I promise Rosa will admit to her guilt, and when that happens, when it is clear without a doubt in everybody's mind that she's guilty, she'll be justly punished."

"And until then you're going to let her stay in Mathair's old room."

"We can't afford an extra guard to mind her. At least in Mathair's room she can't escape and it's easy for us to keep an eye on her."

Rhona shook her head. "I can't believe this. She's responsible for

our athair's death and you think she's really going to admit to that." She climbed back into bed. "Get out."

"What?"

"Get out of my room."

"Rhona." He could understand her anger, but she needed to understand how important it was that they do everything properly. He had to prove to everybody he could be a fair and just laird.

"Now!"

He strode to her bedchamber door. "Rosa will admit she's guilty," he growled. "She'll have no choice."

Rosa's bedchamber door was flung open. It hit the wall with a bang, and she jumped. McWilliam stopped in the threshold with arms cross over his chest, his dagger still hanging from his belt.

She moistened her lips. Even eight feet away she could feel anger radiating off him.

"You took your time visiting, my lord," she said, attempting nonchalance.

"I've had better things to be getting on with."

"Like being yelled at," she suggested. "Was that your sister or mother I could hear?"

"That's none of your business," he grouched.

"You were talking about me, weren't you?"

"My sister is none of your business," he repeated, his voice darkening with a warning.

"Fine, Laird Cantankerous." Rosa turned her back on him, pretending to look out the boarded-over window. It was obvious he cared very much for his sister, and it was obvious his sister was angry at him—snippets of her shouting had penetrated the walls. His sister's bedchamber must have been the room at the end of the hallway that Rosa kept hearing people entering.

"Do you know what happens on Whitsunday in the Lowland?" he asked, walking a few steps into the room. She heard the lock click shut. He still wasn't taking any chances.

Rosa almost laughed. It wasn't possible he thought she was strong enough to overpower him. He was only looking the door as a demonstration of his control over her.

She tapped her foot in protest.

"Do you know what happens on Whitsunday in Scotland?" he repeated.

"No." In England it was a holy day. In Scotland it was probably a celebration of the devil or some other pagan event.

"It's one of the four most important days in our legal calendar. On Whitsunday, contracts and leases are renewed, new servants are hired and old servants retried, and the rent is collected." He looped his hands into his belt. The stance was relaxed, even though his arms and neck were knotted with tightly strung muscles. "More importantly, on Whitsunday all debts and lawsuits are resolved."

Her own shoulders tensed. She could guess where he was going with this.

"By that day you will have admitted stealing my money and you'll be tried for your crimes."

Whitsunday was the seventh Sunday after Easter. That made it—she quickly added the days together—15th May. The same day as her trial in Leeds. In eight days.

"And how exactly are you going to make me?"

"I won't have to make you."

She let out of a huff of air. "There's no way I'm doing anything just because you, Mr Righteous, says so."

"You'll do it of your own accord." No hesitation. No doubt. Absolute certainty. The tenacity!

"Are you threatening me, my lord?" she said in her best don't-mess-with-me-governess voice and pressed her hands to her hips.

"Don't look at me like that," he snapped. "I'm not threatening you. I'm giving you fair warning. Thistle, ye will admit your guilt by Whitsunday next all of your own accord."

"I won't admit to something I didn't do." He might be able to boss around Lowlanders, but she wasn't one of his dewy-eyed tenants. And if she could deal with a drunk father and three snooty-nosed Wright boys,

then she could deal with Anndrais McWilliam.

“Are you willing to bet money on that?” he asked dryly. And he unlocked the door.

She eyed him. “Where are we going? Outside?” It felt like a lifetime had passed while she’d been locked in this room. “Wait a minute.” He was smiling. McWilliam was actually smiling at her.

She didn’t like it one bit. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” And he tugged her from the room.

## Chapter Ten

McWilliam took off down the hallway without glancing back, as though he fully expected Rosa to follow.

She halted in the doorway. There was nobody else around—the hallway was completely deserted and even the door at the far end where she guessed his sister lived was closed and the room beyond silent.

Where was he taking her?

“Come on,” McWilliam called, striding down the spiral stairs and disappearing from sight.

Rosa hurried to catch up. It was too good of an opportunity to miss. If she was really going to escape Fortress Doom she needed to gather information about the layout as well as the comings and goings of the staff. That’s what Bennie Cooke would do.

McWilliam had paused at the bottom of the stairs. He didn’t look any happier at having to wait for her. They left the tower house through the same door they’d entered three days ago. It seemed this door was the only way in and out of the family residence. That, in itself, was important information, and she stored it away for later consideration.

Outside, a fresh breeze tickled her face. It smelt faintly of wood smoke and what she could only imagine was sheep. She took a deep breath.

She never realized it was possible to miss being outside this much. While this courtyard was nothing like the hustle and bustle of the streets of London, or the quieter contemplative alleyways of Bradford, anything was a hundred times better than being cooped up in that ten by eight foot soul-crushingly boring bedchamber.

Back at ground level, Rosa could now see the entire courtyard. It

was almost perfectly square with a squat tower house at each corner as well as a kitchen and veggie garden, blacksmith's workshop, and guard house. And everything was surrounded by the great, heavy stone wall. There was nothing romantic about it. The rough stone loomed overhead so that from the ground she could see nothing of the horizon beyond; just wall and then, above that, the depressingly overcast sky.

A cluster of servants worked by one of the other towers, beating dust from carpets they'd strung between two wooden poles. They looked around, bobbing their heads in greeting to the laird before their eyes came to rest on Rosa.

She could feel the anger and curiosity in their glare even at this distance.

The blacksmith stepped out from under his sheltered workshop, hands on hips as he looked Rosa up and down. He also wore a belt plait, the excess material tucked back in on itself to create pockets that were bulging with hammers and other tools Rosa didn't recognize.

"This way," McWilliam grunted, apparently oblivious to his servants' glares angled towards Rosa as he headed towards the portcullis.

It was open, and the drawbridge was down. From her bedchamber window, Rosa had noticed that a guard opened the gate every morning and closed it again each evening. Were the Lowlands really that dangerous? She sped up, keeping pace with McWilliam. She couldn't imagine anyone willingly attacking him. It would be like trying to topple one of the rocky mountains surrounding Fortress Doom. Nigh on impossible.

The worn heels of her hand-me-down half-boots clicked against the cobblestones as they crossed the courtyard.

"Where are we going?" Rosa asked as they passed under the spiked portcullis locked over their heads like a death trap.

He hadn't brought a horse, so they couldn't be going too far. On the other hand, there looked to be nothing more than fields and sheep within walking distance. There was quite literally nowhere for them to go.

"I want you to meet someone."

"Who?"

“You’ll see.”

“Are you trying to scare me?” Rosa hurried to match his long strides, taking two steps for each of his. “It won’t work, my lord Laird. I’m not afraid of you.”

“Oh.” He laughed, dark and aggressive. “I think ye are.”

She shook her head, pressing her lips together.

His gaze slid over her body, his expression suddenly pained.

The top of her head nearly reached his shoulder; if he was going to kiss her again he’d have to lean right over or she would have to stand up on her tippy toes. She blushed with the unwelcome thought.

“Am not,” she returned. She sounded like a child.

“Bollocks.”

She bit back a retort, dropping her gaze to the ground. In truth, it was a good question. Was she still afraid of Anndrais McWilliam?

He’d promised not to harm her and had given Rosa no reason to think he would. But, he’d also promised to make her admit stealing the money and punish her for that crime.

No, she realised, she wasn’t afraid of the Scot. And she wasn’t afraid he’d make her admit to a crime she hadn’t committed. She was a governess by trade and temperament—determination and stubbornness were the very nature of her profession.

In fact, she hadn’t been afraid of him for quite a while. Sure, she’d been frightened when she thought they were going to be drawn and quartered by highway men and she’d panicked when she thought McWilliam was going to lock her in a dungeon—who wouldn’t have?—but the last time she had been honest-to-God afraid of the broody laird was back at Mistress Thomas’s establishment, five days ago.

As far as kidnappings went, this was nothing like what she’d read in the papers. *So-called thief Rosa Alice Blair treated with begrudging politeness by Scottish kidnapper.*

I’m no gentleman. His words came unbidden to the surface of her thoughts. No, he wasn’t like any English gentlemen—he was so much more...complex.

He strode along beside her, his hands swinging gently by his side, his shoulders relaxed and his step light. Everything about him suggested the

quiet confidence of a man who knew exactly where he was going. But, even as she watched, she saw his eyes dart left then right. He glanced over his shoulder, back at the fortress, seeking—she didn't know who. Hidden attackers? More highway men? Bow Street Runners?

The latter was highly unlikely, she'd never heard of one crossing the border to chase down their prey. She'd been lucky Smith had travelled all the way to Bradford. Lucky, ha!

She bit her lip. A light breeze played with the short strands of McWilliam's hair, brushing the brown, almost black, locks against the back of his neck. She had to tip her head back a little to see his face. He was certainly taller than the average Englishman. But his height suited him well, with his broader shoulders and masculine frame.

She blinked. McWilliam was handsome. Was she mad to think her kidnapper handsome? She gave her head a mental shake. No sane woman could deny his looks. He wasn't a dandy, like the society men in Hyde Park. He was rugged and dark. Surly. That was the word she'd use to describe him if she was a journalist. Surly.

No, she wasn't afraid of McWilliam. But she was afraid he wouldn't believe her to be innocent until too late. And she was bitterly afraid she wouldn't be able to escape him in time to save Amelia.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore, Lord Laird," she said, this time letting the truth of it touch her words.

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "No, maybe you're not," he conceded reluctantly, a strange expression flitting across his face.

It had looked, Rosa realized with a jolt, like...pride?

She frowned. That wasn't possible.

Rosa followed McWilliam along what she could only guess was a shepherd's path. It wasn't cobbled, but the ground was smooth as though generations of people had passed by this way. It twisted and turned around foothills of grazing sheep, leading them away from the fortress and the mountains behind.

Half a dozen crumbling ruins littered the fields on either side. Their roofs had long since fallen in, the stone walls now barely four feet high.

They couldn't possibly have been houses, they were barely the length of two rooms and the stone was damp with lichen.

"What are they?" she asked, breaking the silence as curiosity got the better of her.

"The homes of my ancestors."

"But they're so small."

"They're many hundreds of years old. They were here long before the castle was built."

Hundreds of years old. She could barely imagine a time so long ago. It certainly wasn't the type of thing you read about in the popular press.

"My family has been in this area for thirty generations," he continued. "The castle was built by my ancestors in the fourteen century."

"Were they shepherds too?"

"Of course. The best wool in all the world comes from the Lowlands." He ran a hand down his woolen kilt.

"Did your mother weave that for you?" She knew next to nothing about caring for sheep, but she had spent some time learning to sew and knit. 'A governess must possess many useful household skills,' as snobby Mrs Wright used to say.

"My sister made this one." Pride touched his words.

"The girl I heard yelling this morning?"

"Och aye. She's not happy I brought you into our home," he said, making that noise at the back of his throat that only Scots seemed capable of making.

"That makes two of us. It sounds like your sister and I would get along well."

"You'll stay away from her." McWilliam stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

"Are you afraid she'll believe me when I tell her I didn't steal your money? Because if your sister believes me than you'll have to—"

"Do you really think you can turn my family against me? Like you tried with Cameron."

"I did no such thing," she said, alarmed at how easily he'd realized what she'd been doing. "I merely took the opportunity to properly

introduce myself before he'd had time to be poisoned by your obsession that I'm a liar and a thief. Next minute you'll be telling people I'm a murderer too."

He let out a single, humorless laugh, and it seemed to echo around the open fields. "I don't think you'd manage to persuade my sister, regardless of what I say. She has a mind all of her own."

"I can see who she gets it from," she joked truthfully, but a heavy silence met her words.

Obviously, he was not amused as he clearly loved and adored his sister. In any other man it would have been endearing. In McWilliam, it only added to his power. Like the strength of his feelings enhanced his muscles and bravado, like it was suddenly possible he could tear apart a mountain if his sister was in danger and that was the only way to save her.

She frowned. If she had that type of raw strength, she'd have saved Amelia days ago instead of being trapped in the Lowlands with a virtual stranger intent on destroying her life.

They continued along the path as it slowly wound its way up the steep mountain side. She was becoming increasingly aware of his every movement, the way he swung his arms as he strode purposely forward, as though this path and this mountain was as familiar to him as the back of his own hand.

Just as she knew the streets of London and the pages of the Public Ledger.

But this wasn't London. This was...she tapped her forehead, seeking the right adjective. Alien. That was it; that's how Bennie Cooke would describe it. Alien. Foreign. Dangerous.

"We're here."

She blinked. They stood before a small stone building. Unlike the others she'd seen, this one was well maintained. The roof was shingled, the walls moss free while someone had cleared away the brambles and nettles, leaving the ground clear. More importantly, at the eastern end of the gabled roof was a wooden cross.

"I don't understand. Why's there a church here?"

She turned a circle, and her mouth dropped open. She could see

everything from here. Counterpane, the mountains beyond, a village she hadn't known was there, tucked between mountain and castle, and a loch, the waters of which reflected the cloudy sky above—murky and inescapable.

“This way.” McWilliam didn't stop. He moved around the building to the northern side to where headstones littered the ground, some weatherworn and crumbling so that the names of their occupants were indistinguishable, while others were clear, arrangements of flowers still adorning the graves.

McWilliam stopped before one such headstone, shadows clouding his face. “Rosa, meet my father.”

“Your father?”

McWilliam felt a stab of satisfaction. She hadn't seen this coming.

“Now I really don't understand.” She'd stopped beside him, starting down at the biblical words on the headstone.

*Hearn McWilliam: beloved husband and father, devoted laird. 'Let judgement run down as waters, and righteous as a mighty stream.'*

“Why are you showing me this? I wouldn't have thought—” Her voice dropped away, surprise apparently rendering her momentarily speechless.

His features tightened. “You wouldn't have thought I'd want you up here with him. Well, you're right. You don't deserve to be anywhere near my father. He was a great man. He loved his people very much and did everything in his power to restore our family's reputation.” He clenched his fists. “It was the stolen money that killed him. His heart couldn't deal with the stress of losing so much hard-earned revenue to... *an English wench.*” He practically spat the last word.

Wordlessly, she opened and closed her mouth, and another stab of satisfaction rocked his body.

Good. He wanted her to see what she'd done. He wanted her to understand the man she'd killed and the family she'd ripped him from. He wanted her to be riddled with guilt every single time she considered spending even a penny of that stolen money. He wanted to haunt her

dreams until she couldn't take it anymore. She deserved nothing less.

She turned to face him. A montage of contrasting expressions flittered across her face in quick succession. Confusion, sadness, pity and then, stronger than the others, like a flash of lightning or a clap of thunder, anger. Pure, unadulterated anger.

"I can't believe you brought me up here," she raged, with a ferocity he hadn't been prepared for. "If you think showing me the grave of a dead man is going to make me feel so remorseful that I admit stealing money that I didn't take, you're very much mistaken."

Anger. Of course she was angry! When he wanted her to feel guilt and shame, she defied him, as she always did.

Nobody stood up to him like Rosa did.

"This is my father you're talking about. Not some stranger off the streets of London," he growled. "Show some respect."

"I'm showing as much respect as you. You're ruthlessly using his death to manipulate me. That's not righteous." She gestured at the biblical inscription on his headstone.

He shook his head.

"Don't try to deny it when we're standing up here," she said, not bothering to keep her voice down, although there was nobody near to hear them. "If I told the magistrate about your behavior, he'd call you on it. This is clearly a case of tampering with the witness. It's emotional blackmail."

"I'm not blackmailing you," he informed her. "I'm showing you the consequences of your actions. Back in England, away from all of this, it's too easy to forget that the money you stole was someone's livelihood and that people were depending on it. I refuse to let you forget about my people. I refuse to let you steal from me without understanding how much pain and suffering it has brought upon us."

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry you lost your shipment. I do understand how much losing that money would have affected you. I don't want anyone to die. I'd never want your father to die—" Her voice broke and she glanced over his shoulder back towards the church. "But I cannot change the past. And I cannot admit having done something that I didn't."

He shook his head, determined not to let her show of sorrow and pity beguile him. “You won’t admit it to me, but you were perfectly happy admitting it to an *English* Runner.”

“I lied to Runner Smith. I lied to save my cousin. I’ve told you all of this.”

“Nay, you’re lying to me right now.” He started back down the hill. “This mightn’t have changed your mind, but there’s plenty more for you to see yet.”

She followed McWilliam back the way they had come. What was he thinking bringing her up here? A grave, no matter who was buried there, wasn’t going to change her mind. Amelia was still alive and if there was a chance Rosa could save her then it was worth fighting for, even if it meant yelling in a churchyard.

But McWilliam hadn’t been thinking. That was the problem. His father was dead. He was in mourning. She sighed. When her own father had died she’d mourned certainly, but more for herself than her Pa.

It sounded horrible when she thought about it like that, but without him she was all alone, whereas her father had slowly been withering away since her mother’s death, twenty years ago. He hadn’t been himself in many, many years.

McWilliam, on the other hand, seemed to have really loved his father. He probably hadn’t been a depressed alcoholic with a gambling addiction.

Guilt gnawed at her insides. Reluctantly, she sped up to walk beside him.

“Let’s just pretend for a minute that I’m not Rosa Blair and that you don’t hate me.” She rested a hand on his arm. “I’m really sorry your father died.”

His shoulders dropped, and eyes of steel grey looked down at her.

She shivered, tingles running down her spine; his arm hot and hard beneath her hand. “Tell me about him.”

A shadow flickered across his face, then: “My father and I never did get along very well when I was growing up. But these last few years,

working together to restore the family business..." he shrugged. "Things were almost good between us. And Rhona, she misses him like part of her own heart has been ripped out."

"Your sister." Rhona. Rosa's insides melted. When Emily had died, all those years ago, it had felt like a part of Rosa had died along with her. Everything had ached until it had become almost too hard to breath,

"My younger sister." He ran a hand through his short hair until it stood up on end.

By the sound of it, McWilliam was Rhona's primary guardian.

"So now it's just you, Rhona and Cameron?"

He nodded. "It's just you, your uncle and your cousin, Amelia."

"Yes, I guess." Truth be told, her uncle and cousin had cut off all contact with Rosa when Emily died. The mysterious letter threatening Rosa with Amelia's death was the first she'd heard of them for more than two years.

She twisted her fingers together. "Amelia was always the headstrong one. Emily... Emily was devoted to her sister and wanted to do everything Amelia was doing. It didn't matter that she was three years younger or about two heads shorter. If her sister was doing it, Emily was doing to it."

She could see them both now in her memories, clear as day. Amelia with her long, blond hair and Emily, much shorter with thick brown hair and a little too much flush in her cheeks to ever be considered a real beauty.

"What about ye?" the Scot asked, his voice surprisingly gentle for a man who claimed he believed none of her stories.

"I was always the voice of reason. Not that they ever really listened to me. Why should they listen to their older, poor cousin?" She could hear the pain in her own voice.

McWilliam must have heard it too because he stepped into her personal space. They were so close now she could practically feel the heat radiating from him. It was comforting and almost familiar, as if all those hours she'd spent riding in the saddle pressed against his chest had left his heat pattern engraved into her skin. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch his chest.

CHARLOTTE ANNE

She dropped her hand from his arm, locking her fingers together behind her back.

“Emily died,” he said quietly, “because she didn’t listen to you?”

Rosa sighed. “She died because I’d given up trying to make her listen.” She let out a shaking breath, saying the next words out loud only because she’d promised to always tell him the truth even though she’d never told anyone else in her entire life: “It’s my fault Emily died. I killed her.”

## Chapter Eleven

*“I dare you!” Amelia pointed a finger towards her younger sister, a mischievous twinkle in her sky-blue eyes.*

*Emily pulled her hand from Rosa’s grasp, glancing back towards the snoozing governess.*

*Rosa rolled her eyes. “That’s ridiculous.”*

*“That’s ridiculous,” Amelia pressed her hands to her hips and rolled her slim shoulders back in imitation of their governess. Sunlight glinted off the top of her head, turning her blond hair into a halo.*

*“That’s ridiculous,” Emily laughed as she began pulling off her shoes and stockings, her chubby fingers stumbling over the laces.*

*Rosa took a step back, her feet tangling in the worn hem of her too-long hand-me-down gown. “Amelia Blair, I’m three years older. You cannot—”*

*“You’re poor.” Amelia stuck her perfectly pointed nose in the air. “You’re father’s a drunk.”*

*Shame stabbed through Rosa. She could feel it like a physical sickness churning through her stomach.*

*“Fine!” she yelled. “Do whatever you want. I don’t care anymore.” And Rosa turned her back on her two cousins and the still waters of Loch Mackenzie.*

*“Rosa!”*

*Her eyes snapped open. A dark figure loomed over her.*

*A scream caught in her throat, and she lashed out. The blankets*

tangled around her hands, and the figure reached forward.

“You’re safe. Ye were just dreaming.”

“No, no!” She pushed herself upright, the blankets falling into her lap. “Where am I?”

The answer came back to her instantaneously. Fortress Doom with Laird McWilliam.

The laird stood by her bed, one hand on Rosa’s shoulder, the other brushing loose strands of hair from her face.

“You’re safe,” he said again, his voice low, the words almost indistinguishable.

*Safe.* In Scotland. With the man who’d stolen her from police custody and had sworn a personal vendetta against her.

*Right.* But even as she was scoffing, Rosa felt her heartbeat slow and her breathing calm as her body settled back against the headboard. She was warm and well fed and safe. Despite everything—despite all their arguments and disagreements—McWilliam had always taken care of her.

Even now, when she’d woken screaming with the memory of Emily’s death fresh in her mind, he was looking after her.

“How long was I screaming for?” she asked, under no misconception that he wouldn’t have heard the first cry that had ripped from her mouth.

“Not long.” He nudged her legs over, sitting on the edge of the bed facing her. “My room is just one over. I came as soon as I heard.”

She could feel his thigh pressed against her own, even though the blankets. He was warm and big and strong.

He bowed his head as though causally dismissing her thanks. “Ye said her name again.”

A whisper: “Emily?”

He gave a single nod and released her shoulder, his hand dropping to lie on top of the counterpane.

She stared down at it, his fingers just half an inch from her hip. The slightest movement would bring her close enough to touch.

Rosa tugged up the counterpane, tucking her hands under her arms to stop herself reaching out and brushing the tiny circular burn by the corner of his eye. Even in the darkness, she could see the mark that had

come so close to damaging his beautiful, grey eye.

In fact, this close, she could see a ring of silver flecks circling his pulps. And his scent: she could smell a gentle mixture of wool, fire smoke and something woody that reminded her of the silver birch trees back in England

“I believe you,” he murmured, his mouth barely moving.

Her heart skipped a beat. “You believe me, my lord Laird?”

This close she could feel the heat radiating off his body. She’d missed his heat these last few days apart, but she hadn’t known it until this very moment. It was comfort. It was darkness. It was danger. It was fire, scorching hot. Almost too hot to touch.

And then he was kissing her. His lips strong and persistent against her own. And she welcomed him, parting her own lips, giving him untampered access to her mouth. He didn’t hesitate, sweeping his tongue against her lower lip before plunging inside.

She shuddered, her hands wrapping around his neck, tugging him closer.

His body responded in kind. She felt the shudder rock him to his very core, and he gripped her to him with a possessiveness that nobody had ever before touched her with.

He jumped up and was halfway across the room before she could even open her eyes, the bed bouncing with his abrupt departure.

“I—” Fog had descended upon her brain, and she couldn’t speak. She couldn’t think, not about anything but the rush of heat that was flooding every inch of her body. She pressed her thighs together wanting...she didn’t know what. Just...something more. Something only McWilliam could give her.

She swallowed the rush of desire that was making it almost impossible to think straight and cleared her throat. “You believe that I didn’t steal your money?” she said, trying desperately to keep her voice calm.

“I believe your cousin, Emily, is dead.” He spoke without feeling, his voice empty of anything but darkness.

“Oh.” She ran a hand over her face. Her hair had fallen from its braid and had tangled around her shoulders, pooling at her waist.

McWilliam strode to the door, glancing back for a second as he grasped the handle. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—it won't happen again."

She shook her head. He'd already promised her it wouldn't happen again, but it had. And she desperately wanted it to happen again. "It was a mistake. I know."

He stared at her for a moment, his face completely unreadable and then he opened the door. "I'm sorry Emily died."

"I know." He was sorry Emily was dead; he just wasn't sorry enough to believe in Rosa's innocence.

He stepped into the hallway.

"I'm sorry your father died," she whispered after him.

Silence met her words, and the door swung shut. The lock clicked.

True sleep evaded Rosa for the rest of the night. She tossed and turned, the bed suddenly lumpy and unwelcoming when compared with McWilliam's encompassing embrace.

She pressed the crook of her elbow against her eyes, trying to block out the first light touches of dawn that were creeping in between the boarded-up window, but Emily's face drifted in and out of view. Her chubby nose and flushed cheeks were a little blurred as if Rosa's memory couldn't quite conjure up her image.

*"What were you thinking!" the governess yelled, her face purple with anger. "You shouldn't have let her near the water."*

*"I didn't—I tried." Rosa stepped towards her uncle. His head rested in his hands, his elbows on his knees. Amelia sat on the ground between his legs, one arm wrapped around his ankle as though she were still three, not fifteen.*

*Tears stained her cheeks and she looked up at Rosa through swollen eyes.*

*"I didn't know," Amelia said, her voice hoarse. "I didn't know."*

*Her father ran a hand down her damp hair. "It wasn't your fault," he murmured, his mouth barely moving, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "It wasn't your fault."*

*And he looked up, straight at Rosa.*

"No!" She sat bolt upright. It wasn't her fault, no matter what anyone else said.

"Whoa," McWilliam struggled to his feet, his eyes blinking in the early morning light.

Rosa jumped. From the look of the crumpled clothes, he'd been sleeping in the chair by her cold fireplace. "How long have you been there?"

"You kept talking in your sleep every time I tried to leave," he said, settling back down. He sat low in the chair with his arms crossed loosely over his chest. With his legs outstretched, he practically reached halfway across the room. She could easily have curled up in his lap.

The belted plaid had fallen to one side, leaving his legs bare from his knees down. A light scattering of dark hair covered his legs, but her eyes were drawn to his knees.

Rosa had never seen a man's knees before she'd met McWilliam. And they were beautiful.

Heat burned her face. It was peculiarly reassuring to know that the knees of the first man who'd ever kissed her were beautiful.

Hurriedly, she returned her gaze to his face. He'd kissed her. Those lips—her eyes rested on his mouth—had kissed her with such an ardent need it had seemed to hang heavy in the air.

Her toes curled as heat sped down her body to her most intimate parts.

His own gaze seemed to be drifting as well. His mouth was open a fraction, his breathing loud enough to hear.

She pulled the blankets up to her chin.

He looked back up at her face. "I've seen it all before." He nodded towards her white shift.

In sleep, it had slipped from one shoulder.

"That's beside the point," she said, conjuring up, from goodness only knew, her most disapproving governess tone. "It's not proper, Lord Laird." And she pulled the sleeve back up over her shoulder.

"Nothing about this is proper." He frowned. "Why are you wearing your shift, anyway?"

She shrugged. With any other man she would have been mortified, but McWilliam's directness suggested that she had no choice but to answer. Besides, he was right, he had seen it all. He'd even seen her in the bath.

A new thrill raced down her spine.

"I wasn't given a nightdress," she said. And they'd left her dirt-splattered one back at Mistress Thomas's hostile establishment.

Silence for a moment, then "Right." He stood up. "I've got work to do." And he left her alone once more.

Morning was well underway before Rosa pulled herself from bed. She hadn't fallen back to sleep, but had tossed the counterpane over her head, pressed her eyes tight closed and tried to picture Emily's face. It had been so easy to remember what she looked like when Rosa had been talking to McWilliam yesterday. But mere hours later, Rosa could see nothing clearer than a blurry silhouette of a girl-child in braids and a knee-length day dress. And the harder Rosa tried, the blurrier she become.

Even with her late morning start, Rosa had washed from the small basin beside her bed and was dressed before the housekeeper made her first appearance.

She looked older than normal, her frizzy hair sticking to her face with sweat, her white cap skewed.

Rosa pressed her lips together and moved back to the window to keep out of Fenella's way.

The housekeeper placed Rosa's breakfast tray on the desk and then motioned for a maid to enter.

"Himself ordered that we bring up a couple more things for your room," Mrs Fenella said, her eyes fixed on a spot just above Rosa's right shoulder.

The maid, a younger woman who could only have been Mrs Fenella's granddaughter judging by her equally untamable hair, placed a pile of extra clothes on Rosa's bed. She then ducked back outside only to return with extra coal for the fire.

Rosa raised an eyebrow. The fire hadn't been lit since her first night. Mrs Fenella obviously preferring to let Rosa suffer in the cold. Luckily, the weather had been relatively clement, except for the occasional shower of rain.

Without another word, the housekeeper and maid departed.

Rosa sorted through the clothes. There was an extra complete outfit including a gown and shift, stays, stockings, stomacher, petticoats, garters, a pair of worn kid-leather boots as well as a nightdress and night-rail. Secondhand and a couple of years out of fashion, they were as good as any of the clothes she'd ever been given as a governess, and certainly nicer than anything her father, had he been sober enough, had bought for her.

In fact, come to think of it, the entire room was more comfortable than her tiny room back at the Wright's townhouse, with or without a fire. She'd been too focused on planning her escape that the luxury of having her own four-poster double-bed—even if canopy was a little moth-eaten—had completely passed her by.

What was McWilliam's deal? Why had he given her such a lovely room? She was within hearing of his younger sister, for goodness sake. This wasn't exactly a dungeon or prison, and it certainly wasn't anything like the lifeless coaching inn Runner Smith had put her in on their way to Leeds.

Was this comfortable room all part of his plan to persuade her to admit her guilt? Of course, that must be it. He'd taken her to see the grave of his recently deceased father and he'd given her a room amongst his family to make her feel guilty. He thought that if she saw his family and all the harm losing that money had caused them she'd admit to being the thief.

And was that why he'd kissed her? Was it all a game to him—see how long Rosa could hold out against his kisses and his heated looks and the promise of so much more?

She straightened her shoulders. She wasn't admitting to anything she hadn't done, unless it was to save Amelia.

This was one governess McWilliam wasn't going to get the better of.

With new determination flowing through her veins, Rosa pressed one eye to the gap in the window boards, staring down at the portcullis.

From here, she could almost see the man standing guard, sword and dagger tucked into his belt.

She was getting out of this prison once and for all. And first up was working out how to get out of this room and through that gate.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Cameron slammed the door shut behind him as he entered McWilliam’s office.

“What have I done now?” McWilliam looked up from the accounts he’d been reading. His uncle looked unusually angry. His eyes were narrowed, his lips pressed tight closed and his hair ruffled as though he’d continually run his fingers through it.

“You took her to your father’s grave.” Cameron stopped so close to the desk, his legs pressed against the lip of the tabletop.

“I wanted her to see the consequences of her actions.”

“Your father’s grave is sacred. Your father’s grave is his last resting place. It’s—”

“I know perfectly well where my father is buried.” McWilliam took a swig of whiskey and stood up. His uncle was family, but he wasn’t going to let anyone dictate to him how and what he should be doing with Rosa. She was his responsibility and his alone.

Cameron’s eyes narrowed, if possible, even further. “What are you doing? She’s a sassenach. She’s a criminal. She should be locked away, not given a room in the family’s quarter.”

“You’ve been talking with Rhona.” He should have guessed they’d team up against him. When Rhona had something in her sights she never let it go. She wouldn’t be happy until she saw Rosa punished. Well, she wouldn’t have to wait too long.

McWilliam wasn’t letting Rosa get away with anything.

“She’s grieving. She’s heartbroken.”

“And I’m not?”

“Well, obviously you are. You wouldn’t be acting like this otherwise.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing. It’s not grief. It’s not anything other than a desire to protect my tenants.”

“Regardless of your good intentions,” Cameron said, taking a small step back and lowering his voice, “you’re doing nobody a favor by waiting for her to admit her guilt. She’s a born liar. She’ll say anything to save herself.”

“I know she lies. But she will admit to the truth.”

“No.” Cameron tugged at his hair again. “This crusade isn’t worth it the stress you’re putting Rhona through. We all know she’s the criminal. Put her to trial now. Punish her now.”

“Rhona’s grief isn’t going to disappear as soon as Rosa’s been issued her punishment. She needs closure. She needs to hear Rosa admit—”

“She doesn’t need anything of the sort.”

McWilliam frowned. It wasn’t like Cameron to argue against him so ferociously. It seemed Rosa was getting under everyone’s skin. “Rhona hasn’t been coping very well since father died,” he continued, keeping his voice level. “In fact, I really think she ought to see a physician.”

Cameron shook his head. “I had Duncan examine her when she first sprained her ankle. She’s perfectly healthy.”

“She didn’t seem very well to me when I talked with her yesterday.”

“She’s fine.” Cameron backed towards the door. “And McWilliam, don’t take the sassenach back to Hearn’s grave.” He pulled open the door, rolling his eyes. “For God’s sake, why can’t you just hurry up and get her out of your system? Why can’t you just sleep with her?”

## Chapter Twelve

Rosa was out of bounds. He knew that. He'd always known that.

It was precisely why he'd spent three days avoiding her. Their time apart should have cleared his head and flushed her out of his system. But his response to her had only intensified over that time and now he could hardly control his own body. He'd kissed her, dammit. Again.

What was wrong with him?

She was a thief. She was a liar. She was his prisoner. And he'd just broken every rule and kissed her.

He hunched over, pressing his forehead to the cool wood of his oak desk.

And now Cameron was telling him to sleep with her. Judging by the eager bulge pushing at his kilt, his body thought it was an excellent idea too. But McWilliam was more than just his body, and he was determined never to lose control like that again. Kissing Rosa had been the absolute worst-possible idea he'd ever had.

She'd practically murdered his father.

Nay, he admitted to himself, she'd hadn't stabbed Hearn or pushed him down the stairs, but stealing that money had caused his father's heart to fail and that was as good as if she'd wielded a blade with her bare hands.

Aye, there was no way she could have known about Hearn's weak heart. Nobody outside of the family had known. But that didn't mean she wasn't responsible. She was responsible, and for that reason alone he could never touch her again. Ever, dammit.

He stood up so fast his chair tumbled over. To hell with paperwork.

He couldn't stay here. He needed a swim in a very, very cold loch.

Seated at the desk, Rosa pressed her eyes closed trying to picture the courtyard in her mind.

Without any paper, she couldn't draw a map and had instead decided her best option was to memorize the layout.

Yesterday, she'd taken note not only of the portcullis and its burley Scottish guard, but also the kitchen, which appeared to be the single-storey building right beside the southern tower house. And as far as she could tell, this, the northern tower house, was the families' own tower that they used as their main residence. The other three towers were still a mystery to her. One probably housed the staff and another maybe housed the guards. Either way, more investigation was needed before her escape attempt.

Rosa estimated it would take her four days on horseback to reach Leeds from here, three if she rode all day and all night without stopping. Three days minus the six days that had already past, left her only four. Four days to find the stables and steal some extra food and water. It was, as Bennie Cooke always wrote when describing an unsolved murder in the Gazette, 'a real god-forsaken conundrum'. But it was one Rosa was determined to solve.

Rosa turned towards the door as sound rattled down the hallway. She knew that sound—she'd heard it all too often during her two years as governess. Someone was being ill.

Without conscious thought, she crossed the room and pressed her ear to the door.

It squeezed open. Mrs Fenella had forgotten to lock her in.

From the hallway, it was evident the retching was coming from Rhona's room. She didn't sound at all well.

She didn't hesitate. "Can I help?" Rosa asked, entering the other woman's chamber.

A girl, nestled right between childhood and womanhood, stood beside a bed, a bucket at her feet.

"Get out." Rhona gasped.

Rosa didn't leave. "My lady, I could hear you from my chamber."

"My mathair's chamber, you mean," Rhona tossed her hair over her shoulder. Despite the whiteness of her cheeks, her eyes sparkled something beautiful. Rosa imagined she must be quite a handful. No wonder McWilliam had described her as having a mind of her own.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize." There'd been nothing in Rosa's chamber to indicate it had once belonged to Rhona's mother.

Rhona scowled at Rosa with such ferocity she suddenly looked extraordinarily like her older brother. Although she was still white as a sheet.

Rosa held her hands up before her chest to show that she meant no harm. "You're not well. You need help. At least let me call someone for you."

Rhona doubled over, again retching.

Rosa hurried forward and pulled strands of hair away from the girl's face.

Eventually, Rhona straightened, wiping a hand over her mouth. Rosa passed her the glass of water from the bedside table, and Rhona rinsed her mouth out spitting into the bucket.

"How long have you been unwell?" Rosa asked.

"Since Athair died, I guess."

"Athair?"

"My pa," she translated, moodily.

"And your ankle?" Rosa pointed to the bandage.

"About two days before ye arrived." She practically spat the word 'ye'. "I jumped off the stable roof for a dare."

"That was brave." The McWilliam family sure did produce some pig-headed people. Though how Rhona had found the time to jump off a roof when she'd been suffering from nausea since her father's death, Rosa couldn't fathom. "You're a lot like your brother." Birds of a feature.

"And you're nothing like him." Rhona continued to stare at Rosa. A little color was returning to her face, in stark contrast to the dark circles under her eyes.

She trembled, unsteady on a single leg, and Rosa took the liberty of

grasping Rhona's elbow and lowering her onto the bed.

"Have you seen a physician, my lady?"

"Not that it's any of your business." Rhona pulled the blankets up to her chin, sitting bolt upright in bed.

They surveyed each other. Rhona's hair was more red than brown, her skin fairer than McWilliam's and Cameron's, though the family resemblance was still clear in the strong line of her jaw and the look of complete distrust she was burying Rosa in.

Rosa broke eye contact first, moving to the window. Unlike her own, the glass wasn't broken and the window had been flung wide open letting in fresh air and a proud view of the courtyard below. Rosa didn't have to peak through a crack to see the guard by the portcullis or the chickens scratching in the dirt.

"How tall is the stable roof?" she asked casually. "Can you see it from here?" If she was going to escape, she'd need a horse. A beast much more obliging than Mist, of course.

"It's outside the walls. You have to be standing on the drawbridge to see it properly." Her eyes narrowed. "What do you care?" They narrowed further still. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be locked up."

"I heard you being unwell," Rosa said, sidestepping the question. "I remember when my father died. I didn't get out of bed for a whole week. It was horrible. I felt horrible." Well, she would have stayed in bed if she'd had the luxury. If only Rosa had a brother as devoted to her as McWilliam was to Rhona.

Another thought came unbidden of a devoted McWilliam who was nothing like a brother. His lips bending to her will, his fingers caressing her skin, his body relieving the tight heat in the pit of her stomach that turned to fire every time he looked at her with his smoldering, broody expression.

"I don't remember asking about your father," Rhona snapped, pulling Rosa from her imagination. She continued to scowl, but her hand had relaxed a fraction, and she'd stopped clutching the brocade counterpane to her throat.

"When...when did he die?" she asked, tilting her chin to the air as if she didn't really care about the answer.

“Two years ago. My mother died when I was much younger and I don’t have any brothers or sisters.” She approached the bed taking advantage of Rhona’s momentary distraction. She wasn’t proud of herself for playing off Rhona’s insecurities, but at least Rhona had stopped yelling for Rosa to leave. “You’re lucky to have a brother like McWilliam.” She’d never actually seen the two of them together, but when he’d talked about Rhona, McWilliam’s whole physique had glowed. It was clear her loved her very much.

Rhona paled. “My brother—” She screwed up her face as a child might when conflicted between talking and staying quiet.

“It’s a lovely day.” Rosa indicated the clear sky visible through the open shutters.

“I guess.” Rhona looked towards the window, longing clear in her face. For whatever reason, she didn’t want to be stuck inside. Rosa didn’t blame her.

“I would ask McWilliam myself to let you outside, but he doesn’t listen to me.”

“Nobody listens to you. You’re a liar.”

The door banged opened. Rosa jumped up.

“What are you doing?” McWilliam demanded. He strode into the room, stepping between Rosa and Rhona. He cast a very large shadow over the room. And it wasn’t just his size. His anger seemed to tower over her, threatening to crush her.

Rosa straightened, determined not to let him get the best of her.

Rhona hadn’t been exaggerating—McWilliam was overprotective. “Your sister isn’t well.” Rosa said calmly, looking him straight in the eyes. “She should see a physician.”

“No!” Rhona reached towards her brother. “I’m fine, Andy. Really.”

She could seem him battling with himself. He obviously didn’t want her in his sister’s room but he was also concerned for Rhona. In the end, concern won out as he caught sight of the bucket. “You’ve been sick again? What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing important,” she threw Rosa a death stare. “I didn’t want to worry you. Uncle Cameron has been looking after me.” She intertwined her fingers with McWilliam’s buckskin breeches, tugging

him towards her bed.

He sat in Rosa's vacated seat, pressing the back of his hand to her forehead. "You don't feel feverish."

"That's because I'm not."

Rosa suddenly felt distinctly like she was interrupting where she was no longer needed. The few times Mr and Mrs Wright had graced the nursery, Rosa was expected to make herself scarce so the parents could talk with their boys away from 'prying ears'. She backed up.

Heat seared the backs of her legs, and she turned to find herself standing startlingly close to the fireplace. Coals glowed, keeping the room warm despite the open window and the clement weather.

Rosa blinked. Lodged in the grate was a shred of paper, as though someone had ripped up a letter and tossed it into the fire.

Merciful God! She knew that handwriting. She'd recognize it anywhere. That was the handwriting of Amelia's kidnapper.

Wrapping her hand in her skirts to protect herself from the flames, she picked it up. Her heart thumped in her chest as she stared down at the scrap. No more than an inch or so long, it seemed to be the edge of a page. Heaven knew why Amelia's kidnaper was writing to Rhona?

"What are you doing?" Rhona asked, her voice edged with suspicion.

"Nothing." Rosa spun back around to face the bed, tucking her hands behind her back.

Rhona didn't look convinced, but McWilliam hardly glanced her way.

"I'll come back and visit you this evening," he promised Rhona, standing up and moving towards the door.

"Come," he demanded of Rosa, gesturing for her to follow.

She ducked under his arm and followed him down the corridor. He led her straight past her open door and down the stairs.

The tiny scrap of paper seemed to burn a hole in her hand, but she couldn't look at it without McWilliam seeing. He certainly hadn't mentioned anyone contacting his sister. If he knew about the kidnapper, then he would have believed Rosa when she'd told him Amelia was in danger. That meant that whatever Rhona's connection to the kidnapper

was, McWilliam remained unaware.

She tucked it into her pocket. There was nothing she could do about it now with the laird standing just an arm's length away.

"Where are we going?" she asked instead.

"Out."

"Where out?"

"You'll see."

"Not to another grave."

Silence met her words.

He'd replaced his kilt for a pair of breeches and his hair was damp, as though he'd just washed. It clung to the back of his neck like caressing fingers. She tipped her head slightly to the side. She found his hair fascinating. It was so dark it could be mistaken for black, but when the sun hit it at just the right angle it was clearly a deep golden brown.

She found herself wishing he hadn't adopted the breeches. The soft scating of hair on his legs was just as fascinating. And then there were the legs themselves.

She sucked in a breath, speeding up to walk beside him and keeping her gaze firmly above knee-height.

She shouldn't be having those thoughts, she silently scolded herself with a mental kick. She'd already let him kiss her, twice. And that was twice too many. She had more important things to think about. Like escaping the Lowlands and saving Amelia. She didn't have time for men—for one particular man—or kissing or daydreaming about shapely legs the size of small tree trunks.

As a governess, she'd barely had any time to herself and she'd certainly never let a man distract her from work. Besides, it was utterly ridiculous that she should be attracted to her kidnapper. He was nothing like a gentleman—as he kept reminding her—and absolutely nothing like the ideal beau.

Surly, yes.

Infuriating, no question about it.

Husband material? Ha! The idea was laughable.

Almost as laughable as an ex-governess come wanted woman being considered wife material.

Heaven help her, she'd never been much of a catch even when her drunkard of a father had been alive or, more notably, when she'd been living with her viscount uncle. No young lady should be able to name every murderer currently locked-up for life in Newgate. It just wasn't... proper!

Unaware of the morbid direction of her thoughts, McWilliam strode on as he'd always done—with an underlying confidence that only came with the knowledge that when he spoke, people always listened. His arms swung gently by his sides as he led her out of the gate and around Fortress Doom towards the hills beyond.

Rosa's gaze couldn't help but drift back towards him.

He could certainly fill out a coat—those big shoulders and strong arms owed nothing to the padding that she knew some English gentlemen favored. Her body remembered the feel of his arms only too well, and she interlocked her hands so tightly her nails bit into the backs of her hands.

The village of Gall was protected on three sides by the mountains and Uilleim Castle on the fourth. And like the castle, it had been there for more than 400 years. It didn't take McWilliam and Rosa long to walk there, despite Rosa's apparent preoccupation.

McWilliam had opened his mouth several times to ask what she was thinking about before reminding himself that unless it was about admitting her guilt then he didn't care.

The village itself was made up of several dozen stone cottages topped with thatched roofs, each surrounded by a small kitchen garden. A handful of men lounged outside their homes, sharpening weapons. Children played in the street, darting back and forth along the narrow dirt paths between the cottages, while a group of women had gathered in the center of the village. They each sat on a small wooden stool with either a loom or hand-held spindle. Their hands moved with practiced dexterity, baskets of wool being spun into thread and then woven into cloth right before his eyes.

“Are these your tenants? Is this part of your estate?” Rosa blinked as she emerged from her private thoughts.

“Aye.” Though whether or not they yet thought of him as their laird was another matter.

She frowned. “This is it? Where’s all the shops?”

“Did you expect a milliners or a coffee house?” he asked sarcastically. “Ye have to travel to South Druiminn for that. You’re not in London now.”

“Himself.” One of the spinners rose to her feet, the others following her example.

“Mistress Mary.” McWilliam nodded a greeting, heading straight for the center of the group.

Rosa stalled behind him.

McWilliam knew the instant the tenant women caught sight of Rosa. The companionable silence turned dark. He wouldn’t want to have changed places with her any day. He’d known these women his whole life and knew just how well they could hold a grudge.

But he hadn’t brought Rosa down here for them. He’d brought Rosa here so that she could see the people she’d stolen from. She deserved to know where that money had come from.

“It’s true, my laird” Mary said. “Ye do have her.”

“Och aye.”

Mary was a forthright woman who never tired of speaking her mind. They were a similar age and had grown up together—as close as tenant and future laird could—and McWilliam had spent four years of his youth pining after her. He’d even announced to his mother, on at least three separate occasions, that one day he and Mary would marry.

Now, they were just friends. At least, he hoped they still were. He hadn’t spent as much time in the village since his father’s death—since the money had been stolen—as he would have liked.

“How long have you been working here for?” he asked, although he already knew the answer.

“Since sunup,” Mary answered with another glance towards Rosa. “And we’ll keep working until the sun sets, as we always do.”

“Every day?”

“Aye, every day that there is wool to be spun and woven.” As though understanding his intention, she held up her hands for him and Rosa to

see. Her fingertips and palms were callused, her fingernails short and oily from the lanolin. They were the hands of a woman who worked hard to earn a living. The hands of a woman who would suffer this winter because of Rosa's thievery.

Rosa shifted uncomfortably, her gaze moving from Mary's hands to the patches in her work gown.

Satisfied, he said, "I've got to have a word with Duncan. Could you keep an eye on Rosa for me?" He wanted to speak to the physician about Rhona and it seemed as good a way for Rosa to get to know the women as ever. And Mary wouldn't let her escape. The Scotswoman was nearly as tall as he was, easily able to overpower Rosa.

The women eyed her with even greater suspicion, but eventually Mary thrust a drop spindle into Rosa's hands. "The very least ye can do is help," she huffed, practical as ever.

He nodded his thanks and headed towards Duncan's house.

Duncan had been born in Gall but when he'd displayed an unusual knack for healing had moved to Edinburgh to study medicine. That had been thirty years ago and ever since he'd served as the local physician dealing with ailments, great and small.

He was easy enough to find. When he wasn't seeing patients, Duncan was usually cloistered away in his workshop grinding seeds and mixing concoctions. He waved McWilliam in from his place beside the fire, where he was stirring a large pot of something that smelt like sheep grease.

"Everything all right?" Duncan asked, as was his customary greeting.

"With me, aye." McWilliam pulled up a stool. "But I was hoping we could have a word about Rhona." He wrinkled his nose, close-up it smelt ten-times worse. "What is that?"

The older man laughed. "An experiment. I don't think it's working." He dropped the spoon onto the table, took the pot off the fire and left it by the open door. "What's wrong with Rhona?"

"I'm not really sure." He ran a hand over his face. His mother had always cared for Rhona when his sister had been sick, and since her death many years ago, their father had taken up that role. Hearn had had a way with Rhona. The two had been thick as thieves. "Can grief make

a person ail?”

Duncan pondered. “It depends. Feelings can have a huge influence over our bodies. If she’s depressed or worried it may be displaying itself as a sickness. What exactly has happened?”

“That’s the problem. She doesn’t want to talk to me about it, but as far as I can tell, she’s nauseous.”

Duncan looked thoughtful. “I guess it could be a side effect of the grief. Everyone reacts to death differently.” He raised an eyebrow, surveying McWilliam with a knowing look.

“I know what you’re thinking,” McWilliam snapped, “It wasn’t grief that had me kidnapping Rosa.”

“No? What then?”

“Justice.”

“And this is justice? Leaving her alone with half the women of Gall?” At McWilliam’s questioning look, he added, “I saw you through the window.”

“Rosa’s more than capable of looking after herself.” She was a little demon; a vixen. If she couldn’t hold her own against a group of women, then no-one could. He heard the bite in his own voice.

“All right.” Duncan raised his hands in surrender. “Maybe I should come up to the house and examine Rhona for myself. I heard she sprained her ankle a few days ago.”

“You heard? You didn’t examine her ankle?” Cameron had said Duncan had come to the castle after the roof-jumping incident.

“Nay, your uncle came here and asked me how to care for her. He didn’t seem to think I was needed at the house.” With a shrug, he continued: “I prescribed some laudanum to help with the pain, and he left here happy.”

Strange, Cameron was normally more cautious when it came to injury than almost every person McWilliam knew. Then again, he had been busy minding estate affairs while McWilliam had been chasing Rosa in England.

“If you’re free—”

“Absolutely,” he said before McWilliam could continue. “I’ll come past tomorrow.” He rose, to show McWilliam to the door.

*The Highlander's Thief*

As soon as he stepped outside, McWilliam knew something was wrong. He could hear shouting.

Rosa!

He ran forward only to come to a halt.

The weavers had scattered, abandoning their wool to the dirt and there, in the center of the street, stood Rosa facing Rodd. Rodd, who'd traveled to London with the shipment. Rodd, who'd watched his companion killed before being attacked himself, and Rodd, who'd ridden for five days straight to bring McWilliam news of the attack, despite a deep wound to his shoulder that had resulted in his whole right arm being amputated.

Rodd, who'd named Rosa as their thief.

With a yell, Rodd surged towards her.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Ye! Ye did this to us!”

Rosa stumbled out of arm’s reach. The Scotsman lunging towards her was completely mad. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Goodman,” she said as politely as she could manage under the circumstances, trying to add a dash of calm back into the situation. If McWilliam had taught her anything it was not to provoke an angry man.

The other women had all backed away, leaving Rosa and the crazed Scot in the middle of abandoned stools and looms. Sweet heaven. Thank you for nothing.

“Ye murdered Murray,” he shouted again, lurching closer.

He wasn’t as tall nor as big as McWilliam, but like practically everyone in this village he’d have no trouble overpowering her. This close she could see the red veins in his blue eyes, his flushed cheeks and fist clenched so tight his knuckles were white.

She raised her hands before her face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t do anything.”

But, wait. Hadn’t McWilliam said something about a Scotsman being killed during the robbery and another gravely injured? This must be him, the one who claimed to have seen a woman with the same half-circle birthmark as Rosa at the docks when the money was stolen.

“I know what you think,” she said, backing up with each word, “but I didn’t do it. I wasn’t even in London at the time of the theft. Someone set me up.”

“Lies!” He swung his fist towards her face.

Rosa ducked, and the power behind the swing overbalanced him.

Her attacker stumbled.

“That is enough, Rodd!” McWilliam stepped between Rosa and Rodd.

“How can you say that?” Rodd spat. “She killed Murray.”

Rosa stepped around the laird before he could say anything. As terrible as losing an arm must be, she hadn't stolen anything, and she certainly hadn't killed anyone.

It was one thing to admit to a crime she hadn't committed to save Amelia, it was completely different when faced with a bloodthirsty Scotsman. She was not going to be intimidated by him. She'd spent the last two years disciplining three arrogant boys, Rodd wasn't going to get the better of her. End of story.

Besides, she didn't trust McWilliam to defend her innocence, not when he, too, still thought she was guilty.

“I'm innocent,” she said in her most righteous governess voice. “Goodman Rodd, you will not touch me, and you will not accuse me of a crime I did not commit.”

“Like hell ye're innocent. I saw ye.” He gestured towards Rosa's neck where she imagined her birthmark was visible above the neckline of her bodice.

“A birthmark can be easily forged with a little creative thinking. I was set up. Someone wants me to take the blame for their crime.”

“Ha!” He let out a great bark of disbelief. “Where's your proof?”

“Do you really think I'd be here if I had 3,000 pounds? I'd have been on the first ship to the New World in a second.” She clicked her fingers, trying to drive her point home.

Rodd didn't slow. He threw another fist towards Rosa.

Despite her best efforts, a squeal escaped her mouth, and even as she darted out of the way she knew it would be too late.

Thwack.

Rosa blinked. She hadn't been hit.

McWilliam once again stood between her and Rodd, the other man's fist imbedded in his stomach. McWilliam didn't even wince. He stared down at Rodd with such darkness, Rodd swallowed.

Everyone around them froze.

“I didn’t mean...” Rodd stammered. “I shouldn’t have...”

“That’s right. Ye shouldn’t have.” The embers, always just below the surface, flared into life. Anndrais McWilliam’s hand dropped to his dagger, but he didn’t pull it free. “Go home, Rodd.”

“I...but she...” He pointed past McWilliam to Rosa, glancing around the street. Nobody made eye contact.

“Now.”

He fled, nursing the stump of his missing arm.

“Does anyone else have anything they wish to say to Rosa?” McWilliam looked from woman to woman, until each one had shaken their head. “Good.” He grabbed Rosa’s upper arm, steering her around and marching back towards the castle.

What had Rodd been thinking? Hitting a woman, no matter the circumstance, it wasn’t right, dammit.

But Rodd hadn’t been thinking, that was the problem. He’d let anger and grief control his emotions.

And what had McWilliam done? Sure, he couldn’t have known Rodd would be at the village. He was supposed to be staying up at the castle, where Fenella could keep an eye on him and his shoulder. Providing Rodd with hospitality after that attack was the least McWilliam could do. God knew he couldn’t afford much more than that with the money stolen.

Still, he shouldn’t have let Rosa out of his sight. Not again, he vowed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, breaking the silence.

Rosa glanced up at him, struggling to match his long strides.

He slowed.

“What for?”

“Leaving you alone with Rodd. I knew he was angry.”

“Did you know he would attack me?”

“Nay. But I still shouldn’t have taken the risk.”

She seemed to contemplate his words. “I believe you.” Then she inhaled, lifting her light chest like a preening peacock, obviously

pleased with herself. “Too bad you don’t repay the compliment.”

He couldn’t help but feel impressed by her persistence. If Rodd hadn’t been an eyewitness to Rosa’s involvement, he might actually have started to believe her. It just went to show what a good liar she was. She’d probably had years of practice.

He contemplated the top of her head. Her hair had once again begun to tumble free of its customary braid, the locks apparently too soft to be contained for long, and soft tendrils feathering at her temple and nape. Dressed in a simple grey gown of the day before, she nevertheless managed to look fresh and lively. She looked nothing like a liar. Or a thief.

In fact, she walked and talked like an educated woman. She was a little rough around the edges, but otherwise she could probably pass as a lady. That meant it was possible that the story she’d told him about a drunken father and a wealthy uncle could be true. She even might have been a governess at one point.

And her nightmares were real, he was positive about that. Someone—Emily had died.

But the rest of it? The kidnapped cousin? The threatening note?

He gave his head a shake. Rosa was just an amazing performer. She knew how to maintain a front even when threatened.

*Even when threatened by an almost six-foot tall Rodd?* An uncomfortable voice at the back of his mind questioned. He’d seen men twice her size back down when faced with Rodd. Rodd wasn’t an easy man to deal with when you got on his bad side—and Rosa was as far left of his bad side as possible.

“That was some fight back there,” he said, eventually giving credit where credit was due. Regardless of the fact that she was still lying about her innocence, she’d stood her ground against one of the angriest Scotsman he’d ever known.

She brushed her hands down her skirt as though dusting away invisible wrinkles with a faint smile. “I’m not afraid of getting a little dirty.”

And once again his soldier jumped to attention. He liked the sound of that, dammit.

“You left the sassenach with Rodd?” Cameron stormed into McWilliam’s office. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

“Intelligent.”

“Is there anywhere you don’t have spies?” McWilliam said it as a joke, but when Cameron didn’t laugh, McWilliam frowned. “Do you have spies?” Nay. He shook his head. Cameron was his uncle. News of the confrontation would have spread quickly through the gossip channels—it would have been easy for Cameron to hear about Rodd and Rosa.

“It was a mistake, I’m the first to admit it,” McWilliam continued, not waiting for an answer. “I’ve already apologized.”

“Good. Rodd didn’t deserve to be put in that situation.” Cameron crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at McWilliam with an I-know-better-than-you look only an uncle or father could achieve.

“Nay, ye misunderstand. I’ve apologized to Rosa.” McWilliam stood up. “No matter what crime she’s committed, Rosa doesn’t deserve to be threatened or attacked. That’s not justice.”

“And what about Rodd?” Cameron demanded. “What does he deserve?”

“Rodd’s lucky I didn’t punish him for attacking a woman. I would have been well within my rights to do so.”

“It’s god damn lucky you didn’t,” snapped Cameron. “People are already gossiping about how you favor the sassenach.”

His chest tightened. “It doesn’t matter what they think. By Whitsunday all of this will be sorted, and they’ll see then that I always do what’s best for the estate.”

“The sooner Rosa’s punishment has been handed down the better. Everyone’s on edge.” Cameron ran a hand through his hair, but his voice had softened, apparently reassured by McWilliam’s words. “Rhona doesn’t like her staying so close. It’s making her nervous.”

Nervous. That didn’t sound like his Rhona. “Speaking of which,” McWilliam said, seizing the subject, “Duncan told me that he didn’t examine Rhona when she hurt her ankle. It was you who tended her.”

“Didn’t he?” Cameron wrinkled his nose. “Oh, that’s right, he didn’t. I went down and talked with him about the sprain. Thought it would be easier that way.”

“Easier than what?” As McWilliam’s family had helped pay for Duncan’s university education—one of the only good things McWilliam’s grandfather had ever done—he was expected to serve the family whenever an illness arose and had been doing so quite happily for the last thirty years.

“He was busy that day,” Cameron shrugged. “Old Mrs Campbell’s gout had flared up again.”

McWilliam nodded, satisfied. “I talked with Duncan today, and he said he’d drop by tomorrow to see Rhona. I’ll get him to take a look at Rodd, too. He’s obviously beginning to get better.” Better enough to threaten a woman, dammit.

And it had been all McWilliam’s fault.

“I’ve got a lot of paperwork,” he said as way of a dismissal.

A pause. “I’ll leave you to it then.” Cameron backed up, his voice taking on an edge making it clear he wasn’t happy about being kicked out.

McWilliam pressed his head into his hands.

His blood boiled to think of Rodd hurting Rosa. And then it froze over like ice when he thought of the part he had played in today’s confrontation.

God dammit. It was his responsibility to keep her safe. He was her prison and her jury, and that made her his responsibility.

He banged his palm against his forehead, cursing silently.

Not only had he put Rosa in harm’s way today, he’d also kissed her. He’d kissed the one woman who was utterly and completely out of bounds.

He straightened. To hell—he wasn’t going to make that mistake again! He was a grown man, perfectly capable of keeping it in his pants—or kilt—for another two weeks.

And, as soon as her punishment had been handed down, she’d be out of his life forever. No more Miss Rosa Blair.

The moment Rosa was alone again in her chamber, she pulled out the fragment of paper from her pocket. The handwriting was unmistakable. She would have recognized it anywhere—it wasn't easy to forget the handwriting that had threatened the life of her cousin.

She'd been right in assuming it was the edge of a page. One edge was straight as if from the side, while the other three were jagged as if someone had torn up the page into small squares. And judging by how close it had been to the open fire, Rhona had evidently torn up the page and tried to burn it. Most of the words were missing their beginning, but she could make out something that was probably 'money' and something else that could have been 'promise'.

But why was Amelia's kidnapper writing to Rhona about money, and what could they possibly have to promise her? Rosa tapped her forehead. It was almost unthinkable to even contemplate that Rhona was working in association with the kidnapper. She obviously hated Rosa and believed her guilty of stealing the money. That meant she had no knowledge of the kidnapper's involvement in framing Rosa for the theft.

Could the kidnapper be threatening Rhona too? But why? She could hardly be older than sixteen and under the guardianship of her brother so she couldn't possibly have any money of her own to pay a bribe.

None of this made sense.

There was no reason—

The lock clicked.

Rosa turned, but nobody entered her chamber.

She frowned and tried the door handle. The door opened.

What the—?

She stepped into the hallway. It was deserted. McWilliam was nowhere to be seen. So who had unlocked the door?

Faint voices were coming from Rhona's room as though she was talking with someone. Rosa moved towards her chamber but then another door caught her eye. The room between Rosa's and Rhona's had also been left open. And from what McWilliam had told her, that was his room. Curiosity tickled her fingertips.

Glancing around to double check nobody was around, Rosa ducked inside.

“McWilliam?” she called softly. Nobody answered. “McWilliam?”

The shutters were closed leaving the room in shadow. A large bed took up most of the space, with sheets the color of midnight. She blinked. She'd never seen such a bed.

Beside it was a simple table with a wash basin and razor for shaving, in sharp contrast to his luxurious four-poster.

Other than that, there was only a trunk against the opposite wall. And that too was open.

It was easy to see the contents, even from her place beside the door. There were a couple of white shirts, another kilt, a dagger and a ring.

She frowned. It was the same ring he'd put on her finger when they'd been traveling from Bradford to Scotland and posing as husband and wife. Simple yet elegant, the gold shone brighter than anything else in the room, as though it had just been polished.

Rosa took half a step closer. It had been so strange to wear a wedding band, and from its prominent position amongst McWilliam's personal belongs it was apparently a ring of significant meaning. Had it been one of his parents' wedding bands? That would explain why McWilliam had it. It was probably part of his inheritance when his mother died.

Nothing about this felt right.

McWilliam's bedchamber had never been left open before, and he didn't strike her as a person who'd forget to close it. And the trunk—why was that open? And the ring—was it coincidence that it was sitting in pride of place, visible from all the way across the room?

No. She suddenly felt sick. This was all a set up. Her bedchamber door had been unlocked on purpose and the ring left where she was sure to find it. McWilliam was trying to tempt her to steal from him.

She backed up, hitting the edge of the open door.

How dare he think she was fool enough to fall for such a set up! Her mouth filled with the nasty taste of deception and she pressed a hand to her stomach. She knew he was determined to make her admit to the wool theft, but she'd never imagined he'd do something this low.

“Bull,” she said, copying his favored curse. She’d been too busy admiring the way his hair brushed the back of his neck and his beautiful sculptured knees that she’d let her guard down. Bennie Cooke would be very disappointed in Rosa. Bennie Cooke would never let anyone fool him. Bennie Cooke wouldn’t have fallen for a childish trick like this.

Rosa turned on her heel, determined to storm back into her room but Rhona’s door opened. Rosa froze. If she was found in McWilliam’s room, it wouldn’t matter if she’d stolen the ring or not, she’d be found guilty of intent. Providence save her!

But Rhona didn’t enter her brother’s room. Rosa watched her through the crack between door and wall as she pulled a traveling clock tightly around her shoulders and hurried down the corridor. Rosa stared after her. She wasn’t limping. Had her ankle healed? And where was she going in such a rush?

Rosa ducked back into her own room, snapped the door shut and moved to the window. Pressing an eye to the gap between the boards, she watched Rhona slip out of the tower house. She didn’t head towards the portcullis, but moved along the great wall, using the shadow to obscure herself from observers. Rounding a corner, she slipped from Rosa’s view, ducking behind the eastern tower house.

Rosa sat on the corner of her bed, feeling dumbfounded. Did this have anything to do with the burnt letter? What if Rhona was meeting with Amelia’s kidnapper? Or was it something more innocent like a meeting with her secret beau?

Rosa’s heart thumped in her chest. Stuff the ring, she was going to follow Rhona. She couldn’t let this opportunity pass. She had to do everything in her power to save her cousin, and if that meant leaving this room and following McWilliam’s darling younger sister, then that’s exactly what she’d do.

## Chapter Fourteen

McWilliam took the stairs two at a time. He wanted to check on Rhona before she retired for the night. Worry that she was unwell churned his stomach.

“Rosa?” She walked right into his chest. He grabbed her shoulders to stop her from falling backwards.

A gasp slipped from her mouth, and she froze like a rabbit caught in a trap her sky-blue eyes wide.

Just an hour’s separation and she already looked even more God damn radiant. How was that possible?

“What are you doing?” he asked. She was standing on the top step and it looked like she’d been planning to leave the tower.

“Like you don’t already know,” she snapped, pulling free. “But if you honestly thought that foolish stunt would trick me into stealing your ring, you’re even more barbaric than I first thought.”

“What are ye going on about, wee lass?” She was like a whirlwind. She never did anything by halves, his Thistle. Loving or fighting, she threw herself into it wholeheartedly.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets, the urge to gather her into his arms almost unbearable. His body remembered only too well the feel of her pressed against his chest, not an inch between them. And she’d kissed him with a beautiful innocence, letting him take control of her mouth just the way he liked it.

His blood ran south, and his groin stirred.

If only he hadn’t decided to abandon his belted plaid today of all days. The folds of fabric hid his body’s rebellions, unlike these bloody

breaches, dammit. If she looked down she was in for a nasty surprise.

Rosa pressed her fists to her hips and glared up at him with unmistakable fury. “Don’t you pretend it wasn’t you who unlocked my door.”

“I didn’t. Wait, someone let you out?”

“Yes.” She blinked. “It wasn’t you?”

“Nay.” He rummaged in his pocket for the key. It was still there, right where he’d left it. But, there wasn’t the one blasted key. There was another and he knew exactly who had it. “Where were you going anyway?” he asked, changing the subject.

Rosa shrugged. “Just stretching my legs, my lord.” She glanced at her feet. In anyone else he would have said it was a tell—a sign that she was lying—but she lied all the time and had never glanced towards her feet before.

“I’m on my way to see Rhona so—”

“So you’re just going to lock me back up?” she finished for him, disgust colored her voice.

“You’re a criminal awaiting trial.” His mother’s old bedchamber was more than she deserved. If this crumbling castle had a dungeon, he would have locked her up there.

“I’m not a criminal,” she said brusquely.

“Don’t you ever get sick of lying?”

“I’m not—”

“Come on,” he interrupted, steering her around and back up the stairs.

Her feet dragged. “I don’t want to go back, Lord Laird,” It came out a whisper so soft he could have pretended he hadn’t heard. But something inside him twinged. She’d been locked up in that room for days on the end, her only respite an hour or two at a grave and then being attacked by a Scotsman. More guilt.

Perhaps, maybe, after this morning, he could give her a little leeway.

She turned towards her room but he caught her wrist, tugged lightly. “Let me show you something. Just for a moment,” he added in what he hoped was a menacing tone. He didn’t want her to think he was softening.

Because he wasn't.

Not at all.

She followed him up the final flight of stairs to the top floor of his family's residence, her booted feet barely making a sound. Here, his father had knocked down the internal walls, turning the space into one large room. Or to be more precise, one large library.

Bookshelves lined the walls, while a collection of miss-matched chairs were clustered in the center around a small table. A thin layer of dust covered everything.

"Are those..." Her voice faded away as she walked towards the table as if in a trance. "Broadsheet!" She ran her hands over the already yellowing pages of the *London Public Ledger and the Edinburgh Evening Courant*.

"They're my father's." Were his father's.

Hearn had collected newspapers for as long as McWilliam could remember. But it wasn't like any of them were in date. It took so long for anything to reach the Lowlands that everything was old news by the time it arrived.

He raked a hand through his hair. He'd forgotten the newspapers would be up here waiting for him. All of the ones on the table would have arrived since his father's death. That's why they hadn't be stored away yet.

For three weeks, McWilliam had avoided this room. It had been this father's refuge. It had been lonely up here without Hearn. Now, he couldn't say why but it didn't seem so lonely with Rosa. And then she smiled and his breath hitched.

"Oh my," Rosa gasped, staring over his shoulder. Stuffed into the bookshelves along one entire wall, were hundreds, if not thousands, of newspapers, some crumbling they were so old. "How wonderful!" She darted across the room to run a fingertip along one shelf of papers, barely brushing the delicate edges. "I can't believe you have so many."

"My father was a collector." He'd kept meticulous records of most newspapers published since 1723. The papers at the top of the bookcase, right near the ceiling were the oldest. There were even a couple dated the day of McWilliam's birth in 1719.

He'd never understood his father's fascination. What good was old news?

Rosa turned to face him, her eyes sparkling. She looked as bright and fresh as a spring morning. He didn't think he'd ever seen her so happy.

"My father collected newspapers too. Or at least, he did by accident." She returned to the table, picking up the newest paper amongst the collection. It was dated six days ago. "He loved to read. Even when he was drunk and could barely see straight, he read the paper. And he never threw a single one out. You should have seen our house! The corridors were so packed visitors could barely get past the door." Her smile faded. "I had to throw them all away when he died."

"When you became a governess?" She wasn't looking at her feet now.

"I would have liked to have stayed in London. But it turned out he'd spent all our money on drink and I had to sell the townhouse to pay off his debts. I couldn't afford not to get a job." She absentmindedly turned the pages of the paper without really looking at it, her gaze frosty as if trapped in a memory. "The Wrights took me in; even though it was obvious I hadn't had the most usual of upbringings. I was a little too..." She tapped her forehead as though trying to think of the right word.

"Feisty?" he suggested.

"A little too feisty for their tastes, my lord." She agreed with a shudder as through regretting that she possessed such a less-than-ladylike quality. "Mind you," she added darkly, "no experienced governess was willing to work for the wages they were offering. But I had to take what I could get."

Was that why she'd stolen his money? Because the Wrights hadn't been paying her enough. How much did a governess earn anyway? Rhona had never had one.

Pouring himself a glass of whiskey from the decanter tucked away on one of the shelves, he watched as Rosa sorted through the papers on the desk, stacking them into piles by publication house and release date. Her fingers moved with the dexterity of a woman long familiar with a newspaper.

Then again, Rosa didn't seem to be the type who relished money. She didn't seem to pay much attention to the secondhand clothes she

was wearing, nor did she wear any jewelry or appear to favor the drink as her father supposedly had.

Maybe she really hadn't stolen his money. He nipped that idea in the bud. Just because she didn't appear greedy didn't mean anything. Perhaps selling her family house hadn't been enough to pay off her father's stifling debts.

He shouldn't have brought her up here.

What was it about Rosa Blair? He just couldn't keep away from her, dammit.

And his feelings— He'd never been this conflicted in his whole life. Guilt, desire, anger, longing.

Hellfire, he was weak!

He hadn't had much time for women since Mary and that had been nearly fifteen years ago. Sure, there had been other women, but none of those relationships had been very serious. And he certainly hadn't planned to fall for an English thief.

Love?

Hold up. Who'd said anything about damn love? Why had he even thought that? He lusted after Rosa, nothing more, nothing less. He absolutely didn't love her.

He took a swig of the whiskey, and it burnt a passage down his throat.

Aye, she was feisty and beautiful and intelligent. And she wasn't short of courage. Aye, she stood up to him like no woman ever had. And she didn't seem disheartened by his size or his rough ways.

Sure, he might have, in completely different circumstances, eventually, somehow have fallen in love with a lass like Rosa Blair. But right now, with everything that was between them, it was impossible to think of a future together.

His groin pulsed with need. God damn it, not again.

“The sassenach is missing.” Cameron appeared at the top of the stairs. “The thief is miss...” His voice faded away as his eyes fell on Rosa still bent over the small table, her back to the door.

She glanced around a second later, startling a little as if she hadn't heard the others arrive, being so focused on the papers before her.

"Rosa Blair." Cameron glanced between them, his gaze stopping on McWilliam "What are you doing?" He spoke out one side of his mouth as though Rosa wouldn't be able to hear if he didn't speak his words in her direction.

Fenella appeared behind Cameron, and McWilliam blinked. They must really have been worried to be standing in the same room as each other. Normally they avoided each other at all costs.

Rosa stared at him, a furrow appearing at the center of her brow. She locked her hands behind her back and McWilliam saw a flash of paper disappear into the folds of her grey skirt.

"Right." Cameron was clearly not satisfied with their silence and McWilliam could feel another argument brewing.

"Uncle," he said, forestalling the inevitable, "Show Rosa back to her room. I'd like a word with Fenella."

Cameron bristled at being dismissed again, but didn't argue. They disappeared from sight, Rosa making sure to keep her hands hidden.

"The nerve of that woman," Fenella huffed. "She swiped one of your father's newspapers. Ye saw that, didn't ye?"

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about." He took a final swig, placing the empty glass back on the shelf. Fenella had been with his family for longer than he'd been alive, probably longer than his father had been alive. She had practically helped raise him and Rhona after their mother died. But today she'd overstepped the mark.

"Ye unlocked Rosa's door."

"I—" she spluttered, her fuzzy hair springing back and forth as she shook her head. "I certainly did not."

"Other than me you're the only one with a key to her room."

"But that—" Her hand dropped to the chatelaine hanging from her belt from which dangled a key to every room in the castle. Splotches of color travelled up her fat neck to her wrinkled face. "I did it for your own good."

"For me?" He kept his voice level.

"She's never ever going to admit stealing that shipment. She's

crafty and evil. And... English!” She held her hands out towards him imploringly. “It was the only way we could get proof that she’s really a thief. I had to let her out.”

“Ye set her up.” That’s what Rosa meant by his ring. Fenella had set it up so that Rosa would find her door unlocked and, unable to resist temptation, steal something. “She’s guilty. We don’t need more proof.”

“But we might.” Fenella said, lamely. Her white cap slipped to the side. “I just cannot bear the thought of her not being punished, not after all the work ye and your Pa put into restoring this estate.”

His shoulders dropped. He couldn’t stay mad at Fenella, not even when she drove him crazy with her meddling. “Don’t worry, nobody or nothing is going to get in my way. I intend to make this estate great again, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Rosa sat cross-legged on her bed, her back against the headboard. She held the stolen broadsheet between her hands.

Before today she’d never known there were London papers in the Lowlands, let alone an entire library of them. And right above her head.

Cameron obviously hadn’t been happy. The last time—and only other time—she’d met him, he’d been stand-offish and grumpy. Today, he’d been practically aggressive. And what did sassenach even mean?

If he knew she’d taken the broadsheet—

A stolen newspaper didn’t even compare to a stolen ring, she reassured herself. It was nothing; futile. Besides, she’d return it as soon as she’d finished absorbing every glorious word. McWilliam, or Cameron, need never ever know.

She plumped her pillow, settling down for a serious read.

An hour or so later, the sun had completely disappeared beyond the horizon and shadows covered her room, but Rosa kept reading, straining her eyes by the half-light of the fireplace.

Bennie Cooke had been busy on the 26th April. Three whole articles in the Public Ledger were attributed to him, including—her heart leapt into her mouth—a piece on her.

She scrambled off the bed, leaning closer to the flickering flames,

her pulse beating panic and excitement through every inch of her body. Bennie Cooke had written about her, bluestocking wallflower Rosa Alice Blair.

*Thief Escapes Bow Street Runner* by Bennie Cooke

‘Making her escape out a window of the Dancing Horse coaching inn, on the 22nd April, ROSA BLAIR, late of the town of Bradford and county of West Yorkshire, was arrested for theft. The said Rosa Blair is about 20 years of age, five feet two inches, slender make, swarthy complexion, long brown hair, blue sully eyes; had on, when she escaped, a red faded traveling mantle with pearl buttons and brown ankle boots.

‘Whoever will secure the said Rosa Blair, and give notice to the Keeper of the House of Correction, Leeds, shall receive a reward of TWO GUINEAS.’

She tossed the paper onto the bedside table. Two guineas: was that all she was worth? She was an escaped criminal, possibility violent. A man had died during that robbery, and another badly injured.

She plopped back onto the bed, kicking her shoes off.

Last year, when Percy Guy had escaped from Marshalsea Prison, the Principal Officer had offered a five guinea reward and he hadn’t even stolen anything like 3,000 pounds. Perhaps McWilliam had been right and nobody cared so much because she’d only stolen Scottish money.

Come to think of it, there’d been absolutely no mention of anything relating to Scotland or the Uilleim Estate. Did that mean nobody knew she’d crossed the border? How would anyone know to look for her here?

But that was fine, she told herself, blatantly ignoring the thumping that was her heart pounding at the rate of a speeding curricule. With shaking fingers, she spread her skirts out over the blankets, brushing out the creases, and stared down at her stockinged feet. She was fine. She had an escape plan and needed nobody’s help.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Rosa. Rosa.” Gentle hands shook her awake.

She jerked upright, her pulse pounding. It took a moment to work out where she was—in her own bed. Alone. With a dark figure leaning over her, demanding all her attention.

“Lord Laird?”

“Ye were dreaming again.” He plonked down on the edge of her bed, nudging her over so he could fit. The bed sagged under his weight, and she slipped towards him. This time, he didn’t push her away. “Was it Emily again? You were thrashing around and groaning.”

Rosa felt her face heating. No, this time it certainly hadn’t been Emily. Thank goodness it was too dark for McWilliam to see the flush burning up her face. Even her ears felt hot.

She let out an unsteady breath, keeping her eyes averted from his face. Thrashing around? Moaning? Anndrais McWilliam—his callused hands touching, caressing, while his lips— Oh sweet heaven! Where had that come from? It had been so real, so lifelike. Heat continued to pulse beneath the surface of her skin. The absence of his touch was a palpable thing, and she craved it like she’d never craved anything in her entire life.

Rosa shoved her hands under the counterpane, trying to smooth down her nightdress which had become tangled between her thighs.

She never knew she could feel like this. She was an innocent as far as the actual act between a man and a woman was concerned, but she’d read more than her fair share of newspapers—and during a particularly adventurous month when she was still living at her uncle’s—half a dozen biology books, so she knew exactly what was supposed to

happen.

But no book or words could ever have described how it felt. It was exciting and dangerous and... And it was entirely Anndrais McWilliam.

He was Scottish. And stubborn and arrogant. And large and muscular and hot. He was fire. And he wasn't supposed to make her feel like this.

*It was just a dream. Just a dream.* She repeated it back to herself like a mantra. *A dream. Nothing more.*

McWilliam narrowed his eyes, his gaze caught on the unsteady rise and fall of Rosa's chest. The blankets were tangled around her legs and she was staring at the end of the bed as though to avoid looking at him.

Hold up. Was it possible Rosa Blair had been dreaming about him?

Her hair was knotted at the nape of her neck, unmissable evidence that she'd been thrashing in her sleep. And he'd seen it with his own eyes. Heard her moans with his own ears.

His soldier surged to attention, and need roared in his ears, taunting him.

He fisted his hands in the counterpane. He could control this.

But, another part of his brain argued, if she'd been dreaming about him, didn't that mean she wanted him to kiss her? The hitch in her breath certainly suggested she wouldn't push him away if he pressed his advantage.

But a hundred times more important was the fact that the temptress refusing to meet his gaze at that very moment was Miss Rosa damn Blair, sworn enemy to his family and his clan.

Hell's teeth, he had to get out of here. He pushed himself away from the bed, and was half way across the room before she could blink.

"Where are you going?" She almost sounded disappointed.

"I've recently taken up midnight swimming."

"Swimming?"

"In the loch."

"Isn't that cold?"

"That, lass, is the whole point."

In the daylight, both village and castle were visible from the loch. In the middle of the night, or there about, everything was just darkness and shadows, the moon ominously covered by a thick layer of cloud.

McWilliam could smell another storm approaching. It hung overhead like a weight poised to come crashing down around him. Or perhaps that was just how he felt, so he saw the approaching storm that way too.

He abandoned his shirt, breeches and shoes by the edge of the loch, wading out until it lapped at his waist, then he ducked under. The water was icy, even for spring.

Rosa bobbed at the forefront of his thoughts. Images of her rumped from a night of exotic dreams, her hair tangled and her nightdress askew threatened to undo the work of the water. It seemed not even a teeth-chattering cold could help him where Rosa was concerned.

He counted to ten in his head, then to one hundred, swimming to the rhythm of his thoughts, determined to keep Rosa at bay.

As far as lochs went, Gall Uisce wasn't really all that big. He could swim from one end to the other in little over twenty minutes. By the time McWilliam had returned, the sky was beginning to lighten and some damn overachieving birds were already beginning the morning serenade.

Flicking water from his hair, McWilliam quickly dressed and walked back towards the village of Gall. If he hurried, he might even be able to get an hour's sleep before the sun rose. Because nobody else was fool enough to be lusting after an English thief, the village was silent, everyone safety tucked away in their beds. Or so he thought.

McWilliam narrowed his eyes, his gaze focused on the corner of Mary's house where someone was definitely moving. Only just shorter than him, the figure crept along the side of the house, keeping to the darkest shadows.

McWilliam's hand dropped to his waist where his dirk usually hung. He cursed silently as his finger brushed nothing but kilt. He'd been in too much of a rush to Rosa's bedside and had left his weapon in his chamber.

"Who's there?" he called.

They jumped, glancing at him for a fraction of a second, but their face was obscured by a hood.

“Stop!” He ran towards the figure, just as they slipped between two houses.

McWilliam had to turn sideward to fit his shoulders between the houses and by the time he squeezed out the other side, the figure had disappeared. Concerned, he searched the town but saw nobody else.

“It was probably nothing,” he reassured himself. “Just someone visiting their lover and not wanting to be seen.”

Lightning flashed across the sky, throwing everything into sudden clarity before darkness once more took over. A moment later, a rumble of thunder followed. The storm was getting closer.

And then a bloodcurdling scream pierced the air, louder than any thunder. McWilliam didn’t stop to think. Breaking into a run, he headed straight for Duncan’s house.

“Duncan, Duncan!” There was so much blood. McWilliam pressed his hands to the wound in the physician’s chest even as he knew there was no hope. He gritted his teeth. The man who did this would pay.

The door crashed open, the lock bending under the sheer force of McWilliam’s anger. He strode in the house, Cameron hot on his heels.

“I want every inch of this cottage searched,” he growled. “Tear it apart if you have to.”

How could this had happened? How could one of his own have killed Duncan? The very idea of murder was repellent.

“Faster!” he barked, and his tenants rushed to do his bidding.

Rosa lay on her back, stiff as a board, her hands by her side, not thinking about McWilliam. If she wanted to save Amelia, then she couldn’t afford to be distracted by dreams, especially when those dreams were focused very poignantly on one particular Scottish laird

with roughcast hands and a rugged brogue to match.

To date, her plan to escape hadn't processed very far. She still didn't have any extra clothes, or any food and water. Although, thanks to Rhona, she now knew where the stables were.

That being said, getting from her locked bedchamber to the stables was going to be tricky. On the other hand, McWilliam had let slip yesterday that he carried a key to her room. He'd also hinted at the fact that someone had a key. Probably Mrs Fenella. That made sense. The housekeeper hated her, and had probably been the one to set up the ring for Rosa to 'accidentally' find.

That could be good. Mrs Fenella still hand-delivered all of Rosa's meals. If Rosa could identify which key unlocked her door among the chatelaine that hung from the housekeeper's belt, she could probably work out how to steal it. In the meantime, she'd have to start saving her breakfast oatcakes.

Rosa must have eventually fallen asleep again because she woke a few hours later. Muted sunlight seeped in through the gaps in the window boards, as did the voices from the courtyard below.

She pushed herself out of bed, noticing the newspaper still on the bedside table. Had McWilliam seen it last night when he'd shaken her awake? She wanted to climb back into bed and bury her head under the counterpane with thoughts of last night's dream. It was possible McWilliam had guessed what she'd been dreaming about. It wasn't like she'd been calling for Emily or screaming in panic.

Panic had most certainly not been a factor.

Was that why he'd gone swimming? Because he couldn't bear the idea of kissing her again? Well, she absolutely didn't want to kiss him again either!

Rosa turned her thoughts to Rhona, only climbing out of bed to press her ear to the door. Everything was silent. And that either meant Rhona wasn't yelling at anyone and was feeling better or she hadn't returned from sneaking out yesterday.

Come to think of it, didn't Rhona have a sprained ankle? She hadn't been limping. That was suspicious. And Rosa still didn't know why Amelia's kidnapper had written to Rhona.

She had to tell Anndrais.

That was going to go well. She swallowed.

*By the way, Laird, I'm pretty sure your sweetheart of a sister is lying to you about her ankle. Oh, and she's probably in cahoots with Amelia's kidnapper. You know, the person who tried to frame me for theft.*

On second thoughts, she might just keep that information to herself for now. There was no way in heaven or hell he was going to believe Rosa over his sister without proof. And a scrap of paper hardly counted. Especially when she didn't have the kidnapper's original letter to compare the handwriting with.

Rosa crossed her room to press an eye to the gap in the window boards. It was ominously dark outside with heavy storm clouds hanging low over their heads. There were also more people than usual gathered in the courtyard. They were clustered in small groups, talking among themselves and none of the servants were working. Now and then someone would glance towards the gate.

She frowned. Something was wrong. The portcullis was sealed tightly shut.

Was Rhona missing? Her heart thumped in her ears. Oh, God.

Tripping her way back to the door, she banged her fists against the wooden panels. "Is anyone there? Hello?" If Rhona was missing, it was all her fault. Who cared if McWilliam didn't believe her, she should have told him Rhona had snuck out when she'd seen him last night.

Rhona couldn't become another Amelia. Or Emily.

"Open the door. Please. Tell me what's happening! Open the—"

The door swung open.

Rosa scrambled back. "McWilliam—"

Dark circles lined his eyes. It didn't look like he'd slept for a week. And there was blood on his white shirt.

Her hands jumped to her mouth. "What happened? Are you all right?" Whose blood is that?"

"Duncan, the physician. He's dead." He blinked down at her as though unable to believe what he could see.

"I don't understand." She tugged at his shirt, her heart skipping a beat. "Is this your blood?"

"Nay," he brushed away her question, gathering her hands to his

chest. “Rodd killed Duncan, and then he fled.” He looked straight into her eyes. “Rosa. We found close to 500 pounds hidden in Rodd’s house.”

“But—” She couldn’t think. She couldn’t breathe. No shepherd could possibility have that much money unless...

“Ye didn’t steal the money, I know that now. Rodd did. He set you up.”

## Chapter Sixteen

“Wait. You believe me?” Rosa blinked up at him.

“Aye, wee lass. I believe ye.”

With a crack of lightning and a crash of thunder, the storm finally broke.

A look of confused astonishment crossed her face.

McWilliam let out a shaky laugh, and pulled Rosa against his chest. She didn't hesitate to wrap an arm around his waist or to bury her other hand in his bloodied shirt.

Duncan's blood. The old man had died moments after being attacked. He hadn't even had time to scramble from bed. If only McWilliam had managed to stop Rodd before it had been too late. When he'd rushed into Duncan's house, the physician had already been mortally injured. And then Rodd had escaped while McWilliam was trying to save Duncan. A futile effort. The physician had died in his arms, in pain and completely disoriented. It had not been a good way to go.

A shiver raced down his spine, and he rested his cheek on the top of Rosa's head, breathing in her scent—sweetness and spice with a hint of lavender. She calmed him down like nothing else. If he could lock them both in this room and have the rest of the world fade away...

It was the first time he'd been allowed to touch Rosa without thinking that she'd stolen from him, killed one of his friends or been responsible for the death of his father. Now, at this very moment, she wasn't Rosa the Thief, she was just Rosa.

He felt... relief. Dammit. He was so unbelievably relieved that Rosa hadn't stolen from him and brought his father to an early grave that it

felt as if a mountain had just fallen from his shoulders. He could finally, at long last, touch her without feeling guilty about it.

She was not a murderer. She was not a thief. She was just Rosa Blair.

He wanted whisk her off her feet and toss her onto the bed. He wanted to explore every inch of her beautiful body and then he wanted her to scream his name until she couldn't bear it any more.

But he had to hold back for a while longer. After everything, he owed her an explanation of what had happened last night. She deserved better than anyone to hear what Rodd had done. And he was supposed to be supervising a manhunt after all.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, pressing a feather-light kiss her hairline. "I forgot about the blood."

It near killed him, but he dropped his arms to his sides, letting her go.

She murmured incoherently, tightening her own hold before releasing him. Moving to the bedside table, she washed her hands in the basin of cold water. "What exactly did Rodd do?" she asked, exactly as he'd expected.

He told her about Cameron's death and how after Rodd escaped, he'd searched Rodd's cottage and found the damming money. She listened without speaking, the frown lines around her mouth deepening with each passing moment.

When he finished, she asked, "Why did Rodd kill the physician? I mean, it doesn't make any sense. And why did he yell at me yesterday if he was the thief all along?"

McWilliam sat on the corner of her bed, unbuttoning his spoilt shirt. "Cameron has been berating me for the last few days because he thought I was being too lenient with you. Maybe Rodd thought so too. He might have panicked that I was beginning to believe that you were innocent so he decided to stage that attack on you."

"But what about his arm?" she returned.

"Something must have gone wrong." Rodd had obviously killed Murray himself, perhaps he'd even stabbed his own arm to make his story more believable, or maybe Murray had injured Rodd in the fight. Only then the wound had become infected. "Maybe that's why he killed

Duncan. He must have blamed him for amputating his arm.” He pulled off his shirt, and scrunched it into a ball, making sure to keep it away from her blankets. Though he should probably have Fenella change the bed clothes just encase.

Bloody hell, it had been a long night.

“I guess.” But she sounded hesitant, as though she still couldn’t quite believe it. “What about Amelia? Did Rodd steal her away too?”

Her blasted cousin. He couldn’t help but feel responsible. If he’d believed Rosa earlier, he could have done something. He could have done...something.

Her face hardened. “You forgot about her,” she said, her tone accusatory.

“Nay, wee lass. I didn’t forget.”

Much to his chagrin, she suddenly started rushing around the room, fast as a whirlwind, collecting items of clothing and wrapping them in a messy bundle. “What are ye doing?”

“I have to leave immediately.”

“What?”

“I need to get to Leeds. I’m due to be before the magistrate in six days’ time.”

“But you’re innocent.”

“And now you know that, you’ll finally let me leave.”

“Hold on.” He reached for her as she rushed from the bedside table to the desk.

She brushed him off. “Could you lend me a horse? And some food?”

“Miss Blair, there is absolutely no way I’m letting you travel four days through unfamiliar country all by yourself.” Hell, there was no way he was letting her leave. End of conversation.

“Then come with me if you must, but by all accounts I’m leaving.”

He caught her arm as she whirled past him again. Pulling her up against his chest, he wrapped his other arm around about her waist, trapped her against his naked chest. His manhood ached with the thought of her breasts pressed skin to skin against his chest. Oh, to strip the clothes from her body.

*Not now*, he urged his rebellious body.

“Slow down, Thistle. Everything’s going to be well.”

“No, it’s not.” She refused to meet his eye.

“You said it yourself, we still have six days left, and we will find Amelia.” He tightened his hold. “Two hours ago I sent three of my most trusted men to London and Manchester to start the search.” On realizing what Rodd had done, his first thoughts had been to find Rosa, but McWilliam had first taken the time to organize a search party, not only sending men to Manchester but also sending them to key hiding places around the estate.

He expected her to scoff about how he’d trusted Rodd when all along Rodd had been the thief and murderer, but she didn’t. Instead, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Manchester?”

“Aye. They’re heading to your uncle’s. Maybe he saw something that will help us find her. And —” he preempted her next argument, “if they don’t find her there they’ll take the search further afield.”

And even then it was still a long shot, but he wasn’t going to admit that to Rosa. It wasn’t like half a handful of burley Scotsman would be welcomed with open arms in London or Manchester. But he did know what else to do. And there was no bloody way he was letting Rosa return into the custody of Runner good-for-nothing-Smith. Incompetent fool.

Besides, Rodd was his responsibility. This was his mess to clean up.

“I... you...” For once, in all the time he’d known her, she seemed lost for words.

He almost laughed. In any other circumstance it would have been funny.

“Two hours ago?”

He nodded. Wanting pulled at his body. But for the moment this was more important. “We’ve also started searching all the buildings within a ten mile radius of the castle. We only found 500 pounds in Rodd’s house which means he’s either hidden the rest somewhere else or...”

“He’s working with someone.”

“Exactly.”

“Someone in Scotland?” She pulled back half an inch to look up at

him. "But why did he force me to take the blame? Before, I never knew any Scots." Her frown deepened. "I holidayed near here once when I was living with my uncle. It was when..."

"Emily?"

She swallowed. "Loch Mackenzie, I think it was called."

"Does your uncle holiday in Scotland often?"

She nodded. "Not since Emily died. But he used to. Uncle Oliver had a business partner this side of the border. Grant..." she wrinkled her nose in a way that sent shivers down his spine. He wanted to press open-mouth kisses on the tip of her nose. And her eyelashes. The fine arch of her throat.

"Kyles?" she finished, hesitantly.

He knew Grant. He was the laird of the McCrae Estate, about a day's ride north. "I'll send someone to McCrae. If Amelia's there, she shouldn't be too hard to find. I have family friends up there who'll be able to help us." At last, something he might just be able to succeed at. It would be a hundred times easier to find Amelia if she'd been brought to Scotland. This was his territory.

"I'm sorry about...Duncan did you say his name was?"

"Duncan MacCloud." He pressed his eyes closed for a moment.

Duncan had been a kind man. He'd always cared for McWilliam and his family, but it had been more than a physician-patient relationship. He'd been a true friend, sticking by McWilliam's family even when his grandfather's crimes had come to light.

On a more practical note, the estate was now short a physician. If there were any medical emergencies, the nearest physician was at the McCrae Estate or south across the border.

"He was supposed to check on Rhona today," he said, remembering the discussion he'd had with Duncan only yesterday.

"Is she feeling any better?"

"I don't know." Between Rosa, Fenella, Rodd and Duncan, McWilliam hadn't managed to check in on Rhona last night. He hadn't even told her about Duncan. Once he'd realized Rodd was guilty, his first thought had been for Rosa.

She watched him with large, startlingly blue eyes. Joy at finally

having her innocence recognized had quickly faded, replaced by fear for her cousin. When he'd first met Rosa, he'd believed she had no loyalty. He couldn't have been more wrong. She'd thought of nobody but her family since this whole debacle had begun. Hellfire, she'd even handed herself in to that Bow Street Runner to try to save her cousin. If that wasn't loyalty and bravery, then he didn't know what was.

"What if Amelia has been taken to London?" she asked, voicing his own concern.

"We'll find her," he found himself saying. He knew he was making promises he might not be able to keep, but he couldn't bear the thought of worrying her any more than she already was. Not after everything he'd already put her through.

London was a huge city with thousands upon thousands of places for a single girl to be hidden away. He forced himself to smile reassuringly. "Someone will have seen something. We will find her."

Rosa forced a smile, but she knew he was lying. She'd grown up in London and knew better than most that if Amelia was there then there was almost nothing they could do to find her.

But if Rodd was partly responsible for her kidnapping then there was a chance Amelia was in Scotland. If that was the case, then maybe McWilliam was right.

She let out a shaky breath and sank onto the edge of the bed.

Six days. Perhaps there was still hope. Perhaps his family friends would have seen something that could lead them to Amelia. That was a lot of 'could's, but, sweet heaven, she really didn't want to go to prison. She didn't want to leave Scotland. She didn't want to leave Rhona. And she absolutely didn't want to leave McWilliam.

She blinked, the thought startling her. McWilliam? She lusted after him like she'd never before lusted after anyone else. But was it possible her feelings went deeper than that? Did she...love McWilliam?

"Thistle?" He stood before her, a look of concern clouding his face. And in that moment she had a startlingly clear picture of him kissing his way down her body as he had done in her dream.

*It was just a dream. It was just a dream.*

A flush burnt its way up her neck, and she dropped her gaze from his face. To his gloriously naked chest. Wait, when had he taken off his shirt?

Her breath hitched.

Sure, she'd seen his bare chest once before, but it was like she was seeing him for the first time all over again. A light scattering of hair colored his chest, triangulating at the center of his abdomen, at the band of his kilt. And the kilt itself sat low on his hips, leaving all six of his stomach muscles startlingly visible.

So that was what loch swimming did to a person.

Would she ever get used to such a sight?

Her mouth was suddenly dry. She licked her lips.

McWilliam's eyes dropped to her mouth, and he stared at her with an intensity that was hotter than fire. If he dared lean any closer she knew she'd turn to flame in an instant, and yet the absence of his touch was almost as unbearable.

"Lass," he said, huskily, "what are ye doing to me?"

"Me?" It came out a squeak, and she scrambled up, darting to stand by the window. She clenched her hands behind her back.

He chuckled, low in his throat. It was dark sound, almost ominous, yet Rosa thought it was the most alluring thing she'd ever heard. Her stomach clenched. Her toes curled. Heaven help her.

Behind her, a breath of air carried in a spray of rain water through the gaps in the boards, spraying her hands in tiny splashes. The contrast between the heat of McWilliam and the cold of the rain made her skin more than usually sensitive. Or perhaps that was McWilliam's gaze as it lingered on her mouth, then moved slowly southwards.

He started towards her, his movement more feline than human, like a cat stalking its prey.

She raised a shaky hand; a barrier between them. This wasn't right. This wasn't proper. "Don't," she pleaded. Gentlemen didn't press their advantages so.

"Don't what?" he breathed.

*I'm no gentleman.*

“Don’t kiss me.” Another step closer and she’d be able to see the specks of silver in his stormy-grey eyes.

“You don’t want me to kiss ye?”

“No.”

“Liar.” His breath tickled her chin.

She was melting. Enthralled. Words failed her, so she shook her head instead.

He picked up her hand, pressing a kiss to the end of each finger. “Not even here?” He pulled her middle finger into his mouth right up to her second joint, his teeth grazing her skin even as his tongue traced circles on her skin.

Then he was kissing her wrist, his lips so light she could barely feel his touch. “Not even here?” he murmured, his brogue heavier than usual. And then his mouth was at the inside of her elbow. A throb of pleasure rushed through her body. Her entire arm tingling with sensation, with need and wanting and desire.

Her dream paled in comparison.

And before she knew what she was doing, before she could form another coherent thought, she’d bridged the last inch between them, had grabbed his shoulders and was dragging his head towards her own. He came willingly, a triumphant grin turning up the corners of his lips, and then his mouth possessed hers—no doubt, no hesitation.

His tongue swiped at hers, dared her even as his hands began exploring her, along the curve of her hip to her waist and then to her collarbone. He pushed aside the shoulder of her bodice, exposing more skin than was seemly. His touch continued to ignite her, like she was a candle and he the flint. Then he lowered his head to brush his tongue along her shoulder, following the path of his dancing fingertips.

Her head fell back against the wall and she clenched his bare shoulder, his muscles taut beneath her fingers.

She was aching, acutely sensitive. Damp.

But she couldn’t be. Ladies didn’t behave this way. Governesses didn’t behave this way!

Why was it that around this man she lost all sense of propriety? She should push him away. She should stop this before it went so far that

neither of them could turn back.

She wasn't a free woman. She had obligations.

But even as the thoughts flickered across her mind, McWilliam's exploration took him downwards, and a moment later he was caressing her breasts through the many layers of her clothing.

Rosa could feel the heat of him searing through the strays. She found herself pressing into his hands, needing more. Needing skin against skin.

But he just laughed softly as he moved industrious hands further down her body, his mouth returned its amorous attention to her neck, kissing his way along the curve of her birthmark. She arched her back, her breast feeling suddenly bare and neglected.

"We can't," she murmured, her hands still clutching his shoulders.

"Liar." He linked one hand behind her head, angling her face so he could once again capture her lips as his other hand moved lower, not stopping even as he reached her thigh. She quivered beneath such simple ministrations, her skin burning with his every touch.

"McWilliam." A moan escaped her mouth. "It's not proper."

He tugged up her skirts so as to touch the skin of her thigh beneath.

She stopped thinking as he took her mouth with a fierce possession she thrilled in. The tips of his fingers brushed between her legs, and she parted them, slipping down the wall a fraction as her knees began to give way.

"Is this proper?" he returned, his eyes all-knowing.

"Oh," she breathed, barely able to form words, "this is wicked."

He smiled against her mouth, wrapped his other arm around her waist to keep her upright. He caressed her *there*, his long, strong fingers insistent, knowing, skillful. She arched and withered beneath his touch, growling her pleasure in a way that would have had her blushing in any other circumstance to know she could make such a noise. He'd awakened her to a passion she'd never felt before and she knew, instantly, that her world would never be the same.

And then she shattered, pleasure and pain surging through her body. Her eyes snapped shut and she clenched her teeth to stop from screaming.

*The Highlander's Thief*

A moment later, calm descended, and she opened her eyes to see him standing before her, brushing her skirts neatly back to order.

Her knees wobbled dangerously.

Outside, the storm continued to rage on. Rain hit the roof with an almost deafening crash, and another flash of lightning momentarily filled the room with a burst of blinding light.

“That...” Rosa pressed a hand to her forehead. It was harder than normal to think straight, especially after seeing the particularly snug grin on McWilliam’s face. “That cannot happen again.”

His grin widened as he backed stiffly towards the door. “Liar.”

## Chapter Seventeen

If he had to go for a swim in the freezing loch every time he thought of Rosa or saw Rosa or kissed Rosa or pleased Rosa, then he might as well become the next loch ness monster. He just could not get her out of his head.

Striding from Rosa's room, leaving her sated and, hopefully, a little calmer, McWilliam tried hard to ignore the bulge in his kilt that was demanding his full attention. Now wasn't the time. Not even when Rosa, her eyes hazy with contentment, had glanced down at his bulge, a look of confusion crossing her beautifully rosy face.

He'd explained to her as quickly as he could, while backing out the room, that he didn't want their first time to be a simple tugging and that he didn't have the time to take it slow when he had a manhunt to supervise, so it was better he leave now while he still had the willpower. But with each passing second the urge to stride back into her chamber and tear the lacing from her stays was becoming almost unbearable.

Taking the stairs two at a time, McWilliam tried to force his thoughts to more serious matters. Like Rodd and telling his sister about Duncan's death. He ground his teeth. How could someone as good as Rosa have come into his life under such abhorrent circumstances? Why couldn't he have met her like normal lovers did? At an assembly room or... God only knew. McWilliam hadn't had much time over the last few years for anything other than his family business. And it wasn't exactly flourishing at the moment, despite the fact theirs was the finest wool in all of Europe, if he did say so himself.

After quickly changing his shirt, he found Fenella in the kitchen. He quickly passed on instructions for the housekeeper to organize the

changing of Rosa's bedding and the airing out of her room. She wasn't a prisoner anymore, and it was high time they did something about that broken window. He'd find the money to replace the glass, somehow.

Fenella had the decency to blush when he mentioned Rosa—word of Rodd's involvement in the theft and Duncan's demise obviously hadn't taken long to spread, as usual.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked, her eyes watching his face with keen interest.

"We'll need to arrange a funeral for Duncan. He doesn't have any family"—Duncan's parents had passed away many years ago and Duncan had never married—"so it's up to us."

"He was as good as family," Fenella agreed. "I'll see to the preparations personally."

He nodded his thanks. "Could you also organize lunch for the search teams? They've been out for a couple of hours and are probably getting hungry." He was now itching to get back outside himself, but there were still a few things he had to do before he could help look for Rodd and Amelia. "If you pack it up, I'll take it down to the village myself."

"I'm sure they'll be reassured to see you."

He narrowed his eyes, wondering if Fenella was trying to butter him up after their last conversation, when she'd accused Rosa of being the thief and had attempted to seduce her into stealing his mother's wedding ring from his room.

Ignoring his suspicious expression, she patted him on the arm. "Duncan was everyone's friend and so, too, was Rodd. They need to know that you're going to lead them safely through this."

Her words followed him back into the residence tower house and all the way up the stairs.

The storm was already beginning to fade away, leaving behind a courtyard of slush that was impossible to avoid on his way back from the kitchen to the residence tower. He trailed mud inside with him, unable to shake it from his boots.

Perhaps Fenella was right. Duncan's murder must be bringing back memories of his grandfather's era and that was a time nobody wanted to return to.

Well, he thought with new determination, he wasn't going to let Rodd ruin everything his father and he had been working towards for the last fifteen years. He wasn't going to let anyone else die on his watch!

As he neared the third floor, McWilliam heard raised voices. They seemed to be coming from Rosa's room. He ducked inside to see Cameron standing in the threshold and Rosa, with hands on hips, glaring at his uncle from across the room.

"What exactly are you accusing me of?" Rosa demanded, glancing towards McWilliam without taking her attention off Cameron.

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Cameron hissed, oblivious to his nephew's arrival. "I'm stating the facts. Rodd was obviously working with someone. We only found some of the stolen money."

"And you think that someone was me, sir?"

"Why else hand yourself over to that Runner?"

"You've been against me from the moment I arrived," she snapped, not backing down. "You were never going to believe me, no matter what I said."

"You're a sassenach whore, of course I don't believe you."

"Don't call her that ever again," McWilliam growled, stepping around his uncle and into his view.

Cameron jumped. "How long have ye been there?"

"Long enough to know that you've stepped out of line."

"Och nay." He prodded a finger against McWilliam's chest. "You're the crazy one. Your head's been filled with all the wild tales this liar's been spinning. Your father would never have believed—"

"Uncle." McWilliam knocked his hand away from his chest with a light flick of his own wrist. Aye, he respected his uncle and valued his advice, but lately Cameron had been butting in where he wasn't wanted. And right now, McWilliam really didn't want Cameron's sensibilities. "I'm sorry Duncan's dead. I know he was your friend. He was mine too. But this is no way to express your grief. Rosa's innocent. Everyone knows that now."

"Do they?" Cameron glanced between him and Rosa.

"There's no possible way Rosa and Rodd were in league," McWilliam returned. "They'd never even met before yesterday."

"Rodd travelled to London several times to find a buyer for our wool. They could have teamed up then."

He opened his mouth to say that it was Cameron who'd recommended Rodd for the job, but before he could retort Rosa spoke up.

"I've been living in Bradford for the last two years. There's no possible way I could have met Rodd. In case you didn't realize, governesses don't really get out into society very often." She seemed to have calmed down since he'd first arrived and was watching Cameron with concern. "I'm really very sorry Duncan was killed, but I didn't have anything to do with it. I've been framed."

Cameron jumped at that. "By who?" he demanded.

Rosa shrugged.

"We're not sure yet," McWilliam said, "but I intend to find out." And save Amelia. And then make love to Rosa, again and again. And again. God, he was enthralled. The woman was in his blood.

"You're going to regret this." His uncle glanced between them one last time, bristling with anger, then he strode from the room.

"I'm sorry," McWilliam said, moving closer to the delectable, irresistible Miss Rosa. "He was always the cautious one, but his panic seems to have gotten worse these last few years after his wife's death. And this whole business..." He raked a hand through his hair. "It's got everyone on edge."

"Murder does that," she said, shrugging away his apology.

"It's because..." he began, but the words stuck in his throat. He hated talking of his grandfather, especially to Rosa, who knew nothing of his family's ugly past.

"Because?"

"Something similar happened about fifteen years ago. My...someone killed three people. It was devastating, and it's taken everyone a long time to get over."

Her mouth opened to a perfect O, then she snapped it shut.

Unspoken words hung between them. He wanted to tell her, kind of. Not really. Though she did deserve to know. Hell, everyone else did. But his legs had a mind of their own and he found himself backing towards the chamber door.

In the end it was Rosa who broke the silence. “What does ‘sassenach’ mean?”

He struggled to translate it. The word was so very Gaelic. “‘English’ or ‘stranger’.” Nay, that wasn’t quite right. “I guess the closest translation is ‘outlander’.”

“Outlander. Sassenach.” She rolled the word around her mouth, testing it out.

It was an ugly word. It didn’t belong to Rosa. Not anymore.

“I still have to break the news to Rhona,” he said, changing the topic as an idea occurred to him. “Maybe you could come. Rhona can be a little headstrong, and it might help her understand if you could explain how you were framed.” *And*, a little devilish voice at the back of his mind said, *it would be good if the two women could get to know each other better*. If he got his way, Rosa would be staying here for a long time to come.

Rosa followed McWilliam into the corridor. What had happened fifteen years ago that had put such pain into his eyes?

All Rosa’s life she’d read the newspapers and reveled in the excitingly morbidly true crime. The affairs, the fist fights, the assassinations and the murders. But the pain that had momentarily corrupted McWilliams’ beautiful stormy-grey eyes when he told her about Duncan and then about the earlier deaths had been anything but exciting. And she now knew that what Bennie Cook had failed to explain to his readers, between exposing the dark and the deadly, was the pain and sadness and fear felt by those left behind.

She suddenly felt sick with herself. Not once in all those years had she stopped to consider the how the victim must have felt. Or their family and friends and neighbors.

Both McWilliam and Cameron were suffering because of what Rodd

had done to Duncan. And now they had to face Rhona. The girl had buried her father only a few short weeks ago and now she had to bury her family physician. A man who, in all likelihood, Rhona had known her entire life and had trusted with her secrets.

McWilliam's younger sister was laying on her stomach on top of her counterpane, legs in the air. As they entered she stuffed something under her pillow, sitting up to face them.

"What's happening, Andy?" she asked her brother, with a glance towards the window, plainly ignoring Rosa as though she were nothing more than a bad smell. The shutters were open and voices from the courtyard below wafted up, distorted and unintelligible. "What's everyone doing? I can see people walking up and down the fields. They're unsettling the lambs."

"They're searching for Rodd and Amelia," McWilliam said.

"Where's Rodd? Who's Amelia?" Rhona clambered off the bed. Her ankle was still strapped, but it didn't seem to be hurting because she ignored it as she quizzed her brother.

"It's a long story," McWilliam said. "Perhaps you'd better sit down." And he told her all about Rodd, Duncan and the mystery writer of the threatening letter who still, by all accounts, held Amelia hostage.

As he spoke, Rhona's face slowly froze like a statue, her eyes fixated on McWilliam's mouth as though she couldn't believe what he was saying. Rosa kept her distance, not wanting to crowd them.

It was strange to see two siblings so close, especially considering their age difference. McWilliam was probably close to twice Rhona's age. Then again, he was acting more like a father than a brother.

Amelia and Emily had been close, Rosa supposed, but that was despite Amelia's consistent attempts to ignore her younger, less pretty and significantly clumsier sister whenever they had company. If Emily had lived beyond her thirteen years, Rosa guessed the two sisters would have been at each other throats on a daily basis.

And Rosa had no siblings of her own to compare.

When McWilliam finished, Rhona sat still for a long moment. Rosa could practically hear her thoughts ticking over like the hands of a pocket watch.

“Nay,” she said eventually. “That’s not right. I know Rodd. He would never. He’s...he’s...” She pressed her quivering lips together.

“I’m sorry, Rhona.” McWilliam moved towards his sister, but she scrambled to her feet, moving away from him.

“Nay. She did it.” Rhona pointed right at Rosa. Tears dripped down her cheeks, and she brushed them away impatiently. “Everyone knows she’s guilty. You’re guilty. Cameron said so. You said so.” She turned her accusatory glower on McWilliam. And if Rosa had thought he was upset about Duncan’s death, it was nothing in comparison to Rhona’s grief. Her whole body was shaking and there wasn’t a hint of color left in her cheeks.

If Rosa had any smelling salts, she’d be waving them under the girl’s nose right this moment.

“I know I did,” McWilliam said. “But I was wrong.” And he glanced sideways at Rosa, his eyes full of an unspoken apology.

She felt his gaze like a torch on her face—warm and unmistakable. Especially when there was also a new knowing in them, as though when he looked at her he was remembering what had happened between them less than an hour ago. Pressed against the wall, their bodies so close not even a wisp of air could have slipped in between them.

She shuddered, and the memory of his fingers caressing her most secret place brought a flush of color to her own cheeks.

“I was set up, Rhona,” she said, tearing her eyes away from the spectacularly muscular Scotsman with the grating brogue that could melt her insides with a simple word. “Someone framed me.”

“Who?”

Rosa wrinkled her nose. Wasn’t that the question on everyone’s lips?

“Ye’re lying again!” Rhona charged towards Rosa, turning at the last moment to stride back towards the window. Shuddering breaths rocked her whole frame. She doubled over, crying, her despair almost palpable.

McWilliam gathered his younger sister to his chest, murmuring quietly in Gaelic. Rhona struggled against his hold, before eventually giving herself over to the tears.

Rosa averted her gaze, trying to give the siblings a little privacy. Rhona didn’t need a stranger to witness her mourning. A fire burnt low

in the grate, giving off a little heat to supplement the cold wind after the storm. She squinted across the room, but couldn't see any sign of torn paper.

"Did Duncan suffer?" Rhona sniffed, her voice muffled by McWilliam's shirt.

He shook his head. "I don't think so. It was so quick, and I was with him."

"You were?" Rosa blinked in surprise. She'd just assumed the blood had stained his shirt when he'd found the body, not when he'd seen Rodd actually murdering Duncan.

"It was just after my midnight swim. I was coming back through the village and heard Duncan cry out. I tried to stop Rodd escaping, but I couldn't abandon Duncan."

"I still can't believe Rodd did this. Ye must have seen wrong. Rodd probably had come to Duncan's aid too." Rhona moaned, tears still falling freely.

McWilliam shook his head. "He used to do a bit of work around the castle," he said in explanation to Rosa over Rhona's head. "Cameron often paid him to help with odd jobs the staff couldn't handle by themselves. And then, of course, he started helping me with the shipment to London."

"What exactly was his job with the shipment?" Cameron had said something about Rodd traveling to London to find a buyer. That seemed like a lot of trust to place on one person.

"Loading and transporting mainly. He and Murray accompanied the wool on the ship. And then they also reached out to our buyer at the other end."

"So you already had a buyer lined up?" On occasion she'd perused the share market pages of the broadsheets, so she knew a little of how business worked.

Rhona watched her through the circle of her brother's arms. She looked more child than woman, which was understandable considering the shock she'd just suffered. There was a little mud on her hem.

"A friend of my father's in the trade business had agreed to buy from us," McWilliam answered. "Rodd had travelled down to London a few

weeks before to seal the deal, and they met again when the ship docked.

“The trade was made and the buyer left happy. Rodd said it was only when he had the money in hand that he was attacked. Though,” he added ruefully, “we can now assume anything Rodd told me was a lie.”

“Have you heard from the buyer? Did they see anything?” And the question she was almost too afraid to ask: Did he have Amelia?

But McWilliam seemed to know what she was thinking. “I’ve sent someone to London. But he might not even know the theft took place.”

“You don’t think he’s involved?”

“I don’t think so. He’s a man of quite some means, and it simply wouldn’t be worth all the effort.” He sighed. “But, I guess, it’s always a possibility.”

Releasing his sister, he pulled a handkerchief out of Rhona’s bedside table for her. Rhona blew her nose, rubbing her other hand over her stomach. Dark circles clung to her eyes and her cheeks were too hollow to be healthy, as though she’d recently lost weight.

McWilliam hardly looked any better. She doubted he’d got any sleep last night.

Rosa hated to think what all of this was doing to him. Like Rhona, he’d also just buried his father and now his friend had been brutally murdered by another one of his friends.

“I didn’t think that you of all people would have any family friends in England,” she said with a forced smile, trying to lighten the mood.

“Roy’s half Scottish,” McWilliam replied softly, but the corner of his mouth twitched upwards in a non-smile. “You’re all the English I can handle.”

And handle her he did. Rosa’s blush darkened and heat pricked at her cheeks.

Rhona paused in her crying to glare at Rosa. “If you’re so innocent then why are you still here? Shouldn’t you be back in Bradford?” She drawled the last word in an ugly imitation of Rosa’s English ascent.

“Because we need her,” McWilliam said in answer with absolutely no hesitation. “I need her.”

## Chapter Eighteen

“Ye need her?” Rhona repeated, skepticism oozing from her voice like honey from the comb. His sister could be incredibly irritating when she wanted to be, even when her face was red and blotchy from crying.

He clarified: “If we want to work out who Rodd’s accomplice is and where he’s hidden an innocent woman, then aye. We need her.”

Rhona wrenched open her mouth to reply but there was a light tap on the door, and Fenella entered. She took in the scene with a quick glance around the room. As was her way, she missed nothing, but unlike normal, she didn’t comment on Rhona’s wet, angry eyes or Rosa’s flushed face. Apparently Fenella was, albeit temporarily, letting her humility curb her desire for meddling. Thank God.

“Lunch is ready, my laird,” she murmured.

“Thank you. I’ll head right down. Then I’ll join one of the search parties. The more people looking the better.”

“I’m coming,” Rosa returned at once. She gathered up her skirts in a no-nonsense fashion, and he was rewarded with a flash of pale ankle.

“Not today.” McWilliam clenching his fists to stop himself gathering her up into his arms in front of the other two. “It’s not safe for you outside.” Like hell he was letting her out with Rodd still on the loose.

“Rodd doesn’t scare me.”

“That’s beside the point.” He curbed his sudden anger and worry, saying: “You won’t be any help to Amelia dead.”

She looked unconvinced, so he added: “Ye don’t know the terrain. You’ll only slow everyone down.”

“My Lord,” Fenella interrupted. “She cannot return to her room just

yet. I've got a couple of my girls in there changing the bedding and giving it a general clean."

"Then you can stay in here with Rhona," he said, as Fenella saw herself out, promising to return with a lunch tray for the two women.

"I'm fine by myself," Rhona huffed. She clambered back into bed and pulled the blue and white counterpane up to her chin, looking quite as stubborn as on her best day.

"You haven't been very well," he argued, not in the mood to be disregarded. "I'd feel better if there was someone here to keep an eye on you." At least until she calmed down about Duncan and Rodd.

"I'd be happy to stay," Rosa snapped. "Since you're clearly not going to let me outside to help."

He clenched his teeth. If Rosa and Rhona ever decided to gang up on him, McWilliam would be in trouble.

In response, Rhona turned her back on them both and Rosa crossed her arms over her chest.

He was almost grateful to be leaving for a manhunt. He'd rather face a murderer than these two in a bad mood any day.

Rosa glanced down the corridor after the laird. His shoulders were tense, but his arms swung confidently by his sides. He'd had no right to say she'd be more hindrance than help, even if it was true. Just because she'd barely ventured into the Scottish wilderness and knew next to nothing of survival, didn't mean she shouldn't be out there trying to find her cousin. Amelia was her responsibility after all.

Her thoughts drifted back to this morning. What he had done to her had been so undeniably erroneous and yet it had felt so exquisite. She'd never before realized someone could die a little for the longing of a single touch. Not until McWilliam had touched her like that, right there.

She was now certainly a fallen woman. The Wrights would be scandalized if they thought an ex-governess of theirs had participated... had practically begged the Scotsman to touch her so.

Though, truth be told, the idea didn't actually bother her nearly as much as she knew it should. Her reputation had been ruined the moment

she'd handed herself over to Runner Smith. And it hadn't been all that great of a reputation to ruin in the first place, not with a drunk father and a wealthy uncle who shunned her.

Rhona didn't turn around as Rosa stepped back into her room.

The rain had stopped a little while ago, and outside everything was sagging under the weight of the fallen water. Water had also pooled on the floorboards near the window as if Rhona had left the shutters open during the storm.

Rosa sat in the seat beside the window, studying the outline of Rhona under her counterpane. Her eyes were closed, but two years as a governess told Rosa she was only pretending to be asleep to avoid conversation.

Not that Rosa could really blame her. Duncan had just died. Rodd had just become a known murderer, and Rosa, while she'd been declared innocent, her very presence here had to bring back bad memories of Rhona's father's death.

Rosa was happy to let Rhona sulk in peace. She'd already agreed with herself that McWilliam's younger sister probably wasn't working with Amelia's kidnapper because she had nothing to gain from the theft of the money.

Then again, undeniably, Rodd had written to Rhona, and Rhona had torn up the letter. She scrunched up her nose. If Rodd and Rhona had been friends, why couldn't he have written to her about something completely mundane? It probably had nothing to do with Amelia and everything to do with sheep or...a secret love affair.

"What are you doing?" Rhona was watching Rosa through slits in her closed eyes. "Ye look like a gargoyle with your face like that."

"Well, you look funny with your counterpane pulled up to your chin. Like a tiny owl."

Rhona tossed the counterpane away with a huff.

"I was only joking, my lady." Rosa resisted rolling her eyes. "How are you feeling? Did you need me to get you anything?"

"I'm fine," Rhona huffed.

"Well, you don't look fine. You're pale and tired."

"I haven't been sleeping very well, that's all."

“Have you been sick again?”

“Nay.” Rhona shrugged, lying back down.

“Your friend was just killed. Rhona, you don’t have to be fine.”

“I’m fine!”

“Liar.” She dipped a clean handkerchief into the bowl of water by the bed, gently mopping Rhona’s tearstained checks. But Rhona only watched her with suspicion, her lips pressed tightly closed.

Most people who’d been searching within a two-mile radius of the village had congregated back at Gall when they realized McWilliam had brought them lunch from the big house. They’d found no sign of Rodd or anyone else hiding in the fields or the crumbling blackhouses—not that it had ever really been a likely possibility—and he was still waiting to hear back from the men who’d travelled to the outskirts of the estate. They probably wouldn’t return until late evening.

The physician’s body had been moved to the church and a priest had ridden down from McCrae to oversee last rights. Everything had passed very fast, but it wasn’t like McWilliam had stopped to think when he’d found Rodd standing over Duncan. Rodd shouldn’t have too much of a head start, if only they knew in which direction he’d travelled.

Mary surveyed him with questioning eyes, but McWilliam kept his distance. He didn’t want to talk, not even to one of his oldest friends. She would only ask him how he was feeling and he didn’t want to talk about his grief or anger, and he certainly didn’t want to speak about his complicated relationship with Rosa.

Relationship. God damn it. He desired her. Aye. He desired her like he’d never desired another woman in his whole life. And he cared for her. He really did. Because no matter how much she tried, Rosa was unable to be anyone other than herself.

She was Rosa Blair, the woman who made his heart race every time he caught sight of her.

His body stirred with the memory of Rosa writhing beneath his administrations, but a twinge of guilt also mingled at the back of his mind. Sure, she hadn’t complained. Hell, she’d encouraged him and he

saw her own desire shining from her eyes whenever she looked at him, but they weren't living a fairytale. Rosa was English; he was Scottish. Rosa was a governess; he was a laird. Rosa was sweet and caring and as feisty as a vixen; whereas he was tainted by his grandfather's crimes.

When this was all over, when her cousin had been found, Rosa was likely to return to London or Bradford without looking back.

And if he couldn't find Amelia...

Everything inside him screamed when he thought of Rosa going to prison for a crime she hadn't committed. Nay, he wouldn't let that happen. He'd protect her until the very end. Of that, he was positive.

About an hour later, Rhona finally deigned to open her eyes properly. Staring expectantly at Rosa she declared, "I'm hungry."

"Fenella promised us lunch, my lady. I'm sure she'll bring it in at any moment."

Rhona struggled into a seated position. "But I'm hungry now."

Rosa matched her glare. "Your temper won't work on me. I've had enough practice ignoring angry demands when I was working as a governess. And there were three young boys under my care, not one young woman."

Though, truth be told, Rhona could have given all three of them a run for their money, but Rosa wasn't going to tell her that.

Rhona clamped her mouth shut again, and the room feel silent. If there'd been a clock, the ticking of its hands probably would have bounced off the tension, Rosa thought with a grim smile.

Eventually, Rhona dropped her hands onto the counterpane with another huff and glared towards Rosa. But at that moment, Fenella bustled into the room, carrying a large lunch tray. She rested it on the bed between Rosa and Rhona.

"Sorry it's late, miss," she said to Rhona. "I've been ever so busy. Himself asked me to organize Duncan's funeral, and I had to take the visiting priest up to the church."

"Have they found Rodd yet?" Rhona asked, straightening up so quickly the tray almost slipped from the bed.

Rosa caught it.

“Not yet, but it’s only a matter of time.” Her gaze honed in on Rhona’s pale face. “Maybe I should send for another physician. You’re not looking at all well.”

“It’s fine.” Rhona said, but when Fenella didn’t look convinced, she added: “Rosa’s looking after me.”

Rosa startled, but Mrs Fenella eventually nodded her approval and left the room.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Rhona flashed. “I only said that to please Fenella.”

“I know.” Rosa arranged her hands neatly in the folds of the gown. “You’re quite old enough to look after yourself. I’m just here because I’ve been stuck in that bedchamber for the last nine days with no company.”

Rhona’s glower subsided a fraction. “I never liked that room much either,” she conceded grudgingly.

“I thought you said it was your mother’s old room.”

She shrugged. “Mathair wasn’t like Athair or Andy. She was always very proper. Everything had to be done a certain way or we’d get into trouble.”

“I can understand that. The Wrights—my old employers—were always trying to be proper. They never let me into any of the front rooms and I wasn’t allowed to talk with any of the adults unless they talked to me first.”

“I never had a governess. Mathair tried to find me one but people aren’t all that keen to move from Edinburgh to the middle of nowhere.”

“You were lucky. Governesses are dreadfully boring creatures.” She winked, and a reluctant smile touched Rhona’s mouth.

Someone in the courtyard below shouted, and Rhona’s attention snapped to the window. “What do you think will happen to Rodd when they find him?”

“I’m not sure.” Rosa knew next to nothing about Scottish law. “Judging by how angry your brother was when he thought I was thief, I can’t imagine he’ll go lightly on Rodd for double murder.”

Rhona paled, if possible, even further. “I can’t believe he killed

Duncan.”

“Maybe he panicked.” Rosa had only met the Scot once, but he seemed like the type of person to act first and think later. “Maybe Duncan knew something or had found out something about Rodd that linked him to the theft?”

“Maybe,” But she didn’t sound very convinced. “Or maybe someone put him up to it. Maybe he couldn’t refuse.”

“You mean the person with the rest of the money? Do you have any idea who that might be?”

Rhona tugged at the counterpane. “If I knew,” she snapped, “I’d have told Andy.”

That was probably true. “All right. Why don’t we talk about something else?”

“Like what?” Rhona demanded.

“Um...I could read to you. What about one of the broadsheets from upstairs?”

She frowned, obviously torn between refusing Rosa for the sake of it and genuine interest. “My athair used to read to me sometimes.”

“What types of things do you like? Current affairs, racing results, trade figures, farming news—”

“Farming. I like sheep.”

“All right.” She moved to the door. “I’ll just run upstairs and grab a paper. It might be a little out of date, but that shouldn’t really matter.”

“A Scottish paper,” Rhona called after her. “Not one of your boring English ones.”

Rosa retrieved the broadsheet from beside her bed to take back upstairs, glaring at the article Bennie Cooke had written about her involvement in Rodd’s theft as she entered the library.

It didn’t take her long to find a relatively current Scottish paper for Rhona. The pile of unsorted papers on the table in the middle of the library had grown since she’d last been up there, as though someone had dumped them on the table without knowing where else to put them.

Obviously, without McWilliam’s father, there was nobody to keep the library up to date, and it was clear McWilliam hadn’t canceled any of his father’s subscriptions. Maybe he hadn’t had time or the heart.

The most recent Scottish paper—*Edinburgh Evening Courant*—was dated just two days ago, but there was also a *Public Ledger* of the same date there too. Rosa frowned. The *Public Ledger* was an English broadsheet. So too was the one she'd just carried back up from her room. But that could only mean one thing—someone was crossing the border from England into Scotland every few days to deliver papers to the Uilleim Estate.

Her heart thumped against her chest. Maybe she didn't need to steal a horse after all. Maybe, if worst came to worst and McWilliam didn't find Amelia in time, she could escape with the mail coach.

She gave her head a mental shake. She had no reason to think McWilliam would keep her prisoner here if she really wanted to leave. He'd understand that she had to save her cousin, even if that meant going to prison. She'd give him two more days to continue his search for Amelia, then she'd leave.

Rosa hurried back to Rhona's room. "I've found a broadsheet—"

Cameron stood by Rhona's bed, his expression hard and unwelcoming. "Do ye mind?" he flared at Rosa's intrusion.

Rhona didn't look much happier; she kept looking from Rosa back to her uncle.

"Are you all right, my lady?" Rosa asked Rhona, ignoring Cameron's hostility.

Rhona didn't answer, just glanced back up at Cameron, her mouth pressed closed, as if afraid to speak before him.

"She's perfectly fine," Cameron snapped instead. "Her ankle is finally beginning to heal."

Rosa opened her mouth to say that Rhona's ankle didn't seem to be troubling her anymore, then closed it again when Rhona gave a slight shake of her head. Cameron didn't see the movement as he was fixated on Rosa.

"That's good news," she returned. "I was just about to read to Rhona."

"From that, Sassenach?" Cameron raised an eyebrow. "It's hardly

suitable for a young lady to read the popular press.”

“Sir, Rhona expressed an interest in her brother’s work, so we thought to read from the farming section. Perhaps we can learn something of sheep and wool,” Rosa said, resorting to her best governess voice.

“Please, Uncle.” Rhona murmured, softer than Rosa had ever heard her talk before. “Andy told Rosa she must read to me. You cannot send her away.”

Not understanding what was happening between uncle and niece, Rosa took her seat by the window, crossing her ankles as if to say that she wasn’t going to budge. Rhona clearly didn’t want to be left alone with Cameron and Rosa wasn’t going to abandon the young woman to a man of such a disagreeable nature.

With a grunt, Cameron pressed a wet kiss to Rhona’s forehead and left, throwing one last glare over his shoulder at Rosa.

Rosa shook open the paper, asking as casually as she could manage, “Are you afraid of him?”

Rhona gave a shaky laugh. “Nay, of course not.”

“Then what was all that about?”

“Nothing”

“But I saw you,” Rosa pushed. “You didn’t want your uncle to stay.”

“It was nothing!” Rhona glanced around the room as though looking for something to help her explain away her behavior.

“Miss Rhona—”

“I didn’t want him here because it’s that time of the month,” she snapped.

“Oh.” Rosa glanced down at the paper. Growing up without a mother and then becoming the governess for three unruly boys meant ‘that time of the month’ wasn’t a subject she was used to talking about. And it wasn’t like anyone wrote articles about it in *The Public Ledger*.

She could see the headline now: *Famous Italian writer Giuseppa Barbapiccola today confessed that her translation of the Principles of Philosophy was delayed because it was ‘that time of the month.*

“I don’t want you to read to me anymore.” Rhona lay down and pulled the blankets up to her chin again. “I’m going to sleep.”

CHARLOTTE ANNE

“But you haven’t eaten any lunch.”

McWilliam’s sister didn’t answer as she closed her eyes and turned her back on Rosa. The lunch tray tumbled off the bed with a crash.

## Chapter Nineteen

Hell's bells he was exhausted. After lunch, McWilliam had joined one of the search parties and they'd headed into the mountains that surrounded three sides of the village. It had been unlikely that Rodd had hidden among the treacherous cliffs and rocky peaks, but there were a few hiding places and his party had checked them all.

Back at Gall, there was also no sign of the two parties McWilliam had sent to the far edges of his estate or the messenger to Grant Kyles of McCrae Estate to the north.

It was well past midnight now and even though he wanted to keep looking, his eyes were drooping closed. He hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours.

After sending the others all to their beds, McWilliam began the trek home.

Thoughts of London kept disturbing his sleepy mind. The city was many days' hard ride from here and his men would probably be met with hostility rather than help from their English neighbors. Even if they managed to reach London and locate Amelia before the trial at Leeds, it would take them even more days to get a message of their success from the city back to the Uilleim Estate. By then it might be too late. Rosa was extraordinarily determined to hand herself in to the authorities for her cousin's safe return. If she didn't have exacting proof that Amelia was saved, he'd no doubt she'd do anything in her power to reach Leeds.

He gritted his teeth as a wave of extreme possessives cascaded over him. McWilliam wasn't going to let anything happen to Rosa. She was his. No English Runner or Scottish murder was ever going to come near

her!

His feet dragged as he crossed the drawbridge and ducked under the half-closed portcullis. The guard opened his mouth as if to ask how everything had gone, but McWilliam raised a dismissive hand, in no mood to talk.

It seemed to take longer than usual to climb the stairs, and he pushed open Rosa's bedchamber door without a second thought. She mumbled sleepily as she struggled to rise from her bed, but he'd kicked off his shoes and was lying next to her in a matter of seconds.

"McWilliam?"

Without bothering to get under the blanket, he wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her back firmly against his chest. Then he closed his eyes and was instantly asleep.

"My Lord Laird?"

McWilliam could feel Rosa's eyes on him even without opening his own. He still had one arm draped over her waist, face to face.

By the soft flicker of light over his eyelids, he knew it still had to be early. The sun had barely risen, but his soldier was erect and ready for action.

He feigned sleep, keeping a firm hold of her.

"McWilliam!" She spoke louder this time, pulling at his fingers in an attempt to dislodge them from her waist, but he wasn't to be budged.

"You shouldn't be here." A plea touched her words, but it was the most pathetic plea he'd ever heard.

With a grunt, he flipped her over and closed the gap between them, pressing his chest to her back, exactly where it belonged. Their bodies fitted together perfectly; he could easily tuck her head under his chin.

She let out a little huff of air as though she was suddenly having difficulty breathing. His own breath caught in his throat as his arousal prodded into her back, giving him an inkling of the friction McWilliam so desired. She wriggled against him, still trying to free herself, and he couldn't help but moan.

Rosa froze. "You're awake!" He could practically hear her glaring.

“And if ye keeping moving like that, you’re going to be sorry.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Rosa huffed, using the voice he knew to be her governess tone but it caught a little as her breath hitched.

“Say that again, like ye mean it.” He nipped at her throat, covering his teeth with his lips to temper the bite.

She gasped, a shudder running down her spine. He could feel it running down his own body as an echo might vibrate around a room.

“That’s it. I warned ye.” And with a single tug he had Rosa on her back, his body covering over hers.

“I—” She blinked up at him, her tongue wetting her lips.

He caught her bottom lip between his teeth, sucking. Her hands jumped to his head, her fingers tangling in his hair and she tried to press herself closer.

A laugh rumbled in his chest and he felt her shudder once more. “Like that, do ye.” He nipped at her mouth again, following it with a lick of his tongue. Tasting her.

Obediently, her mouth opened to his touch and he waste no time. Their tongues mingled as he ran a hand down her waist, seizing a handful of her nightdress.

Heat, like the flames of a fire, rushed through him. He deepened the kiss as an instant explosion of hunger made his cock tighten, if possible, even more. Never had he desired a woman more than Rosa. It was painfully, almost unbearably so.

“We shouldn’t—” she began, her argument marred by the fact that she’d angled her head to the side, giving him better access to her mouth. He tugged up her nightdress, running her fingers over her hot center. Instinctively, she ground against him, flexing her hips, and he slid one finger inside.

She was glorious wet and ready. Her folds tightening around his finger as she tried to pull pleasure from his hand.

He inserted another, pressing a trail of kissing down her chin to the elegant curve of her neck.

“Now,” she pleaded and this time she sounded desperate. “Please, my lord.”

“Nay,” he said with another growling laugh and withdrew his fingers. “Not yet. Not like that.”

Rosa tugged at his hair, trying to bring his lips back to hers but he didn’t follow her instructions. Her very presence had tormented him for weeks. It was time she endured some torment of her own.

Tugging at her nightdress, McWilliam pulled the fabric off one shoulder. Rosa tilted her head to the side, giving him full access. She craved his touch like nothing before. His heat, his fire, was burning her up and she was writhing under his administrations.

This was wrong! She shouldn’t be doing this.

“Please,” she begged again, and he complied long enough to nip at her collarbone. Not hard enough to leave a mark but just enough to send a wave a pleasure down her spine. Her toes curled.

With a tear, her nightdress split in two, leaving her naked to his eye.

Rosa’s first instinct was to cover herself but the look in McWilliam’s eyes froze her in place. He was watching her as a dying man would watch a plate of food—like he could gobble her up in an instant.

His head bowed, and he pulled one nipple into his mouth.

She arched her back, pressing herself deeper to his mouth as his hand found her other breast. He kneaded as expertly as a baker kneaded bread and she crashed as wave after wave of release. She rode the pleasure, falling back onto the bed with a satisfied sigh.

“Miss Rosa Blair,” McWilliam smirked. “Who knew ye could make such a sound.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” she said, her words blurry, vaguely aware that she should be ashamed of the noise she’d made but quite unable to bring herself to do so. Her body felt as if it had melted against the bed. “You made me make that noise,” she said instead.

“And I’ll do it again.” He pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it to the ground.

She woke back up in an instant. His was gloriously muscular. She couldn’t help herself but to run her hands up his chest, brushing her fingers through the light scattering of hair and catching his nipples with

her nails.

“Dammit!” he swore under his breath.

A smile tugged at her lips, unable to quite comprehend the possibility that she could make him feel this way. It was a heady sense of power that made her want to explore his entire body. Dropping her hands lower, she rubbed a finger along the band of his kilt.

Her fingers fumbled on the belt buckle. With a grunt, he sat back on his heels, practically ripping the belt off and wresting free of his plaid.

If she'd thought his chest glorious, it was nothing in comparison to what his kilt had been hiding. His erection stood proud and he gripped it with one hand, rubbing his fist up and down in slow strokes.

Her eyes widened and heat flood her checks. His confidence was breathtaking. Spectacular. Predatory. And she was his prey. She didn't think she'd ever wanted someone so much as she wanted Laird Anndrais McWilliam.

No governess should feel like this.

“That's right, lass,” he murmured, “Ye do this to me.”

She bit her lip as a fresh wave of need rolled over her, more powerful than any she'd felt so far.

Hell, she'd never been a particularly good governess anyway, and Rosa grabbed his shoulders, her nails biting into his flesh as she tried to pull him back down.

This time he complied, pulling her bruised lips into another kiss as he nudged at her legs. Without thinking, she opened up for him, letting him settle between her legs, his erection nestled at her core.

“McWilliam—” she moaned. “I need you.”

“I know, love.” And aching slowly he sunk into her.

The pleasure was exquisitely painful. He was inside her. And it was foreign and spectacular. She gasped and he froze.

“Lass?” Concern for her filled his eyes.

Unable to form words, she wriggled against him.

“Don't,” he panted. “Not if ye don't...truly mean it. I can't...hold back.”

And she didn't want him to hold back. Lifting her head up a fraction, she sucked his nipple, pulling at the hard bud with her teeth. She'd

never felt so alive, so loved.

He let out a triumphant cry and plunged deeper. She was so full, McWilliam stretched her to the very limit of possibility. So hard yet so silken, he glided in and out smoothly, sinking incredibly further with each thrust. She climaxed almost immediately, her body rocking as McWilliam continued to grind into her. Colors flashed before her eyes and she gripped his shoulders with all her might as her heels dung into the bed.

“Thistle...I...can’t...” He drilled harder and faster, his face twisted. He grunted, he swore and with one last barrage of thrusts he followed her into bliss.

Then his body dropped heavily onto hers and his head came to rest on her breast. Panting, sweaty and, gloriously, still joined.

Rosa welcomed his weight, it was a like barrier, blocking out the rest of the world. With him, in this moment, nothing else mattered. She wrapped an arm about his waist and, eventually, he twisted to the side, bringing her along with him so that Rosa lay beside him, her legs tangled amongst his.

“Wee love,” he breathed against her ear. “Did I...did I hurt ye?”

She let out a deep breath, sinking deeper into his embrace. “Absolutely not.”

As her eyes flickered open sometime later, Rosa became instantly aware of the very large, very eager Scotsman lying behind her with his face pressed into the tangle of her hair. She rolled onto her back and saw his eyes snap shut.

“I saw that,” she said. “You cannot fool me twice.”

His lips curved, and he released her waist to stretch his arms above his head. His body moved as elegantly, and smugly, as a cat, his muscles rippling. With a melodramatic wince, he pressed a hand to his shoulder where her nails had marked his skin.

“Claiming me for your own?” he asked, his voice dripping with smugness.

Shame twisted in her stomach, and she moistened her lips with her

tongue.

“Don’t do that, lass. Unless ye want a repetition of earlier this morning.” He raised up on one elbow to run his lips tauntingly lightly over her own.

She wriggled as memories turned her legs to jelly and heat burnt a trail from her breasts to her heat. “Anndrais,” she groaned, in the world’s most feeble attempt at a complaint.

As he pulled back she saw the smallest flicker of pain flash across his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He kissed her temple, then her cheek, chin, neck... collarbone.

She didn’t believe him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked again.

He didn’t answer, his mouth traveling lower.

Rosa pushed against his chest, pushing him away. With a sigh he looked back up at her.

“What’s wrong?”

“I asked ye not to call me that.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was that important to you.”

He remained silent for so long Rosa thought he must have fallen asleep, but then he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “It was also my grandfather’s name.”

She pulled back an inch so she could see his face properly. “So? Lots of people are named after their grandparents.”

“My grandfather...Anndrais Edwin McWilliam fifth Laird of the Uilleim Estate wasn’t a very honorable man. He did some things that really hurt a lot of people.”

Another flash of pain flicked across his face, but then he smiled at her and it was gone so fast she could have imagined it.

“What type of things?”

“It’s nothing. You wouldn’t be interested.” He leant towards her again, clearly intent on pressing kisses to her breasts.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Hold up.” Yes, she wanted to know.

He dropped heavily back onto the bed, draping an arm over his face so his eyes were covered by the crook of his elbow. Rosa rolled onto her side so she could see his face, tugging the brocade counterpane over her bare chest to create a barrier between.

He tangled his other hand into her hair, nudging closer to her, completely disregarding the blanket.

“My grandfather...” McWilliam let out a huff of air as though releasing his last ounce of resistance. “He killed three people. Murdered them,” he said, his voice suddenly bland.

“Oh, McWilliam—” she pursed her lips. “I’m sorry.”

“He was a cantankerous man who always believed that because he was laird he could do whatever he wanted. He squandered the family money and payed no attention to the wool market—this place almost went broke under his administrations. And then...three people when missing. All within a week of each other. It took us a long time to work out what had happened.” He dropped the arm over his face back to the bed, and watched her with expressionless eyes.

Under his cool exterior, Rosa knew he was hurting. She found herself snuggling closer, pressing herself as close to him as humanly possible. His arms around her tightened and he draped a leg over both of hers, trapping her against him. A contented murmur escaped her lips.

“Why did he kill all those people?”

McWilliam shrugged, his shoulders gently bumping her. “He got a village girl pregnant. And when the girl’s father and brother confronted him, he killed them. All four of them.” His voice tripped on the last word. “I was five when it happened but it took another ten years before anyone worked out what had really happened.”

“Then what?”

“The bugger died of old age, and then my father became laird. It took the two of us many years to restore our tenants’ trust in the McWilliam family.”

“And that’s why you were so angry when your shipment was stolen. 3,000 pounds is a lot of money.”

“3,000 pounds is an awful lot of money for an estate that has been scraping by for the last few decades.” He let out a deep breath, and the

air tickled her forehead.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she whispered. “Rodd stole that money. And Rodd killed Duncan. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Nay, maybe not. But I should have worked it out earlier. If only I’d realized Rodd was lying—”

“Stay away from the ‘if only’s,” she said, nudging him with her elbow. “It’s impossible to change the past. What you’re doing now is what really matters, and everyone can see that you’re doing everything possible to stop Rodd. Nobody can possibly blame you for what has happened.”

With lightning speed, he flipped Rosa onto her back and was leaning over her, their legs still tangled together. He caught her hands in his, holding them above her head and entwined their fingers. She shook her head as new heat flooded her body.

“What would I ever do without you?”

“If I’m not allowed to call you McWilliam,” she teased, lightening the mood, “what should I call you?”

His smile returned, though tempered with sadness. “Master of Your Pleasure. King of Your Desire. Supreme Ruler of Your Fantasies.”

“Not Andrew?” she asked, referring to the English translation of his Christian name as she struggled to keep a straight face.

He growled in warning, and a giggle escaped her mouth.

“That’s it!” And he bowed down for another kiss.

## Chapter Twenty

Pulling himself from the warm bed and Rosa's embrace was the hardest thing McWilliam ever had to do. Cocooned in her room like this it was almost possible to forget the world outside existed. It was like they had created a place of their own, where nothing and nobody could get to them.

But it wasn't real. And there were things he still needed to do.

Murmuring half-words in her sleep, Rosa reached towards him as he pulled on his shoes. When she wasn't trying so desperately to avoid his touch, she was endearingly clingy. Like the first night they'd ever slept side by side in that English inn when Rosa had kept sliding onto his half of the bed.

He wanted nothing more than to climb back under the counterpane with her.

Forcing his legs into action, he hurried from the room without a backwards glance.

Every inch of his body remembered the feel of her against him. It was like her essence was now rooted so deep beneath his skin that he couldn't shake the feel of her even as he crossed the courtyard and started around the castle towards the village.

It was yet early—the sun still hung low in the sky—but ahead he could already see people gathering outside their houses, the men strapping on their shoes and tightening their belts ready for another long day searching. Looking for Rodd among the foothills was the last thing he wanted to be doing—he was beginning to give up hope that they'd find him hiding so close to home, but what else could he do while he waited for a message from London or Manchester or Laird Kyles?

Besides, he'd made a promise to Rosa that he'd find her cousin, and he was making one to himself right now—he would do anything to keep her safe and in his arms. He sped up.

Rosa woke slowly. She was deliciously warm under the blankets and sunlight streamed in through the open shutters tickling her skin. It was the first truly sunny day she'd seen since arriving in Scotland.

Anndrais McWilliam wasn't in bed, though there was a slight hollow on his side as though he'd only just vacated. And there was a note waiting for her on his empty pillow.

*Joined the search. Will return at nightfall.*

Guilt washed over her. How dare she sleep in when Amelia was still in danger? Rosa should be out there searching for her like everyone else.

She shoved the counterpane aside, scrambling out of bed. Quickly washing, she pulled on yesterday's clothes, pinning her hair out of her face. She was a little sore, but it only served as a reminder of what had happened earlier this morning. That she'd let happen.

She didn't care anymore that she was a fallen woman. It didn't matter. What she did care about was that she'd let her time with McWilliam push all thoughts of Amelia temporarily from her mind. Her cousin had to be Rosa's first and only priority. She owed Amelia and Uncle Oliver that much, and she owed Emily more than she could ever repay.

The bedchamber door was locked but her laird had left the key on the bedside table where she could easily find it, and Rosa rushed out into the corridor. Then she paused—she didn't have a plan. It wasn't like she could run outside and start searching the fields and mountains for Amelia. The search parties were probably long gone, and she had no idea in which direction.

No, Rosa needed to focus on uncovering the identity of Rodd's coconspirator. If she could work out who'd helped capture Amelia, then she might be able to work out where Amelia was being held.

She ducked back into her room and collected the scrap of paper

she'd found in Rhona's fireplace. Step 1: work out if this really was Rodd's handwriting. And if it was then... Step 2: work out if Rhona knew who'd written the note. Where had she snuck off to two days ago when she slipped out of her room? And why was she pretending her ankle was still sore when it had obviously healed days ago? If it had ever been injured in the first place. And why was she afraid of Cameron?

And if all of that came to naught... Step 3: work out when the mail coach back to London would be past again and make sure she was on it.

"McWilliam." Cameron clapped him on the back as he reached Gall. More people than at lunch yesterday had gathered in small clusters around the stone cottages, and he realized the two far-reaching search parties he'd sent out must have returned. They looked serious but still in pretty good spirits, which was more than he could have asked for. Several men were sharpening weapons, while others were heading towards a temporary communal breakfast table set up outside Mary's house. McWilliam felt a swell of pride. They all might just be shepherds and shearers, but his people were warriors too and knew how to pull their weight. It was that sense of community that kept them going, even after everything that had happened with his grandfather.

"Any news?" He started towards them, but Cameron rested a hand on his shoulder, stopping him just out of ear shot.

"Ye look exhausted," his uncle said. "Why don't you go back—"

"Everyone's tired." He pulled away from Cameron's outstretched arm, surveying the older man. There were dark shadows under his eyes and his lips were drawn tight. "Including you. How much sleep did you get last night?"

Cameron shrugged. "Enough."

"Right." McWilliam didn't believe him. "Maybe you should be the one to go back. We can handle the rest of the searching without you." And he stepped around his uncle, towards the group of men gathered outside Mary's house.

"Och nay." Cameron tried to grab his arm, but McWilliam shook him off.

“McWilliam.” Mary smiled as he approached. She held a jug and was pouring beer into an array of mixed-matched cups while Fenella organized a couple of girls who were laying out the bowls of hot oatmeal porridge, warm bannocks and boiled eggs she’d brought down from the castle’s kitchen.

“Did you hear the news? Glenn thinks he saw Rodd out by the old cairns.”

“When?”

“Last night, when they were heading back. They can’t be completely sure it was him because it was dark, and when they went to investigate, he’d disappeared.”

McWilliam touched her shoulder in thanks. “Glenn,” he called to a boy of only fifteen winters but who already had a beard that could intimidate any man twice his age. “As soon as you’ve finished eating, I want you to show me exactly where you think you saw Rodd.”

If the murderer was out there, he wasn’t going to leave any rock unturned.

“A-hunting we go,” Glenn yelled, banging his cup against his fist so beer splashed into the air.

“Aye,” McWilliam agreed darkly. “Hunting we go.”

“What do you mean ‘I’m not allowed out?’” Rosa asked the guard at the portcullis in her most governess-like tone. If she couldn’t even get out of Fortress Doom then how was she ever going to make it to Rodd’s house to search for a sample of his handwriting?

He glanced down at his shoes but didn’t step out of her way. “I’ve got me orders. Ye are not allowed to leave.”

“Whose orders?” Although she already knew the answer. McWilliam.

Memories of their time shared together threatened to surface, but she pushed them back. She didn’t have time to focus on an overprotective Scotsman. She needed to find her cousin.

He opened his mouth to answer, but she held up a hand to stop him. “Did you know Rodd?”

“Aye. Everyone knows everyone.”

Right. “Did he ever send you a letter?”

He shook his head with a bemused expression. “Why would he need to send me a letter? His cottage is right next to mine. Besides,” he added. “Rodd couldn’t write.”

“He couldn’t?” Her heart hammered against her chest. But that meant—

“Rodd wasn’t really one for book learning.”

“No.” She backed up, not really paying any attention to where she was going. Whoever had written to Rosa threatening Amelia—the same person who’d written to Rhona—wasn’t Rodd. Which meant that in her hand she held the handwriting of his co-conspirator. The man who had Amelia. Whoever that was.

New step 1: discover whose writing this really was and stop thinking about a certain too-sexy-for-his-own-good laird.

“He was right there,” Glenn said, nodding towards a spot about three feet from where he stood. “At least, I think it was him. It was dark.”

“I know.” McWilliam ran a hand through his hair. The cairns were only about a half day’s ride from the Uilleim Castle and they sat at the base of the last mountain for many miles. Nobody was sure who’d made them; there’d been there for longer than any of the backhouses scattered through his fields.

Of course, there were rumors the cairns were haunted. Over-cautious Cameron never ventured that far just in case there were ghosts and Fenella would swear to anyone who cared to listen that she’d once seen the light of a wisp bobbing between the mounds. McWilliam wasn’t sure about that—his housekeeper had a tendency to over-exaggerate.

But he did know that there weren’t many hiding places among the ancient dead, and, if Rodd was here, they’d find him.

“Spread out,” he ordered Glenn and the three other men who’d accompanied them. “I want every inch of this place checked.”

There was no possible way Rosa could work out whose handwriting this was without comparing it to the handwriting of very person on this estate. And that was only if Amelia's kidnapper was on this estate. If they were in London or Edinburgh or even Manchester it would be an impossible task.

Which meant there was only one thing left for her to do, the one thing she'd been putting off for days: confront Miss Rhona McWilliam.

As though her feet had known the answer before Rosa did, she found herself standing before Rhona's bedchamber without memory of taking the stairs.

She knocked, then let herself in.

Rhona was at the open window but glanced around when Rosa stepped inside "They're still looking for him," she said in lieu of a greeting. "Where do you think he is?"

Rosa shrugged, coming to stand beside Rhona so she could see out too. A couple of people were still systematically walking the sheep studded fields but otherwise everything looked quiet and still.

"Perhaps he went to Edinburgh," Rhona said, in answer to her own question. "I think he has some family that lives there. Or maybe they're all dead." She frowned, pressing a hand to her stomach.

"You feeling any better, my lady?"

"I just wish everything would return to normal. I wish none of this had ever happened."

"I wish I knew where Amelia was." It was at least twelve days since she'd been taken. Twelve days for which she'd probably been locked away in someone's musky cellar. She'd read an article about a woman who'd been abducted by her insane grandmother and locked in a barouche for three weeks before... She quickly purged the thought from her mind. All those newspapers had given her an overactive imagination.

Rhona moved back to the bed, not bothering to limp though she still wore a bandage on her ankle. Sitting on the edge, she put her pillow on her lap, clutching it to her stomach.

"Maybe you could read to me," she suggested. "Anything is better than silence."

“I actually wanted to talk with you.” It was now or never.

Rhona stared down at her lap, nodding absentmindedly.

“About the scrap of paper I found in your fireplace the other day.”

Rhona’s attention snapped to Rosa’s face. “What paper?” she asked suspiciously.

“This one.” Rosa opened her fist to show Rhona the corner piece with the curly handwriting. “Who sent this to you, and why did you tear it up into the fire?”

“I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

“Miss Rhona, I know this letter is from the same person who’s working with Rodd. And I know you sneaked out the other night, probably to meet up with them. And I also know that your ankle was never sprained because you didn’t jump off the roof like you profess.” She took a leap with the last deduction and was rewarded with a flush.

Recovering a little of her composure with lightning speed, Rhona stood up and raised both hands before her chest as though to create a barrier between Rosa and herself. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I think you should leave.”

“Miss Rhona, please.” Rosa stepped towards her. “This is my cousin’s life we’re talking about. If you know anything, you must tell me.”

Rhona shook her head, glancing towards the door. “I don’t know anything. I don’t know where your cousin is.”

“Who wrote this letter?” She held up the torn corner.

“Please...” Rhona ducked around the bed, backing up.

“I know something is going on. I know you’re somehow involved.”

“Did you tell my brother? Did you show him the page?”

“No. I didn’t think he would believe me.”

“And you’re right,” Cameron said, snatching the paper from between her fingers. “He would never believe ye over his own flesh and blood.”

Rhona stepped behind her uncle.

Rosa crossed her arms. “Rhona and I were just talking—”

“I heard ye,” Cameron interrupted. “I know exactly what ye were doing, Sassenach.”

“I just asked—”

“Ye just wanted to frame my poor niece for the theft ye committed.”

“No!” Rosa shook her head.

Cameron glowered at her. “You’re a liar and a cheat and a harlequin. I know you’re trying to seduce my nephew. That’s the only reason he thinks you’re innocent. It isn’t his brain that doing the thinking, it’s his cock!”

Rhona gasped. Her hands jumping to her mouth.

“Did ye know they’re sleeping together?” he denounced to Rhona over his shoulder.

“We’re...” She couldn’t deny it. “Miss Rhona, I’m not trying to frame you,” she said instead. “I just want to know if you can help me find Amelia.”

“Ye probably don’t even have a cousin,” Cameron snapped. “Ye and Rodd were in on this together the whole time.”

“Rodd didn’t—” Rhona began, but she snapped her mouth shut with a murderous look from Cameron.

“Rodd didn’t what?” Rosa demanded, ignoring Cameron. She wasn’t going to let anyone’s uncle get in her way.

“Nothing.” Rhona vigorously shook her head.

“Rodd didn’t what?” Rosa demanded in her governess tone. “Tell me, Miss Rhona.”

“Rodd didn’t kill Duncan. He couldn’t have. He wasn’t like that. He was nice and kind and—”

Rosa’s mouth dropped open as realization hit. “You’re not—”

“Out!” Cameron yelled, shoving Rosa toward the door. “I don’t want you near my niece ever again.”

Rosa had no option but to obey. He slammed the door in her face, and she let out a shaky breath.

Oh, sweet, glorious heaven. How was she supposed to tell McWilliam that his very much beloved and cherished younger sister was with child? And that the father was Rodd?

She paced the corridor, tapping her forehead. This could not be happening. Rhona wasn’t married. She was young and innocent and, without a doubt, expecting.

Morning sickness certainly explained all the times Rhona had been

ill. And two nights ago when she'd snuck out of the tower house she'd probably been looking for Rodd. That was before anyone knew he'd stolen the money and before he'd killed Duncan.

Duncan! That was probably why Rodd had killed the physician. Duncan was supposed to come to the castle to check Rhona over. He would instantly have recognized all the signs of pregnancy. Rodd had panicked and killed him to stop anyone finding out.

Rosa had to tell McWilliam. But she couldn't. Rhona was his sister and this mess wasn't any of her business.

Cameron should tell him. Or Rhona.

Not Rosa.

But he deserved to know. He loved Rhona, and Rosa knew he'd never hurt his sister, no matter what she'd got herself into.

Oh heaven. She'd read about multiple cases of women been dragged before the magistrate by the parish overseers and forced on oath to name the father. It was humiliating, and no woman's reputation could survive such a display.

Then again, she thought, desperate for a kinder solution, even though Scotland was under English control, it still retained most of its own laws. Perhaps there wasn't a Bastardy Act in this country. She certainly prayed so. She couldn't see McWilliam letting Rhona be pulled before the magistrate, and then he too would be breaking the law.

"Rosa!" McWilliam bounded up the last few steps. He was so very pale. "I thought...but you're safe." He pulled her into a tight embrace.

"He didn't hurt me, just yelled a bit," she said, struggling to free herself. But he would have none of it and kept a firm hold around her waist, his face buried in her hair. "Have you found anything? It's not nightfall yet."

"Wait. Who yelled?"

She frowned. "Your uncle. What are you doing back?"

"Nay," he shook his head, loosening his grip just a fraction so he could see her face. "I'm talking about Rodd?"

"What about Rodd? Did you find him?"

"Aye, wee lass, we found him. He's dead."

"But..." her mouth fell open, all other thoughts extinguished.

“He was murdered.”

“By who?”

“I don’t know.” Worry darkened his voice.

“What?” she asked, dread filling her insides. She gripped his shirt in her fists. “What else did you find?”

He grimaced. “This.” And with his free hand he pulled out of a sheet from a fold in his kilt. “It was pinned to what was left of his shirt.”

The page was stained with blood, but the words were still clearly legible in that same cursive hand that Rosa had come to dread.

*Go to Leeds before I kill you and your cousin.*

## Chapter Twenty-one

She gave her head a little shake as though unable to believe her eyes.

“I promise I won’t let anything happen to ye, lass,” McWilliam said. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, needing to be as close to her as possible. When he’d found Rodd’s body with the note pinned to his front, he’d been unable to think of anything but Rosa. He’d rushed back here as fast as possible, leaving his search party miles behind. Thank God nothing had happened to her while he’d been away. He’d never have forgiven himself.

He’d never have recovered. She was his everything.

He tried to pull her closer but she frowned, her eyes still locked on the note.

“What about Amelia?” she asked. “You can’t promise nothing will happen to her.”

To hell with her cousin. He only cared about keeping Rosa safe.

“We’ll find her,” he said instead. “I have men in London and Manchester. She can’t have disappeared completely.”

“We don’t have time,” she moaned. “There’s only four days left until the trial. I can’t leave it to chance.”

“Nay.” He shook his head. He knew what she was about to say and there was no way he was letting her leave.

“I have to go.”

“Nay.” This time she let him pull her closer. He wrapped both arms around her shoulders, hunching over to bury his face in the hollow where shoulder met throat, breathing in her scent. He’d never have guessed any woman could make him feel like this. And an English

women to boot.

“Never,” he reaffirmed.

“I can’t let you to stop me,” she said, her words muffled by his shirt. “I can’t let you distract me from Amelia.”

“Aye, Love, you can.”

He straightened long enough to tilt her head up towards his, capturing her lips with his own. The taste of her was intoxicating. He wanted to bathe in it until her taste and her smell was infused into his very essence. And when anyone looked at him he wanted them to see her mark upon his skin.

“McWilliam,” someone snapped.

Rosa jumped, trying unsuccessfully to scuttle back, but McWilliam kept a firm hold of her as he looked over her head towards this uncle.

“Cameron.” He released, too late, he’d practically growled in warning at the older man.

“What’s going on here?” His uncle didn’t back up. In fact, McWilliam could almost feel displeasure radiating from him as heat radiated from the sun.

McWilliam cocked an eyebrow. “Can’t you guess? Did you need me to reenact the scene for you?”

He felt Rosa shake her head and glanced down at her. She was glaring daggers at Cameron, her eyes narrowed in defiance. She was a game wee thing. And for some reason she’d taken a real dislike to his uncle.

“Can I have a word?” Cameron asked, completely ignoring Rosa.

“I don’t—” he began, fully intending to tell his uncle no, but Rosa interrupted.

“You two talk. I’ll sit in with Miss Rhona.”

“Nay.” Cameron stepped in front of his niece’s bedchamber door, his walking stick between them like a blockade. “She’s sleeping.”

“No, she isn’t,” Rosa said tightly. “I heard you talking with her just a moment ago.”

It was Cameron’s turn to glower at Rosa, but she paid him no heed, ducking into Rhona’s room before McWilliam could ask what was going on.

“What are ye doing?” Cameron was asking before Rosa had even closed the door behind her. “She’s...” He struggled to find a word to describe Rosa, and McWilliam didn’t want to hear it.

“We found Rodd,” he interrupted. “He’s dead and this was pinned to his shirt.” He held up the note.

His uncle swore. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m not letting Rosa go to prison.”

“But she can’t stay here. She isn’t safe. Obviously.” He gestured to the note.

“Nay.” McWilliam let out a deep breath. “That is why I want you to take her to McCrae.”

Cameron opened and closed this mouth, looking slightly calmer.

“She’ll be safe in McCrae. Grant will take her in. I’ve already organized everything.”

“You have?” Now he looked downright gleeful.

“It was always the backup plan. I just prayed it would never come to this.” He’d sent a message to the McCrae Estate asking Grant if he would take in Rosa when he’d sent a couple of men there a few days ago looking for Rodd and Amelia. “You and Rosa will leave this afternoon. I’ll tell everyone you’re taking her to Leeds. It will just be me, you, Rosa and Grant who’ll know the truth.” The less people he trusted with this information, the safer Rosa would be.

“It’s a good plan. Ye could have told me sooner, but it’s a good plan.” Cameron clapped him on the back, looking calmer than he’d been for a while.

“Good. Though I thought you’d need more convincing.”

Cameron shrugged. “I won’t lie, I don’t trust her, so anything that takes her away from us, even for a short time, is a good idea in my opinion.”

“Regardless of your personal feelings, I’m trusting you to do right by her.” As much as McWilliam wanted to accompany Rosa, he couldn’t go. He was needed here; the search for Amelia was still underway and now he had another killer to worry about—whoever that was.

“Grant said he’d gladly welcome Rhona as well,” he continued. “The two ladies can keep each other company until all this messy business

has been sorted out.”

Cameron shook his head. “That’s isn’t a good idea. Rhona’s ankle hasn’t healed. She cannot travel on horseback and we don’t have time to take the chaise. I don’t even know if it’s still in working order.”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t want to put Rhona in harm’s way just because of a sprained ankle. Then again, nobody had used the chaise for many years and it wasn’t like they had the money to keep it well maintained.

“You can confine Rhona to her chamber,” Cameron insisted, “and Fenella can keep an eye on her. You can even lock her in if you really feel the need.”

“Fine.” It wasn’t like his sister was the murderer’s next target. Whereas Rosa certainly was.

“Did ye tell him?” Rhona asked the moment Rosa closed the door behind her.

She hesitated for a fraction of a second, then shook her head. “It isn’t my place to tell.”

Rhona visibly relaxed. Leaning against the headboard, she let go of her counterpane. It pooled at her waist. She wasn’t showing yet. But she probably would be soon and then it wouldn’t take McWilliam long to work it out.

Rosa guessed the only reason he hadn’t realized yet was because he’d been too busy chasing her and then Rodd.

*Rodd’s dead*, she should say. Instead, she asked? “How far along are you?”

“About three months.” Rhona sniffed. “I didn’t mean to. It just happened. We only...it only happened once.”

She sounded just like the young girl she was, and Rosa’s heart melted. She sat on the bed patting Rhona’s leg through the counterpane. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

But that was a lie, and Rhona’s eyes narrowed.

Rosa signed. “I’m sorry. You should tell him.”

She shook her head.

“Miss Rhona, he’s going to find out eventually. Don’t you think it will be better coming from you?”

*Rodd’s dead, and Amelia’s life was forfeit.*

“He doesn’t ever have to know,” Rhona whispered. “Cameron has sorted everything.”

“What do you mean, Cameron? What has he sorted?”

“Nothing.” Rhona brushed Rosa’s hand away.

“Cameron hasn’t hurt you, has he?”

“Cameron?” she frowned as though that thought was the most ludicrous thing she’d ever heard. “Of course not.”

“Then how has he got everything sorted?” She didn’t understand.

“I don’t know. He just has.” Rhona’s voice rose.

“All right,” Rosa conceded. She could hear McWilliam’s murmur in the corridor though she couldn’t work out what he was saying. Either way, she might only have seconds left with Rhona before one of the men interrupted. And she didn’t trust Cameron as far as she could throw him.

*Rodd’s dead, and Amelia’s life was forfeit. I have to get to Leeds!*

Out loud she said: “You need to tell him. McWilliam deserves to know.

Rhona pursed her lips defiantly. Stubborn girl!

Rosa grabbed her shoulders, her fingers biting into the girl’s flesh. Rhona let out a startled yelp, but Rosa didn’t let go. “You have to tell him. This is important, Rhona. He’s your brother. He loves you. He’ll look after you.”

“Cameron says—”

“I don’t care what Cameron has said to you. McWilliam is the laird and your brother. He’s stronger and smarter than Cameron. And he loves you. More than you can ever imagine.” She’d seen the way McWilliam looked at his sister. She knew what it was like to love someone like that. It was the same love she’d felt for Amelia and Emily. But when push came to shove, she’d failed to protect her youngest cousin.

McWilliam wouldn’t made the same mistake. He’d take care of Rhona no matter what trouble she’d gotten herself into.

“Andy,” Rhona bottom lip wobbled.

*Amelia's life: forfeit.* But she knew McWilliam won't let her go. His loyalty and determination forbade him from admitting defeat regardless of its inevitability. That left only one option.

Rosa pulled her into a quick hug. This might be the very last time she saw Rhona before she escaped to Leeds. If only she'd had such a chance to say goodbye to Emily.

“You're an amazing young woman,” Rosa said, pulling back to look into Rhona's face. “You're going to be a wonderful mother.”

As if on cue, the door banged opened. Cameron didn't hesitate to shoulder his way between Rosa and Rhona. McWilliam followed more slowly, stopping by Rosa's side and keeping a barely respectable hand-width between himself and her.

Rosa forced a smile. She was going to miss Rhona. They'd formed an unlikely friendship. The Scottish girl was loud, over-emotional and always seemed to act before thinking, but she was McWilliam's sister.

McWilliam. How was she ever going to say goodbye to him?

He swept a hand through his hair, brushing ruffled strands away from his forehead. Even now, he still managed to retain an air of assured command; it filled the entire room. In comparison, Cameron seemed to be getting smaller by the second, as though McWilliam's sheer size was overpowering him.

She owed him so much. He'd started off as her kidnapper, but now he was her protector and the man responsible for the massive search effort that was going to find Amelia.

She locked her hands behind her back to stop them shaking.

McWilliam nodded at his sister, his eyes jumping instantaneously towards Rosa. Her knees weakened. Somehow, the silver specks in his pupils were brighter than ever before. They flashed like lightning in a stormy sky.

She couldn't say goodbye. He'd know what she was planning to do in an instant.

“What's going on?” Rhona asked. She reached towards her brother, but it was Cameron who answered.

“Why don't you lie back down?”

“What’s happening?”

Rosa didn’t envy anyone the job of telling Rhona that the father of her baby was dead. Murdered. She caught Cameron’s eye and, for a spilt second, saw a hint of pain in his face. He knew exactly what this was going to do to her.

“Rosa.” McWilliam rested a gentle hand on her upper arm, leading her out of Rhona’s room and into his own.

It was the first time she’d been in McWilliam’s room with him. It felt strangely intimate, like he was inviting her into his private space. Which, she thought ruefully, was exactly what he was doing.

She became suddenly very conscious of the bed in the middle of the room. It was large, much larger than the one in her bedchamber, with four intricately carved panels at each corner supporting a red velvet canopy. The curtains had been tied back at the head of the bed but, with a simple tug of the golden tassels, would fall to enclose the entire bed in swathes of rich, erotic fabric.

It was outdated—not something that would be seen in the houses of Mayfair or Piccadilly—and, like everything in Fortress Doom, rather rundown, but it suited McWilliam. It was so very imposing, and it did wonderful things to her imagination.

As soon as the door clicked closed behind them, he pulled her to him, urgently seeking her lips. She gave over to him, giving him exactly what he sought. He wasn’t gentle. He claimed her mouth. His tongue exploring deeper with each pass. His hand dropped to her bottom and he squeezed, pulling her into his strength and heat.

She loved the urgency of his kisses, how much he seemed to want her. Need her, even.

Tiny shivers of anticipation raced up and down her spine.

Eventually, he pulled away. “Ye can’t stay here.”

Her thoughts were focused on his delicious mouth and it took a moment for the words to sink in. “What?” She blinked.

“It’s not safe for you here anymore.”

“You mean the note.” She wasn’t worried about herself. It was Amelia who was in true danger. “You won’t let anyone hurt me.”

“And that’s exactly why I have to send you away.”

Her mouth opened but no words came out. He was sending her away. And after all the trouble he'd gone through to get her here in the first place.

Where was he sending her? London? Leeds! Her heart jumped into her throat. Prison.

As though he could read her thoughts, he shook his head. "You're going to McCrae Castle. Grant Kyles has agreed to take you in, just until all this mess has been sorted."

"This has nothing to do with him."

"He's a good friend. And has been very welcoming to my men when they made inquiries about whether Amelia or Rodd had been seen in that area recently."

"That doesn't mean you should send me there." From what she could guess, the McCrae Estate was McWilliam's closest neighbor and was in the complete opposite direction to the English-Scottish border. Rosa couldn't let McWilliam take her that far north. It was highly unlikely the English mail coach travelled that far. It was a miracle it crossed the border into the Uilleim Estate at all.

"Cameron is going to accompany you," McWilliam continued. "He's already agreed it's a good idea."

She had nothing to say to that. Crotchety Cameron had clearly only agreed because he wanted her away from his family. And maybe he was right. She was a danger to them and to Amelia. All of this trouble would go away if only she could reach Leeds.

Wait. Maybe that could work to her advantage. Cameron didn't owe her any loyalty and didn't bother concealing his dislike of her, so perhaps she could persuade him to let her go. He could look the other way for a few minutes and she'd be out of his hair forever.

And in the meantime, his presence away from the castle might give Rhona the chance she needed to talk with her brother.

"You have to talk with Rhona. Do you understand? Talk to Rhona." She pressed a hand to his chest. Her touch was supposed to install further urgency, but it only acted as a reminder of the muscle beneath his shirt and how gentle he could be when he pressed his body against hers.

He frowned, covering her hand with his larger one. “I know. I just haven’t had much free time.”

“I know. You’ve been busy looking for Amelia—for which I am eternally grateful—but Rhona might need someone to talk to, with Cameron accompanying me.”

His frown deepened. “You’re taking this very well. I didn’t think you’d agree to leave.” Then he added, “Unless it was to Leeds.”

“I know you well enough by now that nothing I say will change your mind.”

She just needed something to pay for her passage back to London... She’d need to buy food, water and passage on the main coach—assuming she could find the mail coach in the first place. Maybe Cameron could point her in the right direction.

“I don’t want anything to get in the way of helping Amelia,” she said, trying to sound calmer than she felt. “If you think me going to Mr Kyles will help, then I’ll do it and I’ll do it happily.”

He didn’t look completely convinced so, daringly, she wrapped a hand around the back of his neck, pulling his head down for another thought-melting kiss.

It took Fenella less than an hour to prepare everything for Rosa’s departure. McWilliam made sure to tell the housekeeper that Rosa was returning to England. If he knew anything it was that Fenella would have spread the news to the entire castle by midnight.

McWilliam lifted Rosa onto her horse himself, a hand lingering at her waist. It was only for a few days, he kept telling himself, a few weeks at the most. But for some reason it felt as though they were saying goodbye forever.

Unshed tears glistened in her eyes.

“Everything will be well, wee lass.” He dropped his hand onto her knee, not caring that Fenella and half the castle staff were probably watching, not to mention Cameron.

She bent over to press her forehead to his. “Thank you.”

“Thistle—” he began, but Cameron started his steed towards the gate

and Rosa's horse obediently followed.

She twisted in the saddle to watch him as she crossed over the drawbridge and his insides began to ache with the loss of her. She was ingrained into his very soul was Rosa Blair.

He would find Amelia, and when everything was right again he would never let Rosa go ever again.

God dammit, he was going to marry that woman.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Rosa gripped the saddle's pommel with both hands, keeping her gaze fixed on Cameron's back as they rode out of the courtyard and away from McWilliam. It didn't take long before Fortress Doom was lost from sight, disappearing beyond the horizon of foothills and sheep-studded fields.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, not knowing how to broach the subject. *Crotchety Cameron, just disobey a direct order and turn a blind eye while I disappear off into the sunset. Oh, and while you're at it, could you point me in the direction of the English border? And a town where I can buy some food.*

Cameron kept a steady pace, neither acknowledging her or any of their surroundings.

Rosa tried to nudge her mare faster, but she just flicked her ears, content to remain behind Cameron's steed. What was it with Scottish horses? They were as stubborn as the people themselves.

She took a deep breath. Knowing Cameron, as soon as she asked, he'd probably insist she go to McCrae just to spite her.

The drovers' road forked, but Cameron continued forward.

She frowned. "Isn't that north?" She pointed to the road not taken. "Isn't that the way to McCrae?"

Silence.

"Because I won't mind if you didn't take me to Laird Klyes. We could go to Leeds instead."

More silence.

"Sir, you cannot ignore me forever. Whether you like it or not we're

traveling together, and I'm under your protection." Though hopefully not for too much longer. She pulled at the reins, and eventually her horse halted.

He twisted around to look at her, without halting his own beast. "We aren't going to McCrae," he heaved. "I won't let your presence at Uilleim endanger my family any more. I'm taking you to South Druiminn, and from there you should be able to make your own way across the border."

"Oh." Her mouth opened. "Thank you."

Traveling with Cameron was nothing like traveling had been with McWilliam. It could not begin to compare. When McWilliam had kidnapped her she'd spent every moment in suspense, half afraid of what would happen and half hoping something would. With Crotchety Cameron she was left to worry about returning to England and a possible prison sentence.

By the time they had reached the small Scottish town, true darkness had fallen and it was hard to see more than a few feet in front. Clouds hung low, completely curtaining any moonlight, and there were certainly no street-lamps as there were in London or Bradford.

In fact, small didn't quite do the town justice. As far as Rosa could make out it was certainly larger than the village on Uilleim Estate, but that was hardly difficult. One minute they'd been traveling along a deserted road in the middle of nowhere and the next they were standing in the middle of main street, a couple of shadowy buildings surrounding them on either side.

"This is where I leave you." Cameron took hold of her reins not bothering to dismount and leaving Rosa to scrambled down herself.

"Is there a hackney or a main coach I can hire? Who's going to take me across the border?" She wasn't even sure where the border was from here. She glanced around as if expecting to see a signpost. *England 8 miles. Enemy territory; beware of red coats.* Nothing.

He shrugged. "That is not my concern."

"Sir?" Rosa reached for his horse, but he kicked the steed into a trot,

evading her grasping hands.

Fury washed over her and she shouted after him as he disappeared back into the darkness, “Don’t you dare lay a finger on Rhona!”

She kicked at the ground, scrubbing the already scuffed toe of her hand-me-down half-boots. McWilliam would never have left her in the middle of a strange village in the middle of the night. But Crotchety Cameron wasn’t McWilliam. She’d already established that. Time and time again.

Well, she was a Londoner born and bred, and she wasn’t going to let a little darkness or a minuscule Scottish town get in her way. Amelia had been waiting long enough.

Not once in his thirty-one years had McWilliam ever been this irate. Rage rolled over him in waves; his stomach clenched, and he balled his hands into fists. What the hell had she been thinking, dammit?

Hell, what had Cameron been thinking?

He pushed open the door, and it banged against the far wall. The room fell silent, the meagre gathering of early morning patrons turning in their chairs to stare at him.

The buffer of the coaching inn ducked out from behind the bar, hurrying forward.

“She’s still in her room,” he said, leading McWilliam upstairs. “I was afraid she’d leave before you got here.”

“What time did she arrive last night?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“After midnight. I was just about to close up when she came in.”

They reached the first floor landing, and the buffer turned to the right, heading down a narrow corridor.

“I wasn’t sure who she was, but...” he held up a small object between thumb and forefinger, “I recognized this at once.”

“Ye did well.” He passed the man a coin. “I appreciate the message.” In the early hours of this morning, before the sun had even thought of rising, a messenger had arrived at the gate of Uilleim Castle with the news that a young woman, matching the description of Rosa Blair, had taken a room at the Red Deer Inn.

Of course, he known she'd been thinking of leaving for some time, he just never realized she was senseless enough to go through with it. Prison was no place for Rosa. They'd save her cousin some other way.

He took the token from the buffer, as he stopped outside the last door at the end of the corridor.

McWilliam grabbed the handle, but it was locked.

"Here." The buffer withdrew a key from his pocket. "I locked her in, just in case you weren't here in time." He opened the door, and McWilliam didn't hesitate to stride inside.

Rosa spun on her heel to face him, her mouth dropping open. She looked like a rabbit caught in lantern light.

"No." She shook her head, dashing towards the open window.

McWilliam caught her around the middle with one hand, clipping the shutter closed with the other.

She struggled against his hold, digging her elbows into his stomach.

He growled a warning, turning her to face him.

"No, no, no!" She tugged at his hand about her waist, trying to break free. "You cannot be here. You weren't supposed to follow me."

"Lass. Ye can't do this. It's ridiculous. Ye'd never survive prison."

"Oh," she snapped, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "You think I'm weak. Well, I'll have you know I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself. I've been looking after myself for the last two years." She threw her hands into the air, as if applauding the heavens. "I looked after my father for many years. My drunk, useless father. I was quite capable—"

He captured her lips within his own. It was the only way he could thinking of getting her to shut the hell up.

She resisted his seduction, pressing her hands against his chest, as if to push him away.

"I wouldn't survive if ye went to prison," he amended.

The anger and panic fled her face. "Don't," she whispered. "Don't make this any harder than it already is."

"I can't let ye leave. Not after everything that has happened. Not after last night."

She shook her head, nibbling at her bottom lip. "It was wonderful, and I will cherish the memory for the rest of my life. But I can't let

anything, not even you, change my mind. Amelia needs me. I owe her.”

“You owe me.” He tightened his hold. He was never letting her go. “Marry me.”

“I can’t.” She pushed against his chest. “You’re only saying that because of what happened last night. You don’t want an English bride. You’d be so much happier with—”

“With who?” he barked, his anger returning. How could she truly think he’d want anyone else?

“Just...” She struggled for words. “Mary. I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“Mary isn’t possibly carrying my child,” he dismissed.

She blanched. “I’m not...I can’t be...”

“Wee lass.” He pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose, her cheeks, her temples, her throat. “You’re infuriating. You’re stubborn and headstrong, and I love every inch of ye. No matter what happens, I’m not letting the love of my life and potential mother of my heir go to prison for a few measly pounds. Marry me.” He knew exactly what he wanted, and he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. She was his. She had been his since the moment he’d set eyes on her. And he’d been hers the instant she’d tried to steal his horse from under him.

She had stolen his heart and become his purpose in life.

He held up a small, golden band.

She gasped. “But...That’s...”

The same ring he’d put on her finger all those days ago when they’d pretended to be married, the same ring Fenella had tried to tempt Rosa to steal. And it same ring Rosa had taken from his bedchamber less than five hours ago and used to pay the buffer for this room and a coach back across the border.

“I didn’t want to steal it,” she said, her voice muffled by the hand she’d pressed to her mouth. “I didn’t know how else to pay my way.”

“It doesn’t matter. I want you to have it.” He slipped it onto her finger—it fit perfectly—then pressed feather-light kisses to her collarbone, his lips skimming over her angel-soft skin.

He felt her knees wobble as though she was beginning to melt against him.

“Marry me.”

She froze. “I won’t abandon Amelia.” She tried to pulled back. “Anndrais McWilliam, let me go.”

He had no option but to do as she ordered. Letting go, he unpinned the clasp at his shoulder and tugged at his shirt buttons.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her eyes widening.

The bedchamber door had long since been closed, the buffer of the coaching inn making himself scarce.

McWilliam locked his eyes on her face as he pulled off his shirt, letting it fall to the floor.

Her own gaze dropped to his bare chest then up to the ceiling. “It won’t work,” she said, licking her lips.

“Thistle,” he said, lowering his voice to a purr and smiled wickedly when she swallowed, her eyes darting back to his bare chest.

He ran a hand through his hair, then unbuckled his belt. His plaid slipped from his hips, the fabric pooling at his feet, so that he stood before her in nothing but his boots.

“McWilliam—” The words stuck in her throat. “What are you doing to me?” she said, repeating his own words back to him.

“Me?” He pressed a hand to his chest. “It is you who has captured my heart. My soul.” He dropped his hand to his straining erection. “My body. It’s all yours, wee lass. Just say the word.”

“I can’t,” she moaned.

He ran his hand up his burning cock, his eyes never leaving her face. “Touch me like this.”

“I...” She gripped the windowsill to keep upright. “Don’t—”

“Love.” He lifted his other hand, beckoning her to him, and she finally stumbled into his embrace.

Oh God. She was in love with a Scotsman. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her nails digging into his shoulder blades. A giant, obtuse, frustratingly stubborn Scotsman. And she couldn’t resist him any longer.

He pulled her to him, his hands capturing her face as he kissed

her like there was no tomorrow. She could feel his naked body, even through the many layers of her gown, pressed against every inch of her, his erection hard against her stomach.

Her mouth felt bruised but she welcomed the nips of pain, it made everything feel so much more real.

His hands dropped to her gown and he pulled at the lacing, all pretence of gentleness gone. A moment later, her gown and stays were in a pile on the ground, so she stood before him in nothing more than her shift, cotton stockings and white lace garters.

His gaze raked her body for a fleeting second, a triumphant look crossing his face, and then he lifted her onto the bed. Tearing her shift in two and tossing it aside, he plunged into her, claiming her.

“Ye’re mine,” he grunted. “Mine, Miss Rosa Blair, forever and forever. Do ye understand?”

She nodded, running a hand down his glorious chest.

“Do ye understand?” he nipped at her bottom lip.

“Yes,” she cried.

He withdraw, then thrust deeper.

“And I’m yours. Say it.”

“You are mine. Forever.”

He thrust again, sheathed deeper within her, deeper than he’d ever gone before. The ecstasy began inside building up inside Rosa, her muscles drawn so tight around him.

His thrusts intensely possessive. One hand kept most of his weight off her, while his other plucked at her breast, teasing the nipple into a point. “How dare you leave me? How dare you put yourself in danger?” He lowered his head, sucking at the nipple his fingers had tortured. “You’re never allowed to put yourself in danger again. I won’t let ye go to prison. I won’t let ye leave me.”

He sped up, barraging her with thrusts. She arched her back, pressing her breast towards his chest, seeking his mouth once again.

He ran his tongue over her lips, nipping at her chin. “You’re too important,” he growled. “Too beautiful, and I love ye too much.”

“I love you too.” She said it without thinking, without even realizing the words had slipped free.

*The Highlander's Thief*

His face contorted for a moment, as though he couldn't take it, when he thrust into her one final time, sending them both over the edge into oblivion.

## Chapter Twenty-three

“Ye love me.” McWilliam rolled onto his side, pulling Rosa with him. She smelt of warm linen and, he realized with a surge of satisfaction, him.

“I...” She nibbled her bottom lip as he had noticed she often did when conflicted.

“Ye can’t take it back,” he warned, and his voice rumbled in his throat as deep as a lion’s growl.

“I don’t want to take it back. But it doesn’t change the fact that I have to go to Leeds.”

He caught her hand, pressing it to his lips. “It changes everything. How can I possibly let you go now I know you love me?”

“Because you know me well enough to know that if something were to happen to Amelia, I’d never forgive myself.”

“We’ll find her before anything happens.”

“Liar.” The ghost of a smile.

He kissed the back of her hand again and then each of her fingertips in turn.

“Emily already haunts my dreams. Amelia would be very much louder.” She tapped her temple with her free hand. “She always was a cantankerous girl.”

Deep down—very deep down, so deep down it could have been the center of the earth—he knew she was right. He’d seen Rosa many times in the grip of her nightmares. She wouldn’t be able to survive the death of another cousin, even though it wasn’t her fault. Amelia’s death would be Rosa’s downfall too.

With a sharp tug, her pulled her on top of him. Face to face like this, her toes tickled his calves and her breasts pressed against his chest. She was so light, and yet he could feel every inch of her, skin to skin, forehead to forehead as he struggled to vanquish the space between them. He could even feel the beat of her heart as it thumped in her chest, almost as painfully hard as his own.

And then he told her what she wanted to hear, although it near enough killed him, "We still have three days. If we haven't found her by then... I will let ye go, wee lass."

Rosa pressed her eyes closed. *I will let ye go, wee lass*. She never thought to hear Anndrais McWilliam sound so...crushed. He was the most self-assured person she'd ever met, but he lay beneath her with eyes filled with worry and panic.

It was her turn to press kisses to his eyelids, as she tried to banish his fears. Prison would not destroy her. She was stronger than that. But leaving McWilliam, it would most certainly break her heart.

"It will take me at least three days to reach Leeds," she whispered, saying what had to be said. "I have to leave now if I'm going to get there on time."

"I'll send my lawyer in your stead. He will represent you in court on Whitsunday. And if it's still a jail sentence, then I'll deliver you to the prison myself."

"But you can't afford a lawyer."

"Nay, but there's one who owes my family a favor. And he's a good lawyer. He'll make sure your side of the story is heard."

Just when she didn't think it was possible to love anyone this much, he'd surprised her again and Rosa's heart had swollen with the joy of it.

"I really, completely, absolutely love you, Anndrais McWilliam."

He slipped a hand between their bodies, the calluses on the palm catching and tickling her stomach. And then his fingers were slipped between her folds, touching her there. She was sore, but his fingers moved so slowly, circling her nub, teasing her until she could no long press kisses to his face because she felt as if she was melting against

him. She wiggled, her breast stroking his chest as she sought more friction. And she felt his whole body rumble with a very male laugh. His low voice did strange things to her. He had her mind and body spinning out of control. She balled her hands into fists, grabbing at the sheet, digging her toes into his thighs.

“Come on, *mo cridhe*,” he purred in Gaelic, nipping at her chin.

“As you order, my lord,” she just managed, before pleasure exploded, her muscles convulsing around his fingers.

She fell against him, as the last waves ebbed away. She could barely move. Her limbs so heavy, her eyelids sinking closed.

“That’s my lass,” he whispered, running a hand over her forehead and shoulder, brushing away strands of stray hair. His other hand he lay over her back, keeping her from slipping off him.

She was vaguely aware of his erection once against prodding against her stomach, and his breath ragged with the rise and fall of his chest. She’d thought to ease away his pain, but it was McWilliam who had seen to her pain. He was forever looking after her. Heedless of himself.

“If I was Bennie Cooke I would’ve been documenting this whole process.”

“What process?” He cocked an eyebrow.

She wiggled, trying to push her own hand between their bodies. The only problem was her arms didn’t seem to remember how to work.

He chuckled. “I think I get the idea.”

“Bennie Cooke—”

“I don’t care who Bennie Cooke is and I’m very glad you are not him.” He tucked a finger under her chin to stroke the base of her neck and pressed a kiss to her kiss-swollen lips.

“Bennie Cooke is a reporter.” She feigned shock. “The best writer in the whole of London. The whole of England. Bennie can sniff out a murderer or a liar or a thief in a matter of moments.”

“Maybe I should have kidnapped him instead.”

Rosa rolled to the side, falling off him. McWilliam immediately tucked her under his arm, and she rested her head in the crook of his

elbow. "I'm being serious. Bennie would have solved all of this by now. He would have linked all the clues together and..." She shrugged. There was no other way to say it than 'solved it'.

"Linked what clues?"

"The handwriting fragments, Rhona and Rodd, Cameron's bad moods, my blackmail and Amelia." She waved a hand in the air in exasperation. "I mean, where does Amelia come into all of this? She's barely nineteen. She's not married, she's not wealthy. Well, she has a dowry, but it's only—"

"What did you mean about Rhona and Rodd?" He sat up, the blanket slipping away from his chest. He smelt of whiskey and wildness and the musk of his own skin. She could see the corded muscles of his neck tensing.

"You..." Sweet heaven. "You didn't happen to talk with your sister before you came here?" She asked, choosing her words with care.

"Did I speak to my sister after you ran away and I was on my horse, riding here at breakneck speed?"

"Right." When he said it like that... "Rhona and Rodd were... friends."

"I know." A shadow fell over his face. He looked almost as menacing as he had the first time they'd met.

She hated breaking Rhona's confidence. She shouldn't be the one telling McWilliam. But he was giving her *that* look. The look that said if she tried to back down now, she'd live to regret it for the rest of her life. The look that was filled with anger and danger and a warning to obey his every command. The 'I'm not taking 'no' for an answer' look.

"Well, as it turns out they were more than just friends..."

He growled. "Just say it."

"She's expecting. Rodd's the father."

All expression fell from his face. His shoulders stiffened, and he sat before her like a Grecian statue, still and cold as marble. She sat up too, pressing the blanket to her chest with one hand and rested her other hand on his stomach, her fingers stretched open to form the shape of a star. He still radiated heat, but she had to feel it to believe it.

"Ye mean..." He took a shuddering breath. "Rhona and Rodd..."

She nodded.

“That’s why...” He pursed his lips, and she could practically hear the cogs falling into place as he thought back to every conversation he’d had with Rhona over the last few days.

“Morning sickness,” Rosa agreed.

“Cameron...”

“Knows. I think she must have told him when she first found out. He’s been so protective of her. It would actually be kind of endearing if he wasn’t rude.”

“Duncan was killed the same day he was supposed to come up to the house and examine Rhona,” he said, his eyes unfocused.

“Probably the reason Rodd killed Duncan,” she agreed.

“I don’t know.” He tugged a handful of his hair, setting it up on end. “How could he have known Duncan was planning to come to the castle? Nobody but you, me, Cameron and Rhona knew. I don’t think I told anyone else.”

“Maybe Rhona told him? Or Duncan might have.” It only took a passing comment within the hearing of another person for news to spread.

“It couldn’t have been Rhona. She hasn’t left her room for weeks.”

“Actually...”

His gaze swept back to her face. “Actually, what?” Eyes narrowed, voice deadly.

“Actually, I saw her sneaking out right before Duncan was killed. She could have been meeting Rodd. She also recently received a letter from the same person who kidnapped Amelia.” She spoke quickly, determined to get the worst of it out as fast as possible.

“Thistle.” A warning.

“I found a scrap of paper in her fire grate and recognized the handwriting immediately.”

“And do you still have the scrap of paper or did you burn that too?”

“Of course I have it,” she snapped. Reaching over the edge of the bed, she fished around in her discarded gown until she found the torn edge. Passing it to him, she said, “It’s the same handwriting as the letter I received threatening Amelia.”

“It’s the same handwriting as the note we found pinned to Rodd’s chest.”

She nodded. “I noticed that.”

“It looks familiar... And it means,” he said, straightening, “that whoever took Amelia is close. Might even be on the estate.”

“But you’ve already searched everywhere and didn’t find anyone.”

“We didn’t find Amelia or Rodd, but we weren’t looking for her other kidnapper.” Jumping up, he grabbed his kilt, barely bothering to form the pleats before belting it around his waist. “We have to get back. I need to send out more search parties.”

Ignoring her destroyed shift, she began lacing her stays. “I don’t think we should rush into anything. Bennie Cooke—“

“Bennie damn Cooke!”

“Bennie Cooke would stop to think before rushing off into anything.”

“We have three days left. And I am not letting anyone lock you away, not when there’s still a chance the murderer is hiding on this estate.”

His fingers fumbled with his shirt buttons, which he abandoned half undone for his boots. Then he tapped his foot on the floorboards, impatiently waiting for her to pull her gown on over her stockings and garters. The instant she was dressed, he threw open the door and strode down the corridor, his footsteps echoing along the corridor like rolls of thunder.

It took them most of the morning to return to Uilleim Castle. Rosa rode before McWilliam, Mist as indifferent to her presence now as she had been the first time. Her burley Scotsman barely spoke, though his arm around her waist was firm and reassuring despite the silence. She was a little afraid he’d blame her for not telling him about Rhona’s indiscretion sooner, but his thoughts seemed to be focused on Duncan and Rodd’s murderer. Every so often he’d curse aloud, his voice rumbling up his chest and reverberating through her body. Or else he’d mutter the name of some place or other as though he was writing a checklist in his mind of all the places he wanted to search.

Cameron met them at the portcullis, his eyes shooting daggers at

Rosa. McWilliam strode past him as though his uncle didn't exist.

"McWilliam!" Cameron jogged along behind his nephew, the clip of his walking stick on the muddy cobblestones echoing around the courtyard. "I only did what I thought was best."

"Best for who?" McWilliam spat.

"For you. For the estate. For Rhona."

"Don't talk to me about Rhona." He sounded wild, bear-like in his anger.

Cameron paled. Rosa sped up to walk beside McWilliam, putting as much distance between herself and Cameron as possible.

McWilliam grabbed a passing guard. "Gather every man you can find. I want everyone waiting at Gall for me within half an hour."

The guard saluted, then dashed away.

"I have everything sorted," Cameron huffed, grabbing at McWilliam's arm.

McWilliam pulled out of his grasp. "Sorted how? She's fifteen and unmarried."

"I have a plan. I'm going to fix this."

But McWilliam ignored him, striding up the stairs of the family's residence.

Rosa followed. "Rhona made a mistake. It's happens."

But he didn't slow her for. Shouldering his way into his sister's room he pulled her into a bear-like hug.

Rhona squealed, trying to push him away. "What are you doing?" Then she caught Rosa's eye over McWilliam's shoulder and something about Rosa's face must have told her what she'd been dreading.

"Ye know," she said, her voice flat.

"You should have told me." McWilliam pulled back, holding her at arm's length as he raked her face with his gaze.

"You've been busy."

From the little Rosa could see of his face, she knew McWilliam had winced.

"And I was afraid of what you'd say," Rhona conceded. "Cameron kept going on and on about how you'd be so ashamed and that you'd have no choice but to send me away. And I don't want to leave. This is

my home.” She punched the counterpane.

She moved across the room to stand by Rosa. “Rosa doesn’t think you should send me away, do you?” The young woman gripped Rosa’s arm.

“Of course not. But McWilliam isn’t going to send you away. I told you, he loves you.”

“Of course I do.” He paced to the window and back again. “I don’t care what Cameron has been saying, I’ll look after you. Everything will be well. I promise”

A mixture of concern and confusion flashed across Rhona’s face. “But what about the money?”

“What about what money?” McWilliam asked, barely keeping his temper under wraps. He’d always thought he and Rhona were close. He thought they told each other everything... well, everything of importance. He thought she knew him well enough to know he could never make her do anything against her will.

He pushed aside the wave of guilt and panic that was threatening to overwhelm him and focused on what was most important at that very moment—making sure his sister was safe and finding Amelia’s kidnapper.

“Cameron said...” Rhona began, and he had to physically stop himself growling in anger at his uncle’s name.

Rosa wrapped an arm around Rhona’s shoulders, despite being several inches shorter, clicking softly under her breath as a mother duck might to calm her ducklings.

“Cameron said that babies were so expensive, and that you wouldn’t be able to afford her, not with all our financial problems.”

That was it. McWilliam was going to strangle his uncle. “Babies are tiny,” he said forcing an edge of calm into his voice. “They hardly take up any space at all, and as for the money, we’re not bankrupt Rhona. Not anymore. Father and I fixed all of that. I mean, things are hardly wonderful, but we’re not going to starve anytime soon.” Hell.

“But...” Rhona glanced between him and Rosa. “Then why did you

go to all the trouble of chasing Rosa down and dragging her back here?"

"Father had just died, and I was angry," he said, shame trumping anger. "I wasn't thinking clearly. And I am so incredibly sorry if I gave you any other impression."

"Nay," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "It's my fault. I haven't been thinking clearly. Rodd..." She swallowed and Rosa rubbed her hand up and down Rhona's arm.

"Rodd is in the past," he said firmly. "From now on we'll only be thinking about our future."

She pursed her lips.

He crossed her arms. Waiting.

More silence.

"Aye?" he growled.

His sister sighed. "Aye." Agreeability had never been her strong point.

"Good." He backed towards the door, his eyes flitting between her and Rhona. He didn't want to leave them. They had so much more to talk about, but time was running out. "I have to get back out to the search parties."

She moved towards him, but he held up a hand, predicting what she was about to say. "You're safer here."

"Not that again." She pressed her hands to her hips, giving him the look he was beginning to associate with disobedience. "I want to help. For goodness sake, this is my mess."

"You can help by staying with Rhona. I won't be able to concentrate if I have to worry about you too."

Her eyes narrowed. He pitied the children under her care. She was a force to be reckoned with.

"Don't look at me like that. You're not my governess." Though, a rebellious voice at the back of his mind argued, that could be fun. When they had more time and were alone, preferably beneath the red velvet canopy of his four-poster bed.

She looked ready to argue, so he swooped. Pressing a quick succession of kisses to her frown, he strode from the room before she could protest.

It didn't take him long to reach Gall. His feet moved fast as his brain was thinking of more places he needed to search for Amelia's kidnapper. Sure, they'd already looked everywhere before, but the murderer had to be near. He'd killed Rodd just yesterday.

Silence met him as he entered the hamlet. Mary, Glenn and everyone were waiting for him. By the looks of it, the sheep had virtually been left to fend for themselves. Only once before had he seen so many of his people gathered in one place at the same time. And that was when they'd learnt his grandfather, their trusted laird of twenty-one years, had killed three of their own.

"By now you all know Rodd was murdered yesterday over at Rocky Ruins. You also know he was working with someone, and together they stole 3,000 pounds and placed the blame on Miss Rosa." He ached the longing of her and burned with the injustice of it. "Whoever Rodd was working with must be close by. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"We would have found anyone hiding on the estate," Mary said, giving voice to the many people gathered around her. How Rosa thought he'd been happy with Mary was beyond him. True, he'd once had feelings for Mary. But now they were both grown, he knew better that to believe either could satisfy the other.

"I know. But I want everywhere checked again, including the village."

Cries of anger and resentment met his words.

"Every house will be searched," he repeated, talking slowly and loudly so nobody could mistake his request—his demand—as a suggestion. He was done being nice and reasonable. He was done playing by the rules. "I want every inch of this entire estate combed. Even my own house. The murderer could be hiding anywhere, and I will stop at nothing to find them."

Rhona turned her eyes on Rosa.

Rosa steeled herself.

"So..." Rhona started, drawing the word out with a deep breath.

"I didn't mean to break your confidence," Rosa interrupted quickly.

“I thought you’d told him. I would never have told him if I thought he didn’t really know.”

“He kissed ye.”

“Oh.” Rosa’s eyes widened. He had kissed her, right before his own younger sister. Merciful heaven. Rhona’s eyes were narrowed and her fists clenched, but she hadn’t pushed away the counterpane as though she couldn’t decide if she wanted to strangle Rosa or pretend the kiss had never happened.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, waylaying the conversation, “Now that he knows?”

After a pause, Rhona gave over. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. “All right, I guess. Cameron kept telling me how angry Andy would be when he found out—” She shrugged. “I feel so silly. I believed him. Over my own brother.”

“Cameron’s your uncle.”

“I know. But he isn’t like Andy. He’s always been so cautious and afraid, and I let his fear get the better of me.” She sighed, shifting over a little so Rosa could sit beside her. “Aunt Elspeth really was the life of the ball. She was completely different from Cameron. She never stopped to think about anything.”

“A little like you then,” Rosa said, lightly. “How come two so very different people got married?” An arranged marriage? Cameron wasn’t the heir to the Uilleim Estate, but he was the son and uncle of lairds. His marriage could have provided the estate with a strong political or financial connection.

Though, maybe not financial.

“They fell in love. It just happened.” She shrugged again. “You would have liked Elspeth. She was so much fun. One time someone dared her to spend a whole night out at the Rocky Ruins, and she did it. Everyone thought she was going to be eaten by ghosts or spirits, but she lived to tell the tale.” She smiled, lost in memory. “I have a portrait of her somewhere.” Rhona reached over, groping around in the draw of her bedside table. “It was in a little silver locket.”

Rosa reached over to straighten the collar of Rhona’s night-rail. She knew she was fussing, but she couldn’t help it. In many ways, she reminded Rosa of Amelia. Impetuously annoying and more trouble that

she was worth but impossible not to love. She only hoped McWilliam could talk a little more sense into her before the baby arrived.

She pressed a hand to her own stomach. Was she...? It was possible. She and McWilliam had certainly *performed the dirty deed*, as Mrs Wright had once described it. His seed was inside her right now.

And if she was... How could she possibly go to prison knowing there was a possibility she was carrying another life inside her? God, she'd been so incredibly selfish. She should never have let McWilliam touch her. Or kiss her. Pleasure her.

Love her.

*Marry me.*

"I need some air." She swallowed, her breath catching in her throat. Oh Heavenly God!

"Rosa?" Rhona reached for her, but Rosa darted from the room. Dashing down the stairs, she came to a shuddering halt when she reached the courtyard.

She sucked in a deep breath. Never before had she considered the possibility of spending the rest of her life in Scotland, with a giant, loud, bossy Scotsman. And yet here she was. A ring on her finger and possibly a child in her belly.

She couldn't possibly leave now. She couldn't possibly go to prison. She was as incapable of abandoning McWilliam as she was Amelia.

She had to do something! She had to stop the murderer and save her cousin. It was the only way she was ever going to be able to marry the man she loved.

Rosa started towards the portcullis, arms swinging by her sides. She didn't care what McWilliam said, she was going to join the search party.

The guard at the gate tried to stop her, but Rosa strode straight past him, feigning deaf when he protested.

She had no idea where any of the search parties were at that moment, so she continued up the hill towards the tiny stone church. There was an excellent view of the surrounding fields from the graveyard and she would be able to see where everyone was.

Rosa stumbled on her gown, tripping up the steep path. She was so much more comfortable walking along London's busy, dangerous

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streets than she was hiking through the wilderness. Thistles growing along the edge of the path tugged at her stockings and a stone lodged itself in her shoe. With a curse that no lady should say, but one she'd heard McWilliam use, she tugged off her half-boot.

Gravel crunched behind her, but before she could turn, hands shoved, pushing her from the path

She stumbled backwards, and the ground to seemed to give way under her feet. Crying out, she stumbled and fell. She desperately flung both arms wide, but she could find nothing substantial to hold on to. She slid sideways down the rocky, thistle-covered slope rather than following the path that hugged the hillside. She came to a halt hard against a boulder. Pain erupted down her shoulder, sending black spots across her vision.

Then darkness descended.

## Chapter Twenty-four

“Rosa. Rosa!”

Hands, ever so gently, wrapped around her body. The smell of whiskey and musk, and heat. Then excruciating pain. Oh God, her shoulder.

“It’s going to be all right. I’m going to take care of ye.”

And then the darkness reclaimed her.

“What did ye think ye were doing?”

Rosa’s eyes fluttered open. She was back in McWilliam’s bedroom, lying on his bed, and he stood over her, his arms crossed over his chest, biceps bulging.

“What happened?” She struggled to sit. Her shoulder didn’t hurt nearly so bad anymore. “Was it dislocated?”

He nodded, once. His gaze stern as he looked her over. “I heard you scream as you fell over the edge. Luckily it wasn’t so steep and ye didn’t fall too far.”

“You heard me?”

“I was at the church. The vantage point from there is perfect to organize search parties.” His expression darkened. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“I was doing the same thing you were. I was heading for the top of the hill. I wanted to know if I would see anything from up there.” That sounded a little pathetic, but she didn’t back down.

“Even after I told you to stay inside?”

“You’re not my master. And I’m not your prisoner. I can come and go as I please.”

He ran a hand through his hair with a frustrated growl. “I know that. But it’s not safe. Not until I’ve caught the bastard who murdered Rodd.” Rodd was a murderer and now he’d been murdered. Sweet heaven, their lives were beginning to sound like a penny dreadful.

“I can’t sit around and do nothing,” she snapped, equally frustrated. It was beginning to feel like they’d had this argument a hundred times before. “I can be just as stubborn as you,” she threatened.

He pursed his lips, as though he was refraining from saying something particularly ungentlemanly. In the end, he pushed his way onto the bed, wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her against his chest. She dug her elbow into his side “I’ll not let you boss me around,” she confirmed. “I’m my own person.”

“I know.” He pulled the pins free of her hair, so it cascaded around her shoulders. “But it’s my duty to protect you.”

“Only if you let me protect you too.”

He pulled back, just far enough to brush his lips lightly over her own. Her insides melted.

A self-satisfied smile touched his lips, and his kisses became more persistent. “I thought...” he murmured, his lips pressed to hers, “when you screamed...” A nip to her bottom lip. “Love...”

She entwined her hands in his hair, giving over to his inexorable attack on her senses.

His hold tightened, one hand running over her back to her bottom.

Rosa winced.

“What’s wrong?”

“That hurt.” She rubbed her own lower back, her brow furrowed.

“You must have hit it when you fell.”

“No...” she said slowly. “I think I was pushed.”

“Pushed?” McWilliam straightened. He could hear his own pounding pulse in his ears. “Do you mean someone pushed you with malice intent?”

"I think so." She tapped her forehead, a crease forming between her eyes. "I remember hearing someone walking up behind me, and then they pushed me down."

He took her face between his hands. "Do you remember anything else? Did you see anything? A boot, or maybe a smell?"

"No. It all happened so fast. I didn't even remember I'd been pushed until you touched my back."

He winced, his insides churning. This was exactly why he'd tried to send her away. She'd be safest away from this estate. But now it was too late to send her to Grant. Not that she'd go willingly anyway. She was so determined to help.

And, he silently conceded, he couldn't really blame her for that. He'd want to be out searching if it was his family threatened.

"It will be getting dark soon," Rosa said with a glance towards the window. "Tomorrow—"

Nay. "We'll deal with tomorrow when it comes." Reluctantly, he stood up. "Do you think you can sit still for a few more hours without getting yourself killed? While there's daylight left I want to re-join the search." Be damn if he wanted to leave her, but he couldn't stop looking. Not when there was still a chance. Still hope.

She gave him her governess look again. It was the look that said 'mock me at your own expense', and it was all together too prim and proper. He wanted to rip off her clothes and pillage her until she screamed his name to the heavens.

But now wasn't the time. And he didn't want to risk being too rough, not after the fall she'd already suffered. And right now, feeling like this, he couldn't guarantee it would be anything but rough.

Pulling a key from his pocket, he pushed it into her hand. "This is for the door. I want you to lock yourself in. I don't know how long I'll be. Fenella can keep an eye on you, but I don't want you to let anyone in. Not even her."

"I don't think that's really necessary—"

"So someone dinna just try to push you down a cliff?" He raised a questioning eyebrow.

She didn't answer.

“Lock the door after me, Thistle.” An order. He moved to the door, and she followed, a little unsteady on her feet.

“What about Rhona?”

“I’ll tell her the same.” He kissed her forehead keeping his hands firmly pressed to his sides to stop himself locking them both in his bedchamber and having his wicked way with her. “Lock the door, and try to get some rest.”

“Bossy Boots McWilliam,” she said, pouting in a way that stirred his soldier.

He snapped the door closed before his body defied commonsense and he really did rip the clothes from her body.

After quickly checking in on his pregnant sister, McWilliam was halfway to the portcullis when Glenn caught up with him. The young man had taken everything in his stride, and McWilliam was impressed with the effort he’d put into the search.

“We’ve checked the blackhouses, the Rocky Ruins, the loch and the church,” he reported with his effective enthusiasm. “There’s a group still scouring the mountains behind Gall, but they’re not likely to return before nightfall.”

“What about the village itself?”

“Mistress Mary organized that search herself, but there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary.”

“And Mary’s house?” He hated to ask, but they could leave nobody untouched.

“I did that myself. There was nobody there.” He frowned. “I don’t want to say it but three days isn’t really long enough. There’s no way we can search everywhere all over again in that amount of time.”

“Then don’t say it,” McWilliam snapped. “What about the castle?”

“Mistress Mary is bringing the women up now. It’s not ideal, but they volunteered and we need all the help we can get.”

Good. “It’ll be fine. Just make sure they stay in pairs, and keep them away from Rosa and Rhona. I don’t want either of them disturbed.”

“Right.” Glenn bowed his head and then broke into a jog back towards the portcullis where Mary and the other village women had just appeared.

“Get Fenella and the rest of the staff to help,” he called after the young man.

“That lad’s got spirit.” Cameron appeared as if out of nowhere by McWilliam’s side.

“Where have you been all afternoon? I didn’t see you join the search.”

“Nay. I’d stayed here. Someone has to keep an eye on Rhona and the sassenach.”

“And a hell of a good job ye did. Someone tried to kill Rosa.”

Cameron’s mouth dropped open. “When? Where?”

“It doesn’t matter.” McWilliam brushed him off. He was still angry that his uncle hadn’t told him about Rhona and for making her feel so afraid. And he’d certainly hadn’t forgiven Cameron for aiding and abetting Rosa’s escape attempt. “The point is Rosa’s safe. She’s locked in my room, and nobody can get in there. She has my key and I’ve taken away Fenella’s.”

“That’s good.” Cameron drew out the last word as though waiting for his thoughts to catch up with his mouth. “You know time’s running out, McWilliam. Whitsunday is in three days.”

“I have everything under control,” he growled. Which was true, as long as he could capture a murderer before the sun rose on three days hence.

Rosa waited until McWilliam’s footsteps had faded away, then she slipped into the corridor after him, locking the door behind her. If anyone came knocking, hopefully they’d just assume she was sleeping. Because it didn’t matter that someone had tried to kill her or scare her, she only had today left and she wasn’t giving up on Amelia. Not ever.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Rosa spun on her heel. Mary stood at the top of the stairs. She’d rolled up the sleeves of her work gown to her elbows and had an apron tied around her waist.

“The laird isn’t here,” Rosa said with a glance towards his door. Had Mary seen her leaving his chamber? Though, truth be told, her shattered

reputation was the least of her worries now.

“I didn’t realize ye were up here,” Mary said with a slightly apologetic smile. “I was told to leave you to rest.”

“I don’t understand.” Rosa frowned. “Why are you here? And who told you to leave me to rest?”

“Himself has us searching the castle in case someone is hiding here. I just dinna realize this was where your bedchamber was or else I wouldn’t have come up.”

“The castle?” Finally, something she might actually be able to do. “Let me help you search.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. McWilliam said—”

“Please, Goodwoman, I need to do something. I need to help.” She could hear the desperation, the demand, in her own voice.

Mary seemed to struggle for a moment, then she nodded towards the stairs. “All right, after ye.”

They headed to the top storey. Mary’s eyes widened as she caught sight of all the newspapers and books.

“The library,” Rosa explained. “Apparently McWilliam’s father was an avid collector.”

“I knew he liked to read, everyone did. I just never realized he had so many.” She walked a circle of the room, running her fingertips along the book spines and the crumbling edges of the broadsheets.

“Someone told me Rodd couldn’t read,” Rosa said, trying to sound like it was a passing comment. She moved to the table in the middle of the room. No new newspapers had been added since she’d last been up here.

“Nay. He was never really interested in his letters. Anndrais elder—McWilliam’s grandfather—was like that too.”

Rosa remembered McWilliam had been named after his grandfather. That’s why he didn’t like it when she called him by his Christian name—he didn’t like to be reminded of the connection.

“He favored action over his learning,” Mary continued. “Master Hearn was completely different. He read everything he would get his hands on.”

“It sounds like you knew them well.”

“Everyone knows everyone around here. McWilliam, Rodd and I practically grew up together. Well,” she laughed, gently, “as much as one can grow up with a laird’s son.” She circled back around to the door. “I suppose McWilliam’s a little in between Master Hearn and Anndrais. He looks a lot like his grandfather and he can be fast to act, but he’s also like his father in that he listens to other people’s opinions and...”

“...and he isn’t a murderer,” Rosa finished for her.

“Aye. Ye heard about that. We don’t really talk about what Anndrais did.”

“I’ve heard a little.” Rosa followed her back down the stairs. They skipped the third storey, stopping on the second. Rosa had never bothered with this floor before. It looked to be abandoned. “He killed three people from your village. A girl and her family. McWilliam seemed to be worried that this tragedy with Duncan and Rodd would stir up memories of back then.”

“I guess it has.” Mary looked sad, her golden brown eyes framed by downturned brows and fine lines around her frowning mouth. Rosa guessed she was a couple of years older than McWilliam, and while she was taller than Rosa, she had a thin frame that made her look like she’d blow over in a strong gust of wind. Though, Rosa was pretty sure that in this instance, looks were deceiving.

Like the level above, four chambers opened onto a short corridor. Mary opened the closest door. The room beyond was almost completely empty though it had obviously been a bedroom at some point. Most of the furnishings had been stripped away, leaving just a bed, with an old mattress and a thick layer of dust. Nobody had been in here for many years.

They moved to the next room and found more of the same.

“I think this used to be Anndrais’s suite.” Mary nodded to another door that likely connected with the first abandoned room they’d searched. “That was probably his wife’s room. This one certainly looks like it was extravagant enough for him.” She nodded to the plaster moldings of the architrave. In classic white with gold accents it was unlike anything else she’d seen in the castle. It was like something you might find in the drawing rooms of a grand country estate.

“Anndrais liked his luxury,” Mary confirmed.

And Rosa was beginning to see just how irresponsible he’d been with his money. As lovely as they were, the moldings would have cost a small fortune, not to mention that they clashed horribly with the otherwise Gothic-medieval look of the castle.

After a quick sweep of the room to establish that nobody had recently disturbed the dust, they stepped back into the corridor.

“If McWilliam hadn’t seen him kill Duncan, I don’t think anyone would have guessed it was Rodd.” Mary sighed. “Then again, for years nobody realized what Anndrais had done. Did you know it was McWilliam who Anndrais confessed to?”

Rosa shook her head. He hadn’t told her that part.

“He confessed to everyone on his death bed. He wasn’t even the least bit remorseful.” She shook her head, clearly disgusted. “As soon as Anndrais told Himself that he’d hidden the bodies in the loch, McWilliam was out there looking for them.” A sigh. “It was impossible, of course. The loch is too big and it happened too many years ago.”

Rosa’s heart swelled. That was her Scotsman. Always trying to do the right thing. Always trying to clean up everyone else’s mess.

“What about Cameron?” She thought back to the conversation she’d had with McWilliam a couple of days ago. “Apparently he wasn’t always quite so anxious?”

“I suppose not,” Mary said as they checked the other two rooms. Also abandoned. Also left to rot.

“Lady Elspeth was something else entirely,” Mary continued as they headed down to the ground floor. “She was feisty and spirited. She really brought this place back to life, for a while anyway.”

“Rhona mentioned her to me just a little while ago. What happened?”

“She died really suddenly of a fever. Nobody saw it coming, least of all Cameron. It near enough broke his heart. You see, she was expecting.” Mary cringed at the thought of losing a child and a wife. “He’d always been uptight and cautious, but when Lady Elspeth died he became almost neurotic. It’s sad. To love someone so completely your whole world falls away when they’re gone.”

“Yes.” Rosa wrapped an arm around her stomach, thoughts of McWilliam never far from her mind. If anything happened to him ‘neurotic’ would be the least of it.

Mary opened the only door on the ground floor. It was a little behind the stairs, tucked just out of sight. Rosa hadn’t even realized it was there.

“And this,” Mary said, stepping aside so Rosa could see, “must have been Master Cameron and Lady Elspeth’s room before she died.”

Like the others, everything was covered in a layer of dust, but this one hadn’t been pilfered of furnishings. Beside the large bed canopied with crumbling velvet curtains, was a dresser, chair, nightstand and wash bowl. Someone had left a night-rail on the dresser. It was moth-eaten and Rosa guessed a single touch might turn the fabric to dust. It was as if the moment Elspeth had died, the room had been locked up. Under all the suffocating dust and sadness she could almost smell lingering perfume.

Mary stepped forward, obviously intending to give the room a once over but Rosa held up a hand. “Wait.” Footprints marred the dust, as though someone had recently passed this way.

They were large, probably a man’s, and they seemed to lead right up to the fireplace, before turning back towards the door.

“Master Cameron?” Mary suggested.

“But what was he looking for?” It was then Rosa caught sight of the life-sized portrait hanging above the cold fireplace.

It was of a beautifully tall and slim woman, with a mysterious glimmer shining in her blue eyes. Her long white-blond hair was pinned back in a simple bun but a few strands had broken free to frame her face. And she was smiling down at the room with unreserved happiness.

Judging by the dated gown she wore, the portrait had been painted more than ten years ago.

Rosa’s heart skipped a beat and, she felt the blood rush from her face.

The resemblance was striking. Identical in almost every way. Amelia.

There was no gap between this lady’s two front teeth, and she was

obviously older, maybe going on one and thirty, but everything else...it was incredible. They could have been doppelgängers.

“Lady Elspeth McWilliam.” Mary broke the silence.

“You mean that’s Cameron’s wife?”

She nodded. “Beautiful. Everyone used to say that she was a true Georgian beauty.”

Rosa pressed her eyes closed and then opened them again. Lady Elspeth was, without a doubt, Amelia’s double.

“I don’t think Master Cameron could believe his luck when Elspeth proposed to him. The story goes that she was sick of waiting for him to ask, so she stepped up.” Mary rested a hand on Rosa’s shoulder, a frown creasing her brow. “Are you all right? You’re very pale.”

Rosa tapped her forehead. Elspeth was Amelia. Cameron’s long-dead wife. Rhona was expecting, and Rodd was dead after killing Duncan. The answer was on the tip of her tongue and all her instincts were shouting at her that it all had something to do with Amelia’s resemblance to Elspeth.

Amelia and Elspeth.

But nobody could know that. Rosa was the only one on this entire estate who knew Amelia. Aside from her kidnapper.

“I’m think I’m going to lie down for a while,” she murmured. “I’m more tired than I realized.”

Elspeth and Amelia.

“Did you need a hand back up the stairs?” Mary sounded genuinely concerned.

“No.” Rosa brushed her off. “Thank you.”

Amelia and Emily.

She tripped up the stairs, her clumsy feet reflecting her confusion. All this time, Rosa believed she’d been framed for the theft because her father or uncle had a vengeful enemy somewhere that she hadn’t known about. Never had she considered that she’d been framed purely because of her connection to Amelia.

Where was her cousin? Was she safe? Who had her?

Rosa hadn’t seen Amelia since Emily’s death four years ago. She’d been headstrong, selfish, and even contemptuous as a fourteen year old,

but now she must be eighteen. Who knew what type of woman she'd grown into.

"Rosa? Rosa!"

She froze halfway up the stairs between the second and third floor. Ahead, just out of sight, she could hear Cameron calling for her.

Her heart started beating painfully in her chest. Did he know Amelia looked just like his dead wife?

"Rosa!" He sounded desperate, and then there was a bang as though he'd hit the chamber door.

She hadn't locked the door to her own chamber, so he must know McWilliam had left her in his chamber. She gripped the key in a sweaty palm.

With her heart in her mouth, Rosa slipped back a step. She didn't want to face Cameron. Not without knowing the whole story.

"I know you're in there, Miss Blair. Let me in."

Perhaps this was all a misunderstanding. Perhaps Cameron knew nothing of Amelia's similarities. Perhaps...

"I have a message from McWilliam. He wanted me to tell you in person. Open the door."

Her knees trembled. Had he killed Rodd?

Oh, sweet, merciful heaven.

"What are ye doing?" Rhona's voice floated down the stairs to Rosa's hiding place. "Ye woke me up."

"Sweetheart." Cameron's voice instantly became calmer, more seductive, as though he was trying to mollify his niece. "Everything is fine. I just wanted a word with the sassenach."

"Don't call her that." A huff. Then: "She's probably ignoring you. Andy told us both to keep our doors locked no matter what."

There was a pause; Rosa's own breath all she could hear for the space of several seconds. Then, "So, your brother knows."

"He does." There was a slight catch in Rhona's voice. "And he isn't going to send me away. He said so."

"What about the money? And your reputation? Does he have all of that sorted? Och nay." Footsteps sounded. Cameron must have moved closer to Rhona or maybe Rhona backed up. "I have all of it sorted. I

have a plan for that bairn.”

Rosa frowned, leaning forward to hear better.

“A plan?” Rhona sounded confused. “What do ye mean? She’s my bairn.”

“A girl now, is it?” More footsteps. “You’re unmarried. Do ye really think ye can raise a child yourself?”

That was it. Rosa took the stairs two at a time. “Rhona,” she said, pretending not to have overheard. “You’re up.”

“Cameron was looking for ye.” She crossed her arms over her stomach. “Apparently he was a plan for my bairn?”

“Really, I’m sure McWilliam would have a lot to say about that.” Rhona’s brother would never ever let anything happen to that child. Hell, Rosa wasn’t going to let anything happen to her or Rhona. Regardless of the good Cameron supposedly thought he was doing, he’d succeeded at nothing but scaring his niece.

Rosa hustled past Cameron, shrugging off his hand when he reached for her shoulder. She wrapped an arm around Rhona, firmly leading her back into her room. She snapped the door closed and turned the key before the girl’s uncle could follow.

“Open the door.” He didn’t sound pleased.

Rhona winced. “Maybe—”

“No.” Rosa shook her head. “There’s something not right here. I don’t think you should let him near you. Not until your brother gets back.”

“Open the door, Rhona.” A plea.

Rosa tucked Rhona back into bed. She must be thoroughly sick of being stuck inside, but today wasn’t the day to break her quarantine.

“Open the damn door!”

“Rosa,” Rhona tugged at the quilted counterpane. “I really think we should do as he says.”

“We’ll wait for McWilliam.”

“Fenella.” Cameron snapped. “Unlock this door!”

Rosa stood before the bed, blocking Rhona from view. With a rattling of her keys and a click, the door opened. Fenella stepped inside. “What’s going on?” she clucked.

Cameron pushed her aside. Grabbing Rosa's arm he pulled her from the Rhona's chamber. His fingers bit into her upper arm.

"You're hurting me." She struggled to break free, but he wouldn't let go. "Get off!"

"Rosa!" Rhona called, but when she tried to follow Cameron held up a hand.

"Fenella," he snapped, "Keep Rhona there. I want a word with Miss Rosa."

If Mrs Fenella replied, it was lost beneath Cameron's thundering footsteps as he marched down her stairs.

With brute force Rosa hadn't realized the old man possessed, he practically dragged her across the courtyard. It was deserted, and she guessed everyone was still scouring the buildings for sign of Rodd's murderer.

"Cameron, let me go." She tried to free herself, digging her nails into his hand, but he didn't seem to notice, not even when she drew blood. "McWilliam won't let—"

"McWilliam is blinded by lust," he snapped, quickly pulling her over the drawbridge and into the stables. "I know what ye really are, Sassenach."

The same black colt Cameron had ridden to South Druiminn was already saddled and ready to go. He stood in the far corner, snorting and pawing the ground, apparently as eager as his master. Mist stood in one of the stalls, flicking her ears when she saw Rosa and swinging her head around to watch Cameron hustle Rosa onto the colt.

Rosa kicked out, catching Cameron on his bad leg. It bulked but held, and he clambered up behind her. He wasn't at all like McWilliam. He was cold and icy like winter; not hot as summer, and his arm around her waist was all bone and sinew; not muscle and strength.

"Where are we going?" She tried to twist around to look at him over her shoulder.

He smiled, and a chill ran down Rosa's back. There was something primeval in his eyes, something dark, something evil.

"It was you who pushed me down the hill." She narrowed her own eyes, giving him as good as she got as anger and panic swept over her.

“Where’s Amelia? What have you done with my cousin?”

“I see you for what you really are, Rosa Blair.” He wrapped both his arms around her waist, gathered up the reins and kicked the horse into a gallop.

“What are you doing?”

In a matter of seconds they were clear of the stables and thundering down the drover’s path that lead away from the castle, mountains and village of Gall.

“Where are we going? If you’re taking me to Leeds, there’s no point. McWilliam hired a lawyer to make the case in my stead.”

“Not Leeds,” he growled.

“You don’t scare me.” She let out a single humorless laugh, feigning more courage than she really felt. “You’re like a kitten when compared with McWilliam’s wrath.”

“Fool, Sassenach. My nephew would never hurt you.” And I would. The words hung, unsaid, between them.

“Oh, it was you who pushed me down the hill!” She stiffened.

“Where’s Amelia? What have you done with my cousin?”

## Chapter Twenty-five

It didn't take McWilliam long to return to the mountain path leading up to the church. If Rosa had been pushed by the same person who'd killed Rodd and framed her for theft then it was very likely they were still nearby.

Although exactly how and why they'd chosen to focus on Rosa still remained a mystery. McWilliam frowned. His contact with Grant had led to a dead end. Rosa didn't seem to have any ties with anyone in Scotland. The only time she'd ever been north of the border (before he'd kidnapped her) was several years ago when Emily had drowned.

Trying to ignore the image of Rosa lying dead at the bottom of the hill path that kept flashing before his mind's eye and the desperate sound of her scream as she'd fallen, he scoured the ground for clues. The path was scuffed where she'd fallen, individual footprints impossible to distinguish, and it wasn't like Rosa's attacker had left a calling card.

*Yours disrespectfully Rodd's murderer, Mr...* Hell only knew.

McWilliam's eyes narrowed. There was an indent by the edge of the path, right about where Rosa tumbled over. It was a perfectly round hole, about two inches wide. Just like the indentations his uncle's walking stick left in mud or soft earth.

McWilliam frowned. Could it have been here since Cameron last climbed the hill to the church? Even after all the rain they'd had recently?

"Andy!" Rhona dashed up the path and into sight.

"What are ye doing?" He rushed to meet her, but she brushed him away.

“Cameron...” she panted, her cheeks flushed and one hand pressed to her side. “He’s acting completely mad. He stole Rosa.”

“Miss Amelia.” Cameron practically purred her name.

A shudder of revulsion jumped down Rosa’s spine. Although she had her back to him, she could easily imagine the smug expression upon his face. His voice said it all.

“I know my cousin looks just like Elspeth,” she said, trying to keep her own voice as neutral as possible.

“The similarities are truly remarkable. I was quite blown away by them when I first set eyes on her.”

“Where is she?”

“You still haven’t solved it, have you? And you think you’re so clever. Prying through everyone’s lives and telling McWilliam about Rhona.”

His arms around her waist tightened. Not as tall or broad as McWilliam, but he could still easily overpower her.

She let out a shaky breath. Over-power, certainly. Out-wit, maybe not. If only she could work out what Bennie Cooke would do in this situation...

They had skirted around the hill, heading north.

“I know you were working with Rodd,” she continued, trying to distract him. “You were the one who persuaded McWilliam to send him to London to make contact with the buyer in the first place. It was always your plan to steal that money.”

He snorted in a that’s-not-even-half-of-it way.

“I know more,” she said, her heart beating painfully hard against her ribs. “You let Rodd keep 500 pounds for his silence. And then you had him kill Duncan.”

“Duncan was interfering where he wasn’t wanted.”

“He was a physician,” she said incredulously. “He was only trying to help Miss Rhona.”

“Sweet Rhona,” he purred. “She’s too young to know what’s best for her.”

"Amelia's hardly older. I suppose you think she doesn't know what's best for her either?"

"That's none of your concern."

She was almost thankful she couldn't see his face. It lent her a little extra courage. "Mary told me Lady Elspeth died with a baby in her. You didn't just lose your wife, you lost your child as well. And for whatever twisted reason, you've decided to treat Rhona's baby as your own." She narrowed her eyes, calling over her shoulder: "What are you doing, Cameron? Rhona's baby, my cousin—do you think you're recreating your family? Because it doesn't work like that. Amelia could never love you, and Rhona's never giving up her baby."

He laughed. She felt him throw his head back, and the laugh rocked his whole body.

She leant forward, desperate to put some space between them. His stomach was soft, not muscular, and if she leant back she could feel herself sinking into him. He was anything but McWilliam.

"Do you really think I could have planned all of this myself?" he managed to say between gulping breaths. "Do you really think it was my idea to make you take the blame for the theft?" He laughed, darkly. "Amelia hates you." He breathed the last few words into her ear, his breath hot and sticky on her skin.

"Liar." She licked her suddenly parched lips, her throat dry. "Liar."

"Ye killed her sister. Of course she hates you."

"No." She shook her head, blood pumping in her ears.

"She despises you."

"I didn't kill Emily." The words, no louder than a whisper, were spoken with more conviction than she felt. "She drowned."

"Because of ye."

"No. Our governess fell asleep. She should have been—"

"You were supposed to be looking after them. Why else would their father have taken in a poor relation? Amelia has told me all about you. The bluestocking who was always more interested in murderers and newspapers than looking after her own family."

So that was it. Amelia hated her. Even after all these years she still believed Rosa responsible for Emily's death. And, in a way, she was

right. Rosa should never have let Emily into that loch. She should never have given into their childish bickering and teasing.

“How did you know I’d hand myself over to the Bow Street Runners?” she asked, trying to force some logical thought from her grief-stricken mind. “I could have easily ignored your threatening note.”

“Amelia knew you’d do anything to make things right. She said you’ve been sending her letters every year on the anniversary of Emily’s death begging for her forgiveness.” He laughed again, as though her misery was feeding his joy. “After that it was easy. I already knew about Rodd and Rhona, so I threatened to tell McWilliam and Rodd agreed to help.”

“I was on my way to prison until your pigheaded nephew brought me here. Now tell me where my cousin is. If you’ve hurt her—”

“I told you, she hated you,” he scoffed. “Why do you still care about her?”

Rosa blinked. “She’s my family,” she said simply and honestly. “And despite everything you say she’s done, she hasn’t killed anyone. You corrupted—”

“I’ve done nothing but love her,” he snapped. “And she loves me.”

“She told you that?”

“We’re engaged.”

She couldn’t help rising an eyebrow. Cameron wasn’t exactly a knight in shining armor, and he certainly wasn’t the type of man Amelia had spent her youth daydreaming about.

Fortress Doom had long since disappeared from sight. They were surrounded by nothing but fields and mountains and thistles. They didn’t even seem to be following a path. Cameron was guiding his mount without much apparent thought as if he didn’t care where they ended up or as if he knew the landscape as he knew the back of his hand.

She glanced down at his hands on the reins. They were rough and callused; the hands of a Scottish warrior. Not the hands of an English gentleman; not the hands she ever imaged Amelia seriously agreeing to marry.

“How did you two even meet?” she asked. That was something she

hadn't been able to work out herself. As far as she knew, Cameron had never been to Manchester where Amelia and Uncle Oliver lived.

"London, of course." She could practically hear him rolling his eyes.

London, of course, because Amelia was eighteen now and certainly old enough to be out in society.

"My uncle will never agree to your marriage." Not only was Cameron at least as old as Uncle Oliver, there was that small matter of him being a murderer.

"We don't need his permission."

"Then you won't see a penny of her dowry." And another piece fell into place. "But you already knew that. That's why you stole McWilliam's money." 3,000 pounds would certainly go some way to lessening the blow of losing Amelia's dowry.

"That money's for the bairn," he growled, his humor apparently beginning to evaporate. "When Amelia and I are married—"

"What?" It was Rosa's turn to scoff. "You're going to live happily ever after—here?" She waved her hand at the thistle-strewn fields and rocky mountains. "I can spot several flaws in your plan. First," she counted on her fingers because there was little need for her to grip the saddle. Cameron was holding her so tightly she couldn't have fallen off the horse even if she'd thrown herself at the ground. "McWilliam is going to know exactly what you've done the moment you bring Amelia to Uilleim."

"Ha," he brushed aside the first flaw as someone might brush away an annoying fly. "Nobody will know she's *the Amelia*. She can easily change her name."

"To Elspeth?" Rosa suggested.

"Don't you dare speak my wife's name!" He pulled the horse to a stop. Clambering down with some difficulty, he pulled her down with him. His grip bit into her upper arm, and Rosa cried out as pain shot down her to her fingertips. He was burning hot and then flashing cold; calm and then angry.

He threw a glance around the landscape, as if double checking they were alone. There was a mad glint in his eyes and a wildness about him that she hadn't noticed before.

Her heart skipped a beat. Hell, he was probably just as crazy as his murdering bankrupt father had been.

*Bennie Cooke*, she thought wildly. *What the would Bennie Cooke do?*

“Amelia won’t be happy here,” she sputtered, desperate to keep him distracted. “She’s a city girl. The country will bore her senseless!”

“She holidays in the country every year with her father.”

He tugged her forward, and she stumbled over her own skirts trying to keep up with him. He’d abandoned his walking stick back at the castle, but it didn’t seem to slow him down. It was like the madness gave him new-found strength.

“For a few weeks every year,” she spluttered. “Not months on end. My cousin is a fickle creature, Master Cameron. What amuses her one week will not keep her interest the next. You’d have realized that if you’d actually bothered to get to know her rather than trying to recreate your twisted fairytale.”

“You haven’t seen her in four years. Ye know nothing about my darling, sweet Amelia.” He tugged her further from the horse.

Before them was half a dozen mounds of bluestone. They were like small hills. About ten feet wide and several feet tall, they blended into the landscape as if they’d been there forever.

She’d heard tell of the cairns of Scotland, but never before had she seen any. The long-since dead were supposedly buried beneath the stones, but it wasn’t them that worried her. Wasn’t this where McWilliam had found Rodd’s body? Rodd, the man Cameron had murdered in cold blood?

Her fingers began to shake, and she clenched her hands into fists, digging her boot heels into the uneven ground, desperate to free herself. “I know how quickly she’ll grow tired of playing happy family with you. She might be willing to pretend to be Elspeth for a while. She might find that amusing. Hell, she’ll probably even enjoy the flattery. But it won’t last,” she forced out a laugh. “You should just give up now, because nothing ever lasts with Miss Amelia Blair.”

“She still hates you after all these years. That seems pretty lasting to me.” He yanked her forward, practically pulling her arm from its socket. She whimpered in pain. It was the same arm that had been injured when

he'd pushed her down the hill path.

"She's selfish and stubborn and pigheaded," she said with renewed desperation. "If we're speaking ugly truth, then has she told you that it was her who dared Emily to go swimming in that loch? I tried to stop Emily, but neither of them would listen to me."

"Pitying story," he scoffed. "I don't care about ye. If you're not going to take the blame for the crime, then your usefulness has long since passed." He let go of her arm, and she fell to her knees again, unbalanced by the sudden release of pressure.

He was crazy if he thought Amelia could ever love him. He was crazy if he thought he could recreate his perfect family. And he was completely insane if he thought he could get away with kidnapping her. Both Rhona and Fenella had seen him drag her away. They wouldn't need a Bow Street Runner to solve this one. It absolutely didn't take a genius to add one and one together.

It was almost funny. She'd been kidnaped from her kidnapper. Needless to say, McWilliam was unlikely to see the funny side. In fact, he was sure to be furious.

If only he were here!

With a grunt, Cameron selected a stone from the top of the pile.

"I don't think you should do that," she warned. "The dead don't like it when you steal from them."

"You can pass on my apologies then." A dark smirk, and Rosa's blood ran cold.

"What are you doing?" She froze, her legs forgetting how to move in her panic. He was going to kill her!

He hefted the rock over his head, and his weak leg trembled with the effort.

*Bennie Cooke would fight!*

She struck out, kicking him in the knee.

Cameron swore, his mouth filthier than McWilliam's had ever been. The stone tumbled from his hands.

She kicked again, then bundled up her skirts in one hand and scrambled to her feet. "You're a monster and evil. I heard stories about how your father murdered three people; I just cannot believe it took me

this long to realize you're just as murderous."

One more kick to the knee, and his leg gave way beneath him. "I'm a governess," she said, wildly. "Do you really think I'm going to let one misbehaving man get the better of me, Master Cameron? I've spent the last two years dealing with three little boys who could give you the run around any day."

They hadn't been murdering madmen, but at this point she didn't think it a good idea to point that out. It was probably a better idea to shut her mouth and run back to the castle.

Dropping her skirts, she pretended to brush away the wrinkles, then tucked her hands under her arm, to hide the shaking. "You're pathetic," she said, without thinking, unable to help herself. "My cousin would never marry you if she could see you now."

"Fool." Cameron launched himself at her. Wrapping his arms around Rosa's knees, he tackled her to ground.

A shriek escaped her mouth as she was engulfed by Cameron's dead weight.

McWilliam's heart dropped into his stomach. From a distance, he saw Cameron take down Rosa. She fell, practically disappearing from sight under his uncle.

Without thinking, he kicked Mist into a gallop. She charged forward, and McWilliam doubled over, grabbing at the back of Cameron's kilt as he passed. He caught the fabric between his fingers, and yanked, heaving his uncle up.

Jumping from the saddle, he punched Cameron straight in the nose. It cracked under his fist. But he didn't wait for the blood that he knew would come. Instead, he gathered Rosa up, setting her on Mist.

"Get out of here," he barked. Barely waiting for her to gather up the reins, he smacked Mist's rump. She nicked at him, then broke into a trot.

"What the hell are ye doing?" he roared at Cameron.

His uncle clutched his nose with one hand, and glared at him through narrowed, watering eyes. "She's poisoned your mind. You're not

thinking straight.”

“I’m thinking perfectly straight. You’re the one who kidnapped Rosa, and right in front of Rhona. What were you thinking?”

“He murdered Rodd, and he knows where Amelia is,” Rosa said from behind him.

He cast a glance over his shoulder. Mist stood with her back to them all about ten feet away. Rosa shrugged, dusting more dirt and grass from her gown as though she’d tumbled from the saddle. “She never did like me,” she added with a nod towards the horse.

“I...” He blinked, trying to clear his thoughts. “You killed Rodd?”

“Yes,” Rosa said, when Cameron clamped his mouth shut. “And he stole your 3,000 pounds.” She quickly explained to him everything Cameron had confessed to her on their ride to the Rocky Ruins. He could barely believe his ears, but he knew Rosa wasn’t lying. He trusted her completely.

“After all this time,” he said to Cameron when Rosa was finished, “I trusted you. Hearn trusted you,” he said, naming his father. He straightened his shoulders. “You might be family, but I’m still your laird and you fall under my jurisdiction.” He wrapped an arm around Rosa’s shoulders, tucking her safely against his side. Staring straight into Cameron’s eyes, he didn’t blink and he didn’t back down. “Mark my words, Uncle, you will be punished for your crimes.”

Using Mist’s reins as he had once before, McWilliam bound Cameron’s hands behind his back. His uncle could barely walk, his damaged knee black and blue with the bruises from Rosa’s boot, so they bundled him up onto Mist. She flicked her ears and pawed the ground as if to say, ‘Get him off me.’

Traveling in silence, it took them longer to get back because he and Rosa had to walk. He tried to keep his eyes on his uncle, but every time he caught sight of Cameron he couldn’t help but shudder. First a murdering grandfather and now a murdering uncle. It was beginning to really look like madness ran in his family.

Nay! That was never going to happen, of that he was utterly

determined. His parents, especially his father, had been wonderful people. Kind, caring, loving, intelligent people. He only had to look at Rhona to be reminded of that. She was an amazing young woman who'd inherited so many of his parents' best qualities—and a couple she seemed to have picked up all on her own. As for himself...well, now he had so much more to live for. Rhona and his soon-to-be nephew (or niece), and the English thief who wasn't a thief at all.

He slipped Rosa's hand into his, curling his fingers tight. No matter what happened next, no matter how many trials there were in their future, he'd never let anything happen to his family. Not until the last breath left his body.

Back at the castle, Cameron was hustled into his chamber, the door locked tight behind him and a guard put on duty. He'd stay there for three days, when McWilliam would hear his case at the Whitsunday trials and pass down judgement. Then, at long last, all this mess would be over.

It was hard to believe Rosa had only been in his life for nine days; it felt like a lifetime.

He looked down at her, but couldn't find the right words. Technically, she'd never agreed to marry him, and now this was all over she could easily decide to return home. His chest tightened. He couldn't let that happen.

"Ye can't return to England. You're still a fugitive," he growled. Even to his own ears, he sounded grumpier than he'd intended.

She blinked. "I guess I am."

"And I can't send Cameron to Leeds," he said, trying to sound a little more reasonable and failing. "I can't risk even the slightest possibility of him getting free and harming someone else." And, even though it felt like he'd said it already a hundred times before, said: "He's my responsibility."

They were standing in the middle of the courtyard. There were a couple of people milling around, he guessed they were waiting for him to say something reassuring now the murderer had been caught. He could see Mary out of the corner of his eye. She had her arms crossed

over her chest and was watching Rosa with something like curiosity.

Rhona had also come down from her room. She'd wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, and seemed to be using it to hide her stomach from view. Even though she wasn't showing yet, it wouldn't be long before everyone knew.

At his glance, she took half a step forward. Of everyone here, he owed her an explanation the most. Not only had she recently lost her father, but now also the father of her child and her beloved uncle. If he had anything to do with it, she'd never lose anyone else again.

But first, he had something more urgent to say.

"Thistle..."

Rosa frowned. She'd also been looking around the courtyard, but turned her attention back to him. "Aye?"

He gritted his teeth. He was a warrior and a laird and by far the largest person on the estate, but right now, facing a five foot two inch England lass with bronze hair and a smile that could melt ice, he felt more terrified than ever before. He couldn't bear it if she refused him again. He opened his mouth but no words came out.

Ignoring the people gathering around them in the courtyard, Rosa stood up on her tip toes and wrapped her arms around McWilliam's neck. He was too stubborn for his own good. And frustrating and not at all like the England dandies in Hyde Park, but Rosa didn't think it was possible to love him more. Her whole body felt elated, as if her feet might lift from the ground at any moment. Truly weightless.

Right at this moment, he looked a little stunned. She didn't blame him. It had been one hell of a day. And now, not only did he have to deal with the consequences of a murdering grandfather, but also a murdering uncle.

Either way, after everything that had happened, she was absolutely sure about one thing: he'd never have to deal with it alone.

"Lord Laird," she said, tangling a hand in his hair, "marry me."

And without waiting for his answer, she captured his lips with her own in a kiss that he wasn't likely to forget in a hurry.

## Epilogue

*Six months later*

The last of the evening light had just disappeared beyond the distant horizon, casting Uilleim Castle into shadow. Rosa pulled her cloak tighter around her body, trying to fend off the biting cold of a Scottish winter.

Glenn clicked his tongue disapprovingly, and Rosa rolled her eyes. “When McWilliam asked you to keep an eye on me, I’m not sure this is actually what he had in mind.” The young man had barely left her side since her husband had left yesterday morning for business at McCrae Estate.

“It’s too cold be outside in your condition,” Glenn answered, not afraid to give as much as he got.

“In my condition? I’m expecting. Not dying.” She touched Glenn’s upper arm with affection. His beard, which easily brushed the collar of his shirt, lent him an air of gruffness, but Rosa wasn’t fooled. He was a loyal young man, and if McWilliam had to insist on a bodyguard while he was away, then she was glad it was him.

Not that she did need a bodyguard. There’d been no trouble since Cameron’s incarceration. No murders, no thefts. Nothing but peace and quiet and loving.

Sure, she could never return to England. But Uilleim Estate was more her home than London or Bradford had ever been. In just six short months, she’d learnt more about sheep than any city girl could possibly find encouraging, but she had more friends now than she’d ever had in the hustle and bustle of England. And with McWilliam in her life, she couldn’t imagine ever wanting more.

Except...

She dropped her hand to her swollen belly, a smile playing with her lips. All was well.

What about the stolen money, a voice asked at the back of her mind. Apart from the 500 pounds they'd found in Rodd's cottage, they hadn't been able to locate it. Cameron wasn't telling anyone where it was hidden. For all they knew Amelia had it.

Amelia... McWilliam had wanted to alert the Bow Street Runners to Amelia's part in the theft and murderers, but Rosa had asked him not to. Panic churned in her stomach as it always did when she thought of her cousin. Had she done the right thing letting her off? Amelia hadn't actually hurt anyone herself. She'd just been foolish enough to listen to Cameron. And Rosa couldn't really hate her for that. Both Rhona and McWilliam and everyone on this estate had been fooled by him too.

Rosa let out a deep, slow breath. Amelia was young yet. There was still hope for her. And Emily—the pain of her death would stay with Rosa forever, there was no denying it. Even though she was slowly beginning to come to terms with the fact that it hadn't been her fault. And, as McWilliam had become prone to saying, it was in the past and now was the time to look to the future.

"There," Glenn broke the silence, pointing into the darkness.

Rosa straightened, and, a second later, Mist trotted into view. A square-shouldered, six-foot tall Scot, in a belted plaid and dark jacket, wasted no time. Dismounting, he closed the distance between them with three great strides.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight against his side. As he always did.

"What are ye doing out here, Thistle? It's freezing."

"I didn't think you could feel the cold," she teased. He was radiating as much heat as ever.

"But I can imagine it's freezing." He pulled off his jacket, wrapping it around her shoulder, then tucked Rosa under his arm.

"I can look after myself," she said, mock-glaring up at him.

"Aye. That's what I'm afraid of." A sly smile.

"There's time for that later," she berated, heat touching her cheeks,

knowing Glenn could hear every word. “Rhona’s asking for you.”

He frowned. “Is she...”

“Well. And so too is her bairn,” she answered, adopting her new family’s traditional tongue.

“She’s had the bairn?” He lent back to better see her face, and while he was covered in a layer of shadow, she could still see the silver halo around each of his beautiful storm-blue eyes.

“Aye.” She couldn’t help but smile. “That’s what I’ve been waiting here to tell you.”

A smile split his face. “A lass? A lad?”

His excitement was palpable. “Mr High and Mighty, King of the Castle, you’ll have to see for yourself.”

“You’re not going to tell me.” He nipped at her bottom lip in the way that always managed to melt her insides. “Not even if I ask nicely?”

“Maybe...” She narrowed her eyes, in her sternest governess look. “But you’re going to have to try very, very hard.”

“That, sweetheart, sounds like a challenge.” He lowered his head, his gaze fixated on her mouth. “And I do so love a challenge.”

THE END