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LADY OF TWO LAIRDS

SEDONIA GUILLONE

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Taming Kate

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Taming Kate is now available from Loose Id.

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Sedonia Guillone

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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage).

Lady of Two Lairds

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Dedication

To Mitch, always.

Thanks: To Mitch and Allyn for all your support. Thanks, Ansley - you're the best editor ever! And thanks to everyone at Loose Id for taking me in and making me a part of this wonderful place.

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Prologue

Glenparry, Scottish Highlands

July, 1913

“Leda, don’t leave me.”

Leda picked up Caitlynn’s hand from the sheets and gazed down at the young woman in the bed.

Cait’s blue eyes were wild with pain. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and upper lip. With surprising strength, Caitlynn gripped Leda’s fingers in her own.

“Of course I won’t leave you, Caity.” Leda’s gut felt like a cloth being wrung by iron hands. She forced a reassuring smile while fighting down a wave of nausea. “But I must check you.”

Caitlynn’s heaving breaths filled the bedchamber. The air weighed heavily around them, potent with the scent of blood. Outside, the summer storm pounded at the windowpanes, lashing rain in torrential streaks against the glass.

Leda looked up at the maid. “Audrey, please go watch for Dr. Burns.”

“Yes, miss.” The young woman rushed out.

Leda looked at Duncan, who remained standing in the doorway, watching his wife, even though she had advised him repeatedly to wait downstairs. She almost asked him again, wishing to spare him the agony of the scene before him.

He met her gaze, his dark brows drawn together. “I’m not going,” he said, as if reading her mind.

Leda nodded and put her attention back on Cait. Gently releasing Cait's hand, Leda pulled back the linen sheets and goose down comforter and frowned. The sheets and nightgown had been changed less than two hours previously and already needed changing again. Although her labor had begun the day before, Cait was not nearly dilated enough. Leda knew the woman couldn't go on much longer this way, but could not, in her heart, hope for anything except a healthy birth. She wanted to save them so badly. She loved Caitlynn.

And she loved Duncan. She would have done anything to help him, the guardian who had given her a life when she'd had none. She couldn't bear for him to lose his wife and unborn child, especially when he'd already suffered so much, having fought in South Africa. He deserved to have his joy.

"How is she?" Duncan's deep voice carried in a tight whisper across the shadowy room.

Leda looked over her shoulder at the laird, handsomely dark and brooding, as somber in appearance now as he always was. "I don't know yet, Duncan. I'm sorry." She looked back down at the suffering woman. Remaining calm was everything if she were to remember all her training. Her mother had trained her in midwifery, and something her mum had often told her now rang loudly in her mind. *No matter how much you do for the birthing mother, in the end she's in God's hands.*

Caitlynn turned her head on the pillow and looked at him. "Duncan," she breathed.

Duncan rushed into the room and knelt by his wife's side. He took her hand just as a contraction gripped her body.

"It hurts, Duncan ..." Cait arched her body with an obviously painful contraction and let out a mangled wail.

"Dammit, Leda. Do something!" he growled.

Leda fought her rising panic. The sweat on her own body beaded like droplets of ice. "I need to change her sheets and gown." The knowledge that Caitlynn might die seemed to fill the bedchamber with poisonous certainty. "When the doctor gets here ..."

"You *are* the doctor now."

Leda nodded, pushing back her tears. No amount of training had truly prepared her for this kind of agony. She reached for the pile of fresh linens and approached the bed.

Duncan pressed his lips into Caitlynn's hand. "Fight, my love," he whispered fiercely.

Caitlynn heaved labored breaths. "I ... I ... will." She inhaled heavily several more times before Leda saw her pull his hand closer to her. "Promise me ..."

He sank down, leaning over her. "Promise you what, love?"

Caitlynn's chest heaved and she swallowed hard. "Promise that whatever happens, you won't blame Leda. She's done all she could --" Another contraction caused her to swallow her words.

Duncan kissed her hand again and wiped a gentle palm across her forehead. His tortured expression tore her open inside.

Leda understood the glaze of helplessness over his eyes and wished she could trade her own life for Cait's. "You can stay here with her," she told him softly. "Let her squeeze your hand." The contractions were too close together now. There was no time to change the bedding. She set down the linens and gently bunched Caitlynn's nightgown up to her waist.

Caitlynn's moans sang viciously in her own ears and her heart thundered. Thankfully, her mother's words also rang in her mind. *Dive into your heart, Leda, she always told her. Rest there and do what is needed.*

Leda wet a cloth in the basin and tenderly swabbed the perspiration off Caitlynn's face and neck. She smoothed a comforting hand over the swell of the woman's belly. The movement inside was faint. "Caitlynn, when I say 'ready,' you need to push, as hard as you can. Can you do that?"

Caitlynn nodded against the pillow. Tendrils of her hair lay plastered to her pale cheeks. Her hand clenched Duncan's large, strong one. His other hand rested on her golden hair, darkened with sweat.

"All right, Caity, push!"

Caitlynn did as she was told, releasing a loud, strangled wail, her cries melting into the sound of torrential rain pelting the tall windows of the bedroom.

For nearly an hour, they repeated this process. Leda tried to ignore the frightening amount of blood seeping onto the sheets. She could not imagine a person, especially one as slender and petite as Caitlynn, losing this much blood and surviving.

Leda remained crouched at Cait's feet, encouraging her to push.

Finally, as the first hint of dawn lit the sky from ink to gray and the storm abated, the bairn's head showed. Caitlynn, however, had hemorrhaged so severely, she had no strength left to push.

Leda slipped her fingers around the bairn's head, gently easing it along.

After what seemed an eternity, the entire head emerged. Leda suppressed a gasp at the grayish blue appearance of the child's scalp. "You're almost there, Caity," she whispered, grateful that Cait's nightgown shielded her and Duncan's view.

Another hour later, the bairn slipped out of Caitlynn's womb, lifeless, the umbilical chord wrapped tightly around its neck. Leda's own strength drained rapidly, from both exhaustion and helplessness. Every muscle in her body ached fiercely, including her heart. She felt Caitlynn's grip on her hand weaken, until the delicate fingers slipped from hers and came to rest on the bedding.

"Caitlynn!" Duncan whispered, kneading Caitlynn's other hand, furiously stroking her forehead. "Caitlynn!" His gaze shot up, his dark eyes fierce. "Save her!" he cried in an agonized whisper.

Hot tears rolled down Leda's cheeks. She spent the next few hours spooning comfrey tea into Cait's mouth and helping Audrey change the sheets, but she already knew it was too late. Cait had lost too much blood and her pulse weakened with each passing moment.

Dr. Burns finally arrived and did what he could to stop the bleeding, but soon looked up from where he bent over Cait and shook his head solemnly.

When the doctor left, Duncan remained with his wife's body. Leda sagged against the doorframe, watching them through a blur of tears.

He must have felt her presence for he turned around. In the next moment, his expression hardened. He met her gaze for another second, then turned back to Cait.

Bile rose in Leda's gut. She clutched the doorpost for support as the last bit of strength drained from her. She had read everything he felt in his expression. His silent blame seared her to her core. She had lost Caitlynn, her beloved friend. She had failed Duncan. She would never forgive herself.

Duncan would never forgive her.

Chapter One

One week later.

Duncan's powerful presence filled the room. She sensed him stealing up behind her. The laird's strong hands closed gently but firmly on her hips. The heat from his hands burned through the thin cotton of her nightgown, pressing into her soft flesh with possessive fervor.

The moment she had been craving for years had finally come.

"Phyllida." Duncan's breath caressed the side of her neck, causing her eyelids to flutter closed. He pulled her back against him, sliding his hands from her hips, across the soft, feminine roundness of her belly. His palms came to rest flat on her ribcage, the index fingers of each hand brushing dangerously close to the undersides of her breasts.

Leda allowed her weight to rest against him. She reveled in the protective masculine hardness of his body pressed to her back. Duncan made her feel so safe and warm. Her eyes flew open when the hardness of his arousal pushed into the crevice between her buttocks. Her breathing deepened and she put her hands over his, allowing her fingertips to explore the warm skin, veins, and crisp dark hair of his strong hands. His breath, husky and ragged now, pulsed in her ear, beckoning her with erotic promises. "Duncan, I failed you. I'm so sorry." She began to cry.

"Hush now," he told her.

In silence, they gazed through the open window at the trees and lawn of the estate. In the far distance, rolling green hills dipped down to Loch Garmond in the far reaches of the glen.

"My beautiful Leda," Duncan whispered. "I forgive you." The husky tenor of his voice, more potent than the finest whiskey, sent thrills of heat through her loins, and her heart

ached with the release of her guilt. His forgiveness was the sweetest, most healing balm. Slowly, tentatively, he slid his palm upward, off her ribcage, to the soft swells of her breasts ...

Leda sat bolt upright, her chest heaving. She clasped a palm to her forehead, collecting herself. She'd had similar dreams about Duncan for the last five years, and they always shook her. But none so badly as this one.

The moist summer breeze wafted in through the open window, gently lifting the gauzy white curtains. The early pink of sunrise showed itself above the distant hills.

Her sex still pulsed madly from the dream and her nipples tingled against her nightgown. The sensations filled her with guilt. Because of her incompetence, Duncan was burying his beloved Caitlynn and their stillborn child this very day, and she, Phyllida, did not even have the decency to suspend her romantic desire -- no, her lust -- for the clansman she had secretly loved for years. Especially when it was her fault that Caitlynn was dead.

Leda exhaled and fell back against the pillows, her heart clenching painfully. She balled her hands into fists to stop them from trembling. For the millionth time, she ran over all the possibilities in her mind, watching herself staunch the flow of blood that had drained Caitlynn of life. She had employed every ounce of the knowledge of midwifery and nursing her mother had imparted to her. Still, the horrible sense that she could have done more haunted her, like a burr under her skin.

Sagging more deeply into the bed, she stared at the sunrise. The estate already felt darker and gloomier without Caitlynn, the beautiful woman who had brought light and laughter to the overburdened, duty-bound laird. Cait had been a stark contrast to her husband, who carried the weight of his responsibilities with a heavy air. Duncan had surprised everyone who knew him during his short marriage, for he'd made up in those five years for all the laughter he'd missed.

Now Caitlynn was gone, and Leda had to live out the rest of her days knowing she had killed her.

Suddenly, Leda remembered that Ian, Duncan's younger brother, would be home this morning for the funeral. She and Ian were the same age and had grown up most of their lives together. The thought of seeing him, her childhood playmate and best friend, was what propelled her to throw back the comforter and push herself away from the soft depths of her mattress. She stepped into her slippers and crossed the bedroom to her wardrobe. Pulling open the wide doors, she considered what to wear. Not that the selection was wide. She'd always preferred an everyday uniform of blouse, trousers, sweater, and Wellies to skirts and dresses.

In spite of her sadness, Leda smiled at unbidden memories that rose in her mind. Caitlynn, who had been the embodiment of femininity, had tried a thousand times, unsuccessfully, to break Leda of wearing her masculine garb. Even though Leda had always felt like a lummo next to Duncan's wife, her masculine clothing had shielded her, kept her

invisible from the eyes of men, especially Duncan's. If he didn't notice her, it was much easier to ignore the fact that he could never return the affection she harbored for her guardian. Besides, no one could ride horses, climb hills and trees, and scout the banks of a loch in a tea gown.

Audrey poked her head inside the door. "Do ye need a hand, Miss Leda?"

Leda smiled at the woman, her peer in age, and as far as she was concerned, social status. Before her father was lost at sea in his fishing boat, Leda had spent the early years of her life in a rustic cottage in the Orkneys, and there had never been servants. She had never truly grown accustomed to being waited on. "I don't think so, Audrey. Thank you."

Audrey frowned and bustled into the room anyway. "I donna' believe ye, miss." In a whoosh of starched skirts, she went to a chest of drawers and fished a corset and dark stockings from a drawer.

Leda sighed as she pulled a dark skirt and blouse off their hangers.

"Let me do that, Miss Leda." Audrey crossed the room briskly and ushered Leda to her dressing table. With practiced fingers, the maid swiftly undid Leda's long braid and brushed out her hair. "Yer hair is so pretty."

Leda heard the sympathy in Audrey's tone. She knew the young woman's words were meant to soothe and distract. All the same, she considered her long, sand-colored hair that fell in smooth waves under Audrey's gentle hands. "Do you really think so?"

"I wouldna' say it otherwise, miss."

She watched Audrey coil her hair and pin it swiftly into an elegant topknot. The pleasant tug on her scalp was relaxing and reminded her of all the times her mother had brushed and braided her hair for her when she was small.

Unbidden, a memory of her dream skittered across her mind, sending ripples through her. It was Caitlynn, actually, who had spoken to her of the mysterious, sensual world of pleasure between men and women. Caitlynn had rhapsodized to her often about her husband's eyes and the passion smoldering in their depths. She felt heat creep into her cheeks. "Thank you, Audrey."

"Ye're welcome." The dark-haired girl smiled. Sympathy radiated from her dark eyes.

"I wish you would call me Leda," she said softly. "I mean ... after what we've been through together."

Audrey cast her eyes downward, looking shy. "Aye, miss, I mean, Leda." She looked back up, a flush of warmth spreading through her as their gazes met in the mirror. Her smile then faded and she put a gentle hand on Leda's shoulder. "I know ye did all ye could for her, miss ... Leda."

Audrey's voice caressed her pain and Leda swiped at a sudden errant tear with the heel of her hand. "Thank you, Audrey. You're very kind."

They watched their reflections a moment, and then Audrey set the hairbrush down on the mahogany dressing table. "Let's get ye dressed, then. Master Ian will be here any moment. I know ye'll want to greet him."

"Aye, I will." Leda pushed up from the dressing stool, suddenly very anxious to see her friend. He had left his tour in Italy the moment he'd received the telegram about Cait.

Audrey helped Leda lace her corset and hook her stockings onto the garters.

She had just finished dressing and gone downstairs when the motorcar pulled up in the gravel driveway. The top was rolled down and Leda saw the smooth flash of Ian's chestnut hair. She went swiftly to the driver's side, catching her breath at how handsome he looked, even in mourning garb of somber gray tweed and a black tie. His green-gold eyes took her in as soon as he opened the door and stepped out. Leave it to Ian to be unable to hide the mischievous delight in life that characterized him.

"Leda," he said softly. He opened his arms to her. "Come here."

Without thinking, Leda stepped into Ian's arms, enveloped immediately in compassionate warmth. She felt his lack of blame and rested in the comfort, even though she knew the truth. Like Cait, Ian, too, had a way of bringing light and cheer into darkness. *The Golden Man*. Cait's nickname for Ian now surged into her mind. Indeed, his presence was a stark contrast to his elder brother's dark, world-on-his-shoulders sense of life. Without wanting to, Leda found herself releasing the tears she suppressed in Duncan's presence. "It's my fault," she sobbed.

She felt Ian's hand gently stroking her hair. "It's all right, little swan," he murmured close to her ear. "You're not to blame."

Leda allowed her weight to sag against Ian's broad chest. His athletic frame offered a comforting wall of strength.

Ian squeezed her gently. "Thank God you were there for her," he went on. "Perhaps she would have suffered worse without your comfort."

Leda sobbed quietly for another moment into the coarse tweed of his jacket before lifting her face. Ian was well over a head taller and she had to crane her head back to look into his eyes. Like Duncan, Ian had a strong set to his jaw and a handsome cleft in his chin. His lips were arched in a masculine way and high cheekbones accentuated the planes of his clean-shaven cheeks. "Thank you, Ian," she whispered hoarsely.

He brushed away her tears with gentle fingertips. "There now, lass. You'll be all right. I promise." He smiled gently down at her, his lightly tanned skin crinkling handsomely at the corners of his eyes.

His touch sent unexpected ripples of pleasure along her spine, a welcome contrast to the ache of guilt that had been her constant companion since Caitlynn's death. When he released her, Leda suppressed a cry of disappointment. Ian's strength and warm arms around

her left her with a craving for more comfort and protection. She wanted to latch onto him and never let go. To her relief, Ian slipped his arm companionably through hers.

John, the head butler, had already pulled Ian's valise from the trunk of the car. Leda saw from the size of Ian's bag that he only meant to stay a short time, a few days perhaps, before he would return to his young gentleman's tour of Europe. A deep sense of desolation swept over her, as if he'd already left.

"Where is he?" Ian asked as they went up the wide stone steps to the front door.

Leda's stiffened at the reference to Duncan and she tightened her hold on Ian's arm so as not to stumble. She hesitated. "He spends most of his time locked up in his study."

Ian looked down at her, his hazel eyes studying her intently. "Like when he came back from South Africa?"

Leda thought of that period when Duncan had returned from his service in the Boer War. He'd been sullen and quiet, speaking only in terse phrases, having more whiskey than usual. She nodded slowly. "Worse, I think."

He sighed. "I shouldn't wonder."

John held the wide carved door open for them. They stepped into the front entry, surrounded immediately by the dark wooden paneling, displays of the MacGregor arms, medieval tapestries, and the black and white tiled floor.

"Ian, I've barely seen him since ... that night. I don't dare approach him." She felt a fresh rush of tears heat her eyes. "I feel certain he ... hates me."

Ian stopped and turned to her, his hands on her shoulders. "Has he said that?"

"No, but after Caity died ..." Her lip trembled and she struggled to say the words, "He looked up at me and I saw the blame in his eyes."

Ian squeezed her shoulder gently. Sympathy shone in his eyes. "He couldn't hate you, Leda. He knows you did all he could. If he did look at you that way, it would only be because he feels powerless and must blame someone. Just give him time." He touched her cheek. "You're our little swan." Smiling down at her, his eyes darkened with a strange expression Leda had never seen in them before. Just as quickly, it vanished.

At that moment, John entered the hall and informed them that breakfast was ready.

Ian released her and stepped back. "You go ahead, little swan. I'll be along in a minute. I want to find Duncan."

Leda nodded, disappointed to be away from Ian's comforting presence for even a few moments. She turned slowly, moving in the direction of the dining room.

The voluminously long table had been set with a silver breakfast service. Sighing, she took her seat at the end and poured herself a cup of tea. In the nearby fireplace, a crackling fire took the morning chill from the room. Her stomach tightened at the prospect of seeing Duncan, and she sipped her tea, remembering Ian's comforting words. He had sounded very certain that she wasn't responsible for Cait's death. He seemed to have utter faith in her

goodness. In the moment he'd held his arms out to her, he had been the truest friend she'd had since her mum died.

She remembered the feel of Ian's arms around her, gentle yet strong. In spite of the carefree spirit he presented to the world, he had a core of strength, so different from, and yet so like his brother's. She had felt it. He had let her lean on him, something she had never done before. She felt loved and cared for.

Ian had grown into as handsome, kind, and wonderful a man as he'd been a childhood friend.

Footsteps echoed in the hall outside the dining room. Her heartbeat quickened and she put one hand over her heart, struggling to catch her breath, fearing she'd panic if Duncan walked in. She relaxed when she saw Ian.

He came over to the end of the table and seated himself. The sparkle in his hazel eyes had dampened. "He wouldn't come in to breakfast," he told her softly, as he unfolded his napkin and draped it in his lap.

Leda nodded. Tears of both relief and guilt flooded her eyes. She fought them back and looked down at her plate. "It's because I'm here," she whispered.

Ian's silence confirmed her statement.

Her lip trembled and her stomach tightened, making the food on her plate as appealing as rat poison. "I told you. He blames me, doesn't he?" She stared at Ian. Panic rose when he avoided her gaze.

"He's not thinking clearly, Leda," he said finally. "He'll come around. I know him. He loved Cait. Somehow he was able to be himself when he was with her. I'll talk to him." He gazed at her with earnest concern.

The affection in his eyes seared her, and she felt her heart latch onto Ian even more.

He looked at her again and reached his hand to her arm. "I promise, little swan. I will speak to him."

* * * * *

The minister's voice droned in the background, reciting Biblical verses about life and death, times and seasons, to the mourners huddled around the grave in the gray mist.

Leda glanced at Duncan. He had been her guardian since his father, Malcolm MacGregor, passed away two years ago. Malcolm, who'd been dear friends with Leda's mother, had asked Duncan to watch over Leda until she was twenty-five. Duncan had always made certain that Leda had all the advantages a young lady should have and she was grateful to him. He was not obligated to care. He could have sent her back to her native village when Malcolm died. But he hadn't. *This is your home now, Leda, if you wish it*, he had told her one day in his study. *You're a MacGregor*. He'd been pacing in front of the large fireplace, his hands clasped behind his back, its strength unhidden by the tweed jacket he wore. In

spite of the grief over his father's death, his tone and the expression in his dark eyes were kind.

Perhaps it had been those words that had sparked her first womanly affection for him. She'd wanted very much to stay, and he'd not only let her stay, but had emphasized the fact that she was one of them.

Duncan would probably no longer care what happened to her. Or worse, he'd want her to leave Glenparry and suffer the rest of her life knowing she'd let Cait die. He'd remained locked away in his study since Cait's death, yet Leda felt certain that, as soon as he emerged, he'd order her to pack her things and leave for Orkney.

The newly widowed laird of Glenparry stood on the opposite side of the grave, staring into the gaping hole that held his wife and bairn. His chiseled, stone-like features, framed by raven-dark hair, seemed frozen.

His grief hit her with such force it might as well have been a physical blow to her stomach. The image of Duncan kneeling at Cait's side, gripping her hand, begging her to fight for her life, haunted her. Since that moment, anger and sadness had closed over him like a shroud, as if he were burying his heart in the grave with Caitlynn.

He never looked up, staring stonily into the grave.

Leda bowed her head, her cheeks burning from remorse and the gaping well of sadness that engulfed her. She covered her eyes with one gloved hand as tears welled in her eyes.

Suddenly, she felt someone grasp her other hand, squeezing it warmly. She looked up into Ian's face. He smiled at her briefly and stood next to her, his shoulder touching hers, holding her hand. Leda allowed her weight to sag just a bit against him.

With the second shovelful of earth on the coffin, the graveside gathering began to leave, filing back to the carriages and motorcars on the road. Still hand in hand, Leda let Ian lead her to the car that would take them back to the house. She squeezed his hand, gleaning strength from his touch. She dreaded the prospect of sitting in the large, airy parlor full of black-clad mourners, but knowing Ian was there with her made it bearable.

Leda sighed. She had not felt this sad since her mother had passed away five ago. Her father had died in his fishing boat off Orkney when she was a bairn, so she did not remember him. In the years since then, however, death had visited the MacGregor clan enough to last her for many lifetimes.

Ian squeezed her hand, pulling her against his side as they walked to the car.

Leda glanced at his handsome profile, taking great comfort from his kindness.

He helped her into the backseat of the motorcar and slid onto the seat beside her, once again putting his arm about her shoulders.

She allowed her head to rest against his shoulder.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

She caught her breath as the driver pulled out onto the road.

Ian's body against hers was warm and strong, making her feel as if, just maybe, things really would be all right. She turned, snuggling closer against him, wishing they could just ride on forever, just like this.

Chapter Two

Late that night, Ian paced his room like a caged animal. He'd given up trying to sleep about forty minutes earlier when he realized he needed to try and heal the fast-developing rift between the two most important people in his life.

Poor Leda. The look of suffering in her eyes was unbearable. Caity had been a dear friend to her, and he couldn't imagine what it felt like for Leda to bear a moment's blame for her death. This morning, when he'd pulled up to the house and seen her, a surge of protectiveness like he'd never felt before had overwhelmed him.

When he'd gone into Duncan's study and seen the condition he was in and the words of blame he'd used toward Leda, he'd understood why.

Yes, Duncan was grieving and grief could affect a person's mind and heart in certain ways, make them feel hatred that wouldn't normally exist. But the thought of Duncan hating Leda made Ian panic. Having Duncan and Leda here together had always provided a touchstone, a safe haven for him all the years he'd spent in boarding school, and now at Oxford. A peaceful home with the people he loved in it had made the years of being away so much bearable. All these years, he'd even dared to think that he could one day come back here and live with them, even when he married. Hatred could tear them apart.

The panic rose and intensified. Earlier in the evening, he'd resolved to wait a few days to speak to Duncan, to see if he regained some rationality. But he couldn't wait.

Ian snatched his robe from where it was slung over a chair, shrugged into it, and left the room for his brother's study.

* * * * *

Leda tossed and turned in her bed. She dreaded the prospect of falling asleep and battled with her desire to run to Ian for comfort. Since Cait had died, she'd either had

nightmares of Cait's screams and the stillborn child, or she'd dreamed of Duncan. Either way, she dreaded the unconscious state. With Ian here, she felt she had somewhere to turn with her fears.

The bit of affection Ian had given her had only made her hunger for more, and she found herself wishing he would come to her room and hold her. He had comforted her and helped her to feel less like a monster. The need overwhelmed her after the last few days of emotional torment.

She spent another few tortured moments debating whether to awaken him. He'd traveled all the way from Italy on a moment's notice to be here on time for the funeral. Perhaps he would not want her pestering him in the middle of the night.

Finally, she decided to just see if he was awake. She'd just peek under the door. If a light was on, she'd knock. Otherwise, she'd go back to her room.

She rose, put on her wrap and slippers, and slipped out of her bedroom.

The large hallway sat in dark silence. She padded along the plush oriental runner, crossing the open part of the hall that led into the main stairway to the wing where Duncan's and Ian's bedrooms were.

She stopped by Ian's door, her hand poised to knock, when she noticed the door was slightly open. Her body tense, she listened. The room was dark and very quiet. She listened for the sound of his breathing. Her heart quickened. She knew it was improper for her to be here. Her conscience told her to go back to her room and wait until morning to see him. But she couldn't wait. With a trembling hand, she pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

Allowing her eyes to accustom themselves to the shadows, she saw the outline of the four-poster bed in the pale moonlight that filtered through the large, curtained window. She moved a bit closer, listening carefully for any sounds.

She stopped at the edge of the bed and looked at the rumpled bedding. He wasn't there. He must not have been able to sleep, either. The desire to find him overwhelmed her, propelling her from the room, back out into the hallway and down the stairs. When she reached the bottom of the staircase, she stood listening in the hushed shadows.

In moments, the sound of voices carried to her through the air and she walked softly in that direction. It led her to the door of Duncan's study, which was slightly open, a wedge of lamplight spilling into the hall. Her heart lurched and disappointment overwhelmed her. There would be no chance to see Ian as long as he was with Duncan. Leaning her weight against the wall, she sighed. A sense of foreboding told her to turn back, but she couldn't bring herself to go away. She was drawn to the door, where she stood listening for Ian's voice, feeling safer and comforted just to be near him.

She stood off to the side, her back pressed to the wall, straining to hear every word, although she knew she shouldn't be. Ian's and Duncan's voices carried into the hall. Her blood ran cold when she heard her name.

"You must stop blaming her, Duncan," Ian said.

Her heartbeat began to race and she listened, riveted.

"This is none of your business." Duncan's voice was a low growl and Leda detected a slur in his speech. He had been drinking.

"You know as well as I do that Cait's health was bad. The doctor in Edinburgh told you the risk of trying to have a child."

Duncan's voice rose. "I told you to mind your own business."

"She's a good soul, sweet and kind. You know she's not at fault."

"I *don't* know she's not at fault, Ian."

"Yes, you do. This is your grief speaking. You need to tell her."

"I'll do no such thing."

Leda's breathing felt suddenly constricted and she broke into a sweat in spite of the chill in the air.

"Her mother cared for our father, and Leda cared for Caitlynn. What are you going to do, banish her to the Orkneys where she came from?"

"Of course not," Duncan growled. "She's a MacGregor. I don't abandon my own."

"The way you're treating her *is* abandonment. You owe her more than this."

Duncan did not respond.

"The crofters love her," Ian continued when Duncan remained silent. "She's cared for every one of them when they've gotten sick. God knows, she's helped make your relations with them a hell of a lot easier."

"Let's see how they feel about her when she lets one of their own die in childbirth."

She cried out involuntarily at Duncan's words, drowning Ian's response. She flew away from the door, not knowing where she was headed until she found herself in the dark kitchen. She bumped into the large oak worktable in front of the hearth and doubled over, wracked by sobs. Duncan's last statement rang in her mind. She clutched at her mouth to prevent herself from wailing and rousing everyone in the house.

Suddenly, the electric lights went on. She looked up. Through her blur of tears she saw Ian in the doorway. He was in his pajamas and robe.

Without hesitation, he strode over and pulled her into his arms. Leda fell against him, burying her face against the soft material of his robe. "There, there," he crooned, stroking her hair.

"I'm sorry!" Leda choked out between sobs, clutching fistfuls of Ian's sleeves. "Oh, God, forgive me." Ian's arms tightened around her, holding her close. She felt his lips press tenderly into her hair.

"It'll be all right, little swan," he murmured against her hair. "Just let it out."

Leda clung to him, shaking and sobbing until she had no tears left.

When she had calmed, Ian held her gently away from him. His lips tugged into a small grin. "You shouldn't eavesdrop, Leda," he said, with a hint of humor. He brushed her tears away with his thumb, then reached into his robe pocket. "Here," he said, holding out a handkerchief. "It's clean."

"Thank you." Leda accepted the cloth and wiped her eyes. "I ... I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I was looking for you."

"Ah, I see." Ian gave her shoulders a squeeze. "Well, you found me." He grinned again. "Come up here and sit." He lifted her so that she sat on the edge of the large table.

"I miss Cait, Ian." She sniffled, pressing the handkerchief to her nose.

"So do I." Ian gently rubbed her arms. "She was special."

"If only I --"

Ian squeezed her shoulders, cutting her off. "There are no 'if onlys,' Leda." His voice was firm. "You did all you could. Her health was poor. You know that, don't you?"

Reluctantly, she nodded, surprised at the dark, serious way he regarded her.

"Aye," she murmured. "I just wish Duncan didn't hate me."

"He doesn't hate you. He's grief-stricken. He doesn't know what he's saying."

His words brought a ray of hope. "You don't think I should leave?"

To her surprise, a look of fear clouded his eyes. "Absolutely not! Don't you dare leave." He brushed his thumbs back and forth across her shoulders. "Glenparry would not be home without you here, Leda. At least not for me."

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"You heard me." The darkness left his face, replaced by a gentle smile. "I still remember that day you and your mum arrived here from Orkney. Father was so ill, and Duncan was his usual brooding self. You were like a ray of light in this place." He gazed at her for several heartbeats. "Being at school was always difficult and often lonely. But coming back here was hard, too. I began to feel I actually had a home here because of you."

Ian's confession brought fresh tears. She had always known he was fond of her, but she had never known how very much her being here had meant to him. She had always thought she was the only one who felt that way. "Ian, thank you." She reached out and embraced him.

Ian squeezed her. "You're welcome, little swan. I'm sorry I didn't say all this to you before."

Leda sighed deeply, snuggling against him, her hands splayed across Ian's back. Suddenly, her contentment was replaced by the acute awareness of hard muscles underneath her touch. A flush spread on her cheeks and throat, and her breathing grew slightly husky. His touch weakened her. Sudden spirals of heat coursed through her, whispering into her

breasts and down below, into her sex. She stilled, her hands resting on his back, which now rose and fell more heavily, too.

To her disappointment, Ian slowly disengaged from the embrace. The golden hue of his irises had darkened and his lids were heavy. He moved away slightly and cleared his throat. His customary mischievous grin came to his lips, although it seemed forced, and his eyes looked troubled. "Does Fanny still have her stash?"

It took her a moment for his question to register through her haze. She pulled her wrap more tightly around her, wondering if she'd imagined the tension of the previous moment. A fleeting memory of the time she and Ian had found the whiskey bottle years ago while playing hide and seek in the kitchen made her smile. "I don't know."

Mischief glinted in his eyes. "Wait here." He disappeared into the butler's pantry where Leda heard him opening cupboard doors. He reappeared in a moment, holding up the bottle of golden liquid in a triumphant gesture. "Same place as always."

His handsome grin spread across his face, causing Leda's heart to flutter. She watched him go to a cupboard and pull out two glasses, which he set down on the table next to her.

"This'll warm you right up, Leda." He opened the bottle and poured a shot into each glass. "Fanny won't miss a few drops." He handed her a glass and held his up. "Here's to better days in the future."

Leda saw a shadow of sadness darken his face and eyes, but only for a moment.

He grinned and clinked his glass lightly against hers. "Cheers." He tipped his head back and drained his glass in one swallow.

Gingerly, she took a sip of hers. She had never liked the acrid sting of whiskey and only ever took it medicinally. In spite of her distaste for it, the drink slid through her veins like liquid heat, leaving her body in a slightly languid state.

Ian put his glass down and refilled it. "Come on, Leda. You're falling behind." Humor touched his voice.

She smiled and took another tiny sip. Ian downed his second glass and set it back down on the table.

Leda waited to see if he poured another one for himself. Instead, he leaned one hand on the table, standing so close to her that part of her thigh pressed against his hip. Immediately, she began to tremble and took another sip of her whiskey, a larger one this time.

Ian's face was level with hers and he gazed at her. His hazel eyes had darkened again as he studied her. "I've never seen you with your hair down like that, not since we were bairns," he said softly. His gaze traveled the length of her braid where it hung down, sloping over her right breast.

Her heart began to gallop and she felt naked, in spite of the wrap over her nightgown. "No," she murmured. "I suppose not."

Ian levered his weight off the table and pressed in a bit closer. He brought with him the scent of the whiskey he'd drunk, mingled with shaving soap. "May I ask you something?"

Her heart quickened. "Of course."

"Has anyone come to keep company with you? Any suitors, I mean."

His question made her heart lurch. Never before had he shown any interest in her social state. "For me? No."

Ian raised his eyebrows. "You're kidding. I thought surely there would be several lads creeping 'round."

Heat ignited in her belly and flushed straight up her neck and into her cheeks. The pulsing between her thighs resurged. "You're the one who's kidding, Ian. Me? Suitors? Come now. No one wants a lass who runs around in trousers and Wellies."

Understanding flicked across his features. "Ah, that's right." The way he looked at her made her heart thump loudly. Since she had grown to womanhood, Ian was the first man ever to look at her with that soft shine that she'd seen in Duncan's eyes whenever he looked at Cait, even in the presence of others. The room began to tilt and her head swam.

He reached up and brushed his fingertips along her jaw line. His touch made her shiver pleasantly. "Those articles do hide your beauty, Leda."

His gaze moved over her face and hair, as if he had never seen her before.

"Beauty?"

He nodded. "Aye. You're features are very soft. Very feminine." The gold in his eyes darkened. "You even had me fooled."

She swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat. "Wha-- what do you mean?"

Ian moved his hand to her hair, smoothing his palm over it, and fingering the top portion of her braid. "I mean, you're very lovely." His hand came to rest on her hair, cradling her head gently. His eyelids hooded his eyes, which had grown dusky.

"Thank you, Ian." Her voice escaped in a whisper. She was barely able to speak, the way her heart thrashed about in her chest.

He continued to gaze at her. "You're twenty-one now. Why haven't you had a coming out?" You deserve one as much as any other lass."

"Cait wanted me to have one. I always refused."

Ian looked puzzled. "Why? You could have new dresses. You'd be stunning. I guarantee that in the same day you'd have at least four or five lads after you."

The thought was so ridiculous to her, she giggled.

He frowned. "I mean it, Leda. Don't you want someone?"

The question stunned her into silence, and she wondered fleetingly if Ian had seen inside her and knew of her secret love for Duncan. She looked at Ian, whose hand rested on her hair. The tenderness in his gaze so contrasted with the baleful glare Duncan had given

her the other day it sent flutters through her stomach and heart. Ian was now the first man who'd ever held her in his arms and told her she was lovely. He awakened the hunger that had slumbered inside her since she'd realized her love for Duncan would always be unrequited.

Yes, I do want someone, she wanted to say. *Someone who's kind, compassionate, handsome, who finds me lovely and tells me so. I want you.* She suppressed a gasp. How could she feel this way when she'd pined after Duncan for the last five years? The answer was simple. Ian was being kind to her. He was her best friend.

The words teetered on her lips. She did not dare speak them, even though they were true. Ian was as unattainable for her as Duncan had always been. Like his brother, Ian was a gentleman. He studied at Oxford and played cricket. He traveled to foreign lands. Although she, too, was a MacGregor, Leda knew her place. She was no higher in status than a crofter. Her privileges came from Duncan's good graces, as repayment to her mother for nursing Malcolm.

She caught her breath. "Only ... if he's ... like you."

Ian looked momentarily startled. Something strange flashed in his eyes, something that appeared to be sadness. He chuckled. "You can do far better than me." He removed his hand from her hair and leaned against the table, his palm resting on the surface, not far from her thigh.

"Why would you say such a thing, Ian?"

He chuckled again and looked down at the floor. "I say it because you deserve more than I could ever give you."

Leda heard the criticism in his tone and her heart ached. Immediately she thought he meant his status as the non-holding brother, the man who had to carve his way in the world and prove himself because he did not inherit the estate.

Emboldened, she reached out and placed her palm against his cheek, which was smooth but for the hint of growth that he would shave off in the morning. With gentle pressure, she bid him to look up at her. "Now it's my turn to tell you you're speaking nonsense."

She gazed into the greenish gold of his eyes. To her chagrin, he looked very sad. He put his hand over hers, gently pulling it away from his face and shook his head. "It's not nonsense, Leda. I know it to be true."

His hand was warm on hers and sent a flush of pleasant heat tingling in her arm. She loved his touch, which made her feel as heady as the whiskey.

"You're sweet and good-hearted," he said. "As well as bonny." His eyes studied her. "You deserve a prince."

"I don't want a prince. You're every bit as wonderful as a prince." Her voice escaped in a whisper. She was melting under his gaze. She realized, with a lurch of her heart, that they were discussing ... being together.

"You've always believed in me, haven't you, Leda? That's why I've always felt so safe with you." He moved in closer, so close she could feel the heat of his body. His breathing had gone ragged. "I've been so blind, little swan. So blind." He reached up and touched her cheek. "How could I have not seen you?"

Leda caught her breath softly. Her heart pumped madly and she could hear her blood rush in her ears. Her vision blurred and she felt drunk.

Ian leaned his face to hers and pressed his lips into her cheek. Her eyes fluttered closed at the sweet, sensual warmth that radiated into her skin. With his fingertips, he caressed her other cheek.

He rested his lips on her skin for several heartbeats before lifting his face away and gazing into her eyes.

The sound of a man clearing his throat resounded through the kitchen. Leda's heart thumped and her gaze whipped in the direction of the doorway.

Duncan stood there, watching them. His eyes registered surprise then narrowed.

Leda had never seen Duncan so unkempt, his skin so pale, or his hair mussed, disappearing into the crumpled white collar. Dark stubble covered his jaw.

Ian's hand tightened surreptitiously over hers out of the line of Duncan's vision. "What is it, Duncan?" he asked, breaking the tense silence.

Duncan's glaze flickered coldly over her face before falling on the whiskey bottle. "Pour me a glass of that, Ian."

"You've had enough, brother," Ian said softly. "You need to rest."

Duncan teetered a bit in the doorway, balancing himself with a hand on the doorpost. "I'm the one responsible for *you*, little brother. No' the other way 'round."

Ian released Leda's hand and stepped toward his brother. "Come, Duncan, I'll see you upstairs."

"Let me be," Duncan growled, waving him off, and almost falling over because of it. "I did no' mean to interrupt your party." He stared at Leda.

She felt herself cowering under his glare and fought back tears. "I'm sorry, Duncan," she whispered.

Duncan opened his mouth to speak, but Ian stepped between them, standing in front of Leda like a shield.

"Duncan, leave her alone. She's not at fault."

Duncan's mouth worked at the corner, and he shot another hard look at Leda.

"Go to bed, Duncan."

Duncan glared at her a moment longer, then at Ian. A low, mangled sound escaped his throat before he turned and staggered out of the kitchen.

As soon as he was gone, Leda let her tears escape. She covered her eyes and trembled.

Ian turned and embraced her. "It's all right," he crooned. "Please, Leda, calm down." He grasped her shoulders and held her away from him. "Listen to me. Listen carefully."

The pleading tone of his voice made her uncover her eyes and look at him.

"Don't you understand why he came down here in the first place?"

She shook her head, sniffing.

"He felt bad about what he said. I know it's all twisted inside him, but you must believe me." He paused and what looked like fear widened his eyes. "Leda, I'm afraid you'll feel driven away. I beg you not to go. I know it's more than I've a right to ask, considering I'm away so much."

His words touched her and made her feel wanted. "Of course I'll stay here for you, Ian."

Relief flooded his handsome face. "Thank God." He pulled her into his arms and held her for what seemed a long time. When he pulled away, he looked sad again. "Leda, I wish things were different."

"So do I."

"No, you don't understand." He sighed and ran one hand through his chestnut hair. It raked like silk through his fingers. "I can't explain it. But if things were different, if *I* were different ..." He fell silent. "Please promise me we'll always be friends?"

Leda's heart jumped at the plea in his voice. "Of course, Ian. I promise."

Ian picked up one of her hands and pressed it to his lips. He held it against his cheek and looked up at her. "I'll walk you back upstairs," he said softly. He released her, picked up the bottle of whiskey and returned it to its hiding place. He came back over to the table and held out his hand. "Come."

Leda slipped off the table, into his embrace. The length of their bodies pressed together with nothing but their nightclothes between them, and she felt a sudden stirring of hardness against her leg. Ian moved away quickly, looking embarrassed. He took her hand and led her out of the kitchen.

Leda followed him quietly, wishing so badly she could just stay in his room with him.

At the top of the stairs he turned to her, his hands on her shoulders. "Tomorrow we'll go riding," he whispered. "How's that?"

She looked up at him. She wanted so badly to stay with him the rest of the night, but knew that was impossible. "That's wonderful."

He smiled and leaned down to her, giving her a peck on the cheek. The kiss was a painfully far cry from the one he had pressed into her skin earlier. When he straightened, he released her arms. "Good night, little swan."

Leda paused, watching him, hoping that at any moment he would come forward and kiss her again. But he didn't. "Good night." Reluctantly, she forced herself to turn and go back to her room, where she lay as sleepless as before. All she could think of was Ian. Thank God they had tomorrow to spend together.

Chapter Three

Leda's pale, naked body rose up over him. She smiled down at him as she impaled herself on his erection. Her skin was luscious, soft and creamy. She arched her back, pushing her breasts forward. The ripe swells tipped with dusky pink nipples invited his touch. Her long, silky hair, the color of water-darkened sand, fell over her shoulders, tickling his bare chest.

"Ian," she whispered, grinding her hips against him.

He groaned in pleasure and reached up, cupping one of her breasts. The pink bud at the tip hardened under his caressing fingertips. A soft moan escaped her throat and she bent over to kiss him in a blissful explosion ...

Ian awoke from his dream, the blood pounding in his ears. Perspiration had molded his pajama top to his chest, which rose and fell heavily. He stirred, becoming aware of the result of his dream. Groaning softly, he let his head fall back against the pillow, waiting for his heartbeat to calm down. Through his window, the sky lightened with dawn.

Wet dreams were something he thought he'd left behind in adolescence. The intensity of it shook him. Normally, he might have chuckled. But he couldn't laugh off the dream he'd just had, not when it involved Leda. She'd always been more like a sister to him.

Until last night.

He used to like the fact that she was tomboyish and enjoyed exploring and hiking with him. He appreciated that she didn't ride sidesaddle and preferred trousers. When he desired a female companion, there were actresses and singers he kept company with down south, in London and Oxford.

Something had changed after last night.

Sitting up, he raked a hand through his hair, remembering their embrace, the feel of her soft skin under his lips. He'd wanted her so badly the desire had shaken him. She seemed

to want him, too. But he'd sent her to her room alone instead of laying her back on the table and stripping off her wrap and nightgown. That's what he'd really wanted to do in that moment.

He grabbed a handkerchief and wiped his seed from his stomach, haunted by the memories of his dream, of Leda's pale skin and small but firm breasts, the curving swell of her hips and buttocks, and the small triangle of dark hair visible where their bodies were joined. He tried unsuccessfully to force away the ghostly memories, which started to get him hard again.

He took a moment to catch his breath and come into the present, where the beginnings of dawn filtered through the large windows on the far end of his bedroom. In the washroom, he turned the spigot and splashed cold water on his face. He prepared his shaving things, hoping to distract himself from the haunting images of Leda's willowy naked body poised over his.

He brushed the shaving cream onto his cheeks, distracted by his desire to unravel the mystery of his feelings. Yesterday, having Leda turn to him for comfort and friendship had felt like the most natural thing in the world. Yet, once she was in his arms, that had felt right, too. Suddenly, she wasn't only his childhood friend. She was a woman. A woman who needed him. This quiet Highland lass made him feel his strength as a man, something that had never happened to him before.

Ian ran the razor over his cheeks and jaw. He thought of the striking, socially prominent Lady Helen Montcrieff, who had turned her eye on him recently. Helen's father was a member of the House of Lords and one of the most well-connected men in Great Britain. Suddenly, the golden-haired woman with sharp features who smoked cigarettes and knew all the latest dance steps paled next to the image of the woman he'd just dreamed of.

Ian rinsed his face and patted it dry. He sighed and splashed on aftershave. He picked up his comb and ran it through his hair, his heart growing heavier with each passing moment. What good was discovering surprising and sweet new feelings when there would never be a chance to explore them? A man in his position needed to get on with what mattered -- his career, his future, and carrying on his name. As the landless son, he needed to carve his way in the world, build his own empire and bring honor to the MacGregor name. He certainly was not doing that as the skirt-chasing Oxford buck he'd become. And he wouldn't do it living on the estate with Leda, raising racehorses, a boyhood passion he thought he'd outgrow at Oxford.

Making a name included the right marriage. Helen Montcrieff had made known her liking for him. She embodied the type of woman he was expected to marry. Since befriending her at a party several months ago, he assumed he'd eventually propose to Helen and take advantage of the world of connections she and her father could offer him.

Knowing all this did not dampen his persistent thoughts of Leda.

Leda was an innocent. Sweet and childlike, she would be devastated by his womanizing. He hated himself for his weakness, but felt powerless to stop. He found women beautiful and took great comfort from their company. He knew he would try to give up anyone else to be with her, but he was weak, and if he ever fell, he couldn't bear the thought that she would be hurt or lose faith in him. No. He'd meant it with his whole heart when he'd told her she deserved a far better man than he.

Ian watched his reflection in the bathroom mirror a moment longer. Instead of seeing his clean-shaven face, all he saw were the images from his dream. He turned abruptly from the mirror and went back into the bedroom to put on his riding clothes. He stripped off his pajamas, stuffing them into a dark corner of the wardrobe. No sense having Audrey or Angus knowing about his nocturnal emission. The gossip mill of Scottish servants was alive and well. News of his wet dream would have reached every crofter's cottage by noon the same day.

He dressed in his riding clothes, taking a moment to check his appearance. He and Leda had ridden together countless times over the years, but he'd never worried before about possible wrinkles in his white shirt or breeches, or the polish of his boots. His stomach fluttered a bit as he thought of her while buttoning the cuffs of his shirt.

Ian tucked in his shirt and buckled the belt. A pang gripped his heart at the thought of seeing Leda in only a few moments. He sighed under the weight of impossibility in his life. Seeing her today would only make it more difficult, but he had to. At least they had a little while to go riding together before he left.

* * * * *

"Here's a good spot." Ian looked at Leda, watching for her response. He wanted nothing more than to sit close to her on the sun-warmed grass of the meadow they'd just reached. The growth was at its full height and abundant with wildflowers.

She nodded and he brought Racer, his prize chestnut thoroughbred, to a halt. Leda brought Charlotte, her gray mare, to a standstill. He and Duncan had given her Charlotte on Leda's sixteenth birthday.

Ian dismounted and went over to Leda to help her dismount. She was a skilled rider and needed no help getting down, but it gave him an excuse to touch her. She hadn't worn a jacket and he put his hands on her slim waist as she slid down, her backside lightly brushing his front as she slid off the saddle.

At the intimate contact, images of his dream flooded his mind. He started to get an erection and stifled a groan, moving away quickly so she wouldn't notice. He fought back the urge to pull her against him and press his lips into her soft hair, which she'd pinned up in its usual knot at the nape of her neck. All it would take was pulling out one or two of the pins to see it cascading down over her shoulders.

"Let's sit down," he said, hearing the husky tone in his voice.

Their mounts lowered their muzzles immediately to the grass, grazing peacefully. Ian led Leda a few paces away to a sunny spot. The clouds of the day before had cleared, leaving only a few white fluffy ones in the blue sky.

He pulled off his riding jacket and started to spread it on the grass as a blanket.

"Don't do that, Ian." Leda stopped him with a delicate hand on his arm. "You'll ruin your nice jacket."

Her touch heated his blood and he forced a light smile. "You're a lady," he said, and laid the jacket down with a flourish. "A lady doesn't sit on the bare ground." He took her hand. "Now sit."

Leda's pale cheeks reddened slightly as their hands touched.

He joined her on the ground, as close to her as he dared. A tense silence settled between them, replacing the easy camaraderie they'd always shared. Apparently, last night in the kitchen had affected her, too.

Ian reached out and plucked a blade of grass to distract himself from the way his stomach flopped and churned. No woman had ever made him feel so boyishly nervous before.

He chewed absently on the end of the long blade of grass.

"Are you all right, Ian?"

Leda's voice cut the tension and he turned to her, leaning back on one hand. Her eyes were full of concern. He caught his breath. How lovely she was! She was not strikingly beautiful like Helen or the actresses he had always favored, but her beauty shone in the quiet strength of her soft features. For the first time, he noticed the slight upturn of her nose, the pout of her dusky lips, the flush of pink in her cheeks. But most enchanting of all was her eyes, doe-like eyes with their long lashes, gazing on him with love and faith. Just the way a man wanted a woman to look at him.

Pain sliced his heart when he thought of how disappointed she'd be if she knew the truth about him.

"I'm fine, little swan. I'm more concerned about you. You barely said a word at breakfast." He twirled the blade of grass between his fingertips, a tiny movement that kept him from pulling her into his arms as he wanted. He sighed. "The last time I visited, you chattered on about every little happening in the entire glen by the time we'd finished our tea."

His words were rewarded with a faint smile. Her soft brown eyes were full of sadness. "Things are so different now," she said quietly.

His heart lurched and he nodded, outwardly calm, twisting the blade of grass into a series of knots. "I know."

"If you want to know what I've been thinking, I'll tell you."

His stomach jumped. He probably should not know, but he had to. He needed to feel close to her. "Please tell me."

She looked at him just as a breeze whipped a loose tendril of hair across her cheek. It was all he could do not to reach out and push it behind her ear. She glanced down. "I was thinking that I wish you didn't have to leave again so soon."

He sighed as his despair deepened. The fact that her wish matched his own only made it worse. "So do I," he murmured. "But a gentleman's education is not complete without European travel. So, back to Italy I must go." He could not keep the tinge of bitterness from his tone. His gut tightened, knowing he had now even more reason to leave as soon as possible. If he stayed, he would not be able to keep away from her. "Don't worry, little swan, I'll see to it that Duncan behaves."

Leda frowned. "That's not why I want you to stay here. You don't need to protect me." She looked at him, then down, shyly. "It's because I always miss you when you're away."

Ian tossed the knotted blade of grass away and looked at her profile. "I miss you, too, Leda." Once again, he envisioned her as she'd been in his dream, naked and smiling, her body joined with his, her soft hair falling over her breasts in silken waves. He swallowed nervously, his insides and mind churning. He needed to escape before he made a terrible mistake, yet he couldn't move, rooted to his spot by the desire for intimacy with her. "Leda, may I ... may I ask you for just one thing?"

"Of course you may."

He shifted his weight on the ground. "Could I ... I just want ... to see what your hair looks like loose. Do you mind?"

She smiled shyly, the pink in her cheeks deepening. "Of course not."

He watched her tug off her riding gloves, noticing her hands for the first time. She kept her nails short, and her fingers appeared both delicate and strong, and useful. She delivered bairns with those hands. He struggled not to imagine those gracefully skilled fingertips roaming over his bare flesh.

She reached behind her head and pulled out the pins. He noticed her breasts pressing against her white blouse. The next moment, her hair fell in loose sandy waves down her back and over her shoulders, the curled ends turning up just below her breasts.

Ian caught his breath. He immediately regretted his request. Already, an erection threatened to bulge in his breeches. She appeared as she had in his dream. To him, she was the bonniest lass in the world.

His hand burned to reach out and stroke her hair, especially where the silken locks lay over one of her breasts. He didn't dare. "Thank you," he breathed.

Spots of color reddened her cheeks again and she gazed at him with a hesitant expression. "Should I put it back up?"

He nodded, unable to say more. He watched her sweep up her hair in one efficient motion, and methodically retrieve the pins, one by one, from her lap. In another moment, her hair was once again captured in a bun.

When she'd finished, she picked up her riding gloves, toying absently with the worn fingers.

"Will you look after Racer while I'm gone?"

Leda's pretty face brightened. "Of course I will. Every day if you'd like."

He smiled, though his insides felt battered and torn.

"I'll even take him through his paces."

"He'd like that, little swan." His smile faded. "He trusts you."

Leda stared at him. She, too, looked very sad and he longed to hold her as he'd done the night before. He remained still, knowing that if he touched her at all, he wouldn't be able to stop at a kiss on the cheek. The yearning in her eyes pulled at him like a siren and he knew he had to leave soon.

"I think we should go back now," he said. He stood up and held out his hand.

She accepted and rose to her feet.

He picked up his jacket while she tugged on her gloves. The horses stood where they'd left them, and Ian grabbed both pairs of reins. One last time he helped Leda onto Charlotte, gently squeezing her shin as he gave her a leg up.

When she was in the saddle, Ian mounted Racer and turned the horse's head toward Glenparry.

"When is your train?" Leda asked, pulling up beside him.

He looked straight ahead. "Tonight. After supper." He didn't tell her he originally had planned to leave the following morning. When she'd let her hair loose for him and gazed at him with her eyes full of love, he'd known in that moment he had to leave. He could not have spent another night in the house without making love to her.

* * * * *

Angus had the motorcar running in the driveway that evening. As soon as supper was finished, Leda followed Ian and Duncan out the front door. The same heavy sadness had weighed on her each time Ian left over the years. Only now her usual sadness intermingled with confusion. She'd always looked upon him as an older brother, a companion who enjoyed hiking and exploring the glen with her. Last night, something had changed, and she'd experienced desire as intoxicating as she'd felt for Duncan. How could it be? How could she have loved Duncan all these years and then so suddenly feel the same way for Ian?

In spite of her horrible disappointment that Ian was leaving, she also felt a certain degree of relief, unable as she was to sort out the jumble of desires and emotions tangled within her grief over Cait and Duncan.

She watched the brothers shake hands. Stealing a glance at Duncan's expression, she sensed that he too, wanted Ian to stay. Her heart fluttered when Ian released Duncan's hand and turned to her, leaving his brother watching them in the background.

They stood, facing each other. Leda tilted her head upward to look into Ian's eyes.

His gaze traveled over her face and hair, across her blouse and sweater and skirt. "You should wear dresses and skirts, little swan," he said softly. "You're a bonny lass."

She felt heat flush her cheeks and glanced at Duncan, uncomfortably aware of him behind her. He stood watching them, his arms crossed in a stern pose.

She turned back to Ian. "When will you be back?"

He put a large hand on her shoulder and squeezed. She loved the gentle strength in his touch. "As soon as I'm able."

She watched him another moment, worrying that he would not embrace her, but, thankfully, he reached out and gathered her into his arms, pulling her close. His body was warm and strong and every fiber of her wanted to beg him to stay here with her.

"Take care of yourself, Leda," he murmured in her ear. His warm breath tickled her skin, weakening her. He sounded as if he were leaving for a long time. "Whatever you do, remember he's grieving. Don't take what he says to heart. You're not to blame. Promise?"

She nodded, squeezing him a bit more tightly. "I promise."

"That's my lass." He looked down and placed a quick kiss on her lips.

The touch was so light and brief, Leda's eyes flew wide open.

They stared at each other for several moments and she watched Ian's cheeks flush.

"Leda," Ian said.

She glanced again at Duncan. The scowl on his face terrified her and the spell of Ian's kiss broke. "You'll miss your train."

"Aye." Gently, he released her and got into the passenger seat of the motorcar.

With her heart pounding and the ghost of Ian's lips on hers, she stood on the gravel drive, waving until Ian was out of sight.

Pulling her sweater more tightly around her, she braced herself to face Duncan, expecting that he was watching her with his accusatory glare. But when she turned around, his back was to her as he strode back to the house.

Let's see how they feel about her when she lets one of their own die in childbirth.
Duncan's words of the night before rang in her mind, clawing at her heart.

She stifled a cry of anguish and walked swiftly toward the house, her shoes crunching on the gravel. Duncan had already disappeared inside, probably to lock himself in his study as he'd done since Cait died.

Back in her room, she threw herself onto the bed. Her tears wet the coverlet. Suddenly, a gentle hand touched her hair.

"Leda." Audrey's voice was soothing. She caressed Leda's hair while she cried.

Audrey's touch calmed her. She rolled over and looked up at her friend. "I can't do it anymore, Audrey," she said though her tears.

"Do what, Leda?" Her hand never stopped its gentle caress on Leda's hair.

She sniffled, swatting at her wet cheek with the heel of her hand. "Midwifing. I can't do it. I don't want to kill another human being ever again."

"Ye did no' kill anyone, Leda," Audrey said in a motherly tone. "That's complete nonsense." She pulled a clean handkerchief from the pocket of her smock and proceeded to wipe the tears from Leda's cheeks. "Everyone knows the truth. John told us. Mistress Cait was in fragile health. She took great risk in having a bairn."

Leda heaved a deep sigh. "Ian told me the same. It's just ... so hard to believe."

Audrey put the handkerchief into Leda's hand. "Hard or not, it's the truth. Besides, the gardener's wife is seven and a half months along. She'll be needing ye."

"Elizabeth Adams can help her. I'm not the only midwife in the glen."

Audrey reached out and pushed back an errant lock of her friend's hair. "Ye feel this way now because it's all so raw. Give yerself time, Leda." She smoothed her hair back again in a maternal way. "Now, time for yer bath."

Leda put her hand over Audrey's. "I'm grateful you're my friend."

Audrey smiled. "So am I." She rose from the bed and crossed into the bathroom. The next moment, Leda heard the rush of water into the tub.

She sat up slowly, lifting her hands to the buttons of her blouse. An image of Duncan's tormented eyes rose in her mind, causing her to wince. Though Audrey's words had been kind, Leda knew the truth. She could never again deliver a bairn, not after what she'd done to Cait.

Not after she'd ruined Duncan's life. He was the first man she'd loved and she'd destroyed him.

Chapter Four

Early September, 1913

“Leda, your hair is so beautiful.” Ian’s fingertips traced the length of one tress where it curled over her breast.

She followed the movement of his hand as it reached her bare breast. She caught her breath on discovering she was naked, but her embarrassment melted rapidly under his appreciative gaze.

He grazed her nipple, caressing it with thumb and forefinger. The pleasure ignited heat in the cleft between her thighs. She moaned softly.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered. He was dressed, although his white shirt was unbuttoned, revealing a muscled chest, dusted with silky chestnut hair. His bare flesh increased the arousal churning in her core.

Ian cupped her breast, squeezing it gently. Rising up, he nuzzled the pink tip. The sensation sent shards of heat through her. Her pulse raced and she felt her feminine musk gathering below, where her loins pulsed.

Someone pounded on her bedroom door. “Leda! Leda!”

Ian disappeared. The pounding continued. She sat up, blurry-eyed, disoriented.

“Leda!” Her bedroom door swung open, and Audrey burst in. “It’s Sarah Thomas!” She flew to the bedside in a swirl of skirts. “Ye must come now! The bairn’s on its way!” She grasped Leda’s arm with one hand and, with the other, threw back the covers. “Her water’s broke. John and Angus put her in Fanny’s bed.”

Leda mind blurred as Audrey’s words sank into her consciousness. Her blood chilled with understanding. “Fanny’s bed? You mean she’s here, in the house?”

“Aye. She was bringing a basket of greens to Cook when it happened. Please come. She’s hollerin’ from the pain.”

Her heart wrung painfully. “We must call to Elizabeth,” she said. “I’m not fit.”

Audrey flew to the window and yanked open the heavy drapes, revealing the drizzling, gray early morning.

Nausea churned Leda’s gut as visions of Cait and the stillborn babe passed through her mind, visions as grisly and vivid now, more than two months later, as when they occurred.

Audrey halted and grasped Leda firmly by the shoulders. Her dark gaze bored firmly into Leda’s. “She does no’ want another, Leda. She asked for you.” She released her just as swiftly and rushed to the wardrobe, yanking out stockings, camisole, drawers, skirt and blouse.

Leda watched her as stark reality set in. “How can I?”

Audrey set the clothes on the bed and reached for the hem of Leda’s nightgown. “Ye’ll do fine. I’ll be right with ye the whole time.”

Leda took a deep breath and grasped Audrey’s hands in mid-pull. Adrenaline churned in her blood, moved by Sarah’s raw need. It was difficult enough to live with herself. She couldn’t turn her back on Sarah now. “I’ll dress myself, Audrey. Go back downstairs and make a pot of comfrey. You’ll find the herbs on my shelves in the kitchen. Boil extra water and fetch a pile of clean towels and sheets. Make certain she’s comfortable and remove her drawers and stockings. I’ll be down as soon as I’m dressed.”

Audrey nodded. “Aye.” She planted a swift kiss on Leda’s cheek before rushing out.

Leda took a deep breath, working to steady her trembling hands as she started to dress. She threw on her clothing, not bothering to tuck in her blouse, and strode from her room.

* * * * *

The noise was faint, muffled by the sheer size of the house, but Duncan’s soldiering instincts were sharply honed. He sat up in the chair by his fireplace, listening. Another sleepless night hadn’t dulled the long-ingrained discipline of keeping watch when battle was imminent. If he wasn’t mistaken, he’d heard Audrey pound on Leda’s bedroom door, calling for her.

Rising from the chair before the hearth in his bedroom, he strode to the window. The light outside indicated it was about seven in the morning. Peering at the driveway he caught sight of Angus running away from the house, an air of urgent purpose in his gait.

He stepped back from the window. Apparently, Leda was being called out to deliver a bairn, something that had happened regularly. He raked a hand through his uncombed hair, then over his unshaven jaw. He became uncomfortably aware of the rumpled clothing he’d spent the night in, pacing and taking pulls from the whiskey bottle, the companion that rarely seemed to leave his hand nowadays.

Sighing, he went over to the bell pull and tugged it, finding himself looking forward to receiving a pot of tea and some breakfast. John had usually come upstairs by this time to see to him, but he hadn't yet appeared.

Duncan went into the bathroom to shave and comb his hair. When he came back into the bedroom, there was still no sign of John. The older man's absence left a strange feeling in his gut. Without bothering to change, he left the room and hurried down to the kitchen, which was devoid of its usual activity. In fact, there was not a soul about, even though a pot of something simmered on the stove. On the worktable, bread dough sat in a large ball, ready for kneading and a huge basket of fresh greens sat on the other end.

His stomach fluttered. Something was definitely amiss. He looked around and listened. His ears picked up the faint sounds of a woman's cries. He recognized the mangled wails of a woman in labor. He followed their direction, finding himself striding in the direction of the servants' quarters.

He crossed the kitchen and descended the stairs that led to the servants' residence hall. The cries grew louder as he drew closer. As soon as he turned the corner, he saw his missing manservant. John stood outside one of the closed doors, his hands clasped together, his white head bowed.

Another scream of pain ripped through the air, touching off a flood of nightmarish memories. Duncan almost turned and left, but John had heard his approach and looked up.

"Sorry about yer breakfast," John told him. "We've had a bit o' commotion."

Duncan swallowed past a lump in his throat. "Who's in there?"

"Well, it's Sarah Thomas having the bairn. She came to deliver greens and her water broke. Miss Leda is in there with Audrey and Fanny."

He sighed and stared at the door. "Angus, I assume, went to fetch her husband."

John nodded. "Aye." He eyed Duncan sympathetically.

Inside, Sarah released a keening wail, which was followed by murmurs of encouragement from other female voices.

The barrage of agonizing memories continued to assail Duncan. Cait's struggle, the wild look of pain in her eyes, the blood, her clutching the sheets. He splayed one hand against the wall, breathing heavily.

"Laddie, maybe ye'll want to go upstairs. This must be a sight painful for ye."

Duncan looked at him. He did, in fact, wish to flee, but something kept him rooted to the spot, some deep driving need to know that the bairn was born alive and that the woman had delivered safely. "No," he murmured. "Sarah Thomas is in my employ. I'll remain for a time."

John looked at him doubtfully, but nodded.

Only a short time had passed when the sounds of a newborn's wailing emanated from the room. Several minutes later the door opened and Audrey stepped out. The front of her

smock was smeared with blood, but she was smiling. Her eyes widened slightly when she spotted Duncan. "It's a boy, Master Duncan," she told him. "All there, strong lungs. And Sarah is fine"

Duncan's heart wrung with a potent mixture of relief and fresh anguish. Would that Cait's delivery had ended with the same joy. Unable to resist, he looked past Audrey into the room, catching a glance at Leda with the newborn wriggling in her hands. Blood covered her hands and the front of her blouse and skirt. She bent down, gently setting the bairn down on some towels.

Duncan stared, rooted, as she wiped the bairn clean of blood and tied off the umbilical cord.

He turned away, pain searing his heart. "John, I'll be in my study. Send my regards to the Thomases."

"Aye, laddie."

Without another word, Duncan turned and strode out of the hall as quickly as he could. Once in the shelter of his study, he paced frenetically the length of the room. His pain chased him like the devil himself. His memories of Cait on her deathbed mingled with the fresh images of the live bairn in Leda's hands.

Finally, he gave up pacing and sank into his wingback chair. A nearly empty whiskey bottle sat on the table in front of him. He picked it up, stared at the contents, then flung it into the cold hearth. With a tinkle of broken glass, the clear liquid soaked into the ashes. Duncan fell forward, his face in his hands, and wept.

Finally, when no more tears would come, he let his exhaustion wash over him as his grief had done a little while before. His eyelids grew heavy and he leaned back, his legs stretched out in front of him, his hands on the arms of the chair. For the first time in nearly two months, he felt the sleep of the dead coming over him.

* * * * *

When Sarah was resting comfortably with her newborn bairn in her arms, Leda washed the blood from her hands.

Audrey handed her a towel. "I'll come help ye change fer breakfast," she said.

Leda looked at her. "You needn't. You must be tired yourself."

Her friend nodded as they made their way down the hall and out into the kitchen. "Aye. I could do with a bit of rest."

"I'm not going to bathe right now," Leda told her. "I'm going to change and sit quietly and then take Ian's horse out for a ride."

Audrey nodded.

Leda reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "Audrey, you were a great help to me today. As you were ... with Cait." She paused and cleared her throat. "Before you go, I want to ask you something."

"Aye?"

"Would you ... would you like to apprentice? I mean, there is a need for more howdie wives in the county, and ... well ... you have the strength and intelligence."

Audrey's dark eyes shone. "Leda, you think I could?"

She nodded. "Absolutely." It was the truth, and training Audrey gave her a reason to continue her work and then, perhaps, the opportunity to rest from it. Although the birth this morning had restored her confidence to some degree, she did not want to continue indefinitely. "What do you say?"

The other woman nodded. "Aye! I would." She threw her arms around Leda. "Thank you."

Leda squeezed her gently. "No need to thank me. 'Twas your own abilities that brought this about."

Once they had parted, Leda trudged wearily to her room to change. John brought her tea and some oatmeal, praised her for the morning's work, then left her to rest. It was only then, when she was alone and sipping her tea quietly, that she could finally turn her thoughts to the dream she'd been having when Audrey woke her.

In the same way her dream of Duncan recurred, so did this one. The first one with Ian had happened when he'd left after the funeral. The images flowed through her mind, stirring her body even though she was now exhausted.

Sighing, she took a sip of tea. It was no wonder she'd begun to dream of Ian. The way he'd asked her to let her hair down for him and then the kiss he'd placed on her lips before leaving made her certain that their feelings for each other had deepened beyond the bounds of the brotherly-sisterly friendship they'd always shared.

However, after several letters that made no mention of his possible feelings for her, she was beginning to think she'd imagined the attraction between them. She'd been certain he felt the magic, but concluded that he had just been trying to make her feel better after the way Duncan had treated her.

Leda reached for the teapot and refilled her cup. Exhaustion overcame her and she stretched out on the sofa, ready to nap after she finished her tea. Delivering a bairn was always exhausting and she always needed several hours to recuperate. Her eyes began to close and she set her cup and saucer down quickly before spilling tea on herself.

She thought of Sarah, resting with her new bairn in her arms. No doubt, this successful delivery had helped to restore her confidence. Sarah Thomas was a hale and hearty woman. The delivery had been smooth and rather quick, the bairn strong and healthy. Had Cait's health been the same, she would have been alive today, and so, probably, would the bairn

have been. Leda knew deep inside that she could not truly blame herself for Cait's death. With as many births as she'd attended, both with her mum and on her own, she knew well enough the different conditions that affected the mother and bairn. Most were beyond any midwife's or doctor's control.

Tears of relief crowded her eyes and she let herself cry quietly for a few minutes. As she began to fall into the twilight of sleep, Leda realized something else. If she hadn't acted as midwife for Sarah Thomas' delivery, she wouldn't have let herself know the difference.

* * * * *

Duncan walked toward Caitlynn, desire churning his blood.

Her back was to him as she stared out the open window. A highland breeze lifted wisps of her gold hair. The contours of her graceful figure, nude under her wrap, showed through the thin material. The sight caused his groin to tighten.

Stealing up behind her, he slipped his arms around her waist, sliding his hands upward to cup her breasts. She moaned softly as he brushed his fingertips over her nipples, which pebbled under his gentle caress. Her weight sagged against him, rubbing his growing erection.

He closed his eyes and leaned over, pressing his lips into the soft, warm flesh at the nape of her neck. "Cait," he whispered, gently squeezing her breasts.

His lips burned to possess hers and he slid his hands away from the soft orbs of flesh to her upper arms, gently turning her to face him. When he opened his eyes and looked at her, Cait's eyes were no longer blue. A pair of large, doe-like eyes stared up at him. He blinked hard, trying to comprehend how different Cait looked, her face transformed. Strange, yet utterly familiar. Her hair, no longer golden, was the color of soft sand. He stared.

Leda.

Duncan jolted awake. He looked around, disoriented. When his gaze fell on the bookshelves behind his desk, he remembered he'd fallen asleep in his chair. The events of the morning teased the edges of his memory, superseded by the powerful images of his dream.

The dream was always erotic, simmering. In the months following Cait's death, he'd dreamed about making love to her. He'd turn her around, kiss her deeply and push her wrap off her shoulders. The article would fall to the floor and he'd push his beloved down onto the window seat and take her, delighting in her cries of pleasure, in the feel of burying himself deep inside her.

Except this time.

He sat up slowly, raking a hand through his uncombed hair, then over his cheeks and jaw. Though he'd shaved this morning, the stubble had already begun to shadow his face.

The ending of his dream had unnerved him, touching off a wave of guilt and anguish. He had never looked at his ward in a sensuous way, having always been completely taken with his wife. A sense of betrayal of Cait now plagued him, causing his head to throb.

Unbidden, he remembered his dream, the feel of Leda's slender arms as he'd held them, and her heavy-lidded gaze of desire when he'd turned her to face him. Her hair, which he had never seen loose in real life, had flowed freely in silken waves, like sand on a beach.

He searched his waking mind for the possible explanation of why she would have appeared in a dream that should have been about Cait.

Perhaps it was the morning's event. He remembered Leda as he'd seen her this morning, holding the newborn, and the pain that had twisted his heart and gut. He waited for his customary inner rant of blame and resentment that accompanied thoughts of Leda to rise, but it didn't. This morning's birth had affirmed what he'd known all along to be true. He just hadn't been able to acknowledge the truth, until now.

He sighed. A burden had been lifted from his heart, yet he still ached with the deepest sense of loneliness he'd ever experienced. It was even more profound than it had been during his service in the Boer War, far from his home and loved ones. He felt even more powerless and despairing.

The strangest thing was he sensed somehow that Leda could understand. He had spent enough time in her company with Cait to see that she was a sensitive lass, kind and thoughtful. She had adored Cait, and although she couldn't possibly comprehend the loss of one's lover and spouse, she was probably the one person he knew who could appreciate his loss. He remembered looking at her once during the funeral. The way she'd looked back at him before she glanced away had been full of sympathy.

Suddenly, he craved Leda's simple, quiet company. She was the one person with whom he shared a strong connection to Caity.

He stood up to go in search of her.

As if on cue, a knock came at the door, which opened before Duncan could respond. John came in with the customary tea service.

"Where's Leda?" Duncan asked the older man as he approached.

John set the tray down by and proceeded to unload a plate of small sandwiches, a teapot, cup, and saucer. "She went out a bit ago to take Master Ian's horse through his paces."

He proceeded to pour a cup of tea in silence. He shoved the silver bowl of sugar cubes next to the tea. "She'll probably be on her way back to the stable and then to the kitchen for tea."

Duncan experienced a sharp pang of guilt at his ignorance of his charge's whereabouts. Apparently she'd been caring for Racer every day for nearly two months and this was the first he knew of it.

"Thank you," he said absently, as John handed him his cup. He was suddenly intrigued about how she spent her day. "And what about the mornings? What does she do?"

"Miss Leda rises same time as those of us in service, takes her breakfast in the kitchen and goes on rounds of the sick." John cleared his throat. "She was going to pack it all in, after what happened to Mistress Cait, God rest her soul. 'Twas this mornin', and Sarah's insistence, that convinced her not to."

Duncan stopped, unexpectedly stunned. "What? Pack it in?"

John nodded. "She'd turned over all her patients to Elizabeth. Sarah wouldna have any other but Leda for her howdie. A sight of good fortune she was already so close by. 'Twas no time to wait fer Elizabeth."

Duncan stared into the fire, letting this information sift into his throbbing head. Guilt pricked him like a thorn. How could he have not thought his blame could affect the lass so deeply? What kind of monster had his grief made of him? Remorse filled him at the accusations he'd hurled at Leda in his study. The ones she'd overheard. God, the anguish he'd caused her!

Suddenly he knew he had to make it right somehow. If he did nothing else, he had to tell her the truth.

He leaned forward, picked up the cup and saucer, and took a sip of tea. His hands shook and he struggled to steady them.

"I hate to see ye in such a state, laddie," John said with a sad shake of his head. He put his tray under his arm. "I was in this very house the day you came out of yer mither's womb. I heard yer first cries."

Duncan stared ahead into the cold hearth. Another pang of remorse hit him. "I'm sorry, John."

John nodded. "Shall I tell Miss Leda ye want to see her?"

"That won't be necessary. I'll go out and meet her at the stable."

"Very well." John went to the door. He hesitated with his hand on the knob. "Welcome back, laddie," he said, before slipping out.

Duncan set down the empty cup and rose from his chair. Looking through the window, some movement in the distance caught his eye. There was Leda on the road at the end of the driveway, seated on Ian's horse, trotting in the direction of the stables.

Somberly clad in dark woolen trousers and jacket, she held herself with dignity in the saddle. The only splash of color came from the rich reds and golds of her plaid kerchief, woven in the MacGregor tartan. The chilly autumn winds blew the fringe of the kerchief about as it did the dry grasses of the meadows.

The large, innocent, doe-like eyes stared up at him in his mind. Anticipation and guilt churned suddenly inside him. Pushing the image away, he strode out, ignoring the pounding in his head.

The walk to the stables in the fresh afternoon air dulled some of the headache. He entered the stone and wood structure, redolent with the earthen scents of hay and horseflesh, and caught sight of Leda's kerchief when she moved in Racer's stall. She held a brush in one hand, moving it in repeated arcs over the thoroughbred's sleek neck. Racer was munching contentedly on an armload of hay in his feed crib.

Duncan moved slowly toward her. Once again, he remembered the image of her nightgowned figure in his dream, her breasts almost visible under the thin material. A lump formed suddenly in his throat as everything he wished to say to her escaped his mind. Bracing himself and erasing the scene from his mind, he came to a stop by Racer's stall.

Leda emerged, gently closing the gate behind the Thoroughbred. Her large eyes widened when she turned and saw Duncan. "Duncan! I didn't see you there."

He saw fear in her eyes, and felt penitent. His bitter accusations came flooding back to him. He wanted to reach for her, to pull her against him and tell her he was sorry. In that moment, however, he found himself inexplicably awkward. "You're not to go out riding alone." The statement came out in a terse command. He'd meant to say more, to explain his concerns about her getting hurt, but his dream images rose once again, blocking kind words with guilt.

"What?" The question escaped on a startled breath.

"You heard me. You're not to ride alone." He winced inwardly at his harsh sound, but felt powerless to change it.

"I promised Ian I'd --"

"Have Thomas accompany you. I don't want to see you out by yourself again. Is that understood?"

"No, Duncan." Her brown eyes clouded with confusion. "I've ridden out alone everyday for the last two months."

"That was then."

Anger flitted across her features. She appeared to struggle inwardly.

He sensed that if he just explained his reasons, she would understand, yet found himself too tongue-tied by the images that kept returning to his mind.

Finally, she nodded. "Aye, Duncan. As you wish."

"Also, I want to know where you are at all times, when you leave and when you return."

She frowned. "Did I do something wrong?"

"I didn't say that. I have my reasons. They're sound and you don't need to question them."

"Sorry." She watched him a moment, looking uncertain. "I'm going to the house now. Is ... that what you wanted to know?"

What he really wanted to know was what she and Cait discussed when they were together. "Aye. I'll accompany you."

* * * * *

Leda looked closely at Duncan. Dark circles stained the skin under his bloodshot eyes. His hair, in need of cutting, rioted in dark locks over his forehead, curling over his shirt collar. His lips were dry and heavy stubble covered his pale cheeks. Yet, the grief that usually haunted his eyes had lessened. He looked sad, yet ... different.

She stepped carefully past Duncan, afraid of tripping on her own boots. He'd given her such a shock she didn't trust her legs to carry her. Her guardian had barely spoken to her since Cait's funeral, except to hear her reports on the household, and here he was, standing in front of her, telling her he wanted to know her every movement. Her heart raced and perspiration erupted on her palms.

Duncan followed her out of the stable and walked at her side as they followed the road toward the house. "I would like you to begin taking your meals in the dining room," he said after a short distance. "I intend to join you."

She nodded, aware of him walking beside her. In spite of his current condition, he still emanated strength and authority. The thought of sitting at the long, empty table, alone with him, made her heart pound. He blamed her for Cait's death. Whenever he looked at her, she felt his scorn. What would she say to him? How could she eat without spilling her food or dropping her fork? "Aye, Duncan."

He kept his gaze straight ahead. "I've not fulfilled my responsibility to you recently."

"You're grieving." She glanced at him and saw his jaw muscle flex.

"All the same, I'm responsible for you."

She didn't know how to respond, so she remained silent.

Duncan didn't speak again.

John met them at the door. "Miss Leda, a letter for ye from Master Ian." He handed her an envelope. The sight of Ian's handwriting made her heart flutter and she was eager to escape to her room where she could savor the letter in private. She glanced up at Duncan. "I'll see you at supper."

He eyed the letter in her hand, then nodded, the corners of his mouth turned down. "Don't be late." He turned on his heel, striding off in the direction of his study.

Audrey followed Leda up the stairs and ushered her in to take a bath. While the tub filled, Leda sat on the loveseat in front of her fireplace, absorbed in Ian's letter. He was in Greece now and had related an anecdote from his visit to the Acropolis in Athens. She read on, eagerly searching for any mention of when he'd be coming home. There was none. But he did say he missed her very much. She read that one phrase over and over, searching it for any hint of the feeling he had displayed in their short time together. Not finding any, her

heart ached. The longer he was gone, the more she missed him. Perhaps when they were together again, she would have a chance to see whether he returned her feelings.

She put down the letter when Audrey came in to help her undress for her bath. "It's very kind of you to help me like this all the time, Audrey," she said, as the young woman unlaced her boots.

"Oh, I enjoy fussing over ye, Leda. Ye make me feel like a real lady's maid." She helped her off with her trousers.

Leda chuckled wryly. "I'm not much of a lady, I'm afraid."

Audrey huffed. "There you go again, saying things like that. Ye promised me ye were going to stop. Ye're as much a lady as anyone." She pushed Leda's hands away from the buttons of her blouse.

"See? If I were a lady, I'd have kept my promise."

Audrey's gaze fell on the letter and she smiled. "What's the news from Master Ian?" She slipped Leda's blouse off her shoulders, leaving her in camisole, drawers, and stockings.

Leda sighed as Audrey ushered her into the bathroom and closed the faucets. "He's in Greece."

"Greece," Audrey breathed. "How romantic."

Audrey's use of the word "romantic" caused a twinge of jealousy. If Greece was romantic, perhaps Ian had found someone else with whom to share it. She hated being reminded of that possibility.

"I suppose. He wrote that the wind at the Acropolis was so strong it blew his cap away."

Audrey's laughter in response was warm and rich. She lifted off Leda's camisole.

Leda set the letter down and pulled off her drawers and stockings herself, while Audrey removed the pins from her hair and brushed it out.

"I'm going to wash yer hair today," Audrey told her, "so get it wet."

Leda nodded. She stepped into the hot water, sinking herself in slowly. She submerged her head, wetting her hair down thoroughly.

Audrey sat on a stool by her head, put some soap in her hands and began to lather Leda's hair. "What else did Master Ian say? Is he coming home fer a visit?"

Leda sighed again, closing her eyes under Audrey's massage of her scalp. "He didn't say. He begins Michaelmas term at the end of the month. I don't know when he'll have the time." She couldn't keep the disappointment from her voice.

Audrey paused her shampooing. "Ye fancy him, don't ye?"

Leda looked down silently.

"I'll take that as aye." Audrey resumed washing Leda's hair, smoothing the soapsuds down the length of it. "Can't say as I blame ye," she went on. "He's a fine figger of a man."

She picked up a small pitcher, filled it from the tub, and sluiced it over Leda's hair. "Then again, so's Master Duncan."

Surprised at the sudden change in Audrey's voice, she turned and looked at her friend. A dreamy look stole into Audrey's dark eyes. "Now there's a man a lass would want to wrap her legs around," Audrey said in a husky voice.

Leda stared at her. "I didn't know you felt that way."

Audrey smiled at her. "And who would no'?" She filled the pitcher again and rinsed Leda's hair. "I can only imagine the passions raging in that man even though ... well, everything he's been through, God bless him. Did ye no' notice, Mistress Cait, God rest her soul, was always smiling?"

Leda remembered the things Cait had told her about intimacy, and felt her cheeks tingle. "Aye," she murmured. "I did notice." After a moment, she looked at Audrey again. "What about you? Is there ... someone?"

Audrey smiled. "Aye."

Leda stared at her. "Who?"

"Christopher Jones."

"Our Christopher? The gamekeeper?" Christopher was a large, handsome man with blond hair.

Audrey nodded. "Aye. Another one what gets me bloomers into a twist."

Leda laughed. "Does he feel the same?"

"Aye. He has no' had a companion since his wife died seven years ago. He chose me."

"I hope you'll be happy."

"Thank you. So do I. But I told him if we ever marry, I always want to stay in the glen. I want to be near you, Leda."

She looked up at the young woman. "Thank you, Audrey. I feel the same toward you."

Audrey smiled gently. She wet a washcloth and smoothed it over Leda's back. "I do hope Master Ian can come for a visit." She squeezed the water gently from the cloth onto Leda's skin, making her feel pampered. "I know ye miss him."

"I do." She sat quietly while Audrey refilled the pitcher and poured the water over her hair and skin one last time.

In the quiet that followed, she thought of Duncan's strange visit to the stables and his even stranger requests. Something in him had changed. Her stomach fluttered at the thought of sitting at the dinner table alone with him. What would they talk about? "Audrey, Duncan wants me to have my meals with him again."

Audrey's surprise was palpable. "Oh, aye?"

She nodded, feeling like a jarful of butterflies had been let loose in her stomach.

Audrey set the pitcher down and grabbed a towel. "I wish ye'd told me sooner," she said, holding the towel out. "I would no' have washed yer hair just now. We'll have to get it dry quickly!"

Leda stepped out of the tub and into the waiting towel, which Audrey wrapped tightly around her.

"We'll have to make ye up all bonny. I'll do yer hair."

Audrey's excitement made her heart join her stomach in its fluttery dance. "Why such a fuss, Audrey?"

Her friend took up the length of Leda's hair, squeezing the excess water from it. She paused. "Well, the way things have been here ... between ye ... I ... it must mean something good." She quickly resumed her work of towel-drying Leda's hair. "Now, I'm going to stoke the fire in the hearth while ye dry yerself." She hurried into the bedroom before Leda could answer.

By the warmth of the fireplace, Audrey brushed Leda's hair out until it was dry and ready to be pinned up. She chose a cream-colored blouse and a dark gray skirt for her, then gathered Leda's tresses into an elegant topknot, leaving loose tendrils dangling over her cheeks. "Ye'll be wantin' to look your best for Master Duncan," Audrey mumbled around the last pin. "There." She rested her hands on Leda's shoulders. "Ye're a bonny lass."

"Thank you, Audrey."

Audrey picked up a small jar of face powder. "Ye have the expression of one about to face the firing squad," she went on in a gentle tone. She dabbed the powder onto Leda's forehead and cheeks.

"I feel as such."

Her friend chuckled. "Duncan MacGregor is a good man under all that grief. I think ye've no' to worry about. Truly." She draped a heather gray shawl about Leda's shoulders.

"I pray you're right." Leda's heart pounded. She had always admired Duncan. He was the first man to capture her budding woman's heart. But they had never been alone. She had never had a chance to know him deeply as a person. For someone who had played such an important role in her life, he was still largely a stranger to her.

Once again, she thought of sitting at the dinner table with him, and wondered how she would get through the meal.

* * * * *

"What did Ian have to say in his letter, if I may ask?" Duncan punctuated his question with a sip of wine. To his great relief, his hand didn't shake as it had earlier under John's watchful eye. It seemed a bath, a shave, and a dinner jacket had gone a long way toward easing his condition. A bit of remorse hadn't hurt either.

Leda shifted in her seat, avoiding his direct gaze. She cleared her throat. God forgive him for having made her so afraid of him. If he guessed correctly, her stomach was as tight as his own.

"He ... um ... lost his cap at the Acropolis," she murmured. "The wind blew it away." She picked up her wineglass and took a tiny sip. She set it down, her eyes always fixed on her plate of untouched roasted duck.

He chuckled. "I see." When he looked up, she was staring at him, wide-eyed. It was the first time since they had seated themselves that she had looked directly at him. "What is it?"

"You ... smiled." She glanced away, looking painfully shy. "It's been so long."

"Aye," he murmured, "I thought I'd forgotten how."

She looked down quickly. "There was not much else in the letter," she said. "He didn't mention coming home before Michaelmas term."

Duncan didn't miss the sadness in her tone. She'd always waited anxiously for Ian's visits, but now there was something else. A dynamic had shifted between them. In spite of being in his cups, he remembered finding them that night in the kitchen, embracing. And then Ian had kissed her on the lips before leaving for the train. He even remembered both their astonished expressions. "He is preparing for his last year," Duncan offered, guessing at the cause of his brother's avoidance. No doubt in his mind, Ian had frightened himself. He'd never known Ian to really fall in love. That is, perhaps, until now. "I'm certain if he could come, he would. I remember my days at Oxford. There was barely time to breathe, never mind visit one's family."

A bit of light infused her features, and he couldn't help noticing how bonny she was. Her face was delicately sculpted, yet retained an earthy strength and dignity. Her large brown eyes reflected many emotions all at once. Come to think of it, they always had.

"Do you really think that's why?"

He nodded. "Aye, I do." He took another sip of wine.

She nodded and looked back down at her plate. Gingerly, she took a forkful. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her chew slowly, thoughtfully. She swallowed and set down her fork. "Does he write to you?" she asked.

"Not as often as he does you."

Color bloomed in her cheeks at his words. All the more reason to keep an eye on her and Ian.

His brother had a weakness for beautiful women, which, until recently, hadn't extended to Leda, who had been more like a sister to him. But considering his own dream earlier this afternoon, Duncan knew a man's perspective could shift in an instant.

He watched the gentle play of the candlelight on her pale skin and found himself glad that he'd reassured her about Ian. His softening produced another wave of remorse, more intense even than it had been this afternoon when he'd learned Leda had been about to give

up her vocation because of him. He cleared his throat. "Leda, John told me something this afternoon I found very disturbing."

She tensed visibly and set down her fork, avoiding his gaze once again. "What was that?"

"He said that you had intended to give up midwifery altogether ... because of ... what happened to Cait. Is that true?"

Leda sank into her seat, her shoulders drooping. She nodded. "Aye, it is."

Duncan rested his hands on the table as he considered his next words. "He also said that many people objected and begged you to continue."

Her eyes glistened now, and her lower lip had begun to tremble. "It's true."

He bowed his head. In his chest, his heart squeezed like a fist. "Leda, I ... I'm at fault. I didn't mean any of those things I said. I know you did everything you could to help Caity. I'm so sorry I made you feel that way."

As he spoke, tears spilled freely down her cheeks. A cry erupted in her throat. She covered her mouth with one hand. Her chest heaved violently.

In one swift motion she stood. The scrape of the chair over the stone floor echoed through the dining hall. Her hand flew away from her mouth. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to ..." Her skirts swirled as she turned and fled.

Duncan rose to follow her, but an instinct told him not to. He lowered himself back into his seat and sat quietly, mulling over her reaction. He'd never seen her in such a state. Then again, she must have suffered horribly these past two months, believing she had killed Cait. Good God, would he ever be able to make amends?

Suddenly he felt he wasn't alone. Looking up, he spied John, standing in the doorway, watching him. "Ye did the right thing, laddie," he said. Leave it to the old butler to know his business at all times and to offer an opinion on it.

Duncan gritted his teeth, but the annoyance was mild. John had been one of those pressing him about Leda. "Aye. It doesn't feel so in this moment." He picked up his wineglass and drained its contents, setting it down as John approached the table. Duncan looked up at him. "I admit this is one of those rare moments I'm at a loss as to what to do next."

John chuckled. "I'll tell ye, even though I know you'll figger it out soon enough."

"Well?"

"Give the lass a wee bit o' time to collect her wits, then go grovel some more."

* * * * *

An hour later, Duncan realized Leda would not be coming downstairs again and ventured to her bedroom with a cart laden with food and a pot of tea. He thought of his

dream and questioned the wisdom of going to the room in which she slept, but his need to apologize to her overrode his misgivings.

He knocked on the door, his gut tightening when he heard the latch click open a few seconds later.

Leda appeared in the opening, dressed in a nightgown, her heather gray shawl draped over her shoulders. Her eyes widened when she saw him and she pulled her shawl more tightly around herself. Her large brown eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, and her nose was red. Her long, sand-colored hair hung in a braid over her right shoulder.

"Hello, Leda," he said. "I hope this isn't a bad time. I came to bring you some food and tea." He indicated the serving cart laden with cheese, bread, and tea service that he'd hauled up the stairs with him.

She stepped back to admit him, her lips curving into a shy smile.

"I owe you a million apologies."

"Ian told me it was your grief. He said you didn't really feel that way."

He bowed his head. "Ian was correct. But that does not excuse my ill treatment of you."

Leda sniffled and dabbed at her nose with a handkerchief she'd been clutching.

Duncan pushed the cart in, rolling it to the seating area by the fire. "I thought you might be hungry. You didn't finish your supper."

"That was kind of you." She followed him to the sitting area and approached the cart. "My stomach is rather tight, but some tea would be wonderful." She reached for the teapot, but he put a hand over it.

"Allow me. It's the least I can do."

Her cheeks bloomed a shade of pink and a look of embarrassment stole into her eyes. "Thank you," she murmured, gingerly seating herself on the sofa, her hands in her lap.

He poured her a cup. "Do you take sugar?" he asked, realizing with shame that after all these years, he didn't know how she took her tea.

She shook her head. "Just a bit of milk."

He prepared the tea as she liked and placed the cup and saucer on the table before her. Noticing that the fire needed a new log, he went over to the hearth and knelt down, feeling her gaze on his back as he worked.

When he had a cheery fire going, he turned back and sat in a chair. As soon as he looked at her, she dropped her gaze and took a sip of tea. In the background, the flames crackled and hissed pleasantly.

"I wouldn't blame you for hating me, Leda," he said after several moments' silence.

She set her cup down gently on the saucer, which rested in her lap. "I don't hate you. I ... I can't imagine how it's been for you, losing Caity."

Her understanding touched a place deep inside of him. "It's been like drowning, only my heart continues to beat even though I feel dead."

"I'm so sorry, Duncan."

He looked at her, wondering how one pair of eyes could hold so much compassion in them. "It must have been very hard for you as well. I know you loved Caity."

She nodded, her large eyes glistening with tears.

He leaned forward. "Leda, promise me you'll let me take back those hateful things I said. They were never true. Cait's physicians in Edinburgh told both of us the risks to her life if she conceived. I didn't want her to get pregnant. I refused for a long time. She begged me." He looked down. "I needed to refuse. There was nothing you could have done differently. If there had been, I know you would have done it." He studied her face to see if she believed him.

The tears in her eyes began to spill.

"I swear what I say is true."

"Thank you, Duncan," she whispered.

"Will you promise? I was mad with grief when I said what I did. I blamed myself and took it out on you."

Leda dabbed at her eyes. "I promise."

Duncan heaved a sigh of relief as some of the tension drained from his body. "I'll do everything in my power to make it up to you. For a start, I was thinking that after the harvest, I'd take you to London. Buy you some new dresses. You've never been to the theater. I'll take you. I have to see my solicitor anyway. We'll make a holiday of it."

Leda set her cup and saucer on the table. "Duncan, I couldn't ask you --"

He refused to let her turn down his offer. "Perhaps Ian can join us for a day. He can come up from Oxford. Would you like that?"

She brightened visibly at the mention of seeing Ian. After a moment, she nodded, dabbing at her tears with her handkerchief. "Aye, thank you."

He smiled. "Bring Audrey with you to assist you. It will be a bit of a holiday for her as well."

"You're very kind."

He shook his head. "You're the one who's kind, Leda, for allowing me to make amends." He picked up the teapot and refilled her cup, which rested on the table. He set the pot down and put a slice of bread and some cheese on a plate. "Here," he said, handing her the plate. "You should eat something."

Wordlessly, she accepted the plate, setting it on her lap. "What made you change your mind?" she asked softly. "About me?"

Duncan leaned back in his chair and sighed. He rested his gaze on her, noticing for the first time how closely her expression was to Cait's. Both women had an air of vulnerability that touched him and brought out his protectiveness. "I realized what a fool I was, not having learned my lesson from war. The pain of man's inhumanity to his fellow man broke my heart. The needless suffering it caused. And here I was, doing the same to you." He shook his head. "Besides, you and I have a special bond. We both loved Cait."

"Aye, we did." She gazed at him. "We do."

He looked at her, wondering at how swiftly and completely she had forgiven him. He hadn't known of this loyalty in her and felt a deep respect.

"Well," he began after several moments, "I suppose I should let you rest."

She had begun to nibble on the bread, but set it down. "You didn't have any tea," she said. "There's a cup on the tray for you."

He looked and saw that John had set a cup and saucer for him. The old man thought of everything. "Ah, so there is. I suppose it's not too late for one cup." He reached to the cart and picked up the teapot. He spooned sugar into his tea, stirred, and settled back with the cup and saucer. The silence between them felt more companionable now.

Promise that whatever happens, you won't blame Leda. Cait's deathbed words resounded suddenly in his memory. To his shame, he realized he had never actually made the promise to her before she died.

Duncan sighed and took a sip of tea. For the first time since Cait's death, he felt some measure of peace. Leda, too, seemed more peaceful. In that moment he realized why. He had finally made and kept his promise to Cait.

Chapter Five

Late October, 1913

Ian sat on his bed, slumped over. The shock of his classmate's death still gripped him. Just yesterday afternoon, he and Charlie had been walking across the quad to class, laughing and joking, when Charlie froze in his tracks, suddenly gasping for breath. He'd clutched his chest just before collapsing on the grass. In mere seconds, he'd stopped breathing.

The sudden finality of Charlie's death was deeply unsettling and Ian found himself questioning everything he'd thought his life was supposed to be. He'd spent the last two months summoning the courage to try and court Helen the way he should, and could not bring himself to do it. The mere thought of making a match to a woman he could feel no more than friendship for made life seem bleaker than the dead of winter. His sudden, overwhelming attraction for Leda became clear to him.

He loved her. The friendship he'd felt for her all these years had deepened, and had now blossomed into passion. Next to Duncan, she was the most intimate friend he had. She knew his faults -- well, most of them -- as well as his good qualities, and loved him without question. He saw her beauty because he'd grown to love her so deeply. He'd begun to see these things in the wake of Cait's death, but they had become even more painfully clear because Charlie had been a young man his own age, seemingly vibrant and healthy. Charlie's sudden death showed him that even a strong, young man was not invulnerable.

Ian pulled Leda's most recent letter from his jacket pocket. She was very excited about the upcoming trip to London and had described in detail her preparations. But most of all, she'd told him how excited she was about seeing him again and how much she'd missed him.

For the first time since he'd run from her, he allowed himself to feel how much he had missed her, as well. When he first left, he'd believed his absence would lessen the intensity

of his attraction. Their months apart had done the opposite for him. All the thoughts and memories of her he'd fought back now embedded themselves in his heart. All he could think about was the softness of her sandy hair and brown eyes, the sweet way her lips curved when she smiled or turned downward when she was upset; the way she'd cried in his arms and let him comfort her; the way she'd held onto him, not wanting him to leave, her eyes burning with love and faith in him; the way her body melted against his when he held her. He could no longer deny what had been building in him all these years.

Thank God he'd be seeing her in London in less than a week. He was determined to tell her the truth of why he'd left and not come to visit since the funeral, instead of making his usual excuses about being so busy with his studies. Latin and mathematics paled now in comparison with expressing the love that burned inside him.

* * * * *

Duncan's hunger burned in his loins. He pulled Cait against him, running his hands across her back and down over the tantalizing slopes of her buttocks. Only the thin material of her nightgown hindered the feel of her creamy flesh.

"Duncan," she whispered, as he pressed his lips into the side of her neck. Her perfume filled his senses. Lavender. He moaned softly against her skin.

Eyes closed, he trailed kisses across her cheek until he reached her lips, which he tasted deeply, teasing the corner of her mouth and the tip of her tongue with his. His hands slid around to her front, fondling her breasts.

"Duncan ..." Not Cait's voice.

He opened his eyes and stared.

Leda was gazing at him through heavy-lidded brown eyes. Her lips were swollen from his kiss. "Duncan," she whispered.

There was a pressure on his arm.

He started and his eyes popped open. Leda's face hovered above his. Her dark eyes shone with excitement and she was smiling. Her small hand was on the sleeve of his tweed jacket. The train compartment in which they'd been riding now entered his consciousness.

"Duncan, we're here. We're in London!"

He blinked as the dream slowly, stubbornly faded. He spied Audrey behind Leda, looking as eager as her friend.

"London. Of course. I'm sorry." He watched Leda's gloved hand slip off his arm. He rose from the seat and followed the two young women from the compartment. His attention remained occupied with retrieving their luggage and finding a cab outside the bustling station to take them to their hotel. Once Leda and Audrey were seated inside, Duncan asked the driver to take extra routes past Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London. Neither lass had been to London before, and he wanted them to see as much of it as possible.

Watching Leda's expression as they passed through the streets, Duncan was unprepared for the flush of pleasure he experienced. He hadn't expected Leda's wonder and fascination to touch him the way it did. He observed her quietly, the way her gaze remained fixed on the passing sights, the tips of her gloved fingers pressed to the glass. The image made him remember her first day at Glenparry when she'd entered the massive front hall. To him, Leda was still that wide-eyed lass clinging to her mother's hand as she gaped at the tapestries and armor lining the paneled walls.

At the time, he hadn't appreciated her wonder and curiosity. He, himself, was just out of Oxford and busy with his duties as Malcolm MacGregor's son, next in line as laird. Leda had only been a short time on the estate when he'd left for South Africa. When he'd returned, he'd struggled to get his feet under him as a civilian again. Then his father passed away, and Duncan found himself burdened with his duties as laird and with the preparations for his wedding.

Now, as he watched his charge, his newfound appreciation flooded him, inspired by the past six or so weeks since he had apologized to her.

Leda must have felt his gaze on her, for she turned and looked at him, a shy smile curving her lips.

Her wonder continued as they descended from the cab and walked into the elegant lobby of the hotel. With her arm linked through Audrey's, she gaped at every tufted settee, marble table, fountain, and potted palm on the way to the grand staircase. He walked behind them, smiling at the way they spoke in excited whispers, their heads bent together. He couldn't hear everything they were saying, but caught bits about how colorful the hotel was in contrast to the interior of Glenparry, a somber mixture of dark wood paneling and tapestries.

At the door to their suite, he stood aside for them.

"Duncan," Leda breathed, "It's so beautiful here!"

He smiled at her. "I'm glad you're pleased."

"I am!" She turned back to Audrey and continued to explore the suite and exclaim over what they'd seen driving through London.

Duncan directed the porter with the bags. When he'd finished, he sat in one of the chairs, watching Leda move about the sitting room, appreciating the soft blue fabrics, mahogany tables, and marble-encased fireplace.

She came to a stop in front of him. "Thank you," she said softly. A flicker of shyness passed over her delicately rounded features.

Her gentleness moved him. "You're very welcome. But there's more," he added, indicating a stack of boxes on the low table in front of the long sofa.

She looked to where he pointed, then back to him.

"I knew we'd arrive too late to shop for an evening dress," he said. "So I took the liberty of ordering some things for you for tonight."

A deep pink flush bloomed in her cheeks. "Duncan, that was ... so kind."

A sudden pang of guilt assailed him. Her gratitude seemed so abundant in the face of his past treatment of her. "Believe me, Leda, it's the very least I could do. Go ahead, open them."

Leda pulled off her hat and gloves and sat gingerly on the settee. She picked up the top box. Audrey emerged from one of the bedrooms and came to kneel by her to watch.

Leda pulled the lid off the box and pushed aside the tissues. A smaller velvet box lay nestled inside. She pulled it out and opened it, catching her breath audibly. In disbelief, she pulled out the string of pearls. "Oh, my goodness, Duncan," she breathed. Tears slid from her eyes.

"Well, you don't have any jewelry that I know of."

"It's beautiful."

"Here, Leda, let's put it on." Audrey took the necklace from her hands and fastened it around her neck.

In spite of the plain white blouse she wore, the pearls accented the curve of her neck and he understood why Ian had nicknamed her "little swan" all those years ago. He wondered briefly if his gift was too intimate, but when he'd ordered the necklace for her, he'd experienced the most powerful urge simply to indulge her. In all the years he'd known her, she'd gratefully accepted whatever she was given, never asking for anything. In his mind, he had much to make up for where she was concerned.

"What do you think?" Her voice was a touch anxious.

He smiled. "It suits you perfectly."

Her smile spread across her face and he noticed for the first time how gracefully arched her lips were.

Audrey handed her the next box.

Leda's cheeks reddened when she pulled out the shell-colored stockings. She put her attention quickly to the other contents of the box, a pair of evening slippers and long, satin gloves.

He watched her dark eyes glisten with more tears, his concern over the intimacy of the gifts replaced with relief. She seemed to love everything he gave her, and he was glad to have been the first man to give her such gifts. Someone else, perhaps, would expect something from her in return. He wanted her only to be happy.

She lifted the last box onto her lap and removed the cover.

"Oh, Leda," Audrey breathed, as Leda pulled out a cream-colored tea gown.

Leda held the dress up, running her fingertips gingerly over the lace panels and satin rose appliqués.

“Ye must try it on right now,” Audrey said, taking the dress boldly from her friend’s hands. “Let Master Duncan see you in it.”

Leda glanced at Duncan, her eyes questioning.

“I’d love to see if it fits you,” he said softly.

“All right.” She disappeared with Audrey, who carried in the other items for her outfit. A few minutes later the bedroom door opened again. Leda stood in the doorway.

Duncan caught his breath and sat up straighter in his seat. His stomach tightened, the way it used to in his first days courting Caitlynn. How bonny she was!

Leda stepped slowly toward the sitting area, holding up the skirt of the tea gown. The long gloves emphasized her slender arms. The dress fell about her perfectly, accentuating the slopes and curves he’d seen in his dream. The pearls highlighted the delicate skin of her throat, causing his gaze to skim down her front, over the lace panel covering her chest, where he could make out the delicate swells of her breasts. His hands tightened on the arms of his chair as he marveled. When had Leda MacGregor become such a beautiful woman?

She stood in front of him, her head bowed, her gloved hands folded in front of her. “What do you think?”

“I think I’ll be proud to have you on my arm in the dining room.”

Her doe-like eyes widened. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He swallowed past a sudden lump in his throat. “You’re welcome, Leda.” He stood up. “Now, we have a few hours before dinner. I’ve ordered tea. Why don’t you rest? Make certain Audrey has you ready by eight.”

“I will, Master Duncan,” Audrey piped in before Leda could answer. With a gentle hand on Leda’s arm she led her into the bedroom.

Duncan turned to go to his room. Leda’s misty-eyed expression remained in his mind long after he closed the door behind him.

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Gazing at her reflection in the dressing mirror while Audrey fussed over her, Leda almost hadn’t recognized herself. The awkward lass in trousers and Wellies seemed far away, replaced by a young woman who wouldn’t look out of place in an elegant ballroom.

Audrey stood behind her, speechless, but when their eyes met in their reflection, Leda could read her friend’s thoughts and feelings.

“Thank you, Audrey,” she whispered.

Audrey put her hands firmly on Leda’s shoulders, pointing her toward the door to the suite where Duncan waited for her. Slowly, she made her way across the room to where

Duncan stood, devastatingly handsome himself in his black dinner jacket, slacks, and white shirtwaist. His dark hair was combed back off his high forehead, drawing her gaze directly to his piercing brown eyes. He looked very much the way he had the evening he first captured her heart.

Duncan's earlier expression of admiration and wonder returned to his chiseled features and dark eyes when she emerged from the bedroom, dressed for dinner. Audrey had taken special pains with Leda's hair, sweeping it up into an elegant topknot with delicate tendrils dangling along her cheeks.

"You couldn't look lovelier," he said softly, as she came to a stop in front of him.

Her stomach and heart both fluttered. Even though Duncan's praise wasn't from romantic intentions, it made her feel soft and melting inside, as well as feminine and elegant. "Thank you," she murmured.

The moment that followed felt awkward. He stepped forward and opened the door. "Shall we?"

She nodded and stepped into the hall.

He closed the door behind them and offered her his arm.

Gingerly, she slipped her gloved hand into the crook of his elbow. She realized it was the first time she'd really ever touched him. Sheer physical strength emanated from him into her hand, making her a bit dizzy. She concentrated on walking without tripping on the plush carpet.

In the dining room, Duncan held out her chair for her, a formal gesture the two of them had long since dispensed with at home in the ease of growing friendship. Their relationship, since his apology, had recently begun to lose the strain of formality and tension it had before. Their conversations consisted mostly of the happenings on the estate and in the glen, as well as accounts of Ian's letters and travels. They did not dress in eveningwear and he did not buy her clothing and jewelry.

Tonight, however, she felt like a completely different person, a woman she did not recognize. Duncan, too, seemed to her like a stranger, a dashing, strikingly handsome man who had bought her a string of pearls and looked at her as if she were beautiful.

When they were both seated, a waiter approached in a crisp suit. She watched Duncan order champagne, admiring the grace and ease with which he moved about in the world, skills she felt she lacked completely. It occurred to her, as he ordered a many-course meal, that he had stayed here before and that he had a whole life apart from Glenparry, a life she knew nothing about.

When the waiter had bowed and left, Duncan turned to her. In the background a quartet played waltz music. She felt a wave of painful shyness and smiled, quickly sliding her gaze down to the cloth napkin artfully folded on the china plate in front of her. She busied herself with picking it up and laying it across her lap.

"You really do look lovely," she heard him say.

Heat immediately flushed her cheeks and she looked up at him. "Thank you, Duncan." She wanted very much to tell him how handsome he looked, but her shyness froze the words on her lips.

The waiter reappeared with a bottle of champagne and two fluted glasses. Leda watched the golden liquid fizz as he poured some in each glass.

Duncan picked up his glass. "To friendship," he said, holding it out to her.

His unexpected toast made her heart quiver and she raised her glass, clinking it gingerly against his. "To friendship." The bubbles tickled her nose and she suppressed a giggle as she swallowed. She'd only tasted champagne once before, at Duncan and Cait's wedding. The crisp taste reminded her of that evening. Tonight, Duncan looked very much as he had that evening at his own wedding banquet.

"Perhaps you'll honor me later with a waltz."

Leda's gaze flew to his when he spoke. He had set down his glass and sat watching her. She wondered if he had been joking. Her gut clenched when she saw he wasn't. She took another bracing sip of champagne and set her glass down. "I ... I would love to, Duncan, but I cannot."

He raised his eyebrows. "Why not?"

Her hands perspired in her gloves. "I ... don't know how."

"But you had Miss Brown as a tutor. That was one of the things she was supposed to show you."

Leda sighed. So, Miss Brown had not told Duncan after all of her refusal to learn dances all those years ago. Leda hadn't understood the point of learning to dance with a man in a formal ballroom. It wasn't something she'd been destined to have. "I know. She tried, but I ... refused."

She watched Duncan absorb what she'd said. To her surprise, she saw the corners of his lips twitch, in obviously suppressed mirth. "May I ask why?"

She pulled nervously at her napkin. "Aye. I refused because I didn't want to learn something I was never going to use. It would have been painful to know how to waltz when no one was ever going to ask me." The sudden confession caused a rush of emotion, and tears burned in her eyes.

Duncan appeared suddenly pained. He took another sip of champagne before answering. "Why did you believe no one would ever ask you to dance, Leda?"

Leda bottom lip quivered but she fought for control. She couldn't bear the thought of embarrassing her guardian in this elegant place. "It's not ... my place."

Duncan's face darkened. He grew silent and she prayed she hadn't angered him. She waited, her stomach clenched painfully for his response.

"You were *wrong*," he muttered, finally. The darkness passed and he looked at her gently. "However things were in the past, they're different now." He paused, and sighed. "It's always been your place, Leda. It's the fault of the people around you, myself included, who made you believe otherwise." He leaned toward her. "Do you understand?"

She nodded, blinking back tears.

"Leda, I really meant those things I said to you that night. And they've only deepened. You've become ... a dear friend to me."

His tone was warm and sincere and Leda's memory flew to all the time they'd spent together in the last two months, discussing the harvest, the goings on in the glen, remembering Cait, riding together. They took most of their meals together and spent nearly every evening by the fire in Duncan's study, reading or talking about the day ahead. In all that time, it had never occurred to her that Duncan was growing to consider her a friend. She believed herself to be someone for whom he was responsible and was concerned about righting a wrong he'd done, aye, but not a *friend*. The word resonated through her, bringing tears to her eyes. "Thank you," she said in a near whisper. "I ... feel the same way."

His handsome features relaxed and Leda realized she could never look at him without remembering how she'd always felt about him.

"I want you to have everything a young lady should have," he went on. "I'll give you a coming out if you wish."

The words filled her with sudden panic. Ian had mentioned the same thing that night in the kitchen. Coming out meant she was making known her availability to suitors. "No, Duncan. Thank you, but I couldn't."

Concern filled his eyes again. "No? Why not? For the same reason you didn't want to learn the waltz?"

She shook her head. "No, not the same." She glanced down at her plate again.

"It's all right. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

She looked up at him. He was regarding her patiently. She ached to tell him her feelings for Ian, but couldn't imagine how he'd receive the revelation. She had also grown to love the peaceful rhythm of their days and the time she spent in Duncan's company and didn't want to lose what they had built in that short time. "It's that I don't want to leave Glenparry. I'm ... happy there the way things are. I like being there with you."

He furrowed his brow, appearing on the verge of questioning her further. After a moment of studying her face, he seemed to think the better of it and smiled. "Well, then, I see my toast was a good one." He sat back in his chair, appearing much lighter. "I suppose there is only one thing to do."

"What is that?"

His smile widened. "After supper, we'll go back upstairs and conduct your first dance lesson."

* * * * *

"The first thing is to look into my eyes." Duncan stood in front of her, tall and broad and strong, and Leda was unprepared for the raw masculinity that shimmered off him when he stood this close to her. The clean scent of his aftershave balm wafted to her nostrils, making her feel delightfully heady. She nodded and craned her neck to look up at him. His dark eyes pierced her and made her stomach flutter.

He reached out, placing one large hand on her back, just below her left shoulder. His touch was warm and powerful, causing her knees to weaken. "Rest your left hand on my upper arm," he told her.

Duncan had removed his dinner jacket and Leda's fingertips met with rock-hard muscle through the thin material of his white shirt. Her breasts began to tingle against her corset and she felt the strong urge to flee before he saw the effect he was having on her. She didn't mean to have such feelings, considering her affection for Ian, but Duncan was magnificent, after all.

A beautiful smile curved his lips. "Good," he said. He held out his right hand. "Take my hand. Clasp it like this." He positioned her fingers over his. Without her kid gloves on, Duncan's warm, strong hand electrified her. "Now, we'll just begin with a simple step. I lead with my left foot in a rhythm of three and your steps mirror mine. Ready?"

Wordlessly, she nodded.

He chuckled, a warm rich sound. "You look nervous, Leda. Don't worry. Just follow my lead and I know you'll learn it in no time."

Leda cast a glance at Audrey, who stood by the bedroom door, hugging the medical book she'd been studying to her chest. She watched them with a dreamy expression.

Duncan stepped forward with his left foot, urging Leda to step back with her right.

"Good," he murmured, apparently oblivious to the effect his masculinity was having on her. "Now swing to the side and feet together." They came to a standstill, their hands still joined. "Very good, Leda. Now we continue that pattern in a counter clockwise direction."

She followed his lead, slowly and uncertainly at first, then with gathering confidence as she mastered the simple pattern of their steps.

"You are a remarkably fast learner," he told her, as he gently swung her through a step.

She managed to smile, finding it easy to step along with him as long as she kept her gaze riveted to his. "Thank you."

"One, two, three, one, two, three," he murmured.

Leda imagined the waltz music she'd heard in the dining room as her body melted and flowed into the rhythm of their dancing, guided by Duncan's strong, firm lead.

Eventually, Duncan slowed their pace until he brought them to a graceful halt. A broad smile curved the planes of his cheeks and his dark eyes had a touch of smolder to them as he looked down at her. He bowed.

Shyly, she curtsied.

"I've never seen anyone pick up the steps so quickly," he said. He still held one of her hands. Leda's heart pulsed quickly as he lifted it to his lips and pressed a small kiss on the back. His lips were soft and warm on her skin and the heat traveled up her arm. Her head swam slightly and her vision blurred. "We'll practice more tomorrow. You'll be ready for the dance floor by the time Ian gets here on Friday." Gently, he released her hand.

Her heart churned suddenly at the mention of Ian's name and her knees weakened involuntarily. She caught her breath.

"Is something wrong, Leda?"

She shook her head quickly. "No. Nothing's wrong. Tired, I suppose." She cast a glance to where Audrey had been standing, but she was no longer there. She must have slipped back into the bedroom. "Thank you again, for everything. And ... for what you said earlier ... about friendship."

Duncan pressed his hand gently on her shoulder. "You're welcome, Leda. I've been insensitive to your losses. I ... never thought about the things you've missed. I am truly sorry."

Tears stung in Leda's eyes. "It's all right," she whispered.

"I don't want you to think I was trying to get rid of you by giving you a coming out. I want you to know Glenparry will always be your home, as long as you want to be there." He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze before releasing her. "Now, go get some rest. I'm meeting with my solicitor in the morning, but I'll be back before noon. We'll have time to get you some more dresses. And then tomorrow night we have tickets for a play."

Leda smiled. "My goodness, Duncan, you're going to spoil me."

He grinned back at her. "I've a lot of lost time to make up." He touched her cheek gently. "Good night."

The warmth of his touch lingered on her cheek. Slowly, she turned to go into her room, sensing his gaze on her until she closed the door.

Audrey rose from her chair when Leda walked in, and Leda prepared herself for a barrage of questions from her friend about the evening. As she moved into the room, she realized that a special place burned in her heart for Duncan. A place that no time or pain had ever made vanish.

Chapter Six

Ian's stomach tightened as the train pulled up to the platform and chugged to a halt. He peered out the window, searching for Leda in the crowd. He spotted her immediately, standing next to Duncan, watching the windows of the train. His heart pounded. She'd never looked more like a lady, dressed in a suit of dark navy wool, the lace edges of her white collar accenting her delicate neck, her skirts billowing around her in a feminine swirl. One gloved hand rested in the crook of Duncan's arm.

An unexpected sliver of jealousy snaked through him. Although Leda watched the train windows with an eager expression, there was an air of ease and familiarity in the way she and Duncan stood together.

Ian rose from his seat, cracked the window, and called to her.

She and Duncan both turned at the sound of his voice, and he saw her excitedly tap on Duncan's arm and point. He'd never seen another human being's face light up at the sight of him the way hers did, and the vein of jealousy promptly vanished. The glow of love he'd seen in her eyes for him the day he left still burned. He grabbed up his hat, jacket, and satchel and left the compartment.

"Ian!" she cried, as he stepped onto the platform. Before he took three steps, she had reached him and stood before him, beaming. The joy in her face was unmistakable.

He grinned and set down his satchel. "Little swan, I missed you."

Her eyes misted over. "I missed you, too."

Stepping forward, he embraced her, pulling her close. Her softness pressed against him so willingly, he felt his bones melt. God, how he'd missed her! He closed his eyes, breathing in her clean feminine scent. "I missed you," he said softly into her hair, squeezing her with more urgency.

When he finally forced himself to pull away, Leda had tears on her cheeks.

"I missed you as well, little brother."

Ian looked up at the sound of his brother's voice.

Duncan was grinning at him and held out his hand.

"Hello, big brother." He accepted Duncan's offer of handshake with a sheepish grin. "I didn't mean to act as if you were invisible."

Duncan squeezed his hand warmly, a gleam of understanding in his eyes. "No offense taken." He released Ian's hand. "Come, let's get back to the hotel. I'm sure Leda will want to show you her new things."

Ian looked at her, unable to tell if the pink flush in her cheeks was from the chilly weather or from seeing him again.

"You don't want to see a bunch of dresses and shoes, do you?" she asked. "I mean, they are lovely, but ...". She smiled shyly.

"Of course I do." He picked up his satchel and offered her his other arm.

Her eyes widened. "You do?" She slipped her gloved hand into the crook of his arm. Her gentle touch heated his blood. Truthfully, he'd loved seeing her in her nightgown, with her long braid hanging down her breast, but she looked beautiful no matter what she was wearing, and he would happily watch her model dresses if it meant simply being with her.

Back in the hotel suite, he sat in the common room, sipping tea while he waited for her to change into one of her new dresses.

Duncan sat in the chair opposite him. "You look pensive, Ian. Is something the matter?"

Duncan's voice cut into his reverie. He could be certain his older brother would see through him at some point. But he wasn't quite ready to discuss his feelings for Leda. "Charlie Thornton died last week."

Duncan looked at him, setting down his cup. "Died? Whatever happened?"

Ian shook his head. "Don't know, actually. One moment, we were walking to a lecture, the next, he was on the ground, clutching his heart. Then he was gone. I would have told you sooner, but, I've just been unable to speak of it until now."

Duncan reached out and clasped his shoulder. "I'm sorry. It must have been one hell of a shock."

He nodded. "Aye." He looked down into his cup. "It makes me wonder."

"About what?"

"About my own life. About how quickly ...". He stopped speaking, not wanting to cause Duncan any pain from his words. After all, if anyone knew the pain of losing someone before it was time, he did.

Duncan nodded. "I understand. If I'm not mistaken, you've been inspired to reevaluate your life and how you're living it. You see all the ways you're deficient and the things you approve of."

"Aye. Exactly." He looked at Duncan a moment longer. "I've not been living correctly."

Before he could say anything else, the bedroom door opened and Leda emerged wearing an elegant tea gown. His breath hitched softly as he took in the bonny vision before him. His heartbeat quickened with each step she took, as she made her way toward him.

Falling tiers of sheer netting decorated with peach-colored floral embroidery, scalloped edging, and bodice pleats cascaded over her delicate figure, outlined in a peach slip dress. Her legs shimmered in shell stockings, the slopes of her calves melting into small-heeled shoes.

She stood by the sofa, watching him hesitantly. "What do you think?"

Ian set down his cup and saucer, struggling not to show the trembling in his hands. His heart galloped in his chest. "Leda you're ... breathtaking."

Leda's eyes widened and her breath caught audibly. "Breathtaking? Do you really think so?"

He nodded, feeling a bit lightheaded. "Aye. I swear it."

Hot tears clouded Leda's vision. Behind her, she could feel Audrey's approving gaze on her. "Thank you, Ian," she whispered.

"Come, sit with us." Duncan poured her a cup of tea and handed it to her when she'd sat down next to Ian.

Leda thanked him and took a sip. She set the cup on the saucer, aware of a sudden, enveloping sense of contentedness. She glanced at Duncan and then Ian, realizing that this was the first time ever she had sat with the two of them this way. She found herself wishing the three of them could just be together always. A bloom of heat suffused her cheeks and she looked down at the toes of her shoes. "How are your studies, Ian?" she asked quietly.

He sighed. "The usual." He looked at her and she could see he was troubled.

"Something happened, didn't it? Something bad?"

He nodded. "Aye. I was telling Duncan about one of my classmates. He died suddenly. It was his heart."

"Oh, no! Ian, I'm so sorry." Without thinking, she reached out and laid a hand on his forearm.

"Thank you, little swan. I didn't want to trouble you about it."

She frowned. "How could you ever trouble me about something like that?" She glanced at Duncan, who was gazing on his brother with sympathy in his dark eyes and knew he understood what Ian was feeling.

Ian smiled at her, even though his hazel eyes were pained.

She watched a dimple form on his right cheek and her heartbeat quickened. Reluctantly, she lifted her hand from his arm and took another sip of tea.

"Our time together is all the more precious," Duncan said quietly.

She nodded. "Ian, I'm so glad you could come here."

He looked at her, his expression momentarily unreadable. "So am I, little swan," he murmured.

A comfortable silence settled over them. Leda took a sip of tea, glancing at Duncan over the rim of her cup. Their gazes met and Duncan smiled at her.

"Ian, you must ask Leda to dance tonight at supper."

Ian raised his eyebrows, looking at her uneasily. "Leda? Did you finally let Brownie teach you the waltz?"

She giggled. "No. Duncan taught me."

He smiled, yet he still looked troubled, and she wondered if she'd said something wrong. "You changed your mind."

She looked down at her hands. "Well, not really."

"I asked her to dance the other night," Duncan said. "She refused, and when I asked her why, she told me she wouldn't let Miss Brown teach her because she believed that no one would ever ask her to dance."

Ian's eyes clouded over and his face fell. "Oh." He looked down. "Leda, I would have asked you." He looked back up. "Well, maybe I've given you reason to feel I wouldn't."

"No, Ian. It's not like that."

He looked at her. "I'm sorry, little swan." Ian gazed at her steadily now, his eyes sparkling with a bit of his usual humor and mischief restored. He seemed somehow relieved. "Of course, I want to dance with you."

* * * * *

Can a person actually feel this happy? Leda thought, sitting in the dining room with Duncan and Ian later that evening. To her, they were the most handsome men imaginable. She studied them, marveling at how different they were, and yet so obviously brothers. They shared the same strong jaw line and planed cheeks, as well as broad chests and shoulders, both deliciously striking in their black dinner jackets and white shirts.

As soon as the music started up, Ian turned to her and smiled, his eyes greenish gold in the reflection of the chandeliers, the color of sunlight glinting off a loch in autumn. Her breath caught softly in her throat. A moment she'd never thought would ever happen in her life was about to happen.

"Will you honor me with a dance?"

Her cheeks burned with what she was certain was a bright shade of scarlet and her throat constricted. She nodded. "Aye," she managed to whisper.

Ian put his napkin on the table and stood, holding out his hand to her. She watched him a moment, frozen, taking in the god-like image of him, his reddish-brown hair combed back off his chiseled face. She placed a gloved hand in his, letting him assist her to her feet and lead her out onto the middle of the floor.

Her heart surged wildly when he took her into his arms. A poignant mixture of elation and fear coursed through her as she struggled to remember everything Duncan had taught her.

He smiled down at her, his eyes smoldering.

She caught her breath again as he pressed his hand into her back, the heat coursing through into her dress. He squeezed her other hand gently and stepped forward. Slowly, gracefully, he eased her into the steps. Her gaze remained riveted on his until the moment the waltz ended and he let her go. She felt his reluctance in the way his hand slid slowly from her back and his fingertips lingered on her hand until the last possible moment.

He was still staring down at her while the couples around them clapped for the musicians. "Leda, I must speak to you alone, if I may."

She nodded, her heart pounding. "Of course." Her stomach tightened as he led her back to the table, and she spent the rest of the meal forcing herself to eat and to keep her attention on the conversation rather than her wandering thoughts about why Ian needed to speak to her alone.

After what seemed like forever, they left the dining room and went upstairs. Ian took off his jacket and slung it over a chair, sitting down next to Leda on the sofa.

The three of them sat by the fire, sipping port for a while. When Duncan suggested they turn in, Ian asked his permission to speak with Leda alone. Duncan raised his eyebrows in an intensely quizzical manner, but he agreed. "Please don't stay up too long," he said, with a touch of warning in his voice.

When Duncan left, Ian turned to her. He moved a bit closer to her on the sofa. The firelight played on his face, highlighting his chiseled features and smooth, thick hair.

Her stomach flip-flopped. "What did you need to speak about?" she asked, bracing herself inwardly for whatever he might say.

He took a deep breath, and she could see him preparing himself to speak. "I owe you an apology, Leda," he answered softly.

She furrowed her brow. "I can't imagine what for."

"I abandoned you ... after the funeral. Things were horrible between you and Duncan. You were frightened and alone. I should have stayed."

Her breath caught softly. In a million years, she wouldn't have expected Ian to say that, but the deep sadness in his eyes conveyed to her how upset he really felt. "You couldn't have stayed. You had to go back. And then, you have your studies. I know that."

He sighed. "No, Leda, you don't understand." His shoulders slumped. "I could have stayed longer. Or I could have come back for a visit, something. Had the situation been reversed, *you* would have come to see me, no doubt." He paused and raked a hand through his hair. "You see, the truth is, when we were together ... that night in the kitchen ... and then, the next day, riding ... I felt something ... between us. It was so strong it frightened me. That's why I left." Reaching out, he covered one of her hands with his. "It's no excuse, but it's true."

Leda stared at him. A moment passed before she realized she'd not taken another breath. Could he possibly be saying what she thought he was? "Do you mean it wasn't my imagination?"

He shook his head. "No. It wasn't your imagination." He turned briefly in the direction of the fire and then to her. "I'm so sorry. It was cruel of me. You've always been my best friend. That's why it was such a shock to ... feel more. Can you forgive me?"

She stared at him, momentarily speechless. "I can forgive you, Ian. I ... felt it, too." She looked away briefly, bracing herself for his reaction. "I just never thought you could feel ... romantic ... toward me."

His brow crinkled. "Why not, Leda? You're beautiful and sweet. It's my fault for not seeing it sooner." He leaned closer. "Why do you believe I wouldn't find you ... desirable?"

Leda looked at him. The room had begun to tilt and everything in the room shone with a magical glow. She never imagined they'd have this conversation. But they were! "I ... I ... my mum. She always told me to remember my place. I was in Glenparry on Malcolm's graces. I was there to serve." She looked down. "Even though you've always been my friend, I always assumed you felt the same as Mum did about me."

Ian reached up and touched her cheek. "Little swan," he whispered. "To me, you're a princess."

Leda's heart galloped in her chest, making her breath tight. She'd never thought even to hope for that. "Ian, I don't know what to say."

He picked up her hand and held it to his chest. "I love you, Leda. Say you love me back."

Hot tears swam in her eyes. "I love you. I do."

Ian pressed his lips into her hand and moved closer to her. "I want to ask Duncan's permission to marry you."

Her vision blurred and the room swayed like a boat in high seas. "You want to ... marry me?" she heard herself say.

"Aye. Would you, Leda?"

Joy surged through her. "Of course, I will, Ian. I'd love nothing more in the whole world."

Ian's face lit up and he broke into a huge grin. His hand went to her cheek. Suddenly, the corners of his mouth turned downward. "I don't have a ring yet to give you, Leda. I ... I wasn't certain of what you'd say."

She shook her head. "I don't care about a ring, Ian."

To her surprise, his eyes misted over. "Little swan," he whispered, "You're the sweetest lass in the world. I want more than anything to kiss you."

A tingle of heat spiraled through her entire body. "Please," she whispered.

Ian leaned closer, the spicy scent of his aftershave wafting into her senses. He pressed his lips to hers, gently at first, then with growing urgency. His hand was still against her cheek, his thumb stroking the skin in soft circles. The sensation of his touch weakened her, stoking her desire, which pulsed between her thighs and in her breasts. He encircled her with his arms, pulling her closer against him.

Leda softened, her body melting against the hardness of sinewy muscle. Her hand went to his hair, stroking it. Her fingertips slid onto his neck, warm and strong under her hand, and she rested there, feeling his muscles flex with the movements of his mouth.

She parted her lips, and he slipped his tongue between them, tentatively exploring, then tasting the soft recesses of her mouth with more hunger. His lips tasted faintly of the port. One large hand slipped into her hair, then down again, over the back of her blouse, exploring, caressing.

Their kisses grew heated, the desire mounting. Months of suppressed yearning began to slip out and Ian took her mouth more hungrily, suckling her tongue, nibbling at her lips. She melted, breathing raggedly as he devoured her lips and neck.

Gently, he pushed her back against the sofa cushions and sank down, half covering her body with his. She arched against him, letting her hands roam over his back, absorbing the feel of hard muscles under her hands. They felt exactly as she'd always imagined. Masculine, delicious.

Ian covered more of her body with his as their passion intensified, and the evidence of his desire pressed against her leg, hard and male. She breathed in his masculine scent, absorbing the taste of his kisses.

"Leda," he whispered. "Bonny Leda."

His fevered words elicited a soft moan. She was drowning in bliss. She clasped her hands around his head as he dappled small kisses on the base of her throat and over the lace panel at the top of her dress where just a bit of her skin was bare underneath the film of material. Under her corset her nipples pushed against the sateen, aching for his touch.

Ian lifted his face and smiled at her, his eyes smoldering, his breath ragged. "I love you," he whispered.

A lock of his hair fell over his forehead. She pushed it back. "I love you, too."

Ian bent his head to kiss her. His lips were a breath away from hers when the sound of Duncan clearing his throat quite loudly carried through the bedroom door.

Ian sighed. "Why do I get the feeling that was meant for us?"

"Because it probably was."

He kissed her once more then moved his weight off her so she could sit up, then picked up her hand. "Leda, after what happened to Charlie, I realized I didn't want anything else from life except to be with you."

She looked at him. Her lips felt swollen from his kisses and her breathing had not yet calmed. Between her legs, she was wet, open, aching for him. "I feel the same way, Ian. I'm so happy you do." She put her hand to his cheek. "That must have been so frightening for you, with your friend." She embraced him and rested her cheek on his shoulder, her heart squeezing with sudden pain. "I don't know what I would do if anything happened to you."

He pressed a small kiss into her hair. "It's all right, little swan. I'm here, and I want us to spend whatever life we have together."

In the next room, Duncan cleared his throat again. Loudly. Ian pulled away from her and stood, assisting her to her feet. He leaned down and kissed her softly. "Good night, love," he whispered.

She stood, her hand lingering in his. Her head swam, drunk from her taste of passion. "Good night," she managed. Slowly, she pulled her hand back and went into her room.

* * * * *

Duncan was sitting at the desk bent over a book when Ian walked in. His brother turned and looked up at him, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

Ian sat on the edge of the bed and returned his gaze, unable to speak at the moment. The feel of Leda's soft skin under his fingertips lingered, as did her feminine scent and the taste of her lips. He sighed, summoning the strength to speak. "You've always encouraged me to be truthful with you, Duncan."

"Aye."

He raked a hand through his hair. "I'm in love with her. It started when I was home for the ... funeral."

Duncan nodded. He closed the book and turned on the little bench. "I thought as much," he said softly.

Ian watched him, his heart pounding. "Are you angry at me?"

Duncan's brows rose. "Why would I be angry? I can certainly understand. She's lovely and sweet and you've been friends more than half your lives." He paused and cleared his

throat. "Ian, I know I don't say it enough, but I love you very much and only want your happiness. I'm just not certain Leda is ... ready for you."

Ian's heart lurched slightly. "Ready?"

Duncan leaned forward. "Aye, ready. You're a bit more experienced than she, to say the least, aren't you?"

Slowly Ian nodded as his brother's meaning sank in. "I haven't been with anyone since I returned to school. I don't want anyone else."

"What about Helen Montcrieff? You've spoken to me of her a few times. I was under the impression you had intentions toward her."

Ian shook his head. "I like her. We've become friends, she and I. And I had considered her ... that is ... before this happened. There's nothing between Helen and me but friendship." He looked at Duncan. "You'd prefer if I courted Helen, wouldn't you?"

"Not if you don't love her. I wouldn't ask that of you."

Ian stared at his brother. His answer was not what he'd expected.

Duncan returned his gaze. "It was Father who expected a good marriage from us both. Not me." He sighed. "I apologize for not addressing it with you sooner. I've been ... preoccupied." He heaved a deep sigh. "This seems sudden for you."

Ian thought of Leda and his body tightened sensually. "It's unlike anything I've ever felt before, Duncan. I think about her all the time. I only want to be with her. I ... was frightened of how I felt, but after what happened to Charlie ..." He trailed off and looked down at his hands. Duncan seemed dead-set against him and Leda. "I want to marry her."

Duncan rose from the bench and sat beside him. Gently, he clasped a hand on Ian's shoulder. "Ian, I'm responsible for Leda until she's twenty-five. I'm not certain I can permit marriage."

Panic arose and he looked at Duncan. "That's four years, Duncan. That's too long. I don't mean any offense, but there was a time not long ago she cried in my arms because she thought you hated her."

His brother nodded. "I know, Ian. It's hypocritical of me. But even if I weren't her guardian, I'd protect her. She's precious." He looked at him. "She's innocent. She's not a woman of the world, like Helen."

The word *innocent* sliced through Ian's heart. "I know. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her, I swear." The tendril of jealousy that had wrapped his insides earlier that day re-emerged. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Duncan sighed. "I didn't say that." He rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "I'm still mourning Caity." He had released Ian's shoulder, but now reached out again and squeezed it in a brotherly manner. "Ian, I want you both to be happy. You and Leda are the most important people in the world to me. You're a good man." He paused, his hand leaving Ian's shoulder to rest on the mattress. "It's your readiness to settle down that I question."

“I feel ready. I’ve never wanted anything more in my life.”

His brother nodded, his dark brows drawn together in deep thought. A pensive air settled over him and Ian knew he was reflecting. Finally he raised his face. “You swear your intention is marriage?”

Ian nodded vigorously. “Aye. Nothing less.”

Duncan sighed. “All right, Ian,” he said finally, “Show me that your feelings for her are real. When you come home after this term, if your feelings haven’t lessened, I’ll give you my blessing to get engaged. But,” he added quickly, “even then, I’ll want you to take things slowly. Do you understand?”

Elation swept through Ian. He grinned until his cheeks felt stretched and he grabbed Duncan into an embrace. “Thank you, Duncan. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, little brother.” Duncan’s arms tightened around him before they released each other.

Ian noticed his brother’s dark eyes looked troubled. “I love her, Duncan. You’ll see. I’ll do everything in my power to make her happy.”

Duncan nodded. “Aye. As I would expect of you. She deserves nothing less than that.”

Chapter Seven

December, 1913

Duncan slipped his left hand around to cup Cait's breast. She moaned as he moved, his cock sheathed deep inside her. The molten pleasure reverberated through his whole body. He closed his eyes, melting against her softness, breathing in her musky feminine scent.

He kneaded her nipple between his fingertips, eliciting one moan after another. The pressure built in his shaft and exploded, causing his entire body to shudder. His hand remained closed over her breast, gently squeezing it as he caught his breath. He wanted Caity to have her pleasure as well and let his hand stray to the damp nest between her thighs. Still hard inside her, he rubbed the swollen nub of her clitoris where it stretched against his cock.

He nibbled the back of her neck, each swipe of his tongue a companion to the intimate caresses of his hand. Her hips bucked against his hand and she moaned until her body shuddered with an orgasm. A long sigh of contentment escaped her and she fell limp underneath him. Gently he turned her onto her back and leaned over her to kiss her mouth.

Leda gazed up at him, tendrils of sandy hair plastered to her cheeks from the heat of lovemaking.

Duncan shot awake, his chest heaving. Automatically, he groped the bed next to him, relieved to find the empty space beside him.

Well, relieved and pained both. He lay back, staring up at the ceiling, his heart aching. Not a morning passed that he didn't wake up missing Cait. His body ached for her and he longed to see her smile and hear her laugh. He wasn't happy about the fact that in the last few months she always turned into Leda in his dreams.

He still hadn't found an answer as to why this dream was occurring. At first he'd thought it was a lack of love for Cait. It wasn't. He missed her as much as ever. He'd hoped that Leda's romance with Ian would have stopped the dreams somehow. On the contrary. The scenarios had only grown more intense, more intimate with time's passing.

He let his thoughts wander to the possibility of Leda's engagement to Ian. For some reason, the prospect saddened him. Why? The two people he loved most in the whole world would be together, happy. That's truly all he wanted for them. He didn't care if Ian made his own way in the eyes of the world, as long as he was fulfilled. In spite of his concerns about Ian, he knew that his younger brother was a good-hearted man who would cherish Leda.

Somehow, the answer, he sensed, was about Leda herself. When he thought of her being married, he felt as if he were going to lose her, the one person in whom he'd found comfort in his grief. Understanding dawned and the pain of missing her already clutched him. What if Ian wanted to settle somewhere far away? He didn't like to think of being separated from him and Leda. The realization struck him then, with brute force. Glenparry without Leda MacGregor would become a dead, barren place. The wide-eyed lass who'd arrived that day from Orkney, clinging to her mother's hand, had become a deeper part of his life than he'd ever realized.

She was enchanting, he had to admit. Leda had grown into a lovely, charming woman. He could certainly understand his brother's feelings. But there was more. Duncan had grown to love her for who she was. Her sweetness and loyalty made him want to shower her with the same.

She couldn't leave. Not now. Not ever.

Slowly, he rose from the bed and made his way into the bathroom. He'd overslept and Ian was due home this morning for Christmas holidays. There wasn't much time to get ready. He and Leda were driving to the station to fetch Ian in less than an hour.

Ian had finished his exams and was coming home for an entire month. Leda had been so excited last night she'd only been able to nibble a few bites of her supper. He doubted she'd been able to sleep last night, either. Her feelings for Ian had not waned in the least and apparently, Ian's feelings for her were strong as ever. It looked as if they were going to ask for his blessing on their engagement.

Duncan shaved and combed his hair. When he went back into his bedroom, John had already been to his room with a tray of tea and toast, and had set out the suit he would wear. Duncan sighed and removed his pajama top. The heavy feeling that came over him when he thought of Leda's getting married persisted, even though he had made a decision to ask them to remain at Glenparry. The fear that harm could come to her troubled him deeply and he prayed to understand the reason why. If he hadn't always had an inner sense of foreboding, he would not have been as troubled, but just as he had feared getting Cait pregnant, he had similar, disturbing fears around Leda.

He poured a cup of tea, stirred in sugar and lifted the cup. When it was halfway to his lips, the answer struck him. Of course! How could he not have seen it before? Marriage meant bairns. Bairns meant pregnancy. His blood ran cold. What if ...? He couldn't even bring himself to complete the thought. He thought briefly of forbidding the engagement. No. Pain wrung his heart. Leda would be devastated and so would Ian. He couldn't do that to them. He wouldn't prevent them being together, but he could ask them to wait.

Leda was dressed and pacing at the top of the stairs when he left his room to go downstairs. She looked very pretty with her hair swept up and pinned, and a cream-colored lace blouse and dark wool skirt. She smiled and rushed to him the second he emerged from the hall. "Good morning, Duncan. I'm ready to leave."

He chuckled and reached out to touch her cheek. "All right. We'll leave now. Did you have some breakfast at least?"

She shook her head as she followed him down the stairs. "No. I had tea. I'm too excited to eat."

The car was waiting for them in the driveway. The sky above was iron gray and packed with snow-filled clouds. A biting wind swept past them as Duncan held the passenger door open for Leda and then got into the driver's side.

"Duncan, is something troubling you?" Leda asked after they'd been driving a while. The train station was in Kirkfield, on the outskirts of Glenparry.

He felt her tense and glanced at her. "What makes you say that?"

"It's just a feeling. I've been sensing it for a few weeks. Are you unhappy about Ian and me?"

Duncan became suddenly aware that his fingers had closed tightly around the steering wheel. He relieved his grip and cleared his throat. "No, I'm not unhappy about you." He kept his eyes riveted to the road ahead. "But I ... I've been worrying about something."

"Worrying? Can you tell me?"

He nodded. "I was thinking this morning of how much I would miss you ... and Ian, if you moved away. I was going to beg you to remain here, in the glen. I'll buy Ian some land and a title. You'll have your own estate, but you'll be close by."

Leda was quiet.

When she didn't speak, he glanced at her, his heart squeezing at the way she was gazing at him, her soft eyes misted over.

"Duncan, he and I actually discussed it. We don't want to leave here, either. I couldn't imagine it. I'd ... miss you too much as well." She was quiet another moment and he saw movement from the corner of his eye as she looked quickly out the window, then back to him. "You're the best friend I've ever had."

Duncan felt a deep flush of warmth spread through him. "It's mutual, Leda. The night I came to you and apologized for treating you so horribly and you forgave me without question, I knew you, too, were one of the best friends a person could hope for."

He heard her snifle. "Well, then, it's settled. Ian and I aren't going anywhere."

He smiled as relief washed through him. He should have known she would respond to his concern with care and love. "Aye, it is."

Within minutes, they had neared the town and were pulling up on the street outside the station. Duncan got out and opened Leda's door, holding out his hand to her.

She smiled up at him as she accepted his assistance.

As her gloved hand came to rest in his, a wave of fierce protectiveness and affection washed over him. He had cleared the first obstacle. Yet the feeling of foreboding nagged him. He was determined to speak to them both at the first opportunity.

* * * * *

Ian's train pulled up just as they reached the platform. As she had in London, Leda watched the windows, anxiously searching for Ian. She didn't need to search far, for he stuck his head through the open window and waved to her. In her excitement, she squeezed Duncan's arm.

Duncan smiled down at her. She noticed briefly that his dark eyes still looked troubled, but Ian called to her as the train chugged to a stop and she began to pull him toward the car in which Ian rode.

Ian appeared at the top of the steps and leaped down, grabbing Leda up into a fierce embrace. She buried her face in his neck, breathing in the clean masculine scent she'd been craving for the last month. His arms tightened around her and she absorbed their strength. Joy washed through her at the thought of four whole weeks of embraces ... and, hopefully, kisses.

Ian pressed a long, soft kiss into her cheek before releasing her and turning to give his older brother a hug.

Leda gazed at him, elated to see his handsome face wreathed in smiles.

He slipped his arm through hers, pulling her close to him while Duncan picked up his valise.

"How were your examinations?" Leda asked, as they began to leave the platform. She hugged his arm close to her body as they walked, never wanting to let him go.

"Fine. I believe I've passed them, at least."

She chuckled. "I'm sure you've more than passed. And even so, I don't care if you passed or not. I'm just glad you're home."

"Thank you, Leda." Ian turned to Duncan. "What about you, Duncan? Are you glad I'm home?" Leda heard the plea in his voice and her heart squeezed. She knew Ian was nervous about asking his brother's blessing.

Duncan reached out and clapped Ian's shoulder affectionately. "Of course. I'm always glad when you come home. In fact, I just finished telling Leda I don't want the two of you to leave Glenparry."

Ian stopped short and turned to Duncan. He still held Leda's arm close. Around them the station had emptied. Their breaths puffed vapor into the cold air and the only activity was the passersby in the village. "Duncan, does this mean you give your blessing?"

Duncan smiled. "Well, have your feelings for Leda remained passionate? Are your intentions still to marry her?"

Ian nodded vigorously. "Aye, Duncan. I've missed her more each day." He released Leda's arm and dug under his coat into a pocket, producing a small box. He opened it with his gloved hands, displaying a gold ring with a diamond.

Leda caught her breath, her eyes stinging with sudden tears. Her heart pushed against her chest, threatening to burst.

Ian grinned, looking at his brother. "Is that serious enough for you?"

Before Duncan could answer, Ian looked at Leda and picked up her hand. He went down on one knee on the cobble walk. "Little swan, here in front of my brother and the whole village of Kirkfield, would you marry me?"

Leda squeezed his hand. Elation swept through her and she imagined she was light enough to float to heaven. "Of course I will, Ian. I'd be honored."

A broad grin broke out on his face and he pulled the ring from the box. "Take off your glove then."

She did as he said and he slipped the ring on. He turned her hand over and pressed his lips into her palm, his eyes closed.

Tears slipped from Leda's eyes and she was vaguely aware of a small crowd having stopped to witness the laird of Glenparry standing with his brother, who'd just proposed marriage to the midwife.

He opened his eyes and stood, pulling her into an embrace. "So, Duncan," he said, after several moments of just holding her, "What do you say? Do we have your blessing?"

"Aye, Ian. You have it."

Relief swept through her and she closed her eyes, resting her cheek against the wool of Ian's coat.

* * * * *

"Now that you're officially engaged, I need to speak to both of you." Duncan stood by the window of his study, watching the swirl of the blizzard. They had gotten back from the train station just before the clouds above released the storm. Lunch had been waiting for them when they arrived and Duncan had invited them afterward to the study, anxious to clear up the other matter that was bothering him.

He turned to Leda and Ian, who watched him from the sofa by the fire. They sat close together, holding hands. Now that their emotions were free, they seemed not to want to let each other go.

Duncan sighed as he went over to them and sat in his chair. The raw sexual energy filled the space around them, and he knew it was going to be a long month ahead. He cleared his throat. "I need to speak frankly with you."

"What is it, Duncan?" Leda's gentle voice cut through his tension.

"I think I know what it is," Ian said. "You want us to wait to get married, don't you?"

Duncan nodded. "Well, first, I would like you to wait until after you graduate to have the wedding."

"I sort of assumed that. And I know Leda is training her apprentice." Ian sighed. "She's needed here." He reached out and touched Leda's cheek before turning back to his brother. "But that's not all you meant, is it?"

He shook his head. "No." He fixed a firm look at Ian. "*Protect* her, Ian. Do you understand?" He glanced up, seeing Leda's pale cheeks flush. Obviously she had understood. After all, she was a midwife, someone who would most definitely understand the human sexual drive and its results. He took a deep breath.

"I understand, Duncan," Ian said quietly.

Duncan's heart squeezed suddenly as the fear he'd experienced before rose up. He looked at Leda more closely, feeling an upwelling of protectiveness. He wanted to forbid them to touch each other, but doing that would only urge them to go faster. He wondered if, perhaps, this was how a father felt having to let his daughter lose her innocence to her husband. "I implore you to go slowly. Please." He fell silent. Forcing back his impulse to be fierce on the matter took all his strength, and he gripped the arms of his chair while he waited for their response.

Leda rose from her seat and knelt before him. Her large doe eyes gazed up at him. She put her hand over his. "We'll be careful, Duncan. I promise." She looked over her shoulder at Ian. "We owe him that, don't we?"

Ian nodded. "Aye." His gaze went to his brother's face. "I promise, too."

Duncan picked up Leda's hand. Her demonstration of affection had melted him inside. "Thank you," he murmured, squeezing her hand before releasing it.

She smiled up at him and then sat back down next Ian.

Duncan looked at them both, relieved that they'd promised to be careful. He just wished he could rid himself of that terrible feeling of foreboding.

Just then a knock came at the door. At Duncan's call, John popped his head in. "You're needed in the kitchens, laddie." He turned and winked at Leda.

Duncan turned to them before preparing to take his leave. "Go on, get out of here."

* * * * *

Leda smiled at Duncan. She saw that for some reason, the situation was as difficult as it was joyful, and she respected that his reason was sound. She wanted him to feel as joyful about her engagement as she did, and hoped that whatever was troubling him would pass when he saw how happy she and Ian were together. "Thank you, Duncan," she said softly.

Ian picked up Leda's hand and stood, drawing her up with him. "We'll see you in a bit?"

Duncan rose from his chair and nodded. "Of course."

"Thank you, brother."

"You're welcome."

Ian looked at Leda. "We haven't been to our window in such long time."

She smiled, her stomach tingling at the prospect of being alone with him in a remote corner of the house. "Too long." For years, they'd always gone to the far western window on the top floor to watch the sunset behind the hills and loch, or to watch the storms blow through, but now, going to the cushioned window seat took on a new meaning.

Duncan left with John and Ian tugged her gently from the room. He grinned. "Hey there, lassie, you look pretty tasty." He reached out and tickled her sides.

Leda shrieked and dodged him, taking off in the direction of the stairs.

He chased after her, their laughter echoing through the halls of the huge house. They didn't stop until they'd reached the window and stood, panting for breath.

"Come here, then," Ian said softly when their breathing had calmed. He reached out and pulled her against him in front of the window. They stood quietly, pressed together, watching the blizzard swirling outside.

Leda pulled her shawl more tightly around her and snuggled against Ian's warmth. "It's very chilly up here," she whispered. Her breath puffed a cloud into the cold air.

Ian pulled her tighter and kissed her hair. "I'll keep you warm," he murmured.

She looked up at him, her heart and stomach dancing. "I'm so happy," she whispered.

"Me too, little swan. I'm the luckiest man in the world. You could have any man you want, and you chose me."

Leda felt her cheeks burn under his praise. "Actually, that's how I feel about you."

He grinned. "That I could have any man I want?"

She laughed. "No. You know what I mean."

His arms tightened around her. "I know what you mean. I'm just glad I got to you before anyone else could. One coming out is all it would have taken, and I would have had too much competition."

She gazed up at him. At first she thought he was joking, but his earnest expression told her he was sincere. Reaching up, she cupped her hand to his cheek. "I would always have chosen you."

Ian put his hand over hers. The shadowy light filtered through the large window outlining his strong features. "I love you."

"I love you."

Ian cradled the back of her head in one hand and lowered his mouth to hers. His lips pressed to hers tenderly, the tip of his tongue beckoning her to part her lips. When she did, he slipped his tongue between her lips in a gentle invasion, exploring the depths of her mouth with suppressed passion.

His muscles flexed under her hands as she slid her palms down his shoulders and back, touching him the way she'd dreamed and fantasized of in the months since he'd left.

Their kisses grew deeper. The scent of his aftershave mingled with his natural masculine scent, the way she'd remembered it since that night in the kitchen. The feel of his lips, strong and soft all at once, stoked the unrequited desire she'd lived with for so long.

Ian pulled her closer so that their bodies were tightly together. His erection pressed hard against her stomach. The sensation sent waves of heat through her sex, radiating through her body, into her breasts, thrilling her and frightening her all at once.

Ian lifted his lips and trailed heated, moist kisses across her jaw and into her neck, burying his lips into the soft skin with tender passion. His love for her was unmistakable in the way his fingers slid into her hair and his other hand caressed her back; in the way his lips explored her skin with heated appreciation.

He slid his hands to her shoulders and lifted his face from her neck. In the shadowy light, his eyes smoldered down at her. His chest rose and fell with ragged breaths. Gently he ushered her to the window seat. "Come, Leda," he whispered hoarsely. "Sit with me."

He sat down and gently tugged her down next to him, gathering her again into his arms, taking her mouth in deep, open kisses.

Leda's body melted underneath his, her sex swollen and wet with desire. She wanted nothing more than to have Ian inside of her. The force of her desire made Duncan's request surge in her mind. Fear coursed through her suddenly. She pulled away from their kiss and pushed on Ian's arms. "Ian, we must stop."

He looked down at her, breathing raggedly. "What is it, little swan? Am I hurting you?"

Her own chest heaved with ragged breaths and her entire body tingled with the hunger for Ian's hands all over her. She shook her head. "No." She squeezed his hand and gazed up at him. "I want this. I just don't want us to break our promise to Duncan."

Relief washed through Ian's handsome features. He lowered his body over hers, bracing himself on one elbow. With the other hand, he stroked her cheek. "We won't break our promise," he breathed. "I just want to be with you so badly." He leaned over and pressed soft kisses into her forehead. His erection stirred against her thigh.

A sudden ache of jealousy gripped her in the chest. The way she loved Ian now made her feel intensely vulnerable in a way she never had before. "Ian, have you ... done this before?"

Ian lifted his face and gazed down at her with a troubled expression. "I won't lie to you, Leda. Aye, I have." He sighed. "But with you, it's different." His hand came back to her cheek, stroking, his fingertips pleading.

"Different? How?"

"I've never been in love before. That's how I know." He gazed at her. "I adore you. To me you're the bonniest, sweetest lass in the world."

She caught her breath. "Do you really feel that way?"

He brushed his fingertips across her cheeks, over her lips. His hazel eyes smoldered. "I swear it," he breathed. He lowered his face to hers and took her mouth, pressing firmly against her lips.

She parted hers, a rush of heat blazing through her when their tongues pressed together. Ian's scent filled her, and she reveled in the sweet intimacy of their kisses. She slipped her palms around his back, her hands filling with hard muscle that quivered under her touch.

Ian moaned softly into her mouth and sank down on top of her, his pelvis rubbing against hers. His erection fit through their clothing into the crevice between her thighs, which she had parted just enough, and the hard length rubbed her clitoris through the thin material of her drawers.

She clutched his shirt, moaning softly into his mouth. She pulled away from his kiss. "Ian," she breathed. "We really should stop."

Her body burned for him and she felt a mixture of relief and heartache when his body tensed and he lifted himself partway off her so his erection no longer touched her. The space around them filled with his heavy panting. "I'm sorry, Leda."

She touched his cheek. The throbbing between her legs turned painful with unrequited desire. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I just don't want to break our promise. I don't want to do anything to ..." She dropped off and avoided his gaze, suddenly embarrassed about her fears.

"Tell me, little swan. It's okay."

She looked up at him, unshed tears gathering in her eyes. "I don't want Duncan to get mad and ... forbid us." Deep down, she couldn't imagine that Duncan would do such a thing, but she felt suddenly terrified of losing Ian. The sensation shuddered through her in places deep inside her she hadn't previously been aware of, a sudden sadness that made her feel their love was so very fragile.

Ian lay back down on her, holding her. This time his embrace was more protective than erotic. "I'll do my best to keep our promise, Leda. I swear I will. You're just so beautiful and I love you so much, it feels impossible."

Leda stroked his hair as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm grateful you love me so much," she whispered.

Ian raised his head and pinned her eyes with his. "No, Leda, listen to me. *I'm* the one who's grateful. Do you understand?"

Leda felt a smile tug at her lips. "Aye, Ian, I understand."

Suddenly, their seriousness melted and Ian's eyes twinkled with his usual mischief. He bent and pressed a light kiss to her lips. "I'll do my best to go slowly, Leda."

She let herself smile. "Me, too."

Slowly, they sat up and Ian put his arm across her shoulders, holding her against him as they watched the dark sky swirling with snow.

Leda felt a deep sense of contentment, although as soon as she remembered the feel of Ian's kiss and the sensation of his hardness pressed between her thighs, a flicker of fear passed through her. She didn't know how slowly she could actually go.

Chapter Eight

“Ian,” Leda whispered, holding her arms out to him.

Ian smiled down at her as he pulled the covers aside and settled his body over hers. Hard and naked, he pressed deliciously against her. Her sex pulsed madly, melting open with need.

She parted her legs, offering herself as a loving cradle to him. The swollen head of his erection pushed against her slit. The intimate friction caused her to moan.

He bent his face to hers, whispering her name over and over ...

Leda opened her eyes. Ian’s face still hovered over hers. She blinked. He did not disappear. Crinkles of a smile creased the planes of his cheeks. His hazel eyes twinkled down at her.

“Ian?”

He leaned in closer. “Aye, it’s me. I couldn’t wait to see you.” He put a hand to her cheek. “Apparently, you feel the same, for you said my name in your sleep.”

She blinked as a flush of heat infused her cheeks. “You were in my dream,” she murmured.

His thumb brushed across her cheek. “A good dream, I hope.”

The warmth in her face deepened. “Aye. A good dream.” She put her hand over his. “What time is it?”

“Seven-thirty.”

“So early? You’ve already shaved.” The clean scent of his aftershave filled the air between them, stirring her blood, as did his touch. He wore a bathrobe over his pajamas.

“I wanted you to be the first person I saw. And vice versa.”

His sweet words made her ache and she wanted nothing more than to pull aside the covers and invite him into her bed. Had she not made her promise to Duncan, she would have done just that. "Thank you, Ian. You've made this the sweetest waking up I've ever had."

His eyes sparkled with a mixture of mischief and desire. "I've plans to make it sweeter," he said softly.

Her heart thumped. "How?"

He leaned his face to hers. His breath was warm on her skin. "Like this." He brushed his lips across hers, once, then again. The third time, he pressed his lips more firmly, feathering the tip of his tongue along the seam of her lips. When she didn't part them, he lifted his face and looked at her. "What is it?"

She frowned. "I haven't brushed my teeth yet."

Ian chuckled and nuzzled her cheek. "I don't care, Leda. You smell as sweet as heather to me."

Her face burned but she giggled. "You're a charmer, Ian," she laughed. "A silver-tongued devil, Caity used to call you."

Ian grinned and pressed his body against hers. Together, they sank back against the pillows. "As long as my charms work on you, I'm satisfied."

"Aye, they do." She smiled up at him, succumbing to the glorious feel of his chest against hers. She nuzzled his cheek, smooth and cool against her lips. Her body pulsed wildly from the hardness of his muscles crushing her breasts. Without the constraints of her corset, the contact brushed her nipples, making them tingle.

Ian pulled the bedcovers away as he nuzzled her cheek, feathering the tip of his tongue on her skin. Each brush of his tongue sent shards of heat into her body and she moaned, her hands roaming freely over his back, tracing the smooth hard ridges of muscle along his spine. He continued a moist trail of hot kisses onto her throat, along her collarbone and down over her chest, through her nightgown. One large hand sought her breast, gently squeezing it while he nuzzled the other one with his lips.

Leda moaned softly, her body melting rapidly under Ian's hands and kisses. Her nipples stiffened as he teased them between his lips and teeth and fingertips through the soft cotton of her nightgown.

"Leda," he moaned, surging against her. His erection pushed urgently against her thigh.

Her eyes fluttered closed and she sank further back against the pillows, her fingers laced into Ian's soft, thick hair. She felt her nightgown being worked up above her knees and then his hand was on her bare thigh, caressing her skin in fervent circles, moving toward her buttock. He squeezed the soft flesh once then released it, his fingertips skating to her inner thigh.

Ian raised his face from her breast. His breathing rasped harshly and his face had darkened and was flushed from arousal. The lids of his eyes were heavy, the hazel pools beneath smoldering. "Leda, may I touch you there?" he breathed.

Leda panted. Ian's other hand still lay on her breast. She felt the wet swollenness of her sex and ached for his touch. Dear God, but it was nearly impossible to have only a small taste of such pleasure!

The word *yes* hovered on her lips just as a knock sounded at her bedroom door.

Ian's hand shot out from under her nightgown and he threw the covers back over her, sitting back as the door opened. She and Ian both stared.

Audrey appeared and jumped when she saw them. "I can come back." She started to turn.

Leda heaved a sigh of relief. "It's all right, Audrey. Ian just came to say good morning."

Audrey did not answer, but curtsied briefly at Ian. A glint of mischief lit her eyes.

Ian leaned in to Leda, his lips close to her ear so only she could hear. "We'll pick up later where we left off."

A shudder of heat passed through her and she watched him rise from the bed.

Audrey approached and stood by one of the bedposts. "Ye haven't forgotten Mary Argyll?"

Leda shook her head. "Of course not. We'll go to her right after breakfast."

"Where are you going?" Ian asked. Disappointment clouded his face.

She pulled back the covers. "We're looking in on Mary. She's due the beginning of April." She stood up and put her hand on his arm, resisting the urge to embrace him in front of Audrey. "We won't be long."

His face brightened with relief. "Might I go with you? Don't worry. I'll wait outside."

She wrinkled her brow. "It's freezing out, Ian, and the snow's knee-deep, I'm sure. I can't ask that of you."

Ian reached out and pulled her into his arms just as Audrey approached the bed with a pile of Leda's clothing. "You didn't ask. I did." He kissed her forehead.

Leda smiled. She liked the idea of walking with him all that time, arm in arm. She also loved how eager he was just to spend time with her. "Well, if you don't mind, I'd like your company." She turned to Audrey, who had gone to the dressing table and picked up Leda's hairbrush. "You don't mind, Audrey?"

Her friend grinned. "Course not. Just as long as ye both have enough left in you for your feast tonight."

Ian grinned down at Leda, his hazel eyes churning with joy and desire. "I'll always have it in me to dance with me bride," he quipped in a heavy Highland brogue. He grabbed

her up and waltzed her over to the dressing table. "I've already pressed me tartan and polished up me *sgian dugh*."

She laughed heartily and then breathlessly as he released her. "Ian, why do you need a knife at our engagement party?"

Ian puffed out his chest. "To fight off any rogue who might try and steal me lass."

"I wouldn't let them steal me."

He smiled down at her, his eyes soft with love. "All right then, maybe I'll leave the *sgian dugh* in me room, but not me tartan." He leaned down and kissed her softly.

Audrey laughed and then sighed.

He let the kiss linger a moment longer then stood up straight. "I leave you to your toilette, ladies." He bowed gallantly and left.

Leda watched him until he was out the door. She hated being apart from him even the short time it took to get dressed. With a sigh, she sat down and let Audrey pull the braid from her hair and brush it out.

"I'm so happy for ye, Leda," Audrey said as her fingers worked swiftly but gently in Leda's hair.

"Thank you." She glanced at her friend in the mirror, surprised to see Audrey's dark eyes looking troubled. She stayed Audrey's hand that held the hairbrush. "What is it, Audrey?"

Audrey sighed and returned her gaze. "Ye're no' going to be leavin' Glenparry, are ye?"

Leda stared at her. Audrey was the second person close to her to express fear that she would leave after her marriage to Ian. A deep flush of affection coursed through her for her friend and she squeezed her hand. "No, Audrey. Neither of us wants to leave here."

Relief washed over Audrey's soft features. "Thank God fer that," she breathed.

Leda released her hand and Audrey finished brushing her hair and swept it into a bun. She watched Audrey work on her hair, staring at her own reflection, and smiled. When Audrey had finished, Leda followed her over to the bed where her blouse, undergarments, and skirt were spread on the bed.

As she lifted her nightgown, the memory of Ian's hand caressing her thigh rose in her mind, the sensation nearly as powerful as the actual touch. Had Audrey not knocked when she did, Ian would have touched the most intimate part of her. In that moment, she'd wanted nothing else and wondered at the overwhelming force of physical desire. The reality both elated and troubled her. Becoming intimate with Ian was the sweetest thing she'd ever experienced and she longed for him, but she was also afraid of breaking her promise to Duncan, especially when she'd now felt how intoxicating a man's touch really was.

She could only pray that if she broke her promise, Duncan would forgive her.

* * * * *

Ian was waiting for her when she emerged from the Argyll's cottage. She smiled, unprepared for the rush of pleasure that seeing him brought her.

He reached for her arm as soon as she approached him. "How is she?" he asked, as she slipped her mittened hand into the crook of his arm.

"She seems fine, thank God. The women in her family have a history of breech births, so we're keeping an eye on her. Audrey's staying with her a bit longer, but Mary said she wouldn't miss our party for all the wool in the Highlands."

He chuckled, leading her down the walk onto the road. "You're well loved here, little swan."

She squeezed his arm. "So are you."

He pulled her closer to him. "Shall we go back?" He looked down at her with a dreamy expression in his eyes. He seemed oblivious to the chilly air that had reddened his nose and cheeks.

"Aye." She leaned against him as they walked, vividly aware of his ruggedly masculine form beside her, pressed close to her.

The morning sky was a cloudless azure, and crisp sunlight sparkled on the blankets of snow covering the land.

Ian was unnaturally silent for most of the walk to the house. When the large, dark, gabled structure loomed ahead in the distance, she heard him sigh. "May I ask you a question, Leda?"

"Of course you may."

Ian stopped and turned to her. "This morning, before Audrey came in ... you were about to answer the question I asked."

She nodded, remembering again Ian's silken touch on her inner thigh, his fingertips a whisper away from the intimate folds of her sex. She became aware of the pulsing that sprang up there, merely from the thought. "Aye, I remember."

He cleared his throat and averted her gaze. "Well, I've been wanting to know ever since ... what you were going to say."

Tingling heat infused her cheeks, spreading like fire through her entire body. Slowly, she nodded. "I was about to say aye," she answered, her voice escaping in a near-whisper.

A smile spread across Ian's face and she loved the way a dimple formed in his left cheek. He cupped her cheek with a gloved hand and bent his head and pressed his lips to hers in a soft, sweet kiss that made her knees weaken. His lips were intimately warm in contrast to the cold air and she resisted the impulse to burrow against him under his coat.

When he pulled away, he took her arm and resumed their walk. "I'll do my best to go slowly with you, Leda," he said, as their boots crunched on the snow. "You're so beautiful, I can't keep away from you." He shook his head. "I can't believe you want me, too."

“Why wouldn’t I, Ian? I’m the one who can’t believe you want to marry me.”

He was silent for a few moments. She heard him chuckle softly as they turned onto the long driveway of the house. “I was just thinking, what if God put us together so we could learn our belief is wrong? What if we’re supposed to learn we can have the love we never thought possible?”

She smiled, touched that Ian reflected so deeply on their relationship. She knew that his thoughtfulness was one of the things that drew her to him. Since they were younger, he’d always wondered about the meaning of life below the surface. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.” She squeezed his arm. “But it sounds true.”

They were quiet as they moved up the driveway. She caught sight of Duncan, emerging from the house, bundled in his wool coat and scarf. He waved.

“There’s Duncan,” she said, waving back.

“Aye.” Ian grinned. “Watch out for him after a snowfall. He’s itching for a snowball fight.”

Leda furrowed her brow. She could never remember Duncan throwing snowballs, even with Caity. “Wait a minute, Ian. You’re the one who throws snowballs.” Every year he pelted her with snowballs until she couldn’t breathe.

He stopped and released her arm. “Aye, ye’re right, aren’t ye, lass? Ye’ve got ten seconds to get away before ye get it!”

Leda shrieked in delight and took off, but the snow was too high for her to get more than a few feet. A powdery snowball exploded against the back of her head. Before she could even grab up some snow and fight back, another one hit her shoulder and then another one on her back. She laughed and threw the snow in her hand, but it fell apart before it even reached Ian. She collapsed in the snow as Ian pelted her with one snowball after the other, laughing.

Duncan approached them and attempted to fend off Ian’s attack with a defense of snowball throwing. Leda watched them, at the same time shielding her face from the barrage of snow falling around her and on her.

“All right, all right,” she heard Ian shout. “I know she’s had enough.” He chuckled and went over to her.

Reluctantly she moved her mittens from her face and looked up. Both Ian and Duncan towered over her. “Am I safe now?”

Ian grinned. “For the moment.” He looked at Duncan. “She needs help.”

Both he and Duncan held out their hands. She took them and they lifted her to her feet as if she weighed no more than a leaf. They stood together, all breathing heavily from the exertion. Leda noticed that neither of them let go of her arm.

“Come in and get warmed by the fire,” Duncan said.

They turned toward the house. Ian and Duncan each pulled one of her arms through theirs and she walked between them, feeling incredibly, wonderfully warm. Nothing made her happier than being together with the two men she loved most in the entire world.

The warmth did not abate after she was seated on the sofa in Duncan's study, watching the fire and drinking tea. Ian sat close to her and Duncan sat on the other side, a bit further away.

"I'd like to give you your wedding present now, if I may," Duncan said.

"Thank you, Duncan," Ian answered.

She nodded, already knowing what it was.

"I've bought you some land neighboring this estate, as well as a title to go with it," Duncan went on. "I know how much you love it here, and, well, if you've no objection, I didn't see any reason you couldn't establish your estate in Glenparry." He looked hopefully at his brother. "I know you've wanted to make your own way, and you still will, but as your older brother, I wanted to do this for you."

Ian looked at him. "I accept your gift gratefully, Duncan," he said softly. He reached out a hand.

Duncan accepted the handshake with relief on his chiseled features.

"Thank you, Duncan," Leda said.

He looked at her. "You're very welcome." He released Ian's hand and embraced her.

John served them lunch in the study and afterward, Ian and Leda left Duncan to do some work.

Ian closed the door behind them and reached for Leda, as he always did, tickling her in all the spots he'd discovered she was most ticklish. She shrieked and broke into a run, into the hall and up the stairs. He grabbed her, tickled her, then released her, letting her go a bit further before grabbing her again. They continued this way until they'd reached the private corner with their window and collapsed on the window seat, both panting for breath. The pale winter sunlight shone through the glass, warming the spot where they sat.

Leda turned to gaze out the window, marveling at the sunlight glittering like crystal on the snow. "It's so beautiful out there," she breathed, aware of Ian moving closer to her.

"It's more beautiful in here," he said softly, bending his face close to hers. His strong arms closed around her and he nibbled on her earlobe.

She closed her eyes, melting against him. A soft moan escaped her throat as he tugged sensuously on the tender skin of the lobe. Leaning her head back against him, her breathing grew ragged as he moved from her ear to the side of her neck, feathering the tip of his tongue on her skin. Each tiny movement made her body tingle, the sensations concentrating in her breasts and down in her sex.

Ian stirred against her and she felt his erection rise and press into her buttock. One large hand slipped from her arm, stealing underneath her sweater, pulling her blouse from

the waistband of her skirt. His palm flattened on her ribcage, his searing touch separated from her bare skin by a thin layer of woolen undershirt. "You're not wearing a corset," he breathed in her ear.

"I leave it off in winter."

"Oh. Nice." He rubbed his palm in small circles, letting his hand move upward, cupping her left breast. Tenderly, he squeezed it, his fingertips gingerly touching the nipple, which immediately hardened at his touch. He took the tiny peak between thumb and forefinger, tugging at it with a rhythmic pulse. She moaned softly at the intense pleasure, feeling moisture gather swiftly between her legs.

"Leda," he whispered in her ear. "You're the softest, most exquisite lass."

"Aren't all women soft?"

"Not like you." He lifted his hand from her breast and tugged her woolen undershirt from her skirt. He skated his hand over her bare skin and closed it over her breast again. "How does that feel?"

Leda sagged against him, melting from the delicious heat of his touch. "Wonderful," she breathed.

He reached around with his other hand and held her right breast, squeezing both breasts together, his fingertips tugging again on the nipples.

Leda arched her back, pushing against his hands. "Ian ..."

Gently, yet urgently, Ian pulled his hands away and turned her to face him. His hazel eyes had darkened and his face flushed. He bowed his head to hers, capturing her lips. A soft groan escaped his throat at the contact of their open mouths. His tongue slipped between her lips, hungrily tasting every moist corner of her mouth while his fingers worked the buttons of her blouse, opening it and pushing it back over her shoulders.

She stopped kissing him long enough to unbutton the cuffs and slip the blouse off, dropping it to the floor.

Ian's eyes smoldered and he laid her back against the cushions and slipped the woolen shirt upward, over her ribcage, exposing her breasts. His gaze lingered appreciatively on her bare breasts, and he ran his hand lightly over the soft swells of flesh. "How beautiful you are, Leda," he breathed. He lowered his body gently onto hers; he bent to her breasts and captured one nipple in his mouth, tugging it languorously between his lips.

Leda moaned at the incredible sensation. She laced her fingers into Ian's hair, watching him pleasure her through heavy-lidded eyes. Tiny muscles in his jaw flexed as he suckled and nibbled on the tight pink bud, while he delicately pinched her other nipple with his thumb and forefinger. The blissful feeling of his mouth and tongue on her nipples traveled all the way to her sex, which tingled and swelled with raging desire, as if it were connected to her breasts with an invisible string.

Ian's other hand slipped under her skirt, caressing her inner thighs over her woolen drawers. His touch moved upward, his fingertips skating over her mound through the scratchy wool between her thighs. His breath caught in his throat as he traced the outline of her lower lips through the drawers, soaked with her musk. He lifted his face from her breast and gazed down at her, his skin darkly flushed. The pale sunlight coming through the window played on his handsome features.

"Leda," he said tightly, as his fingertips sank more deeply between her legs, "I'm trying to go slow. I ..." He hesitated and brought his mouth down hard on hers, suckling her lips and tongue feverishly.

Leda let her hands roam from his hair to his back, grasping at the hard muscles that quivered under her touch.

Ian undid the strings of her drawers and slipped his hand inside, palm down over her mound. At the contact with the moist heat of her sex, he surged against her, his erection pressing like a rock into her thigh. His fingertips spread her lips apart, exploring inside the folds. The intimate contact of the pads of his fingertips with her bare, slick flesh drew a long moan from her, and she spread her legs open further, one leg hanging over the side of the window seat.

"Leda, you feel so good," Ian panted hotly against her mouth. He lowered his face to her breasts again and feasted on a nipple, suckling it as he pushed two fingers inside her, gliding them in and out in slow, easy thrusts.

Leda moaned, her head thrown back, grabbing fistfuls of Ian's shirt.

He pulled his hand away and lowered his body down, between her legs, his hands on her buttocks.

She let out a small gasp at the sudden contact of his tongue on her clitoris, laving it in hungry strokes. She heard him groan in his throat, pressing his mouth harder against her slick flesh. In mere seconds, the most intense explosion erupted under Ian's fingertips and wave after wave of pleasure passed through her womb. Her fists clenched Ian's shirt and her eyes squeezed shut until the orgasm passed, leaving her wilted underneath Ian's body. She released his shirt and squeezed him in her arms, breathing heavily.

Ian raised his face from her sex. "Was that good for you?"

She nodded vigorously. "I want to do that for you."

He moved up on her body until he could hold her again. He kissed her softly, and Leda could smell her own female musk on his lips. "You don't have to."

"I want to."

Ian groaned and slid back up her body, rubbing his groin against her. He rolled to the side, unbuckled his belt and trousers, pulling them down past his hips along with his drawers.

Leda propped herself up on one elbow and stared down at him. His shirt was lifted up, revealing his taut stomach with a trail of hair down the center, ending in the thick nest of hair surrounding his shaft. Gingerly she reached out and touched him, closing her hand around the thickness of his erection. The dark purplish skin was velvety smooth and lined with veins, the head swollen from arousal.

Ian moaned when her fingertips made contact and began to rub softly, up and down his length.

Encouraged by his obvious enjoyment, she moved her hand a bit faster, stopping every few strokes to caress his testicles. They were firm and filled her hand, covered with same crisp hair that surrounded his cock.

“Leda,” he moaned softly. “That feels so good.”

She smiled and slid her hand back up, around his shaft, squeezing lightly and stroking at the same time. She leaned over and kissed him. A faint trace of her musky scent clung to his lips.

“Press here, with your thumb,” he breathed, guiding her fingers to a point below the head. “Oh, yes. That’s it.” He moaned and closed his eyes, his head lolling backward. He lay back against the cushions, breathing heavily. One hand wandered under her skirt again, his fingertips playing lightly between her thighs, stroking her clitoris, feeling the outlines of her vaginal lips.

After a few minutes, Ian’s body tensed. A long, low moan issued from his throat and his cock throbbed in her hand, his milky seed pulsing onto her fingers.

He stayed her hand with his and opened his eyes. He grinned. “Thank you, little swan.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his stomach and Leda’s hand. Then he put it aside and pulled her against him, burying his face into her hair. “I love you, Leda,” he whispered. “I can’t wait until I can have all of you.”

She smiled and snuggled against him. “Neither can I,” she said softly. “I feel exactly the same way.”

Chapter Nine

March, 1914

“Help!”

Duncan turned at the sound of Leda’s scream. She stood at the other end of the room, her eyes covering her hands. The sounds of her screams filled his ears. Her distress filled the room like a blizzard.

He broke into a run, his arms outstretched. She was on the window ledge now, teetering dangerously.

“Leda!” he called as he ran, but she didn’t uncover her eyes. His lungs burned in his chest. No matter how fast he ran, he couldn’t reach her.

“Leda!” he yelled.

She was gone.

Duncan sat bolt upright, gasping for breath. He opened his eyes. Sweat poured over his forehead and chest.

He looked around, finding himself in his bed. The room was dark, and it was probably the wee hours just before dawn. A late winter snowfall pelted the windows.

Catching his breath, he threw aside the covers and shrugged into his robe and slippers. He let himself out of his room and padded down the long hallway, to the wing where Leda’s bedroom was.

He knocked lightly on her door, his heart still pounding. He wished he understood these latest dreams.

A few moments later, the door opened and Leda peered out, pulling her wrap on. Her long braid hung over her shoulders and her large doe eyes were sleepy. Relief washed through him and he sighed heavily, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms.

Her eyes widened when she saw him. "Duncan? What's the matter?"

He collected himself. There was no need to worry her. "Nothing's the matter. I ... couldn't sleep and wanted to make sure you were all right."

A smile curved her lips. "Thank you. I'm fine." She peered at his face in the shadowy hall. "You seem restless. Ah, I know what you need, Duncan."

His heart lurched. "What's that?"

"A glass of warm milk. It'll help you sleep."

He breathed another sigh of relief, sneering at himself inwardly. What had he thought she'd say? "I don't want to put you to any trouble."

She smiled again and stepped out of the room. "Of course it's no trouble."

He walked through the dark, quiet house down to the kitchens and lit the stove for her while she put some milk into a pot and set it on the stove. He sat down at the table with two cups and watched her stir the milk with a wooden spoon.

The sight of her in her robe made him remember the last time he'd seen her in the kitchen in the wee hours of the night. She'd come here crying because of what she'd overheard what he'd said to Ian and found Ian comforting her. He'd known then that something was changing between her and his brother.

Something had changed between himself and Leda, too. Their friendship had deepened, to such a point he couldn't imagine how he'd lived all these years without it. Perhaps that's what his dreams were telling him. He shoved a hand through his hair, realizing he no longer saw her as his ward. Leda was a grown woman with dreams, desires and hopes. A complex human being, like himself.

And then there was his fear about her becoming pregnant. Undoubtedly, she would. What if she met the same fate as Caity? He couldn't bear the thought. He took a deep breath as he shored up the courage to express his fear to her.

Leda approached the table with the pot and poured warm milk into each cup. She put the pot back on the stove and sat down near him. "Be careful," she told him. "It's very hot."

He made himself smile. "I'll be careful." He picked up the cup and set it down again. "Leda, there's something I haven't told you."

She gazed up at him, her eyes questioning. He saw she was afraid of what he might say.

"Don't worry," he added quickly. "It's nothing bad. It's just ... well ... I never told you that I become afraid when I think of you --" He paused. "-- having a bairn." He raked his hand again through his hair. "I'm terrified that the same thing will happen to you ..."

"That happened to Caity?" she finished softly.

He nodded. "Aye."

Her eyes misted over suddenly and she sipped from her cup. Several moments passed before she spoke. "Duncan, I don't want you to have this distress."

He looked at her. "That's why I've been so adamant about you and Ian ... being careful."

"Oh, I see. We have been."

"I know. I trust you."

She was quiet a moment. "I'll go to Doctor Burns," she said. "He can give me a complete physical first. Then we'll know whether I'm healthy." She reached out, resting her hand lightly on his arm. Her large, sweet eyes regarded him with sympathy. "If I'm not healthy, Duncan, I won't try to have a bairn. I promise."

He put his hand over hers. "Jesus, Leda. You don't know what you're saying. I can't ask you to make such a promise."

"Like you once said, Duncan, you didn't ask. I'm telling you."

He chuckled softly. "Throwing my words back at me are you? I've taught you well."

She smiled. "Aye, you have."

He squeezed her hand as a measure of relief washed through him.

They sat quietly, sipping the warm milk and Duncan noticed that some of his distress had dissipated. Still, there was something nagging inside him, a sense of foreboding he could not shake. When he thought of Ian, the feeling intensified. He remembered his initial fears about his brother's maturity. Ian seemed to be doing well and loved Leda very much. He phoned her every day and wrote to her at least once a week. He'd be home soon for Easter and then it would be only a couple of more months until the wedding.

Duncan took a deep breath and finished the milk. He looked at Leda and returned the smile she gave him. As they rose, he prayed silently that his fears were unfounded and that everything would be all right.

Chapter Ten

Lady Helen Montcrieff. Helen sneered at her own reflection in her dressing mirror. The term *lady* was a misnomer as far as she was concerned. A lady did not get into the situation she found herself in now. And a lady did not alter the course of a man's life without his knowledge, as she was about to do.

Taking a long sip from her glass of gin, she swallowed, closing her eyes past the burning sensation the liquor caused in her throat. She set her glass down on the dressing table to let her maid tie the sash of her dress around her waist. "Where are my cigarettes, Gerty?"

"Here, my lady." The uniformed maid picked up the silver case and opened it for her.

Helen plucked a cigarette from the case with manicured nails and lit it, taking a long drag. Tobacco was probably not the best thing for the unborn child growing inside her, but she needed something to distract her from the twisting in her heart.

She glanced at the clock as she exhaled. Ian would be here any minute. He was always a reliable friend. The only person she could turn to. He would do the right thing by her if he thought he needed to.

Sanjay Mattar certainly wouldn't. He'd never expressed any feelings for her in the months of their affair. He already had two wives back in India and neither he nor his father, the rajah, would want to acknowledge an illegitimate child by an Englishwoman. As soon as Sanjay graduated from Oxford this spring, he had plans to return home. Without her.

She cursed herself for having gotten involved with him in the first place. She realized too late that she had been trying to convince herself that she really could be attracted to men instead of women. Looking back, she saw now that she'd only been able to be with him because he had soft, pretty skin like a woman's and a slim, almost feminine, build.

And then there was her father, a prominent member of the House of Lords. What would such a scandal do to him and her mother? They were the type of people who'd disown her first if they thought it could save their own reputation. She could never have come to them and said she loved women, not men. So she certainly couldn't tell them about this.

No. She'd considered her alternatives endlessly, and her mounting desperation had brought her to this disgusting but necessary pass.

A knock came on her door. Gerty answered it.

Ian stood in the doorway. He wasn't grinning as usual when he came to see her, but the sight of him brought a small measure of relief. He must miss his fiancée in Scotland. He talked about the girl endlessly. Another twist seized her heart. They were so in love, Ian and the girl he was engaged to, Helen couldn't imagine what this would do to them. But he was the only man she knew who would do right by her. He'd proven it merely by coming over because she said she needed to talk to someone badly.

She walked toward him, her gut twisting madly. There was still time to stop. Perhaps she would just have dinner with Ian, engage in conversation and send him on his way, as she always did.

She excused Gerty from the room and forced a breezy smile. "Looks like we could both use a drink."

Ian stepped into the room. "Thanks."

Helen poured two glasses of whiskey, handed him one and then settled herself nonchalantly on the sofa.

Ian sat down in a chair opposite her. His hazel eyes were missing their usual sparkle. He held his glass up. "Cheers," he murmured and downed a large sip.

Helen resisted the urge to ask him about his visit with his fiancée who had just left from a weekend holiday. If she knew details, she might not be able to go through with it. To her relief, he didn't offer any.

"What about you?" he asked her, resting his glass on his leg.

She sighed. "You know me. I'm in one of my black moods." She took a small sip of whiskey. "It'll pass. They always do." She looked at him. "Are you hungry?"

He shook his head. "No, but thank you. I'm never hungry after I speak to Leda on the phone. I miss her too much."

Dear God, she needed to steer the conversation in a different direction before she lost her nerve. She started on the range of topics she'd planned ahead of time, carefully refilling his whiskey glass at intervals.

Several hours passed and Ian set down his glass. "Helen, I've enjoyed your company as usual, but I should get back."

Her stomach flip-flopped. She had to act now. She thought for one brief second to let him leave, but a crushing tidal wave of fear broke over her. She saw only devastation and

ruin in her future. She needed him. “Just one more drink?” she asked, turning down the corners of her mouth. “I could use the company.”

She saw him relent, knowing he hated to think he was hurting someone. And that was one of the reasons she knew she could count on him.

“All right. I don’t want you to feel alone, Helen.”

She smiled and picked up his glass. With her back to him at the liquor cart, she emptied the small packet of tranquilizers into his drink, stirred, and brought it back over. She handed him his glass and sat back down. “No toast,” she said, desperate not to delay. The longer they waited, the greater chance she’d lose her nerve. “Just enjoy.”

“All right.” He took a large sip and sat quietly.

Helen cast about for more tidbits of conversation, waiting for the tranquilizer to take effect. Ian was a muscular, strong man and she knew it would take a while for him to fall asleep. She watched his lids grow heavy over his hazel eyes and mumble something about putting his head back for a few minutes before going home. When he was soundly asleep, she took the glass from his hand, spread a blanket on the floor by the sofa and started to strip Ian’s clothes off.

I’m mad, she thought desperately. *I’m bloody mad*. She strewed his clothes around the floor and sofa in a show of having succumbed to passion, and then did the same with her own. With all her strength, she maneuvered Ian’s sleeping body onto the floor, then lay down beside him, covering them both with a second blanket. Her heart crashed and rioted in her chest as she lay down and, in spite of the several glasses of whiskey she’d drunk, she felt far from sleepy. Beside her, Ian slept heavily, his chest rising and falling steadily.

Helen lay quietly, listening to him sleep. She was tempted to take some of the tranquilizer herself. She had more in her purse. But she couldn’t take the chance he’d awaken and leave without her seeing him first. She wished desperately that she could sleep, a blessed escape from the guilt that assaulted her. She thought of somewhere she could go for a while and come back when he was due to wake up.

She sighed. There was nothing to do but wait. Her actions had brought her to this vile pass. She no longer had anywhere to go.

* * * * *

Ian awoke to a vicious pounding in his head. He blinked hard several times and rubbed his eyes, trying to remember what happened. He’d been sitting and talking with Helen, sipping a drink when he’d become suddenly, deeply, heavily exhausted.

Slowly he became aware of his surroundings. His muscles groaned when he moved and he discovered he was naked under the blanket. He became conscious that he lay on a carpet, not a soft bed. As his vision cleared, he began to recognize the room he was in.

Movement stirred beside him and he heard a feminine sigh. Maybe he was having one of his dreams about Leda. He blinked again and turned his head. Blonde hair peeped over the covers. A lump formed suddenly in his throat. Something was very wrong.

Slowly he reached up and pulled the covers down. Helen was sleeping beside him. Naked. Forgetting his grogginess, he sat bolt upright.

Helen opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"Helen ..." He fell silent. Nausea began to churn in his gut. How could he have done this?

Helen sat up. "I'm sorry, Ian. We drank too much, I suppose."

He looked at her, his eyes wide. "Did I ... force you?"

She shook her head. "No, you didn't. It was mutual irresponsibility, I'm afraid." She put a hand on his arm. "It won't happen again."

Ian shoved a hand through his hair, struggling to tamp down the anxiety that swirled up in him. "Helen, I'm sorry."

"So am I." She pushed her hair back off her face. "No one has to know, do they?"

The room was tilting and all he could see was Leda's tears. She would be heartbroken. He knew he had to tell her the truth. He wouldn't begin their marriage with a lie. "Aye. I have to tell Leda. I can't lie to her."

Helen's eyes clouded with fear.

"I won't tell her who, of course," he added. Then another horrifying thought occurred to him. "Helen, there's no chance you could have gotten ..." He fell silent. The word was just too painful to utter.

"Pregnant?" she finished softly.

He nodded, feeling the bile rise viciously in his stomach.

"I'll know in a couple of days."

He looked at her. "Because if you are, I'll have to ... do the right thing by you."

"Oh, Ian."

He sighed and brought his knees to his chest, leaning his forehead on them. "Oh, God," he whispered. "Forgive me."

* * * * *

Helen was pregnant.

Ian's hand shook as he took the receiver off the cradle of the telephone box. Right now, he wished he could have traded places with Charlie rather than have to tell Leda what he was about to tell her. He had tried to be faithful, and failed. The least he could do was take

responsibility for his actions. There was no comfort in knowing Leda would be free to find a better man.

The operator connected him to Glenparry. He prayed Leda wouldn't answer, but knew she would. John had told him how she waited everyday for his calls and pounced on the telephone box before anyone else could reach it.

The telephone clicked on the second ring. "Hello?"

Ian's heart sank at Leda's breathless voice and he almost hung up without speaking.

"Ian, is that you?"

He swallowed hard. "Aye, it's me, little swan."

"Oh, Ian! I miss you so much!"

"I miss you too. What are you doing?"

"I'm showing Audrey some herbal preparations. We're in the kitchen. What about you?"

His hand shook so badly, he nearly dropped the earpiece. "Not much."

A moment's silence followed. "Ian, something's wrong. I hear it in your voice."

He cleared his throat, his grip tightening on the earpiece. "Um ... something is the matter, little swan. But I need to speak with Duncan."

"Ian, tell me what's wrong. Tell me now. Are you hurt?" Panic made her tone slightly shrill.

"No. No. I'm not hurt. I'm fine. It's ... something else."

He heard her gasp. "Please tell me. I'm so worried now."

His heart clenched painfully. "Leda, I ... committed an indiscretion."

Silence. He could feel her absorbing his words. "Indiscretion?" Wariness tinged her voice.

"I was ... with someone. A woman."

"When?"

"The night you left on the train." He blinked back tears.

"Ian, why? Don't you love me?"

"Of course, I love you. I couldn't love anyone more. It's not that. I ... truthfully, I'm ashamed to say I don't remember it. I'd had too much whiskey."

She was silent again.

"Leda, are you there?"

"I'm here. Ian, we can still marry, can't we?"

Ian choked back a sob. God help him. She had already looked past his sin. "Leda, listen, I love you the most in the whole world, but she's ... pregnant. I have to do the right thing."

"Ian, no!" She began to sob, her wailing so loud his eardrum throbbed. "God, please, no! Say it isn't true!"

"Leda, I'm so sorry. I've never wanted to hurt you."

Her cries sounded suddenly further away and he realized she must have dropped the earpiece. More voices murmured in the background. He sat, listening to Leda's keening wails, his shoulders slumped, his heart aching.

"Ian, what's going on?" Duncan's voice growled through the line.

"Duncan, I asked to speak with you first, but she wouldn't stop asking me. I've been with Helen. I don't remember it, I swear, but it happened. And now she's pregnant."

"Damn it, Ian!"

"Duncan, I never meant to hurt Leda. I've been faithful to her, I swear."

Several moments' silence followed. "Listen," he said finally, "go to your apartment and stay there. I'll call you back as soon as I can. Do you hear me?"

"Aye, Duncan."

The line clicked off. Ian sighed and raked a hand through his hair. Slowly he replaced the earpiece into its cradle and turned to go upstairs.

* * * * *

Duncan turned to Leda, who sat slumped on the floor, sobbing in Audrey's arms. Fanny and John stood over her, offering comforting words.

Audrey's face was a mask of distress. "I don't know what happened, Master Duncan."

He didn't answer and knelt down, one hand settling on Leda's back, which heaved violently under his palm. "I was afraid of something like this," he murmured under his breath. Reaching out, he maneuvered Leda into his arms. She slumped against him like a rag doll. He lifted her and stood up.

She grabbed fistfuls of his shirt. "Duncan, oh, my God. Duncan!"

"I'm bringing her to my study," he told Audrey.

"Aye, sir."

In his study, Duncan set Leda gently down on the sofa and sat next to her, pulling her against him. Her guttural sobs had waned and she wept into his shirt.

"It's all right, sweetling," he crooned, stroking her hair. "I'm here."

Leda raised her face from his shirt, damp with her tears. "I wish I could die," she sobbed. She pulled off her engagement ring and let it drop to the floor. Duncan watched the glint of gold as the tiny object landed under the table. He determined to retrieve it later.

"God forbid, Leda." He pulled her closer to him.

"I feel like I'm going to die."

He sighed, remembering his own grief. "I know how it feels, sweetling. But I promise, you won't." He continued to caress her hair and her back, letting her sob against him. Staring into the fire as he held her, he let his thoughts go to Ian.

So, Ian had done the very thing he had sworn not to do. He sighed. Perhaps it had been an act done out of fear. God knows he'd done some of his own in the past. His heart ached for both of them. Ian did love Leda. Duncan knew that. And if Helen hadn't gotten pregnant, perhaps they could have picked up and gone on.

Dear God. Ian would have to marry Helen. That much was clear. A MacGregor took responsibility for his actions, right or wrong. He sighed again, squeezing his arms protectively around Leda. Poor lamb. It wasn't right that she had to suffer in the meantime.

He continued to watch the flames dancing and crackling in the hearth, his thoughts and emotions galloping. To his shame, the only thing he wanted to do in that moment was carry Leda upstairs to his bed and make love to her. Somehow, he felt that would go much further to easing her pain than anything else he could do. He couldn't imagine what it would be like for her when Ian brought Helen back to Glenparry to finish out her pregnancy. And of course, Duncan would have them come here. This was Ian's home too, after all, and as Ian's older brother, he felt as responsible for Ian's well being as for Leda's.

Duncan wished he could simply ask Leda to marry him instead. He didn't want to betray Cait's memory by not even waiting an entire year to re-marry, but the circumstances were dire. Leda was not hardened by life. She had a tender heart and he didn't want to see her suffer even more than she already had. "I'm here for you, Leda," he whispered. He pressed a kiss into her hair and felt her burrow more closely against him. He sensed that she at least felt safe with him.

"What am I going to do, Duncan?" she asked, her voice thick from crying.

"Don't you worry about that now, sweetling. Whatever needs to be done, I'll take care of it."

She gazed up at him. Her large brown eyes were red-rimmed and glossy with tears, her softly rounded features lined with grief. "Thank you," she whispered. She turned and buried her face into his shirt again and curled up against him like a little girl.

She sighed and wept softly. He rested his hand on her hair. When the future came, he would handle it. All he cared about in this moment was comforting the woman in his arms.

Chapter Eleven

April, 1914

“Ian, I love you! Don’t leave me! Leda screamed the words over and over, but Ian’s back was to her and he didn’t seem to hear. His deep, rich laughter resounded in the air.

“Ian, please!”

He didn’t turn and, instead, reached his hand out to a woman who materialized by his side. She had golden hair that flowed down her back. Leda couldn’t see her face, but when Ian looked at the woman, she could see from his profile that he was smiling.

“Ian!” Leda screamed until her lungs ached, but he wouldn’t turn.

“Ian!”

Leda sat bolt upright, her chest heaving. Since Ian had broken their engagement six weeks ago, the dream haunted her every single night.

She fell back against the pillows. Her body felt especially heavy this morning, her muscles leaden and aching. The mere thought of rising to put her clothes on was more repugnant than usual.

She put a hand to her forehead. Her skin was burning and dry. The low-grade fever she’d had for the last few days had worsened. When she swallowed, the pain seared her throat. She longed for a sip of water, but could not summon the energy to reach for the glass on her bedside table. She hadn’t felt well for some days now. Her appetite had waned to almost nothing and even though Duncan constantly pestered her to eat, she could never take more than a few mouthfuls.

I’m going to tell him today. She’d been putting off telling Duncan of her decision to go back to Orkney. She’d actually made the decision a week after Ian’s fateful phone call, but

hadn't been able to go through with it. She desperately missed Ian and longed to see him when he brought Helen to stay. But at the same time, she couldn't imagine being here with the two of them. How could she possibly watch them together and see Helen's belly swelling with Ian's child? Duncan had him stay down in Oxford until after his graduation.

Perhaps it was because of Duncan that she hadn't left for Orkney.

Duncan had been the best friend she could ever imagine. Since her heartbreak over Ian, Duncan spent as much time with her as she wanted him to. He was understanding and gentle and never complained about how much she cried, or the way she'd gone back to wearing her trousers and Wellies. He was the strong, steady presence in her life and she would miss him so horribly if she left. However, the closer the time came for Ian to come back, the more she felt she had to escape. She wouldn't leave right away. Ian didn't graduate until early June. She would make sure she was back in Orkney before then.

A knock came at her door and someone cracked it open. "Leda?" Duncan called softly. He poked his head in. "May I come in?"

"Aye." Her heart lurched in his chest as he drew near. He was dressed, but his clothing looked rumpled, the way it did when he'd spent a sleepless night.

He came to stand near the bed, looming over her in the shadowy light of the room. "I was worried about you," he said. "I don't think I slept an hour the whole night." He perched on the edge of the mattress and peered at her, his face darkening immediately with concern. "You still aren't well."

"I'm fine, thank you," she answered. "Just a bit tired."

"A fever for three days is more than a bit tired. You'll remain in bed and I'll summon the doctor back."

"Duncan ... I ... have to tell you something." She braced herself and decided to let her news spill out. "I've ... decided to leave."

His dark eyes widened. "Leave? What do you mean, leave?"

She looked down, avoiding his eyes. "My mother's sister still lives in Orkney. She'll take me in."

Duncan remained silent and she glanced up in time to see his jaw tighten. For some reason, she'd thought he would respond with relief, with understanding of her condition. Yet, she felt tension radiate from him. "You can't be serious."

"I am, Duncan. I can't stay here. Not with ... her. I have my allowance saved up. That should see me through until ... until you are no longer responsible for me. I'll ride Charlotte to the coast and ferry across."

"No," he said finally. His voice was low and sounded forced, as if he were using it to tamp down a storm of anger.

She looked up at him, unprepared for what she saw in his eyes.

The irises churned like two storms. His forehead was creased in lines. "No," he repeated. "You may not leave."

"Duncan --"

"I forbid it." Unexpectedly, he reached out and put his palm on her forehead. "My God, Leda, you're burning up!" He stood and yanked on the bell pull behind her headboard.

Audrey appeared within moments. Her eyes widened when she saw Duncan and the expression on his face.

"Audrey, run her a bath of ice water immediately. She's burning with fever."

"Aye, Master Duncan." She ran into the bathroom. The next moment, water was gushing into the tub with a roar, and Audrey rushed out of the room.

Minutes later, John and another young man came through with buckets of ice, which they dumped into the tub.

Audrey went back into the bathroom and turned off the faucets. She appeared in the doorway. "It's ready, sir."

Duncan pulled back Leda's covers and scooped her up.

"Duncan ..." she murmured, but nothing else. Her fever was mounting rapidly, even since he'd come into the room. She fell limp against him as he carried her into the bathroom.

Audrey stood by the tub, and when Duncan brought her in, she stood by to help.

Duncan carried Leda over to the tub and lowered her carefully, submerging her in the tub, nightgown and all, up to her neck.

Immediately she revived and began shivering violently. Her eyes flew open, staring up at him, and her teeth chattered loudly.

He grabbed a hand towel off a ring by the sink and soaked it in the ice water. Kneeling on the tile floor, he smoothed the cloth over her hot forehead and cheeks. "It's all right, Leda," he told her softly. "We must get your fever down." He was very afraid for her, but the self-possession that had failed him moments earlier now sustained him as he continued to dip the cloth back into the icy water, using it to draw the heat from her skin.

"I'll tell John to fetch the doctor," Audrey said and rushed out.

"Duncan, I'm freezing." Leda's body jerked and twitched, shifting the ice around her. She gripped either side of the claw-foot tub with such force her knuckles turned a purplish white.

"I know, sweetling." He smoothed the cloth across her forehead then over her cheek. With one hand, he gently pushed back her hair.

Audrey reappeared, clutching a dry nightgown. "I've prepared the bed, Master Duncan." She set the nightgown down and picked up a clean towel.

Duncan nodded and waited another minute. He then felt Leda's forehead. She was still running a fever, but the ice water had definitely lowered her temperature to a far less frightening degree. "Come, sweetling, let's get you out of here." Rolling up his sleeves, he plunged his arms in to the freezing water and helped her up, one large hand cradling her head, the other gripping one of her hands.

Steadying her shivering body, he lifted her to her feet, guiding her carefully out of the tub. The filmy material of her dripping nightgown clung to her wet skin, affording him a glance at her small breasts and pink nipples, hard from the cold water, and the dark triangle of hair at the apex of her thighs. He tore his gaze away. "We need to dry her," he said to Audrey, uncomfortably aware of the husky tinge to his voice and the tightening in his groin. "Help me." He looked at Leda. "If you feel it's wrong, I'll send for Fanny."

To his surprise, she shook her head. "No. I don't want you to leave. Just close your eyes."

"Of course." He nodded to Audrey. "Go ahead."

The lass came forward, lifted the hem of Leda's sopping nightgown and pulled it up over her head.

Duncan averted his gaze while helping Leda balance on the tile floor. "I'll hold her, Audrey. You dry her off and put on her dry gown."

"Aye, Master Duncan." Audrey worked swiftly yet gently with towel.

Duncan kept his eyes shut, opening them only for a swift moment when he needed to help Leda turn around. Without meaning to, he received a glance at her nude figure, with its graceful curves and pale creamy skin.

Thankfully, Audrey finished drying her quickly and slipped the nightgown over her head. When he opened his eyes, he found Leda covered with soft, white cotton trimmed with lace.

He forced a smile. "Come now," he murmured, scooping her up into his arms again.

Leda's arms locked around his neck and her head lolled against his shoulder as he carried her into the bedroom. Audrey had already pulled back the covers, allowing him to place her gently on the soft mattress and cover her up. In the bathroom, he could hear Audrey draining the tub. He turned to bring over a chair to put at her bedside.

"Duncan, please don't leave."

Leda's voice, small and childlike, pierced his heart, and suddenly he knew how alone and frightened she must have felt all the time he shunned her. "I'm not leaving, sweetling. I'm just getting a chair." He carried one over from her writing desk and set it down.

Audrey returned and asked permission to wait with them for the doctor, who arrived just as the sun had fully risen. Duncan refused to leave the room while Leda was examined.

Finally, Dr. Burns patted Leda's hand. "Miss MacGregor, you're going to be just fine." He turned to Duncan as he pulled off his stethoscope and put it in his black bag. "You did the

right thing putting her in that water. Probably saved her life.” He picked up his bag. “The most important thing now is complete bed rest for one week. Two would be best.”

“I will see to it she doesn’t move from that bed.” He offered his hand.

Dr. Burns smiled, accepting the offer of a handshake. “I’m certain of that, Duncan, sir. I’ve always known you to run a tight ship, as did your father before you, God rest his soul.”

He released the physician’s hand and turned to Audrey. “Please show the doctor out. I’ll stay here and call for you in a while. I want her to rest.”

“Aye, Master Duncan.” Audrey curtsied, but Duncan’s heightened senses did not miss the wave of disappointment that crossed the girl’s features. He knew she and Leda were close friends and admired Leda’s natural tendency to inspire such loyalty.

When he was alone with Leda, he sat back down at her bedside. Her shivering had not abated and her teeth chattered loudly.

“I’m so cold, Duncan.” Her brown gaze rested on him, the large pupils still glassy with fever. “I’ve never been so cold.”

Duncan reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. Her warm hand trembled in his and he couldn’t ignore the impulse that rose in him. There was only one way to warm her. “I’m going to help you get warm, Leda,” he said, rising from the chair. He went around to the other side of the bed, pulled off his boots and slid in next to her, pulling the cover up over both of them.

He pulled her shivering body against his. Her back trembled against his chest. He pulled her closer, squeezing her gently. With one hand, he stroked her hair, noting with each passing moment that her shivering was subsiding. When her shoulders continued to quake, he realized she was weeping softly.

“Duncan?”

“What is it, love?”

“Will the heartache ever go away?”

Her question caused a rush of tears to his eyes. “Aye, sweetling. It will, in time. Don’t fight it. Let it be. Rest now.” He squeezed her gently, protectively. “I’m here for you, always.”

After several minutes, she rested calmly in his arms.

He pressed a kiss into her hair. *I won’t let anyone hurt you anymore*, he promised silently, as the adrenaline passed and his exhaustion from a sleepless night caught up with him ...

* * * * *

Duncan's eyes popped open. He didn't remember falling asleep, but remembered slipping into the bed beside Leda, who still lay in his arms, soft and warm. Her breath rose and fell peacefully, with no indication of illness.

He lifted his hand to her brow. Light perspiration covered her skin, which was cool to the touch. He heaved a sigh of relief.

Now that she was out of danger, he knew he should not remain in the bed with her, more so because she felt so good in his arms. He hadn't held a woman in many months and missed the feel of a soft, yielding body against his. By his own admission, he was hot blooded and had made love to Cait nearly every day.

His heart squeezed with guilt. He'd loved Cait, but he couldn't deny his desire for the young woman in his arms. All the more reason to get out of the bed.

As carefully as he could, he released Leda and slipped off the mattress. He picked up his boots and padded back to his chair, setting them down as he took his seat. Leaning back, he stretched his legs out in front of him and looked at her.

Her long lashes rested on her cheeks. She was pale and her sandy hair rioted about her face and spilled over the pillow. Her beauty had an earthiness and sweetness he had rarely encountered. Leda was truly one of the loveliest women he'd ever known.

Heaving a deep sigh, Duncan rested his cheek against his palm and watched her sleep. Again, his thoughts wandered to the future and the time when Ian would return home with Helen. Anger simmered inside him at the thought of Leda's humiliation. If anyone didn't deserve such treatment, it was she.

What are you going to do about it?

The question rose inside him with such ferocity, he nearly jumped from the chair. His conscience challenged him. How badly did he want to help alleviate her suffering? He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. As far as he could see, there really was only one way. A man had broken her heart. A man's love could heal it.

He could take action or he could lose her.

She had decided to go back to Orkney. His heart lurched suddenly. He remembered his reaction to her news. He hadn't meant to get so angry, but he'd panicked, something quite alien to his nature. Not even in the midst of battle on the Paardeberg Drifts of South Africa had he panicked. Never had he lost the train of rational thought so swiftly as when Leda told him she wanted to return to Orkney and shared her well-thought out plan to ride Charlotte to the coast and ferry back. She'd even considered her need for money. He'd even felt a bit hurt that she had been considering leaving at all, even though he certainly understood why.

The prospect of life without her was unthinkable. If he wasn't mistaken, she cherished his friendship as well. He could well imagine the magnitude of her grief that she would even consider leaving the home and friend she loved.

He had to prevent it.

Leda sighed in her sleep and turned her head on the pillow.

Duncan watched her, his heart churning. He knew what he had to do.

He only hoped that Leda would have him.

Caity's smiling face rose in his mind. He wondered what she would have said about the whole situation. He sighed as a wave of guilt passed through him.

Forgive me, Caity, he begged silently, as he watched Leda sleep.

* * * * *

"I'm here for you, always," Duncan whispered. His warm breath tickled her ear. The warmth of his strong body surrounded her like a cocoon. She felt safe, protected.

Smiling, she snuggled closer to him. His muscular arms tightened around her. His breath caressed her neck. The soft, sensuous press of a kiss whispered against her skin.

She moaned softly as a hint of passion laced their tender embrace. He stirred behind her, and the press of an erection pushed between her buttocks. She arched her back, rubbing against him ...

Leda opened her eyes. Several moments passed before she remembered what had happened. Slowly, the image of Duncan holding her as she cried herself to sleep teased the edges of her memory. No doubt, she'd been dreaming.

She turned her head slowly to the other side of the bed. Empty. Of course.

Dim light filtered into the room between a narrow opening in the heavy curtains, bringing her slowly to consciousness. Bit by bit, the memories trickled in. She'd awoken with a raging fever. Duncan had come in. She'd told him of her plan to leave Glenparry. Her words had angered him and he forbade her to leave. Then he'd seen her fever and immersed her in a tub of ice water. She remembered nothing beyond that except she'd angered him.

She reached a hand to her forehead and pressed her palm over it. The skin was cool. Her body no longer felt parched, though she was still exhausted.

It was then she became aware of the sound of breathing. She turned and saw Duncan in the chair close to the bed, sleeping. His eyes popped open, as if he'd been subconsciously waiting for her to awaken, and he lifted his head, a smile stretching his lips when his brown eyes looked at her. Heavy stubble darkened his strong jaw and the planes of his cheeks. The top buttons of his shirt were undone and as he sat up, Leda saw the dark hair of his chest peeking through.

"Leda, how do you feel?" He rose from the chair and sat on the edge of the mattress. He picked up her hand.

His show of affection made her remember her dream. If she hadn't been so tired, she would have trembled from his nearness. "Exhausted, but otherwise much better."

He put a large hand palm down on her forehead. His touch soothed her and she closed her eyes. "Thank God," he murmured, relief clear in his voice. He lifted his hand and touched her cheek gently before withdrawing his touch.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Since yesterday morning, after your bath of ice water." He stood and reached for the bell pull.

"What time is it, Duncan?"

"Four o'clock in the afternoon."

She blinked. "I don't think I've ever slept that long before in my life."

He chuckled. The sound was deep and rich and as soothing as his touch. "There's a first time for everything, so they say." He poured a glass of water from the pitcher on her bedside table. "Come, have a sip of water. Audrey will be coming in soon with some tea."

With one large hand cradling her head, he helped her sip from the glass. She swallowed a bit of water and let her head sink back into the pillow. Even the small movement had been an exertion. "Thank you," she whispered.

Duncan set the glass down and took his seat on the mattress beside her.

She looked up at him, searching his face for any traces of the anger she'd seen the day before, but his eyes were gentle and his demeanor showed only relief. "Have you been here the whole time?"

His lips curved in a smile. "Just about. With the exception of calls of nature."

A sudden unexpected rush of tears flooded her eyes as she realized how worried he must have been to stay at her side this whole time. "Duncan, you ... needn't have."

His smile faded and his eyes darkened with sadness. "I wanted to, Leda. I was ... terrified I'd lose you." He took her hand again, squeezing it gently. "And I'm sorry about how I reacted to you yesterday morning. I understand why you want to leave. But I still won't let you."

The tears that had gathered now pushed out onto her cheeks. "I don't want to leave, Duncan. I have to. How will I be able to stand it? My heart never stops aching."

"I know, sweetling. But the truth is I couldn't bear it if you left."

She stared at him. "Duncan, please ..."

"Please what?"

Her lip trembled. "Don't make it worse. I must go. I have no choice."

"Aye, Leda, you do have a choice, in fact." There was a strange tone in his voice and his eyes burned with an equally strange light.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I think you could stay here if the situation were different."

"Different? How?"

“Well, if you were my wife, perhaps?”

Leda blinked several times and felt his hand tighten on hers. “Duncan, what are you saying?”

He put his other hand over hers as well. “What I’m saying is that I want you to marry me.”

Duncan’s words took several moments to seep into her consciousness. “Duncan,” she whispered. Her tears rolled freely down her cheeks.

“You don’t have to answer right now. Just think about it. Take all the time you need.”

“You’re the kindest man I’ve ever known.” She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to stop herself from sobbing. “You don’t have to do that for me. I know you’ve not wanted to marry again.”

He smiled. “I’ve changed my mind.” He leaned closer. “Leda, I’m not going to find a woman sweeter and more loving than you. I’d be a fool to let you go.” He squeezed her hand gently. “I’ve thought this over very carefully. I would give you a handfast. That way, after one year, if you didn’t want to stay married to me you wouldn’t have to. I’ll remain your guardian, or I’ll turn your income over to you, as you wish.”

His thumb brushed tenderly across the palm of her hand.

She never wanted him to stop touching her. “But, Duncan, you shouldn’t have to do this.”

He sighed and used his other hand to brush her hair back, off her forehead. “It’s not a matter of have to, Leda. It’s a matter of want to. I realized recently that if you hadn’t been engaged to Ian, I would have asked you anyway. I just would have waited until a year had passed, for the sake of Caity’s memory. I refuse to wait, however, because I’m terrified that you’ll leave.”

She stared at him, unable to comprehend that he loved her so much. “You forbade me to leave.”

His eyes saddened. “You know I couldn’t have gone through with my threat,” he said. “Just as I couldn’t refuse Cait anything that would make her happy, I couldn’t have refused you an escape from seeing Ian and Helen together.”

Leda started to sob openly just as the door to her bedroom opened.

Audrey appeared with a tray, the smile on her face vanishing when she saw Leda crying. She set down the tray and rushed over. “Leda, oh, my God!” She looked at Duncan. “What’s happened?”

“I’ve just asked her to marry me,” Duncan answered. “I usually succeed in driving women to tears.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and gently wiped at Leda’s tears.

Audrey clasped her hands together as tears filled her eyes. “Oh, Master Duncan, congratulations! I’m so very happy for ye!”

“That’s kind of you, Audrey,” Duncan said to her. “But Leda hasn’t given her answer yet.”

Leda looked at him and squeezed his hand. After the things he’d just said to her, there was no way she could leave him, even for a moment. “I have my answer, Duncan,” she said softly.

He turned to her, his dark eyes smoldering. “What do you say, sweetling?”

She smiled. A salty teardrop glided down her cheek onto her lip. “I say aye. I want to be your wife.”

Audrey let out a small cry of delight.

“Thank God,” Duncan murmured. “Then, as Audrey is our witness, our handfast is made.” He leaned over and kissed Leda’s forehead tenderly. He lifted his lips from her face and looked down at her. The velvety brown depths of his eyes held her with an ardent gaze. “Now, Mrs. MacGregor, you need to rest.”

Chapter Twelve

Two weeks later.

“Here we are.” Duncan came to a stop and draped an arm around Leda’s shoulders. “My cottage.”

Leda caught her breath. “Duncan, it’s beautiful!” Her gaze traveled over the small cottage of stone and wood. Smoke curled from the chimney and trellises of roses climbed the walls.

He pulled her gently against him. “You’re the first person I’ve ever brought here,” he said. “Not even Cait saw this place.”

Leda had known about Duncan’s little cottage on the edge of the estate since she’d come to Glenparry. Ian showed it to her on one of their earliest treks together, but she’d never been inside it. Duncan had always been very possessive of the place he used for his solitude. Indeed, the little house was very secluded, tucked in between the edge of a forest and a loch.

With his large hands on her shoulders, he gently turned her to face him. “Our honeymoon is a wonderful way for me to begin sharing this place with you.” He squeezed her shoulders then released them. “Well, shall we go in?”

She nodded. Her stomach danced suddenly as if a jarful of butterflies had been released inside it. The reality was slowly sinking in. Duncan’s cottage was now their honeymoon cottage. They stood by the door in their wedding clothes. Duncan, of course, looked handsome in a heather gray tweed suit, and she hoped she looked as pretty for him in her white lace dress and crocheted gloves.

Duncan led her to the front door and pushed it open.

She smiled through her nervousness and took a step toward the doorway. Duncan stayed her with a sudden hand on her arm. She looked up at him.

"Please," he said, "I want to do this right." He lifted his hand from her arm and scooped her up.

She let out a small cry of surprise as her feet left the ground. Duncan crossed the threshold and set her down carefully.

He picked up her hand, clasping it between his palms. "What do you think?"

Leda perused the small cottage. Her gaze swept over the stone floors and giant hearth in which a blaze crackled. The walls were of cozy dark wood as was the furniture. In the middle of the room, a table had been set with china, white linen, and silver, laden with a spread of fresh bread and butter, smoked salmon, oatcakes, cheese, champagne, tea, and shortbread. A tiny sink and cupboards sat against one wall and a cozy seating area took up the remainder of the room. Through another doorway, she spied the corner of a large four-poster bed. She turned to Duncan. "It couldn't be prettier."

He smiled. "I'm glad you like it. You chose to stay here instead of having me take you to Paris, so I wanted to make sure it was perfect." He touched her cheek. "You deserve the best," he added softly. He gazed at her, his eyes darkening with a silky veneer.

She felt as if he might kiss her, but knew he wouldn't. He'd made it clear after she'd accepted his proposal that he would only touch her when she felt ready.

Her body began to melt under his gaze. Duncan had waited for her to recover completely from her illness before bringing her here. He would have taken her anywhere in the world she wished to go, but she hadn't wanted to go anywhere except to hide away with him. Now, as she returned his gaze, she knew she was ready.

Duncan released her hand. He took her hat and gloves, setting them aside, then pulled out one of the chairs for her. "Come, Leda. Angus has gone to the trouble of setting out our wedding feast."

The meal was beautiful, but Leda spent much of the time wondering how to tell Duncan she wanted him to make love to her. Sitting by him at the table, sipping champagne to celebrate their handfast, the reality sunk in even deeper that Duncan was her husband now.

The champagne slipped warmly through her veins and, after one glass, her nervousness began to dissolve. The desire she felt rose to the surface, heating her blood. Duncan couldn't have looked more handsome in his suit, his raven-colored hair combed back. She watched the dimple form on the plane of his clean-shaven cheek each time he smiled, and she remembered that first night when she was sixteen, the moment she realized her affection for him.

"Duncan, can I tell you something?"

He raised his eyebrows, looking at her over the rim of his glass. He swallowed his champagne and set the fluted glass on the table. "What is it, sweetling?"

Her heartbeat quickened and she took a large sip from her second glass of champagne. "When I was sixteen, I ... fell in love with you." She looked down, her fingers tightening around her glass.

"Leda," Duncan said softly, "I had no idea."

She glanced up at him, relieved to see the tender way he gazed at her. "That's because I hid it." She thought of that moment, remembering the smallest details. "You and Cait had recently married and Ian was home from school. We were together at the dinner table and Ian was telling a joke. When you laughed, I looked at you and ... it was strange ... I felt like I knew you in a way I never had before. You always looked so serious. I know it was because of all your responsibilities. But I felt like we were deeply connected, like I knew everything about you." She smiled. "I even remember the way the glow of the firelight shone on your skin." Glancing at him again, she felt suddenly shy and naked.

He was staring at her. "How beautiful you are," he breathed. He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing them into the soft flesh of her palm. Leda's eyes fluttered closed under his touch and her body weakened. She hoped he would understand what she was saying, for she felt suddenly painfully shy.

"Leda."

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Come here." He tugged gently on her hand. She rose from her chair and stood over him. He moved his chair back from the table and pulled her into his lap. "Put your arms around me," he murmured.

She did as he said, clasping her arms lightly around his head. She rested her cheek on his hair, silky and enticing against the pads of her fingertips. She closed her eyes, breathing in his masculine scent.

His arms closed around her, and she felt his hands wander over her back. One rested there, cradling her, while the other moved lower, over her skirt, resting a moment on her hip, then sliding over her buttock, down her thigh.

She felt his breath, warm on her chest. Her breasts were even with his face and he began to nuzzle them lightly, through her blouse and corset. Her breathing deepened and desire stirred deep in her sex. Duncan's breathing had grown huskier and her hand tightened in his hair.

She lifted her face and looked down at him, at his smoldering eyes. "Leda, you don't ever have to hide how you feel from me." His hand moved in languorous circles on her buttock, squeezing it. "If you still love me now as you did then, I'll be very glad."

Leda gazed at him, molten heat coursing through her body. Between her thighs, she felt the moisture of desire pooling rapidly. She ran her fingertips over his clean-shaven

cheek. His masculine skin thrilled her and the scent of his aftershave wafted to her nostrils, making her heady. "I do still love you, Duncan."

He tilted his face upwards, the heat of his breath caressing her face. "I'm very fortunate, then."

She cupped his cheek with one hand and bent her face to his. Tentatively, she brushed her lips over his. The movement caused his gaze to darken. His breath caught softly in his throat and his hand came up and laced into her hair, loosening the pins.

Gently but firmly he brought her mouth down harder on his. He slipped his tongue between her lips, tasting her with growing heat.

Her shyness dissipated and Leda took his mouth with equal ardor, pushing her tongue fervently against his, her hands sliding into his hair, luxuriating in its silky caress against her palms. His lips tasted sweet from the champagne, and she felt drunk from merely sliding her tongue across his lips and teeth.

Duncan moved his hand from her bottom and hooked his arm under her knees. The other hand cradled her back and he stood from the chair in one swift movement, carrying her swiftly toward the bedroom.

He laid her gently on the bed with her head on one of the large, fluffy pillows. Staring down at her with the simmering heat in his eyes, he pulled off his jacket and slipped off his shoes. He yanked off his tie and then sat on the edge of the bed next to her, working the buttons of her blouse with strong fingers.

The ache between her thighs had risen to a heavy throbbing and she sat up, helping him undress her.

He unlaced her shoes and slipped them off while she undid her corset and stockings. When she was down to her camisole and drawers, Duncan turned their attention to his own clothing, undoing his trousers while Leda unbuttoned his shirt with trembling fingers.

She pulled his shirt open, revealing his broad chest covered with swirls of silky, dark hair. Placing a hand gingerly on his chest, the raw power of his body emanated into the skin of her palm.

He sat, quietly watching her as she ran her palms in wonder over his chest and allowed her fingertips to trace the trail of soft hair that ran down the center of his taut, hard stomach.

"You're so beautiful," she whispered, pushing the shirt over his muscled shoulders to explore the hard ridges and swells of his arms.

Duncan moved away long enough to pull off his trousers. He maneuvered the bedcovers down and climbed in beside her, stretching the length of his body alongside hers, propping himself up on one elbow. With his other hand, he began a slow, tender exploration, slipping underneath her camisole, palming one breast gently, then the other. He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her with the same sensuous languor with which he touched her, making her feel savored, appreciated, like a beautiful work of art.

His fingertips traced around her areoles, squeezing the nipples with a feathery touch. She moaned softly, her eyes fluttering closed. "We have all the time we want, sweetling," he crooned, punctuating his words with a brush of his lips across hers. "I want to saturate you with pleasure."

His words touched off another rush of heat through her sex and she felt how slippery and ready she was down there.

Duncan lowered his lips to her neck, feathering his tongue along her jaw and throat, nibbling with torturous leisure in the direction of her collarbone. Her fingers wound again into his hair, and her body sought his instinctively, pressing her pelvis against the hardness of his erection.

Slowly, he pushed her camisole up, exposing her breasts. He nuzzled one breast, then the other, teasing each pink tip into a hard bud with his tongue and lips until Leda felt her drawers become saturated with her slippery cream.

Using both hands, Duncan pulled her camisole off and then lowered his upper body onto hers, crushing her breasts against his hard chest. He wrapped his arms completely around her and took her mouth again, suckling and tugging at her lips, plunging his tongue deep into her mouth. His hips ground against her, and she opened her legs, allowing his erection to sink into the vee of her thighs. The hardness of his shaft ground against her clitoris, sending waves of pleasure through her groin, making her want him to bury himself deep inside her.

She let her hands roam over his back, exploring the ridges of muscle, feeling them flex with the tiniest movement of his body on hers. Her breath caught in her throat when he smoothed his hands over her hips and thighs and then undid the tie of her drawers.

Lifting his body up, he smiled down at her as he slipped her drawers down her hips, along the length of her legs. He dropped that last article of her clothing to the floor and looked at her completely naked body. His gaze roved from her face, over her breasts and stomach, over her mound of brown curls to her thighs. His hand then followed the path where his gaze had gone, his fingertips lingering over her pubic bone, trailing down the opening of her vaginal lips, slipping inside her slick folds to massage her clitoris.

Leda moaned, her head thrown back. Her legs fell open under Duncan's skilled hand. Her pelvis thrust upward when he dipped two large fingers into her wet opening, gliding them in and out, pushing a bit deeper with each inward movement. He leaned over and kissed her mouth. "Are you ready, Leda?" he whispered.

She nodded, her chest heaving from arousal. "Aye, Duncan," she breathed.

He rose up and pulled off his drawers.

Leda gazed at his naked physique and thick erection. Dark hair surrounded it at the base, and the taut skin was dark reddish-purple, lined with veins. The sight sent waves of need coursing through her and she held her arms out to him.

He lowered himself on top of her, settling his groin between her legs. The swollen head of his cock pressed into her slick opening and she moaned. He bowed his face to hers and brushed his lips over hers. "I'll be gentle," he said softly into her ear.

Lowering his hand to her sex, he massaged her clitoris in gentle strokes while pushing his erection into her deeper, inch by inch. When he came to the barrier of her virginity, he paused one moment, staring into her eyes before carefully pushing through.

She cried out softly as he glided into her, their bodies meeting. The pain was muted by his tender caresses on her sensitive bud, and he continued to rub it while he moved slowly in and out of her.

"Does that hurt?" he whispered, rubbing the small nub of flesh in tiny, slow circles. Pleasure radiated through her sex.

"No."

He smiled. "Good." To her surprise, he pulled out of her and lowered his body down on the mattress. He leaned his face down and kissed her mound of pubic curls, spreading open the lips of her sex and running his fingertips gently up and down her slit. "You're barely bleeding," he added softly.

Leda rose up on her elbows and watched him dip his face down and kiss her open sex. He swiveled the tip of his tongue around her clitoris and brushed it back and forth along the opening of her passage. The warm, moist heat of his tongue brought waves of bliss, and she tilted her head back, her eyes fluttering closed. He slipped two fingers inside her, moving them in and out while he tasted her. After only moments, her sheath tightened around his fingers and the spasm started, radiating through her. She cried out with each frisson of pleasure, her pelvis arching upward, against his hand and mouth.

The orgasm left her breathless, and she sank down onto the mattress, breathing heavily.

Duncan lifted his face from her sex and gazed at her, his face flushed darkly, his eyes smoldering. Her musk glistened on his lips. He settled his body alongside her again and kissed her, long and slow, probing her tongue with his in a delicious dance. His hand roamed over her breasts, fondling them, his fingertips skating over her stomach, her inner thighs, and over her slit, stoking her desire again, preparing her for more.

After several minutes, he rolled onto his back and reached for her. "Come here, sweetling." His voice was deep and husky. "Climb on me." With his hands on her hips, he brought her to straddle him, guiding his erection to her opening. He brought her down onto him slowly, and she moaned softly as he filled her. "Pretend you're in the saddle and ride me," he said, a smile curving his lips. He reached up and played with her nipples, squeezing them with gentle firmness between his fingertips.

Leda braced herself with her hands splayed on his ribcage and moved back and forth. She found the sensation very pleasurable, her clitoris grinding directly against the base of his cock.

Duncan moved underneath her, lifting his hips against her rocking motion. "That's a sweet lass," he crooned, his chest rising and falling heavily.

She smiled down at him, drowning in the pleasure swirling between her legs and in her breasts, which he continued to fondle. He lifted his head and captured one nipple between his lips. She leaned over, cradling his head in the crook of her arm as she moved. Before she knew what was happening, another orgasm swept over her, shuddering through her with such force she cried out, then collapsed gently over him, completely satiated.

Duncan lifted her off him and maneuvered her onto her back. He pulled her down underneath him and slipped his cock inside her. "I won't be long now, my love," he whispered, capturing her mouth in a hot, open kiss. His skin was damp, tangy, and salty, his masculine scent filled her, and she laced her fingers through his hair.

She was so wet and open, her musk flowing freely, that he slid in and out of her with barely any discomfort. He moved faster and harder, groaning softly, bracing himself on his elbows. She felt him twitch and pulse inside her. He released a long, low groan and pulled out, stroking himself as his seed spilled onto her stomach.

Duncan sank onto the bed beside her, his face pressed to her neck, his arm loosely draped across her breasts. "How was that for you," he asked, pressing small kisses into the tender flesh of her neck.

Leda closed her eyes, leaning into him. Their perspiring bodies fused together as a cooling breeze wafted through the open window. "That was beautiful," she breathed.

He kissed her again. "Thank God," he said softly. "I wanted it to be wonderful for you."
"It was, Duncan. I love you."

"I love you too, Leda." He reached for a handkerchief and wiped her stomach, then settled next to her again, pulling her against him. "I'm honored to have been the first man in your heart." He reached up and caressed her hair. "I'll try to be a good husband."

"You already are."

They lay together quietly. Leda closed her eyes, listening to the birds outside in the trees. For the first time since Ian had told her he couldn't marry her, she felt some peace. She let her thoughts wander over the months she and Duncan had worked together, running the estate, and saw, in hindsight, the signs that he'd begun to love her as a woman. Of course, he'd never said a word to her because of her relationship with Ian. Strange how life presented such irony, after all those years she'd loved Duncan in secret. She smiled, grateful that neither of them had to love in silence any longer.

She also understood why Duncan had wanted to marry her. He loved her so much he hadn't wanted her to leave, and he'd known that making her his wife would brace her for the day when Ian came back with his pregnant wife in tow. Now, thinking of that impending moment didn't fill her with the same panic and dread. She knew she'd be able to face it with grace and strength because Duncan would be there with her, at her side.

Chapter Thirteen

June, 1914

Leda squeezed Duncan's hand harder as the large motorcar turned onto the driveway. In mere moments, she would be standing in front of Ian and his wife, something she'd vowed she couldn't have faced. She hadn't seen Ian since early March, when Duncan had brought her down to Oxford for a visit. Even with Duncan beside her, his strong, loving presence bolstering her courage, the urge to turn and flee was nearly overwhelming.

"I'm here, Leda." Duncan squeezed her hand as the car drew closer and pulled to a stop at the foot of the large stone steps.

A uniformed chauffeur got out and opened the passenger door in the back. Another woman, presumably Helen's lady's maid, emerged from the passenger side of the front.

Leda's breath caught softly in her throat when Ian emerged and stood up, holding his hand out to the other passenger.

She heard Duncan gasp very softly at the sight of his brother in the uniform of a British Army officer. He'd not said a word about it to Duncan.

Her gaze moved to Helen, elegant and aristocratic in her movements. Helen's features were aquiline and sharp, and her clothing had oriental accents with sashes and feathers. Her hair was golden. Leda felt suddenly homely and dowdy.

Duncan tugged her hand gently, bidding her to follow him down the steps and over to Ian and Helen. She was vaguely aware of the staff that had collected by the front door behind them, while Angus went forward to assist the chauffeur with the trunks piled in the boot of the car.

She and Duncan came to a stop a few feet away.

Ian removed his cap, his gaze resting steadily on her. She felt his longing immediately sizzle through the air. She'd known him too long and too well to miss it. She didn't know how she felt, herself, because her heart was pounding too hard.

"Welcome home, Ian." Duncan extended his hand.

"Thanks, brother." Ian accepted Duncan's hand, relief washing away some of the tension that tightened his features.

"Aye, welcome home, Ian." Leda forced her voice to sound stronger than she felt. She held her hand out to him, and his closed around it. His touch was warm through his leather glove. She looked directly into his eyes. To her surprise, her anticipation and fear melted, and she felt only the love she'd always had for him. She suppressed the urge to embrace him for fear she'd lose control and sob. She didn't want to make a scene in front of Helen.

"Hi," he answered softly. A hesitant smile curved his lips, but she saw the same love reflected in his eyes. His hand lingered on hers a fraction of a second longer before he released her and put his hand to Helen's elbow, drawing her forward. "This is Helen. Helen, my brother, Duncan. Duncan, Helen."

Duncan shook her hand warmly. "Welcome, Helen. This is Leda."

Helen's blue eyes regarded them tentatively, as if she'd anticipated hostility. "I'm honored to meet you both." Her voice was smooth and she spoke with quiet dignity. "I ... can't thank you enough for accepting me here."

"You must be hungry," Leda said. "We have breakfast waiting for you, and then I'll show you your room."

Helen looked at her, and Leda swore she saw guilt haunting the woman's eyes. She'd wanted to hate this woman and found she couldn't.

"I am hungry, actually," Helen answered. "Thank you."

The staff welcomed Ian and Helen as they entered the house and they went immediately into the dining room.

Halfway through the meal, Duncan cleared his throat and put his napkin down. "Ian, when did you enlist?"

Ian took a sip of tea and set his cup down. "Two weeks ago. I thought it better to tell you in person. I got myself an officer's commission."

Duncan was silent a moment and Leda felt his distress simmering underneath the surface. "Do you realize the political situation in Europe? The Hapsburgs are cousins of the King. Of course, the Crown will defend them if something happens."

Leda stifled a cry.

Ian looked down. "Aye, I do realize it." He looked back up at his brother. "With all due respect, Duncan, I'd prefer to finish this conversation in private."

Leda reached for Duncan's hand under the table. He closed his fingers over hers. "Very well. After breakfast, Leda will show Helen your rooms, and we'll go into my study."

Ian nodded. "Thank you."

* * * * *

Duncan sat down in his chair, studying his brother's face. The only other time he'd seen Ian this sad was after their mother had passed away. Leda's friendship had been his great comfort then. He sighed. Whatever had happened between Ian and Helen had not been because Ian didn't love Leda. He knew Ian well enough to know that, and Ian's misery was a palpable force in the room with them.

"I must ask you a question."

Ian looked at him. "What is it?"

"What about your degree?"

Ian hung his head. "I've left school."

Duncan gripped the arms of his chair. "What?"

"I'm not going to finish, Duncan. Please don't be angry. I can't bear it now. I couldn't stay in Oxford a moment longer than I had to." He looked up, his eyes clouded with grief. "Besides, one doesn't need a degree to herd sheep."

"You're not herding sheep. You're to be a laird of an estate."

Ian avoided his eyes. "I don't want the estate, Duncan," he murmured. "And I can't stay here a moment longer than necessary." He began chafing his hands.

Duncan sighed and let his brother's words settle on him before responding. "Hence, your enlistment."

Ian nodded. "Aye."

"And Helen? Leda and I are strangers to her. Perhaps she'll need your company."

"I'll be here at times. I have training, but then I'll be back and forth. Besides, you don't know how it is with me and her."

"Please tell me."

Ian met his gaze. "Before ... this happened, we were friends. Now, we barely speak." He leaned forward in his seat. "Duncan, I sense her relief every night that passes and I don't touch her. She doesn't want me to."

"Maybe she's just nervous."

Ian shook his head. "No. I sense it deep down." He sighed. "Which is a relief to me. I don't want to."

Duncan studied his brother's face, all his arguments with him melting away completely. Ian had always been deeply thoughtful, even though, externally, his life

appeared typical for a man of his age. Ian's introspection and care had drawn Leda to him in the first place. "I'm sorry, Ian."

Ian looked up at him. "You're not angry with me?"

Duncan shook his head. "I'm more worried about you than anything else. The situation is already difficult enough without the prospect of your going off to war. In spite of anything you might think, Leda is the one who would be devastated the most if, God forbid, something happened to you." He watched his words sink in.

"Do you really think that, Duncan?"

He sighed. "I'm not a fool, man. She adores you. I knew that when I asked for the handfast." He paused and cleared his throat. "She was going to leave, you know. She was planning to return to Orkney before she became ill."

"Oh." Ian looked at him. "She loves you, though. It's in her eyes."

Duncan leaned back in his chair. "Aye, I'm fortunate. But the heart is complex. You and I are the two people she feels the closest to in her whole life, next to her mother, God rest her soul."

Ian rubbed his eyes then slumped over, his elbows on his knees. "I'd give anything to take it back, you know."

Duncan leaned forward and put a hand on Ian's shoulder. "I know you would," he said softly.

* * * * *

"I hope you like your room," Leda said. "Ian is right next door to you." She went to the connecting door and opened it. "See? Right here. You don't even need to go out into the hall." She watched Helen wander to the window then through the sitting area, looking about as if she were lost.

Finally, Helen looked at her, her eyes distant and sad. "It's beautiful, Leda. Thank you."

Leda wondered if it was fatigue that made her so quiet. Perhaps pregnancy didn't agree with her and made her seem morose inside, or even ... haunted. Helen seemed almost afraid of her. Leda could understand that much. If their positions had been reversed, she wouldn't have been able to come here and face the woman Ian had been supposed to marry without the most terrible dread.

What she couldn't understand was that she couldn't bring herself to stay angry with either Ian or Helen. The emotion would course through her and then pass. During breakfast, whenever she'd looked at Ian directly, she could only remember that she loved him.

Helen set her purse on a table and sat down on the sofa. "I'm sorry for being so tired," she said.

Leda approached her. "It's quite all right. Later, after you've rested, I'll give you your first examination."

Helen's gaze shot up. "Examination?"

She nodded. "Aye. Ian must have told you. I'm a midwife. I'll help you deliver when the time comes. Audrey and I, together, actually. She's my apprentice. A very gentle lass." Leda found her speech running like a brook, dispelling the tension inside her.

Helen's blue eyes widened, registering what appeared shock. "Oh ... yes ... of course, he's told me. I've been so muddled lately, I'd simply forgotten."

"I understand." She glanced up as Helen's maid came in and began to unpack Helen's trunks. "I'll leave you to rest a while. Don't hesitate to call on me if you need anything."

Helen looked at her and Leda could have sworn the woman's blue eyes held a wounded expression. She wondered if she'd said something wrong. "You're extremely kind, Leda. I can't tell you how kind."

"Thank you."

* * * * *

As Leda descended the steps on her way to Duncan's study, her heart scudded in her chest. The desire to see Ian nearly overwhelmed her as much as it frightened her. They hadn't spoken directly to each other since that horrible phone call that had ended their engagement. Leda paused at the door, her hand on the knob and took a deep breath.

Ian and Duncan both stood up as she walked in. Her gaze locked with Ian's as she came toward them. As she reached the sofa, Duncan was at her side, bracing her with her hand firmly in his.

Ian's eyes never left her face. "Hi, Leda," he said softly.

She heard the hope in his voice. "Hello." She forced herself to breathe normally.

Ian waited for her to sit down. Duncan tugged her gently to a seat close beside him.

Ian sat down further away, still looking at her. "I ... I didn't think you'd come in," he said. "Of course I would have understood if you hadn't, but ... I'm glad."

She smiled, unable to suppress the tenderness she felt for him. "Me, too."

An awkward silence settled between them.

"Leda, I'm sorry," Ian said after several moments. "I never meant to hurt you. I'd do anything to take it back."

She nodded as hot tears crowded her eyes. "I know," she whispered, acutely aware of Duncan's hand moving to rest on her shoulder. Although he was silent, she felt him hovering protectively behind her.

Ian's gaze flickered to Duncan and back to her. A wave of sadness passed over his features. "Duncan's a good husband to you."

“Aye, he is.”

“He told me you were going to leave Glenparry. I’m very glad you didn’t, Leda. I’ve hurt you enough without driving you out of your home.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. Ian pulled a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. Their fingertips touched as she took the cloth from him, touching off a flash of memories. Climbing trees and riding horses, laughing at his jokes, feeling Ian’s embrace for the first time, his proposal, their first kiss, exploring sensuality in their special corner. Ian’s friendship had made up the better part of her life. “Ian,” she whispered, looking at him through her tears.

He reached out and embraced her. “I pray you can forgive me, little swan,” he said softly.

Leda closed her eyes, resting her head on his shoulder, her tears flowing freely.

Gently he released her, and she smiled at him, wiping her eyes with the handkerchief. She felt joyous just to hear him call her “little swan” again. “Don’t you realize, Ian?” she whispered. “I already had.”

* * * * *

“Leda.” Duncan’s voice was a whisper behind her in the shadowy hallway. She stopped and turned to him. They’d been walking together back to their bedroom when he’d slowed his pace.

She stood in front of him, looking up into his eyes. A small lamp burned in the hallway on a table near their bedroom door. The play of light and shadows illumined Duncan’s carved features and masculine bow-shaped lips, lending him a godlike air. His dark eyes smoldered, looking at her with a potent combination of hunger and tenderness.

“What’s the matter, Duncan?” She raised her hand to his cheek.

He grasped her wrist lightly and turned her hand to his lips, his eyes closing as he kissed the soft flesh. His dark lashes fluttered before he opened his eyes and looked at her again. “Nothing’s the matter, sweetling. I just love you.”

She smiled and put her arms around him, rising up on her toes. “I love you, too,” she whispered, leaning her mouth into his.

Duncan answered her by parting his lips and mating his mouth deeply with hers, his tongue plundering hers with wild heat. He lifted her up and set her down by the wall, pressing her gently against it.

Leda responded to his need by softening, her body growing pliant under his searching hands. By the hunger with which he pulled at the fastenings of her dress, she knew he would have her completely undressed before they even got the bedroom door opened ...

"Are you comfortable, Helen?" Ian looked at her from the doorway of her bedroom. She stood by the window in her peignoir, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders. She was a strikingly pretty woman, but he couldn't bring himself to stay in the bed with her. As usual, she looked relieved when he said he was leaving for the night.

She nodded. "I am, thank you." She took a drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke through the open window. "You have a lovely family, Ian," she added, crossing the room in his direction. His heartbeat quickened with apprehension when he thought she might have changed her mind about his leaving for the night.

To his relief, she lowered herself wearily onto the sofa and flicked her ashes into the ashtray. She sighed and turned to him again. "They've been very kind to me under the circumstances. I see that your integrity and caring run in the family." She puffed the cigarette and exhaled. "I wish I could say the same for mine."

"What do you mean?" He walked over to the sofa.

"They would never have taken me in like this, with no judgment, no reservation."

The sadness in her voice touched him and he felt guilty for being on his way out. He touched her shoulder gently. "I'm sorry for that," he murmured.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Thank you, Ian."

"Helen, do you want me to sit with you a while longer?"

She shook her head. "That's kind of you, but, no. I'm going to sleep in a few minutes." She leaned forward and mashed out her cigarette. "Good night," she said softly.

"Good night, Helen." Instead of going through the connecting door, he turned and went out into the hall, closing the door behind him. He stood alone in the shadows staring at the next door down. Leda's old bedroom. The thought filled him with sadness.

He sighed and turned toward his room, remembering the way she'd laughed when he waltzed her across the room the morning before their engagement party. The morning Audrey walked in just as he had been about to touch Leda intimately for the first time ... The soft sound of a woman's laughter carried to his ears. At first he thought it was the laughter in his memories, but when he stopped and listened, the sound was real. His heart lurched painfully in his chest. There was only one woman whose laughter was so sweet and earthy.

Ian moved slowly down the hallway toward the wing he used to occupy with Duncan. He reached the top of the staircase and crossed over to the other hall, stopping at the first doorway. The hall was mostly dark, except for the small lamp that burned about halfway down. He stood in the first doorway listening, his heartbeat rising to a gallop at the sound of heavy breathing further down.

Staying in the shadows, he made his way closer. The breathing grew louder. Soft female sighs and moans carried to his ears. He caught his breath when he saw her.

Leda was against the wall, naked. Her clothing lay in small piles in the middle of the hall. The lamp burned against the opposite wall, illuminating her soft swells and curves. The

rosy tips of her breasts were erect, rising and falling heavily with the breathing that accompanies carnal pleasure.

Duncan, still fully dressed, was on his knees before her, his hands splayed on her hips, his face buried between her thighs, making love to her with his mouth.

Ian stood, frozen, unable to turn away from the magnificent sight of Leda's bare flesh. Her head leaned back, revealing the soft curve of her throat. His gaze traveled over her breasts, down her stomach, to see her hips writhing and her pelvis grinding against Duncan's mouth.

Ian's groin tightened and his erection swelled against his drawers. His breathing grew ragged as he watched Leda's body tighten with the orgasm that gripped her. Her cries of pleasure rang in his ears and he remembered the many times he'd tasted her down there, loving the warm, moist tang of her sex and her juices that covered his lips and tongue. He imagined his own fingertips caressing her skin and her soft ripe breasts filling his hands. He remembered the light musky flavor of her nipples as they hardened against his stroking tongue.

Leda sagged against the wall. Duncan gathered her clothing and pulled her against him, capturing her mouth in a wild kiss. He opened the door to the bedroom and they both disappeared inside.

Alone in the hall, Ian's mind burned with the image of the scene he'd just witnessed. He leaned back against the wall and undid his trousers, taking his erection in his hand. Closing his eyes, he put himself in Duncan's place, licking and kissing every naked surface of Leda's body, feasting on the slick moistness of her sex, feeling her writhe under his hands and mouth, then burying himself deep inside her, bringing her to bliss.

His climax shook his body, and he stifled a moan. The spasms of release passed and he leaned back against the wall, catching his breath. Staring out into the darkness, he ached to hold Leda again, to stroke her hair, to kiss her, to feel her arms around him. To make love to her again.

The prospect seemed hopeless, yet, deep down, he prayed for another chance.

Chapter Fourteen

November, 1914

Ian was going to war.

Just one more thing to add to her already heaping pile of self-loathing and blame. If she hadn't tricked him, he probably wouldn't have enlisted in the first place. Perhaps he'd be the one walking outside with Leda, laughing.

Helen stared out her bedroom window, watching Leda and the maid Audrey walk down the driveway together. The late autumn wind gusted around the two women and Helen watched them pull their woolen coats tighter around themselves, their heads bowed together, deep in conversation. Leda was very distressed about Ian and it seemed that her friend was offering her comfort.

Helen had never had a female friend like that. She sighed as an overwhelming sadness engulfed her. She took a long drag on her cigarette and turned from the window, pacing the length of her bedroom.

When she'd tricked Ian into marrying her, she hadn't thought about the reality of being discovered. She hadn't remembered all those things Ian had told her about Leda, the times he'd bragged about her midwifery skills. She hadn't considered that Leda would be the one delivering the child, now due in a mere few days. She'd remembered feeling only envy. She would never be free to have someone love her openly, a beautiful woman who would speak of her with the same dreamy expression of desire in her eyes that Ian had Leda.

Leda had not only one man, but two who adored her. Then again, Leda didn't go around tricking innocent men into believing they'd impregnated her.

Her envy and guilt tortured her, and Helen spent as little time as possible with Leda and Duncan together, desperate to spare herself the agony of watching the tender way

Duncan treated his wife, the way his dark eyes smoldered when he gazed at her, and the way they laughed together, enjoying the secret world that only lovers share.

Helen pulled her sweater more tightly around her bulging middle. Even though it horrified her, she hated the child growing inside her, hated the man who'd created it with her, and hated herself for having put herself in such a position in the first place.

With a heavy sigh, Helen mashed out her cigarette in a nearby ashtray. A sudden, sharp pain coursed through her belly. She gasped, clutching her stomach with both hands.

She yanked open her bedroom door and staggered out into the hall. "Help!" she cried out as another horrific, blinding jolt of pain seared her middle. She fell to her knees, alone in the dark empty stretch of corridor. "Gerty ..." she cried out in a mangled whisper.

* * * * *

Duncan felt as if he were reliving the nightmare of the past. He stood in the doorway to Helen's bedroom, watching Leda, Audrey, and Doctor Burns attend to Helen. He had to force himself not to retch at the copious amounts of blood and Helen's agonized screams as the labor pains gripped her.

"Duncan!"

Duncan turned at the sound of his brother's voice. Ian had left the base in Chingford as soon as he'd received the telegram about Helen.

Ian yanked his hat off and grasped his arm. "I got here as soon as I could."

Helen's cry shot through the air, and Duncan grasped Ian's sleeve as he started to rush in to her.

"No, Ian," he said firmly. "Stay here." He kept hold of Ian's arm. "They're doing all they can for her." He tugged gently on his brother and closed the bedroom door. When he released his brother, Ian started pacing.

"Duncan, what happened?"

Duncan sighed. "I don't know. Her maid found her lying in the hallway, crying from pain." He watched Ian move back and forth. Dark circles of exhaustion and stress showed under his eyes. "I'm supposed to leave in two days. They're moving us down to the Western Front." He stopped and raised his troubled gaze. "How can I leave her?"

Duncan patted his shoulder. "Leda and I will look after her. You know that."

Ian's shoulder drooped and he bowed his head. "Yes, I do. You always have. You two are the best friends a man could hope for."

Just then the bedroom door opened and Leda stepped out. Blood covered the front of her apron, and tears brimmed in her eyes.

"How is she?" Duncan asked her, gently grasping her upper arms.

Leda's lower lip trembled. "Helen will live."

Duncan heard Ian's sigh of relief mingled with his own. "And the bairn?"

She nodded her head slowly, her teary gaze resting on Ian. "Weak, but alive, thank God. If she nurses him and he lasts this week, he'll live."

"What caused this?"

Leda shook her head. "I'm not certain. I've tried to get her to stop smoking cigarettes and drinking whiskey during her pregnancy, but she wouldn't. It's most likely those things induced the premature labor."

"I want to see them."

Leda put her hand on Ian's arm, stopping him. "Ian, before you go in, there's something you should know ... about the bairn."

"What is it?" Ian's voice was a hoarse whisper.

Tears rolled freely down Leda's cheeks. "It ... he ..."

Duncan squeezed her arms gently. "Go on," he urged softly.

"He isn't yours."

Ian gasped. "My God." He bowed his head and took several deep breaths. When he looked up, a tear rolled down his cheek.

Leda released his arm and sagged against Duncan.

He sighed. "I should see her."

"I'm sorry, Ian," she whispered.

He touched her cheek. "You hardly have anything to be sorry for, little swan." He took one last look at her and his brother, then went into Helen's room.

* * * * *

In his study, Duncan poured Leda a glass of whiskey and handed it to her. Her hand shook so badly he covered it with his own, guiding the glass to her lips. After she'd swallowed a hearty sip, he took the glass from her, set it down, and laid her back gently against the cushions, keeping her hand couched in his own.

"Can you talk about it, Leda?"

She turned to him, her cheeks tearstained, her eyes red. "The bairn --" She sniffled. "-- had hair darker than coal. His skin was brown."

Duncan rested her hand on his leg and stared into the fireplace, watching the flames crackle and shoot sparks. "Did she say anything?"

Leda shook her head. "No. She lost consciousness."

He sighed just as a knock sounded on the door, opening at his call.

Ian stood in the doorway, his eyes red, his skin sickly pale.

"Come here, Ian," Duncan said to him.

Slowly, Ian walked in and sank down onto the cushions next to Leda. He slumped over heavily, resting his elbows on his knees.

"How is she?" Duncan asked softly.

"Exhausted, but awake now." He raked a hand through his hair. His cap dangled from the other hand. "She ... explained everything."

"You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to," Duncan said.

He shook his head. "No. I want to. I know the father. He's in my class. Sanjay Mattar. She was with him because she was trying to convince herself she could be with a man." He looked at them, his eyes slightly glassy. "She loves women," he murmured. "I never knew." He sighed deeply. "She was frightened and ashamed and panicked when she realized she was pregnant." Tears glistened in his eyes. "She drugged me. I passed out and when I came to, she made it look like we'd ..." He fell silent, his gaze on Leda. "Leda, I never touched her. I never did and still haven't."

Leda sat up. She reached for his hand.

"Leda, can you ever forgive me?" His eyes went from her face to Duncan's. "Can you, Duncan?"

"There's nothing to forgive," Leda whispered.

"I say the same," Duncan added. He sighed as a wave of guilt overtook him. Ian had lost Leda to him because of another person's deception.

Ian's eyes filled with tears. "Thank you." He looked away. "I'll raise the bairn as my own ... if he lives."

"We'll help you," Leda said.

"Aye, we will."

Ian looked at them. "I can't stay angry with her. Doesn't that sound barmy? She doesn't have any real friends. I'm the only one."

"You're not barmy," Duncan told him. "She knew she could turn to you."

Ian nodded solemnly. "Aye." He looked at Leda and Duncan saw the longing in his eyes. Guilt assailed him at the agonizing knowledge that Ian had lost Leda through a deception, that he hadn't done anything worse than trying to be a friend to someone in need.

Ian twirled his cap in his hands. "I should go back up to her." He rose slowly from the sofa and left the study.

Duncan reached out and pulled Leda against him, pressing a kiss into her hair. "I'm sorry, Leda," he whispered.

To his surprise, she raised her head, looking at him with wide eyes. In spite of the distress he saw reflected in them, he saw her love for him as well. "Why are you sorry, Duncan?"

"I'm sorry for anything I've done to hurt you in this. You love him and I ... interfered."

She cupped his cheek with one hand. "Don't ever say that, Duncan, I beg you. You've done nothing to hurt me. I love you." She kissed him, a slow, tender kiss, then snuggled against him, curling up in his lap.

He sat quietly, stroking her hair, remembering the longing in Ian's eyes when he looked at her. Tomorrow his younger brother was leaving to go to war. Maybe he would never return.

Duncan's heart ached in his chest and he longed to give Ian a parting gift.

* * * * *

Leda stood over the homemade incubator, watching the bairn. She'd taken a small chest lined with cushiony velvet and packed it with towels to keep him warm. Thank God, Helen had been willing and able to feed him. If she did so regularly and abundantly, he had a chance. She checked the toweling around his body then pressed her fingertips delicately to his chest, breathing a sigh of relief. He slept quietly, the distressed heart rate with which he'd been born now regulated.

She nodded to the nurse who'd been brought in from the hospital in Edinburgh and left the bairn to his rest. Turning, she glanced at Ian, who sat at Helen's bedside watching her sleep, a mournful expression darkening his features. He looked up at her as she approached.

"It's getting late," she whispered to him, when she saw the dark circles under his eyes. "You should rest a while and come back later."

He nodded. "I will."

Leda sighed reached out to rest her hand on his shoulder. He put his hand over hers and squeezed it.

"Duncan is waiting for you."

She nodded, swallowing back an upwelling of tears. Her hand lingered on his shoulder for another moment, before she turned and went back to her room.

Once there, Duncan ordered her into the bath he'd drawn for her, and when she was finished and in her nightgown, he brought her to sit on the bed, unpinned her hair, and began to brush it out.

Leda leaned her head back, savoring the pleasure of the hairbrush moving over her scalp and down the length of her hair. Duncan was very gentle with the brush, smoothing one large hand down the shaft of her hair, following the brush.

"Mm," she murmured. "That's wonderful."

"Leda, there's something I need to tell you." Duncan lifted the brush from her hair and sat down next to her on the bed.

She looked at him, his dark brows drawn together, the concern darkening his eyes. Her stomach fluttered. "What is it, Duncan?"

He sighed and gently ran the palm of his hand down her arm. His touch was warm through her cotton nightgown. "I don't want you to feel bound to me," he began softly. "I mean, after the year of our handfast."

She furrowed her brow as the meaning of his words sank in. "I don't feel bound to you. I love you." Reaching up, she touched his cheek. "Does this have to do with what happened today?"

"Aye." He raked a hand through his hair. "Ian and Helen's marriage has never been consummated. It could be dissolved. You and he would be free to ..." He paused, the word he was about to say stuck inside him. "Marry."

Leda gasped. "Duncan, don't you love me anymore?"

His gaze snapped to hers, his eyes wide. "What? I couldn't love you more. That's why I want you to be with Ian if it's what you want."

She looked down at the hairbrush dangling from Duncan's large hand, a hand that had caressed her, pleased her, and comforted her countless times. The mere thought of giving him up made her feel hysterical. And yet, when she thought of Ian, remembered the way he'd looked at her earlier with desire and tenderness as in the days of their engagement, she couldn't imagine living without him, either. As strange and as confusing as her heart was, she loved both men. They were both part of her soul. "It's not that simple, Duncan." She put a hand over his, squeezing it. "I don't want to end our marriage. Ever."

He looked at her. His gaze caressed her face and his relief was palpable. "But I know you and Ian still love each other. I never expected you to stop having feelings for him."

Leda opened her mouth to speak, but Duncan gently put a finger to her lips.

"Leda, I want you to have us both."

She stared at him, waiting for him to lift his finger. When he did she gasped. "Duncan, do you realize what you're saying?"

He nodded. "Aye. Don't think I haven't given this a great deal of thought." He set the hairbrush on the bedside table and reached for her hands. "If it were any other man, I wouldn't feel this way. I love you both more than anything in the whole world. I know what you mean to each other, and, well, Ian has more than proven himself worthy of you."

Her lips trembled and hot tears crowded her eyes. "Does Ian know how you feel?"

"No. I haven't spoken with him yet." He reached up a hand and pushed her hair back, away from her face. "During our honeymoon, I told you that what I wanted most deeply in my heart was to love unreservedly." He brushed a tender kiss across her lips. "This is my gift to you, Leda, to give you what you want most deeply in yours." He fell silent and wiped a tear off her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

A knock sounded at the bedroom door, which opened at Duncan's call. Ian stepped inside and approached them. He wore a bathrobe over pajamas and his hair was damp and combed back. He looked at them hesitantly. "Is it all right I'm here?"

"Come and sit with us," Duncan told him.

Ian went over to the bed and sank down next to Leda. He sat with his shoulders hunched. "I can't say enough how sorry I am," he said after several moments.

Leda noticed Ian's hands shaking and put her hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her, his hazel eyes lined with grief.

"Leda, I'm so frightened," he whispered.

She realized instantly what he meant, and her terror over his leaving for war washed over her. "Ian." She threw her arms around him, burying her face into his neck. His strong back heaved under her palms, making her aware he was sobbing. She held him as tightly as she could. God, it felt so sweet to hold him after so long. She'd missed him horribly, even during her time with Duncan. And not because she loved Duncan any less. She was meant for both of them, body and soul.

Ian's sobs abated, and his breathing changed, growing more ragged. He stirred against her, and she felt the change in his body. His breathing deepened and he smoothed one hand over her back. "Leda," he whispered. His eyes smoldered under heavy lids as he gazed at her. "I can't bear the thought of never seeing you again. I've missed you so much." His gaze flickered to his brother, and his eyes filled with fear and remorse. He pulled away from Leda. "I'm sorry, Duncan. I've no right to touch her."

Duncan reached out and squeezed his brother's arm. "Don't be sorry, Ian." His voice was low and husky. "Love her." His hands went to Leda's shoulders, rubbing them in slow, sensuous circles. The heat of his hands radiated through the thin material of her nightgown and she breathed heavily as the tingling in her body increased, trailing deliciously through her entire body. "She wants us both," he whispered, burying his lips in the side of her neck, feathering the tip of his tongue along the delicate skin. His strong hands slid down the length of her arms and onto her hips, rubbing and caressing them.

Leda opened her eyes.

Ian was staring at her hungrily, yet hanging back, as if he thought he was dreaming. She reached a hand out to him, gently tugging him to her.

When he was only a few inches away, he exhaled sharply and leaned into her, taking her mouth in a deep kiss.

She felt him releasing pent-up longing in the way he mated his tongue fervently with hers. His hands cupped her breasts, squeezing them tenderly, yet urgently.

Duncan grabbed up fistfuls of her nightgown, raising it above her knees.

Ian lifted his face from their kiss so that the gown could be raised over Leda's head, exposing her bare flesh. She watched Ian's gaze travel the length of her body.

"She's yours too, now," Duncan whispered, leaning over to press a kiss into her shoulder.

Ian leaned into her again, kissing her deeply.

She breathed in his masculine scent that she'd missed for so long. Reaching up, she laced her fingertips into his hair as he nibbled her lips and jaw, trailing kisses down her neck to her breasts.

Duncan caressed her hips. One large hand slid over her stomach, his fingertips raking through the curls on her mound. Her hand followed the movements of Ian's head as he went from one nipple to the other, suckling each one hungrily to a hard peak. Tingling heat coursed through her body as he tugged each sensitive nipple between his lips and tongue. She wilted against Duncan, melting under their exploring hands and tongues.

Duncan's fingertips slipped down between her legs, into her moist center, rubbing back and forth over her clitoris. She spread her legs wider, sagging back further against Duncan. When Ian sat up to pull off his robe and pajama top, Duncan's hands slid back up to her breasts, cupping them from behind, kneading her nipples gently between his fingertips.

Ian's hazel eyes were dusky, his face flushed, his muscular chest heaving. One hand reached out, his fingertips tracing a path from her inner thigh to her knee and back up again, while Duncan turned her face to the side and kissed her, slipping his tongue between her lips, tasting her mouth languorously in slow strokes.

She moaned, her eyelids fluttering closed. She felt Ian move closer and then felt his lips press into her stomach, the tip of his tongue flickering over her skin. His palms caressed her inner thighs before skating upward to her sex, spreading her open gently with his thumbs. His breath was suddenly warm over her clitoris, which he began to lave with his tongue.

Leda surrendered completely to the overwhelming pleasure. She spread her legs wider as Ian slipped two fingers inside her swollen channel, musky and wet from arousal. The combined ecstasy of Duncan's kisses, his fingertips squeezing her nipples, and Ian's tongue on her desire, brought her body over the edge. An orgasm erupted under Ian's mouth, shimmering through her womb. She cried out from the intensity of the waves that gripped her. When they passed, she sagged languidly against Duncan, who laid her back against the pillows.

Ian raised his face and gazed at her, his hazel eyes glazed with desire. "Leda, may I have you?" Ian whispered, his eyes smoldering. Her musk glistened on his lips.

She nodded and he pulled off his pajama bottoms. His erection was full and thick and she gazed on his magnificent body, her desire stirring again.

He parted her legs and settled himself between them, guiding his penis to her opening.

Leda moaned as he pushed the head in, then glided up inside her until their bodies touched.

He took her mouth hungrily in a kiss as he moved inside her, bracing himself on his elbows.

Duncan had pulled off his pajama top and stretched out beside them, his hand fondling her breasts, squeezing the nipples. When Ian lifted his lips from hers, she turned to look at

Duncan, who smiled at her and leaned over, kissing her full, open mouth, suckling her tongue feverishly.

Again, the pleasure crashed over her and the friction of Ian's cock inside her, grinding against her clitoris, brought her back to the edge of orgasm. When Duncan pinched her nipple firmly between thumb and forefinger, the resulting jolt of heat traveled from the pink tip to her womb, and the bliss erupted a second time, coursing in tiny waves through her until she went limp again. Her breasts heaved, and Duncan removed his hand from her breasts. He pulled off his pajama bottoms and lightly grasped her hand, guiding it to his erection.

Leda let out a small gasp, closing her hand around the hardness, smoothing her palm up and down the shaft. Duncan moaned softly in her ear, his breath tickling her skin. She turned and kissed his lips.

Ian moved harder and faster inside of her. He rose up on his hands, his eyes closed, groaning softly. He pulled out quickly and rubbed himself, his seed spilling out warm and milky onto her stomach. When his ejaculation had passed, he sat back, breathing heavily. He opened his eyes and gazed down at her. "I'm sorry, Leda. I couldn't last."

She smiled lazily, feeling drunk from pleasure.

"It's all right," Duncan said in a husky voice. "It's my turn." He reached for a handkerchief, which Ian took from him and wiped Leda's stomach. He stretched out next her and caressed her hair as Duncan positioned himself between her thighs and pushed his cock inside her. He groaned as his entire length sheathed itself deep inside her.

She reached up and caressed his chest, the silky hair damp with perspiration. The air around them was warm and heavy with the musky scent of sex. Slowly and sensuously, he moved in and out of her, reaching down to slick his fingertips over her clitoris.

Leda closed her eyes as the pleasure ignited her again, her body soaking up all the passion and affection they lavished on her. She turned her face to the side and felt Ian's lips capture hers, nibbling and suckling on her bottom lip. His fingertips caressed her cheek and neck, while Duncan's breath whispered heavily into her ear.

Waves of bliss exploded a third time in her sex and she cried out as the tiny muscle contracted with blinding intensity. When her orgasm had passed, Duncan removed his hand and braced himself, and moved faster and harder.

Leda grasped his buttocks, squeezing them, feeling his movements in and out of her. She caressed his hips in small fervent circles, and he moaned, pulling out of her as he came, his seed pulsing out onto her stomach.

He collapsed gently next to her, the room filling with the sound of his breathing.

Leda lay contentedly sandwiched between the two men, smiling up into the shadows of the bed's canopy.

Ian put his face against her left breast, and she caressed his hair, her contentment suddenly, viciously, marred by the reality that he was leaving the next day for the front.

She pressed a small kiss into his hair.

Duncan wiped his seed from Leda's stomach and then molded his body to hers, his hand resting on her naked hip.

"Thank you, Duncan, for my gift," she whispered.

He answered her with a gentle kiss pressed into her neck.

They rested together for a little while, and then Ian stirred next to her. She felt something hard push into her thigh and realized he was aroused again. He rubbed his erection against her and groaned softly, but when she reached her hand down to touch him, he stopped her.

"I must check on Helen," he whispered.

She looked at him. "May I go with you? I want to see how the bairn is."

He kissed her. "Aye, I want you with me."

Duncan opened his eyes and looked at them.

When she pulled away, he smiled up at her. "All right. Come get me if there's a need."

She smiled and squeezed his hand before rising from the bed. Her nightgown had fallen to the floor. She retrieved it and put it on, along with her slippers and wrap.

Ian had put his pajamas and robe back on and stood nearby. "Duncan," he said softly.

Duncan looked at him.

"Thank you."

Duncan smiled and waved him away. "It's all right, brother. Go see after Helen."

* * * * *

To Leda's surprised relief, Helen was awake and sitting up, cradling the bairn, who suckled hungrily on her breast.

Helen looked over and smiled at them when the nurse opened the door.

"We can come back," Ian said softly.

"No. Please come in, both of you."

The nurse smiled at Leda as she passed, and Leda noticed her in a way she hadn't earlier. The woman looked a few years older than she, with blonde hair and kind, smiling blue eyes. Something about the woman's gentle demeanor made Leda sense that she would take good care of Helen and the bairn.

Leda followed Ian over to the bed, her eyes on Helen. Although weariness rimmed Helen's eyes, her color was a healthy pink, and the bairn was nursing with vigor. She breathed an inaudible sigh of relief.

Ian perched carefully on the edge of the mattress. Leda sat behind him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the nurse slip quietly from the room, leaving them in privacy.

"Please thank Duncan for bringing the nurse here. She's very caring. Her name is Sarah."

"I'll tell him," Ian answered. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right." Helen glanced down at the bairn, then looked up, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "He's rather beautiful, I think," she whispered.

"Aye, he is," Ian said softly.

"I think so, too," Leda added.

Helen looked at her, then Ian. "You're both the kindest people in the entire world," she said. "I have siblings, none of whom I'm close to." She sighed. "I'm so sorry. I understand if you'll want me to leave."

Ian reached out and touched her cheek. "We don't want you to leave, Helen. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

Helen began to sob quietly. "I'll make it up to you both, I swear it."

Leda put her hand on Helen's arm. "You don't have to. Just take good care of your bairn."

Helen nodded. "I will. I'll try. I don't know how good a mother I'll make."

Leda smiled gently. "You'll be fine. Have you named him yet?"

She shook her head. "No, I haven't." She looked at Ian. "What's your middle name?" she asked him.

"Robert."

"And Duncan's?"

"Patrick."

Helen smiled through her tears. "I'd like to name him Robert Patrick MacGregor. Is that all right?"

Ian smoothed her hair back. "Aye, of course. That's the perfect name for our son."

Helen's lip trembled and tears rolled down her cheeks. "Our son," she repeated. "I'll miss you, Ian. I wish you weren't going."

He looked down. "So do I."

Leda's heart crashed in her chest at the reminder. Even though her body still felt languorous with the memory of Ian and Duncan both loving her together, her hands began to tremble and she clutched at her wrap. "We'll write to you every day, Ian," she said quietly. "And we'll send you photographs."

He looked up at her. "Aye, I'd like that."

She glanced at Helen, who leaned her head back tiredly against her pillow. Robert lifted his little mouth from her breast and gurgled.

Helen smiled. "I think he's full."

Leda smiled and leaned forward, gently lifting Robert from his mother's arms. "Aye, I see." She rose from the bed. "I'll burp him and put him back."

"Thank you, Leda."

"It's all right." She went to the table, which held a pile of fresh towels and put one over her shoulder. Holding Robert against her breast, she patted his back softly, rubbing it in small circles. She breathed a sigh of relief at the healthy sounds he made.

She laid him back in his incubator, tucking the bedding firmly in around his tiny body. "I'm going to let you rest," she told Helen.

"Thank you, Leda. I can't thank you enough."

Ian rose from the bedside and escorted Leda out into the hall. He closed the bedroom door behind them and pulled Leda into his arms, holding her close.

She returned his embrace, resting her cheek against his chest.

"I'm going to sit with her awhile until she falls back asleep," Ian said softly. "Then I'll come back to you."

"Aye, Ian, come back to me," she murmured into his robe. She didn't want him ever to let her go. Each moment was precious. She couldn't bear the thought that he might not come back and their loving would be over when it had only just started.

Ian laced his fingers into her hair, which still hung loose, cascading over her shoulders. "I love your hair so much," he whispered, burying his face into the fall. "You always smell like roses."

Leda nuzzled his chest, tightening her arms around him. She choked back a sob. God, she would miss holding him. The thought of him getting shot at or an explosion taking him ... The mere possibility made her stomach churn violently. She pushed back her tears.

He raised his face from her hair and tipped her face to look at him. "Go on now, little swan," he said softly. He kissed her lips with incredible tenderness before he released her.

"Come back soon," she whispered.

"I will."

She turned and padded back to the bedroom she shared with Duncan. He'd left the lamp burning on the bedside table so she could see. She slipped off her wrap and nightgown and climbed in beside him, grateful for his warm, masculine strength.

Duncan switched off the lamp and drew her against him, molding his naked body to hers. He murmured a sigh into her hair, then pressed his lips on her back. "I love you, Leda."

She raised his hand to her lips, kissing it softly, then held it against her middle. "I love you."

“Leda ...” she heard him say, his breath warm on her skin.

“Aye?”

“Pray for Ian’s safe return.”

“Aye. I will. I already have a thousand times.”

Chapter Fifteen

Sixteen months later ...

January, 1916

“Ian is coming home.” Duncan made the pronouncement from the doorway. “I just received the telegram from the War Office.”

Leda’s gaze snapped up to see his large frame filling the space. Immediately, her hands holding the teacup and saucer began to shake. She set them down and jumped up. “Oh, my God! Where is he? Can we go to him?”

Helen, who’d been sitting next to her, also set down her cup and saucer and picked up Robert, who’d been playing on the floor by her feet. “Thank God,” she whispered.

Duncan walked up to Leda and put his hands on her shoulders. The grim expression in his dark eyes made her stomach lurch.

She stared up at him. “Duncan, what is it? Something’s wrong?”

Helen approached them. “Is he ...” She fell silent, leaving Leda’s own greatest fears unexpressed. Some of the young men from their district had trickled back from the Front, the vast majority of them either physically or emotionally mutilated.

Duncan sighed heavily. “Physically, he’s whole, thank God. But his nerves are badly damaged. He’s being taken to a war hospital in Edinburgh that specializes in treating officers with his condition. He scheduled to arrive there by tomorrow morning.”

Leda fought to keep her breathing steady, glad for Duncan’s strong hands holding her. “When can we go to him?”

Duncan looked down at her. “As soon as possible.”

"Would it be too many of us if I went with you?" Helen handed Robert to Sarah, who'd come to visit for the weekend. In the weeks and months following Robert's birth, a relationship had developed between the two women, and they had obviously fallen in love.

"I don't know," Duncan answered. "If you wish, we can go ahead and then send for you in a day or two when we know how Ian is doing."

"I'll stay here with her," Sarah offered. "I have a few days' leave from Elsie's."

Helen smiled, her face brightening. Just as quickly her smile faded and she turned to Leda. "I think he would rather see you first," she said softly.

Leda returned her gaze. There had been no sarcasm or guilt of any kind in Helen's voice. Just truth. "I don't know about that," she said. "Your friendship has deepened."

"Yes, it has. But he adores you," Helen answered.

Leda nodded. "Thank you." She put her hand on Duncan's arm. "Can we leave first thing in the morning?"

"Aye." He leaned over and kissed Leda on the cheek. "Have Audrey help you pack, and bring enough for several weeks. We don't know how long he'll be there."

* * * * *

Craiglockhart was a gigantic stone mansion on the grounds of what had once been a magnificent Highland estate off Prince's Street. But to Leda, the structure, with its endless nooks, crannies and gables, held only one interest for her. Ian was inside. And he was alive.

Her hand tightened on Duncan's arm as they went up the steps in the cold, gray winter air.

The front entry was a large, airy hall with black and white tiles, not unlike the foyer of Glenparry. She felt almost as she had the first day walking into Malcolm's home, holding onto her mother's arm. Her heart pounded in much the same way, stepping into the unknown. Aside from the few soldiers milling about in uniform, nurses, and the sounds of silverware and murmuring voices in what must be the dining hall, the place did not feel like a hospital. Some of the young men turned and watched them as they walked in, and Leda searched their faces, hoping to see Ian.

A young man in an officer's uniform sat at a desk by the entrance. He looked up when they walked in. "May I help you?" he asked politely.

"I received a telegraph that my brother, Ian Macgregor, arrived here two days ago," Duncan told him.

Leda held tightly to Duncan's arm. Her heart had begun to pound, her senses heightened, trying to detect Ian's presence in the building.

The officer checked a ledger of several pages. "Yes," he said after several moments, "He's here. I'll let Dr. Rivers know you've come to see Lieutenant MacGregor and we'll

locate him for you.” He set the papers down and stood up. “Dr. Rivers is in session with a patient at the moment, but you’re welcome to wait in the dayroom, if you’d like.” He indicated the direction of the room.

“Thank you.” Duncan looked at Leda. “Let’s go sit down.”

Silently she nodded, letting him lead her through the large front hall to what must once have been an elegant ballroom, now full of sofas, tables, and chairs. Although the day was overcast, plenty of daylight came into the room through the many pairs of French doors that surrounded it.

At the far end of the room, a solitary man in officer’s uniform sat staring out one of the French doors, silently puffing on a cigarette. Leda watched him as they entered. Her heart lurched when she recognized him. She gasped and tugged on Duncan’s arm. “Duncan,” she breathed, “there he is!” She looked up at him. “May I go to him?”

Duncan looked down at her, obviously saddened by the sight of Ian sitting so quietly, smoking. As they watched, he leaned over, mashed out the cigarette, and turned back to the window. “Of course.”

She released his arm and walked toward Ian. Something told her to move slowly, so as not to startle him.

He didn’t notice her until she stopped a few feet away. He turned his head slowly and looked at her. He stared at her as if he couldn’t decide whether she were really there.

Tears gathered in her eyes at the change in him. His once sparkling eyes looked haunted and his handsome face was frighteningly pale. He did not seem to be in the same world with her.

“Ian,” she whispered, stepping a bit closer. “Ian, it’s me.”

Gradually, she saw recognition light in his eyes. “Leda?” He turned fully, so that he faced her, and rose to his feet. “Are you really here?”

She stepped closer to him. “Aye, I’m here.” She restrained the overwhelming impulse to throw her arms around him.

He still seemed reluctant and stared at her. “I’ve dreamed of you so many times, but you always disappeared.”

Leda heaved a sob that caught her in a whirlwind of joy and relief. “I’m real this time, Ian,” she said through her tears. “I promise I won’t disappear.”

Ian reached up and touched her cheek. She heard his breath catch softly as his fingertips made contact with her skin. “Oh, my God,” he breathed. He pulled her into his arms, squeezing her tightly, his face buried in the side of her neck.

Leda sobbed into his jacket, wrapping her arms around him as tightly as she could. When they finally released each other, Duncan was standing beside them, looking at his brother.

"Welcome home, Ian," he said softly, sitting down on Ian's other side and pulling him into an embrace.

Leda watched them, her tears of happiness and relief flowing freely. She sensed that other people in the room were watching them, but she didn't care. All that mattered was that Ian was alive, and he was home.

"Excuse me," a voice cut into their reunion.

They turned. A woman from the Voluntary Aid Detachment in a nurse's uniform stood nearby. "Dr. Rivers can see you now," she said. "I'll show you to his office."

Duncan released Ian and turned to her.

Leda stepped toward the VAD, but Ian grasped her arm, and her gaze flew to his. His eyes were suddenly wild and frightened. His grasp was gentle, yet desperate. "No, Leda" he said in a pleading tone, "Don't leave."

"I'm not leaving, Ian." She put her arm around him and felt him calm down a bit under her touch.

"I'll go speak to the doctor," Duncan told them. "You can stay here."

"Thank you, Duncan," Leda said.

Duncan smiled at them and went with the nurse.

Ian immediately turned to Leda and threw his arms around her. "Leda, Leda, I can't believe it's really you." He rested his head on her shoulder, and she stroked his hair. "I thought I'd never see you again." He lifted his face from her shoulder and gazed down at her, his hands on her cheeks.

She smiled at him through her tears. They sat together, their hands interlaced. "I've missed you so much. Did you get all my letters?"

"I think so." He frowned. "There were days with no letters," he added, his voice heavy with sadness.

She reached up and caressed his hair. She waited for him to ask about Helen and Robert, but he didn't. "Helen would like to come see you," she told him. "Robert is getting so big."

He looked at her. That faraway look had returned to his eyes, and he squeezed her hand. She put her arm over his shoulders again and held him. Sadness overwhelmed her and she knew without being told that so much of his consciousness was still at war, even though his body had left the Front.

Ian rested his head on her shoulder again, and they leaned back against the cushions, sitting quietly.

Leda turned and kissed his hair, trying not to weep.

Duncan returned in a little while. Leda saw him enter the dayroom and she and Ian stood up. "I have some good news," he said. "Ian can come stay with us at the inn, if he'd

like, as long as he comes back here for his sessions with Dr. Rivers and for his medical boards.”

Leda smiled. “That’s wonderful! Ian, we must get your things.”

Ian’s eyes filled with fear again and he grasped Leda’s arm as he had before. “You’ll come with me, won’t you? My room is far away.”

“Of course, I’ll go with you.”

Duncan clapped a hand affectionately on his shoulder. “We’ll go together, Ian,” he told him in a gentle voice.

Ian nodded and Leda felt the tension leave his body. He looked up at his brother. “Duncan, don’t let Leda disappear.” The pleading tone in his voice sliced through her.

Duncan squeezed his shoulder. “I won’t,” he answered. “I promise.”

* * * * *

Ian clung to Leda’s arm as they walked down the long driveway of the hospital and waited for the trolley car that would take them down Prince’s Street to their inn.

“What did the doctor tell you?” she asked Duncan, as they stood in the chilly air. Ian waited quietly beside her.

Duncan glanced at his brother, who obviously was not attuned to their conversation. He looked at her in mutual, silent acknowledgment of Ian’s emotional state. “He told me that Ian was rendered incapable of remaining on the Front after a shell exploded in the trench. Several of the men under his command were killed.” He paused and looked down. “Horribly so,” he murmured. “I will not go into details.” He sighed, his breath puffing in clouds in the winter air. “Dr. Rivers explained that Ian has been repressing his horror and fear for the entire time he’s been in combat. He was moved to that faraway room because he’s been having nightmares and was keeping his roommate awake.” Duncan put his hand on Leda’s shoulder. “I don’t have to tell you the change that’s happened in him.”

She shook her head. “No, you don’t.”

The trolley car came to a stop in front of them and they boarded the car.

“Will he get better?” she asked softly.

Duncan nodded. “Aye, I’m certain he will. Dr. Rivers said that while he’s with us, if he has memories or nightmares, to encourage him not to repress or try to forget them. That only adds to his distress. He said Ian should come and take part in the athletics and do other leisure activities that will give him a sense of normality.” He looked over at his brother, who clung to Leda’s arm, pressing close against her. “I think Ian has found the one thing he wants to do.” He touched Leda’s cheek.

She nodded and glanced at Ian, who laced his gloved fingers more tightly through hers.

They reached their stop and descended the trolley car.

"There's just one thing, Leda," Duncan said as they started to walk down the busy sidewalk toward their inn.

"What is it?"

"He has to go before the medical boards. They'll determine whether Ian has recovered sufficiently to return to the Front."

"No!" She tightened her grip on Ian's arm. "Duncan, you can't let them send him back."

"Unfortunately, sweetling, I have no control whatsoever about that. But you needed to know about the possibility."

"I don't want him ever to go back there. He's too gentle. Look what it's done to him."

"I don't want him to go back either, Leda. But we're together now, and it's important to enjoy what time we have."

They turned onto a side street and Duncan opened the front door to the inn. "Ian has repressed his emotions for a very long time. It didn't just begin while he was at war."

Leda looked at Ian. She felt strange discussing him as if he weren't there, but part of him wasn't. "I know," she answered softly.

"So," Duncan went on, "It's important that he expresses himself in every way he can." He looked at her meaningfully, and her heartbeat sped up slightly, a flush of heat infusing her cheeks when she understood what he meant.

In the room, Ian set down his rucksack and looked around, gazing on the cozy furnishings as if he'd never seen such a place before. "What a beautiful place," he said.

"Aye." Duncan clapped a gentle hand on Ian's shoulder. "A palace compared to where you've been, isn't it?"

Ian nodded and sat gingerly on the velvet-upholstered sofa, smoothing his hand over the material as if it were magical.

Leda watched him as she unpinned her hat and removed her coat and gloves. The valet built a fire in the hearth and Duncan ordered a meal from room service and went downstairs to call Helen.

"Ian, would you like to take off your coat?"

He turned at the sound of her voice, which seemed to bring him a bit more into the present. He nodded and undid the brass buttons.

She took their coats and hung it on the rack by the door. When she turned around, Ian was staring at her. She smiled and went over to him.

As soon as she was at his side, he reached for her hand and brought her to sit down on the sofa with him, staring into her eyes with an expression of wonder. He reached up and ran his fingertips across her cheek, trailing them tenderly over her lips. "I still can't believe you're real," he said softly. "I can't believe you're not going to disappear. I'm afraid to close my eyes."

"I won't disappear, Ian. I promise."

Just then the door opened and Duncan walked back in. He came over and sat down next to Leda.

"How's Helen?" she asked him.

"Helen is fine." He smiled. "She says that Robert is enjoying his two mothers. I told her to wait another day or two before coming down." He put his hand on Ian's shoulder. "Helen sends her love to you, Ian. She's very happy you're back."

Ian looked at him. Again, that puzzled expression clouded his eyes. "I'm sorry, Duncan," he said. "I'm having trouble remembering."

Leda furrowed her brow, her eyes meeting Duncan's. "You remembered me and Duncan," she said.

Ian turned to her. "Aye. You were with me every day and night," he said. "I remember making love to you once, and Duncan made love to you at the same time." He looked down. "But now, I'm not sure that wasn't just a beautiful dream too."

She put her hand to his cheek. "That wasn't a dream, Ian. It really happened."

Ian leaned his face in to her and nuzzled her cheek. The contact of his warm lips caused her skin to tingle. She remembered that night, the way Duncan had fondled her breasts from behind while Ian pressed a trail of kisses, starting with her lips, moving lower, down her neck and chest and stomach, each kiss bringing him closer to her sex. The memory stoked the heat of yearning between her thighs and she wanted them to make love to her again, right now.

She looked over her shoulder at Duncan, her eyelids heavy with her arousal. His dark eyes had begun to smolder. She caught her breath when Ian's fingertips skated over her nipples through her blouse and woolens.

Just then, someone knocked on the door. She gasped and sat up. Ian's hands slowly receded from her front.

Duncan rose from the sofa. "It's our food," he murmured. He opened the door and accepted the cart. He tipped the young man who had delivered it and closed the door after him.

As soon as he had, Ian reached out and pulled Leda against him, pressing his lips to her neck, nuzzling and kissing the sensitive skin of her throat.

Duncan grinned. "I suppose food can wait," he said.

Leda pulled off her sweater while Ian's fingers worked open her blouse. He pushed it off her shoulders and palmed the swells of her breasts. He leaned in and kissed her, brushing his lips gently across hers, then, pushing more firmly, slipped his tongue deep inside her mouth, tasting her with growing urgency.

Ian tugged her woolen undershirt from the waistband of her skirt, pushing it upward. She raised her arms so he could lift it off. He dropped the shirt to the floor and lowered his face to her breasts, hungrily feasting on her nipples with his lips and tongue.

Leda leaned back against the cushions, moaning. She turned and gazed at Duncan, who sat next to her, his dark eyes gazing on her with lust. "I enjoy watching you," he whispered.

His words sent a shimmer of heat through her sex and her eyes fluttered closed as Ian tugged one nipple between his lips and tongue, fondling her other breast with his hand, kneading the nipple between his fingertips.

She glanced up just in time to see Duncan lean his face down, his soft warm lips pressing against hers with erotic languor. He ran the tip of his tongue back and forth across the seam of her lips and she parted them, moaning softly at the moist intrusion of his tongue. Slowly, and in deeper circles, he dipped into her mouth while Ian laved her breasts with his tongue, his other hand leaving her breast to wander under her skirt, caressing her inner thighs over her woolen stockings. There was something so arousing about Duncan and Ian being fully dressed while divesting her of her clothing.

She sighed, her body writhing under their lips and hands while Duncan reached down and undid her skirt and Ian slipped his hands under the waistband of her woolens and slipped them down her legs, leaving her completely naked.

With his large hands on her shoulder, Duncan gently pulled Leda down so her head rested on his lap. She hooked one leg over the back of the sofa while Ian bent over her, trailing kisses down her stomach, over her mound. Duncan's hand moved in sensuous circles over her breasts, squeezing them and tugging the nipples between his fingertips. She felt his erection swell in his trousers against her cheek, and she tilted her face, nuzzling the deliciously hard bulge with her lips. He groaned and she worked open his trousers, slipping her hand inside, rubbing the tumescence with her fingertips.

Duncan's breath caught in his throat and he pulled his trousers and drawers down, past his hips. Leda turned her upper body slightly so she could take him in her mouth. The hard shaft slid smoothly between her lips and she closed her eyes, loving the taste of the velvety skin and the feeling of veins and hard muscle. She ran the tip of her tongue around the swollen head, feeling every ridge and nuance of his cock, including the salty droplets of seed seeping from the tiny opening.

She moaned around his shaft when Ian spread her sex open with gentle fingertips and laved her clitoris with his tongue, licking and suckling it with unleashed fervor. Dense heat spiraled through her core and she writhed her hips.

Ian lifted his face from her sex. She could hear him panting. "Leda, I'm sorry, I can't wait." She turned to see him pulling off his jacket. He unbuckled his trousers and pulled them down, while she rose on her knees so he could take her from behind.

She closed her eyes, a small cry of pleasure escaping her at the intimate contact. She'd missed him so much and reveled in the deep joining of their bodies. His strong hands grasped

her hips, bracing her as he glided in and out of her wet, swollen sex. She smiled and turned back to Duncan, closing her mouth around his erection again. With one hand, she stroked the base in tiny circles while running her tongue up and down his length.

Duncan wove his hand into her hair, gently caressing her as she pleased him.

Ian bent over her, closing his hands over her breasts and Leda felt as if she were going to drown in pleasure. She was never happier than when the three of them were together.

Duncan put his fingertips under her chin and lifted her face. "I want to watch you," he murmured in a husky voice. He sat up. "Let's go to the bed."

Ian pulled out of her and stood up, yanking off the rest of his clothing.

Duncan pulled up his trousers and picked Leda up, setting her down on the bed. She lay back against the pillows, watching Duncan unbutton his shirt and pull off his trousers. A surge of arousal coursed through her sex at the sight of his broad chest, gleaming with silky dark hair and his large erection, straining, throbbing.

Ian lay down on the bed beside her, gently turning her face to his. He plunged his tongue sensuously in to the deep corners of her mouth, parting her legs with one knee.

Duncan lay on her other side, his head propped on one elbow, watching her through heavy lids. The feel of his gaze, his obvious enjoyment of seeing another man make love to her weakened her, and she fell open underneath Ian, who found her opening with probing fingertips. He pushed the head of his erection easily inside her and slid the rest of the way in with a satisfying thrust. Ian lowered his face to her neck, nibbling and suckling the tender skin while he moved inside her.

Her head fell back against the pillows, and she felt Duncan's mouth close sensuously over hers, tasting her with deep, molten passion. She loved the way he kissed her, savoring her lips and tongue. He always made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. She reached over with one hand, lightly rubbing her palm over his chest, relishing the feel of hard muscle and soft hair, the way it quivered from her touch and flexed as he fondled one of her breasts, pinching and squeezing the nipple. Her other hand rested on Ian's buttock. She squeezed him, pushing him deeper inside her, loving the flex of the muscle as he moved on top of her.

The overwhelming concentration of pleasure built inside her and an orgasm erupted, causing her body to arch, her pelvis thrusting against Ian's. She moaned into Duncan's mouth as wave after wave of sheer erotic bliss passed through her.

Her pleasure caused Ian to climax and she felt his body tighten. He groaned softly, pushing against her in tiny movements before collapsing gently onto her, breathing heavily.

Duncan lifted his mouth from hers and looked down at her, his dark eyes troubled. "Leda," he whispered. He fell silent and rolled onto his back.

Levering gently out from under Ian, she turned. "Duncan, what is it?" She reached up and put her hand to his cheek, breathing heavily from their passion.

Ian lay close beside her, the length of his body pressed against hers.

Duncan sighed, grasping her hand and holding it away from his cheek. "Are you fertile right now?"

His question made her blood suddenly run cold. In the heat of lovemaking she'd forgotten she was, in fact, fertile. "Aye." She closed her eyes. Duncan's distress was suddenly palpable.

Ian raised his head and looked at them. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, Ian," Duncan murmured. He reached over and ruffled his brother's hair.

Leda's heart began to pound and she leaned close to Duncan's ear. "Dr. Burns said I was in perfect health, remember?" she whispered as softly as possible.

He sighed. "Aye, I remember." He took her hand and kissed it.

"Duncan," she whispered, "please make love to me." She reached out her arms to him and he rolled over, settling himself gently on top of her. She opened her legs and he slid inside, smoothing her hair back with one hand, gazing down at her as he loved her. She smiled up at him and then looked at Ian, who lay quietly, gazing at her. When their eyes met, he smiled and leaned over her, kissing her tenderly. His tongue slid into her mouth, leisurely tasting the ridges along the roof of her mouth, sliding along her tongue and teeth. The masculine scents of their bodies and male musk filled her nostrils, and she felt another orgasm heating in her sex, under the grinding motion of Duncan's cock.

Ian pulled his mouth from hers and bent his head to her breast, tugging it between his lips. When Duncan reached one hand down and stroked her clitoris with his fingertips, she went over the edge into bliss a second time, her sex clenching around him, her body tensing as the tiny contractions wrung pleasure from her.

She went limp underneath Duncan and he continued thrusting, harder and faster. Leda reached around and massaged his hips, squeezing and kneading them, her gaze locked with his as he moved toward his own release.

With a sudden motion, Duncan pulled out, stroking himself as his seed spilled onto her stomach. He exhaled and bridged her body with his hands before moving off her and reaching for a handkerchief. She watched him, one hand lazily stroking Ian's hair as he lay beside her, his head pressed to her shoulder.

Duncan wiped Leda's stomach then settled next to her, bringing her head to rest in the hollow of his shoulder.

"I'm so happy," she whispered. She closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of being completely surrounded by the two men she loved. She only wished Duncan weren't so afraid about her becoming pregnant. She wanted to give each of them a bairn. She wanted Duncan to have what had been taken from him before. And she wanted Ian to have the same.

She turned her face to Ian and pressed her lips into his forehead. The poor man had been through such hell and he was as happy to be with her again as she was to be with him. She hoped that making love would help heal him. She was willing to give herself to him as many times as it would take.

Chapter Sixteen

Duncan opened his eyes as the first pale light brightened the room. Leda slept on, pressed against his side. Since yesterday afternoon, the three of them had spent almost the entire time in bed, with Ian and Duncan taking turns making love to her. They'd had a light supper before finally falling asleep.

In the half-light he saw Ian's head resting on her breast. Duncan watched them, listening to their quiet breathing, grateful that Ian was alive and they were together -- and felt suddenly plagued by serious concerns. Like Leda, he worried over the prospect of Ian's being sent back to the Front. However, judging from his own experience of war and the damage it did to a man's nerves and will, he doubted that Ian would be fit for command again.

It was just as well. Ian was strong in his way, but he was not a soldier. He had always been a sensitive lad who loved beauty. It was these qualities that had always brought out Duncan's protective instinct with his younger brother, in spite of the thirteen-year gap in their ages that could have made them more distant instead of closer. Had Ian been any other man, Duncan would not have been able to share Leda with him in this way, but Leda had always been a source of comfort and sweetness for his younger brother. The two of them shared a bond of love that was rare in this world.

Then there was the concern over his relationship with Leda. The trial of his handfast marriage with her was nearly over. He had not gotten her with a bairn, so there was nothing to hold her to him. In fact, there was now a good chance Ian had gotten her pregnant, all the more reason she could leave their handfast and marry Ian. Now that Ian's marriage to Helen was in name only, the union could easily be dissolved, freeing him to marry the woman he truly loved.

Ian stirred suddenly. He whimpered, his head moving from side to side. Leda opened her eyes as Ian's whimpers grew louder and he cried out, sitting bolt upright.

Duncan sat up, clasping a gentle hand on Ian's shoulder. Ian didn't seem to notice and Duncan realized his brother was still in the throes of his nightmare.

"No!" He was crying, shielding his face with his arms. "No!"

"Ian," Leda cried softly. She sat up and folded her arms around him. Her touch jerked him awake and he swung around, looking at her and Duncan with wild eyes. "Make it stop!" he cried. "Make it stop, please."

Leda pulled him into her arms and he buried his face into her neck, sobbing. "It's all right, love," she crooned, stroking his hair. "We're here. Don't fight it, let it come out." She lay back and Ian went with her, weeping against her.

Duncan sat quietly, watching. Ian's distress brought back memories of his own recovery from war, and he knew that Leda's feminine softness and loving heart would go a long way to comforting Ian.

Leda pressed a kiss into Ian's hair. She caressed his back and squeezed him tenderly in her arms. Gradually, his breathing steadied and his sobs abated. He rested quietly against her, his face still hidden in her hair. She looked up at Duncan and he could see her eyes glistening with unshed tears in the early morning light.

"He's better now," he murmured.

She nodded silently and turned back to Ian, closing her eyes and kissing his hair again. Duncan watched her hand smooth lovingly back and forth over his back. Ian stirred and lifted his face from her hair. He lowered his face to hers and kissed her lips. The sound of their mouths joining whispered in the dawn stillness. A low murmur sounded in Ian's throat and his head moved over Leda's with the deepening of his kiss.

Leda's sigh of pleasure caused Duncan's groin to stir. He'd never known how voyeuristic he was until just yesterday, while watching Ian make love to her, fondling her breasts, pleasuring her sex with his mouth.

Ian lifted his mouth from their kiss, the suction of their lips hissing in the air and trailed moist kisses down her neck as his passion heated. Duncan saw Ian's lips and tongue flickering on her porcelain skin, hungrily taking one of her nipples between his lips.

Leda arched her back, pushing her breast into his mouth, murmuring and sighing. She turned her head on the pillow and gazed at Duncan, her lids heavy over her dusky eyes. "Duncan." She whispered a silky invitation to join their lovemaking.

He smiled as he rose up on one elbow. "It's all right, sweetling," he said softly, "I want to watch you. He needs to lose himself in you for a while."

"I love you, Duncan." She gazed up at him, her eyes glazed with desire, her body moving under Ian's hands and lips. Her eyes fluttered closed and she turned back just as Ian's trail of kisses moved over her mound of curls to her slit.

He spread her lips open with his fingertips, exposing her slick inner sex and buried his lips into her flesh, causing her to moan softly and arch her pelvis. Leda's heady scent filled the heated air around them, an intoxicating blend of flowers and female musk from her glistening cream. Ian's mouth made wet, suckling sounds as he feasted on her, and her body clenched as an obvious orgasm washed through her.

Her body went limp under Ian, who lifted his face from between her thighs and moved up on her body, easing his erection into her slick channel. She opened her arms to him, her small hands gripping his back muscles as he thrust in and out of her, his mouth locked on hers in a deep kiss.

Duncan groaned softly, his body aching for release after watching Leda's nude, graceful body writhing under Ian's loving. He pushed the covers down and began stroking his erection, his thumb rubbing in firm, quick movements. He looked down and saw Leda's face turned toward him, watching him pleasure himself, her eyes silky and satisfied.

A sensual smile curved her lips as her eyes roved up and down from his face to his groin. The way she watched him urged him on and he rubbed harder, his climax building, pounding inside until it erupted, his seed spilling onto his hand.

He stroked himself until the last spasm died down and lay back, gazing on Leda.

Ian rose up on his hands moving inside her harder and faster. His body twitched and jerked and he groaned softly, collapsing gently on top of her.

Duncan sighed, hiding his grimace. If his instincts still functioned as they always had, he felt certain that Leda would become pregnant.

Ian's emotions had been pent up and his reunion with Leda had unleashed all the passion and longing for her that he had repressed for a very long time. Duncan reached for a handkerchief and wiped himself off.

Leda turned onto her side and reached for his hand. He saw from her expression that she sensed his distress. She lay quietly with his hand pressed to her lips, while Ian draped his arm over her, nuzzling her hair.

Duncan sighed. He couldn't expect Ian to be concerned about the same thing. The poor lad wasn't even completely in this world with them. His only connection to them at this point was his lovemaking with Leda. Duncan couldn't find it in his heart to be angry with him.

Gently he pulled his hand away. "I need to go to the loo," he murmured, rising from the bed. He went into the bathroom and stood over the toilet to relieve himself. When he finished, he felt someone watching him.

Leda stood in the doorway with her wrap on, the light fabric whispering about her naked body. Her large eyes brimmed over with worry.

He pulled the chain on the basin and rinsed his hands. He turned and leaned against the sink, watching her approach him.

"Duncan, do you still love me?"

"Aye, of course." He put his hands on her shoulders.

"As much as you did before?"

He pulled her against him. "I love you more than ever," he said against her hair. He felt her arms close around him, and her back heaved softly under his hands. He sensed her relief.

"Will you want to stay with me even though the year is almost finished?" she asked.

Gently, he held her away from him, gazing down into her eyes. "I was worried you'd want to leave *me*."

She shook her head, her eyes glistening. "No. Never."

He leaned down and kissed her lips. "Then we're in agreement."

She fell against him, squeezing him tightly. "Thank God, Duncan," she whispered.

"Is something the matter?" Ian's voice came from the doorway.

They both looked up.

Ian's eyes were wide with worry and he seemed lost. "I thought you'd disappeared again," he said to Leda.

She smiled and held her hand out to him. "Everything's fine, Ian."

He came over and grasped her hand, bringing it to his lips.

"I have something for you both," Duncan said. He gently disengaged from her embrace and went out of the room. When he returned, he was wearing his trousers. He approached them and reached into one pocket, pulling out a diamond ring.

Leda looked down at it and then at Duncan. "It's my engagement ring."

"Aye." He smiled. "Ian, you once gave this ring to Leda, as a symbol of your love for her. Why don't you give it to her again?"

Ian's eyes widened and a flicker of recognition lighted them. He took the ring wordlessly and slipped it onto Leda's finger, leaving it to rest next to the gold band Duncan had given her.

Leda's doe-like eyes filled with tears and she smiled, kissing each of them on the cheek.

Duncan smiled back at her, pressing his large fingers over the two rings at once.

* * * * *

One month later

Leda awoke before dawn, her chest tight, as if a heavy weight pressed down on it. She knew exactly why. Today was Ian's second medical board and Dr. Rivers had told her and Duncan that this session would determine whether or not he would be sent back to the Front or discharged from the military altogether.

Ian was still sleeping with his head against her breast. She'd awakened each morning with him pressed against her like that, and it had been one of the sweetest feelings she'd ever known. On her other side, Duncan stirred, pulling her closer to his warm body. She wished they could just remain forever like this, and that Ian could never be sent back. Her hand went absently to his hair, stroking it. His breath was warm as it caressed the skin of her chest. He sighed and continued to sleep. Last night was the first night in nearly a month he had slept straight through the night without nightmares.

She sighed. They would have to get up fairly soon. Duncan had ordered their breakfast to be served at eight o'clock. Helen would be joining them for breakfast and then she would wait at the inn for them to return from Craiglockhart. She and Robert had come to stay in the room next door. Thank God, Ian had taken immediately to Robert. Seeing Helen again had restored Ian's memory of her, and he had become miserable over remembering the past hurts. But being with the woman he loved had gone far to soothe him, and his friendship with Helen had deepened as she supported him through this period. Helen and Sarah were deeply in love and Helen had asked that Ian stay married to her in name because it helped satisfy her family and kept them from judging her. Ian had agreed since in his soul he was married to Leda.

When she looked up, her gaze met Duncan's. She saw immediately from the darkness of his eyes that he was feeling the same worry concerning Ian. He leaned over and pressed a tender kiss on her lips before rising from the bed and padding softly into the bathroom.

Leda lay quietly, caressing Ian's hair and listening to Duncan moving about in the bathroom. A sudden wave of nausea gripped her belly and she wriggled from Ian's grasp and ran for the bathroom.

Duncan was standing at the sink when she bent over the toilet, retching. She felt his large hand on her back, gently rubbing her.

When her sickness had passed, she sat back and gazed up at him, swiping the back of her hand across her mouth.

Duncan smoothed her hair gently back from her face, gazing at her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, feeling hot tears gather in her eyes. She wanted to be happy about the fact that she was carrying Ian's bairn inside her.

"Is it what I think it is?"

"Aye," she whispered. "I'm three days late already." She grasped Duncan's shoulder. "Please don't hate me, Duncan."

He pulled her into his arms, rocking her like she was a wee lass. "Why would I hate you?"

She clutched at him, burying her face in his neck. "For becoming pregnant. I've so much wanted you to get back what you lost and now --"

He kissed her hair. "I already have everything back, Leda."

"Leda?" She heard Ian's voice close by. Glancing up, he was kneeling beside her, her wrap in his hands. He held it out and draped it over her.

"I've good news for you, Ian," Duncan said softly. "You're going to be a father, for real." Ian's eyes widened.

"Aye," Duncan smiled and clapped a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder. "This time, 'twas you who actually planted the seed."

Leda smiled and nodded. "It's true, Ian."

"Leda," Ian whispered. He leaned over and gathered her into his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder, letting her joy flood through her.

* * * * *

Leda sat next to Duncan on a sofa in the dayroom while Ian was at his Medical Board. She spent part of the time writing to Audrey, telling her the news and reading the letter she'd received from her friend earlier that morning. Audrey and Christopher were getting married, and were waiting until Master Ian returned home so that Leda, Master Duncan and Master Ian could all be present for the wedding. Audrey, who had successfully delivered the Argyll bairn on her own while Leda was recovering from her illness, was now preparing to take her exam in Edinburgh to become certified as a midwife.

She folded her letter to Audrey and stuffed it into her coat pocket, then rested her head on Duncan's shoulder. An interminable amount of time seemed to pass before Ian finally came into the room with Dr. Rivers.

She and Duncan both stood as Rivers, a short man in officer's uniform, approached them. He had kind eyes and Leda smiled, accepting his offer of a handshake.

Dr. Rivers smiled in return. "I've come to inform you personally that Lieutenant MacGregor has of this day been honorably discharged from service."

Leda gasped. "You mean he doesn't have to go back?"

The doctor nodded. "That's correct. It was my evaluation that he's served honorably and that it is not to his benefit to have further exposure to combat."

Leda sobbed from joy, and threw her arms around Ian. She squeezed him tightly to her, feeling his arms close around her.

Duncan was waiting for them when they ended the embrace. They thanked the doctor and then he slipped his arms through each of theirs. "Come," he said softly. "Let's tell Helen the good news and then go home."

Epilogue

December, 1918

Leda finished breastfeeding her daughter and smiled up at Duncan. Outside, the beginnings of a snowstorm pelted flakes against the large window. The bedroom, however, was warm and cozy from the firelight. Ian's laughter, followed by the high-pitched giggles of Robert and Ewan carried through the wall from the lads' bedroom next door.

"Your daughter is ready for bed now, Duncan," Leda said, standing up to pat Elspeth gently on her back.

Duncan touched the bairn's head of dark curls reverently. "So's her father," he said softly.

Leda shook her head and carried Elspeth out into the hall. She stood in the doorway of the lads' room, watching Ian in the middle of the bedside rug, being crawled on by two lads clinging to his pajamas and giggling. Leda frowned in mock annoyance. "You always get them riled just before bed."

Ian looked up at her and grinned, his chestnut hair mussed from their tiny hands. "All right, lads," he said, laughing, "we've been caught. Time for bed."

"No, Daddy!" Two boys clung to his pajama pants as he tried to walk to the doorway. He laughed again and dragged them gently off before they pulled his bottoms off. "Come say good night."

"Robert," Leda said, "You must get your sleep. Your mum will be back from Edinburgh tomorrow and she'll be upset if you're all tired and cranky." She kneeled down and Robert kissed her on the cheek. "Good night, love," she told him, smiling.

"Good night, auntie." He turned and ran to the bed, clambering up the side and landing on the mattress with a bounce.

Ian had picked up his son and leaned the boy into his mother. She smiled at his plump cheeks and shining eyes. Ewan was the spitting image of his father, and the same gentle sensitivity shone from his little face.

“Good night, sweetheart,” she said softly, kissing him on top of his head.

Ian smiled at her and carried Ewan over to the bed to tuck him in.

Leda went back to the other bedroom and laid Elspeth in her cradle. She stood over her, rocking the cradle gently until the bairn had fallen asleep.

She felt Duncan come up behind her, slipping his strong arms around her waist. Over her shoulder, he looked at the sleeping bairn. “I never thought,” he breathed close to her ear, as he did each night.

Leda rested her head against him, silently thanking God for answering her prayers.

Duncan sank his lips into the side of her neck, the tip of his tongue darting sensuously against her skin. An immediate heat ignited in her loins in response to his kiss and to his warm hands, which slid over her breasts, squeezing them in tight, arousing circles. “Let’s go to bed,” he murmured into her ear.

Ian came into the room just then, closing the bedroom door behind him. Leda smiled, seeing desire rise in his eyes in response to the simmering atmosphere in the room. She slipped her robe and nightgown off and climbed into the bed. Both men had already pulled off their nightclothes and slipped in on either side of her, sandwiching her in between them.

In the soft light of the bedroom, Leda drank in the sight of their two muscular, virile bodies, hard with bulging erections closing in on her, and she turned onto her back, opening her arms and body to them.

At the same time, both Duncan and Ian lowered their mouths to her breasts, gently suckling on her nipples until they pebbled from the delicious attention. She moaned softly, arching her pelvis. Duncan reached down between her legs, gently opening her. He slid two large fingers inside her, pulsing them in and out, while Ian caressed her clitoris with his fingertips.

Leda threw her head back, moaning, feeling her consciousness join completely with the loving pleasure they were giving her.

“Yes! Yes!” she cried out, as an orgasm rippled through her sex in grinding waves. They stroked and licked her until she was satiated and her body had fallen limp on the mattress. Duncan raised his face from her breast and plundered her mouth with his tongue, gulping her greedily while Ian feathered moist kisses across her stomach and sex and suckled on her inner thighs.

Leda reached down and closed her hand around Duncan’s erection, stroking her hand over the silky skin, smoothing her fingertips over the hard muscle and veins, and down to his scrotum, gently squeezing it. “Please let me pleasure you both,” she breathed, when he’d

lifted his mouth from their kiss. She loved submitting completely to them, feeling their mastery over her.

Duncan grinned. "All right." He lowered his body between her legs, pushing the head of his erection into her wet opening. She moaned as he pushed all the way in and began a rhythmic thrusting.

Ian leaned his face over hers, his eyes gleaming with arousal. He took her mouth in deep hungry kisses, one hand fondling her breasts, gently tugging and kneading her nipples between his fingertips.

Duncan pulled out before he came and leaned back, making room for his brother, who nested in the apex of her thighs, spreading her open with one hand. She was wet and open, and Ian slid into her easily, bracing himself on his elbows as he took her.

Leda pulled her legs back as far as she could, reveling in the way they shared her and took their turns with her. "I'm yours," she whispered. "For both of you. Always." Her words drove Ian on and he groaned softly, pulling out before his climax could build too far.

Duncan turned her over and took her from behind, each thrust of his hardness inside her sent a wave of tingling pleasure through her sex.

She leaned her head down and captured Ian's cock in her mouth. The hard shaft was slick and creamy from being inside her, and the tanginess of her own musk tingled on her tongue as she gulped him down as far as she could.

Ian moaned and laced his fingers into her hair, his shaft twitching from the pleasure of her tongue circling the dark purple ridge of the head and pushing the tip of her tongue into the opening.

Duncan released a loud groan and she felt the pulse of his climax. He pulled out and his warm seed spilled onto her buttocks. She continued her loving massage on Ian's cock as Duncan wiped her off. When he was finished, Ian pulled out of her mouth and gently pushed her onto her back, taking her with driving force.

She locked her legs around his hips, her hands clutching his hard buttocks, squeezing and pushing him as deeply inside her as he could go. He ground wildly against her, the friction sending waves of heat crashing through her entire sex. The orgasm built with each thrust and exploded, a shimmering heat contracting over and over, bringing her to bliss.

Ian ground against her a few more times and then caught his breath. He pulled out of her and stroked himself, spilling his warm milky seed onto her stomach. He fell on his side next to her, breathing heavily.

Leda lay on her back, panting, her body damp with perspiration from the two rugged male bodies having possessed her with such fervor.

"Thank you," she whispered, as Ian wiped her belly with a handkerchief.

“No, sweetling,” Duncan said softly, settling beside her and caressing her hair. “Thank you. You’re the one who loved us unreservedly for all those years.” He kissed her forehead. “You were there, waiting for us both to come to our senses.”

Ian snuggled up to her on the other side. “That’s right,” he whispered. “Little swan, my sweet friend all that time. And I never knew you were the love of my life.” He rested his lips against her shoulder, cradling her body in his.

Leda murmured a sigh of complete happiness. “It’s just like you said to me all that time ago, Ian, God was trying to show us we were worthy of love.”

“The sweetest love,” Duncan said softly.

Leda pressed her cheek to his back and closed her eyes. She smiled to herself as she drifted off to sleep.

 THE END 

Sedonia Guillone

Sedonia Guillone lives on the water in Florida in winter and on the rocky coast of Maine in summers with a Renaissance man who paints, writes poetry and tells her she's the sweetest nymph he's ever met. When she's not writing erotic romance, she loves watching spaghetti westerns, cuddling, and eating chocolate.

Visit Sedonia on the Web at www.sedoniaguillone.com.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Taming Kate

by Sedonia Guillone

Available Now from Loose Id

Taming Kate

Kate looked down just as a pair of heavy work boots came to a halt in front of the swinging doors of the dressing room. Her gaze traveled upwards, meeting his. He was staring at her over the doors. Terror and anger at feeling so naked and vulnerable pulsed through her. She especially hated the way her nipples tightened against her brassiere. She hated the way she wanted him to come into the little booth with her.

She stared back, astonished as the anger drained from the darkening green hue of his eyes. His breath caught in his throat as his gaze roamed over her negligee-clad body. If his eyes had been hands, he would have been running his fingertips over her skin, reaching for every intimate spot.

"My God," he whispered. A million heartbeats seemed to pass as he gazed at her and she stared back, half entranced, half-terrified.

She pressed her back against the wall. "What are you going to do to me?" Her legs trembled and she struggled to keep her balance, unable to tell whether he was going to tan her hide or come in there and ...

The sound of her voice seemed to jar him out of his hypnosis. He grabbed hold of the doors and swung them open, his brawny physique filling the doorway. His unshaven jaw flexed with tension. His dark blond hair was tousled. "That was a pretty good bit of engineering there, Kate."

Her anger at feeling vulnerable took over, and she glared at him; damned if she would let him see her fear. Or her desire. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He waved his hand toward her scantily clothed body. "This lacy get-up. You figured by the time I came to confront you, you'd turn on the sexy act to control me, right? Flash the goods and I won't take you to task for the paint job on my truck?"

Kate jammed her fists on her hips, forgetting that her pink nipples were visible through the black lace of both bra and negligee. "I did not *engineer* anything. I was simply trying on something I wanted to buy. I have no interest in controlling you or anyone. I want to be left alone. I figured you would be halfway home by now."

Peter stared at her a moment before a look of understanding lit his chiseled features. He crossed his arms and leaned casually against the wall. Even in his relaxed stance, there was barely room to move. "I see." He leaned in closer, his breath a warm caress on her face. The tight quarters did nothing to lower the simmering in her loins that continued in spite of her tension. "You were fixing to get rid of me, weren't you? Testing me to see if I'd prove you right?"

Kate blinked, trying to push away the weakening effect he was having on her. She was probably in a heap of trouble with him, yet instead of worrying about that, she was getting

aroused. She had never met anyone who made her feel that way. Until now. “Of course I was. What did you think? Neither you nor my father will listen to me.”

Peter looked down and sighed. When he looked back up, he trapped her gaze with his. His face was so close, Kate could see the gold flecks in his irises.

“Well, this does change things a bit, Kate. If you're really that dead set against doing this.” He rubbed his chin with thumb and forefinger, a pensive look in his eyes. “Hmm.” He stopped and looked at her. “Are you going to tell him? Or am I?”

Kate sagged against the wall, narrowing her eyes at him. “Damn you.”

Suddenly she found herself caged close between his chest and the wall, his palms pressed to the wall on either side of her head. “No, Kate. You know what? Damn *you*. Your father cares about you, so much so that he's had to call on a horse whisperer because he's run out of options. As for me, I've got an eleven-year-old nephew who's developmentally disabled because his father abandoned him when he was five. I've got a ranch to run and a horse that's recovering from a trailer accident. And now I've got to get my truck to the body shop so it doesn't continue to look like the wall of a subway station. You think I'm on holiday here?”

He bent his face to hers, so close that their noses almost touched. The insight into his personal life worsened her guilt. She wished suddenly she could go back and handle the situation differently. She wished he would kiss her instead of reaming her a new asshole. She wondered if he felt that way too, pressed up close to her when she was wearing nothing but a bit of lace and silk.

She swallowed past a lump in her throat. “I think you're wasting your time. And of course I'll pay for the damages.”

“Damn right you're going to pay for the damages,” he shot back. “But it's not that easy, Kate. Your father begged me to work with you as much as he begged you to let me work with you.” He paused and heaved a deep sigh. When he looked at her again, his lids were heavier over his eyes, which had darkened and grown dusky. He shook his head. “Damn shame that I have to teach you a lesson now. I'd much rather be kissing you.”

Kate caught her breath, not only from surprise but also from the reality that he felt what sizzled between them. The small space had grown feverishly warm from their bodies, and Peter pressed his more snugly against hers. Her breasts crushed against his rock-hard chest, and she weakened further, sagging against the wall, fighting the urge to part her legs and let her lips fall open for a kiss.

A soft groan escaped Peter's throat and he squeezed his eyes shut. From the look of it, he was fighting for control. He dipped his head forward, his lips close to her ear. “I'm going to teach you not to destroy another person's property, Miss Rossi. After all, I didn't *do* anything to you to deserve that. This is for your own good.”

Kate's arousal dissipated and her lip trembled. “So ... so ... how are you going to --”

"I'm going to put you over my knee."

Her heart lurched. He couldn't be serious! "The hell you are," she spat, her remorse over his truck forgotten in her shock and fear-induced anger.

He stepped further into the room, filling the small space. His hard, muscular body pressed against hers. His masculine scent, primal and musky, filled her nostrils, weakening her. Before she knew what was happening, iron-strong hands gripped her and dragged her out of the dressing room.

"Let ... go ... of me, you bastard!" Kate twisted and struggled as the clothing racks and shelves passed her view. He was heading to the front of the store, to the counter where her stool sat behind the register.

Flailing her arms, her nails flexed, she clawed at his face, raking a trail down his cheek.

"Ow! Damn you, Kate!"

"Let me go! Let ... me ... go!"

"Not until you get what's coming to you."

"I'll sue you!" She writhed in vain. Peter's arms held her in a viselike grip.

"You're the one who damaged my truck."

"My father will, then."

"Your father'll thank me."

"Someone will see us from outside! You'll be in trouble then!"

He dropped onto the seat, bringing Kate with him. If they can see through a shade, maybe."

In spite of her thrashing, she was no match for him, and he maneuvered her until she was across his knees, the flimsy negligee hanging around her head.

One arm held her firmly in place. Then *whap!* A hand came down firmly on her left butt cheek, delivering a stinging slap.

"Ow!" Kate cried out and struggled, but Peter just held her more firmly.

He delivered a second slap.

The blood rushed to Kate's face. A pulsing sprang to life in the cleft between her thighs. *Damn it! It's not supposed to feel good!* She struggled less fiercely. Her hands hung like a rag doll's. Her breasts were crushed against Peter's muscular thighs. Suddenly the entire energy between them shifted, and she couldn't remember whether he was punishing her or pleasuring her.

The third slap brought a pleasant sting that shimmied through her, into her pussy and thighs. Kate felt her resistance slipping. Her head lolled against his leg.

He slapped her a fourth time, bringing a rush of sexual wetness through her slit. She moaned softly.

She waited for a fifth slap. She glanced up, seeing Peter's hand frozen in mid-air. The sound of his ragged breathing filled the air around them. He released her, causing her to roll off his lap to a heap on the floor.

The negligee had come untied in their struggle and lay open. Kate braced her hands on the floor, staring up at Peter. Her nipples were erect in her black lacy bra. She, too, breathed raggedly, watching him for what he would do next.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Taming Kate

Taming Kate is an emotionally charged tale that combines heat, sensuality, intimacy and love in one spicy package. This modern day twist of *The Taming of The Shrew* will taunt, tease, and please all of your senses.

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Sedonia Guillone has created a vivid and captivating novel in *Taming Kate*. From the first emotion packed prologue to the finale, I held tight with anticipation. I will definitely look for more of Guillone's work

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