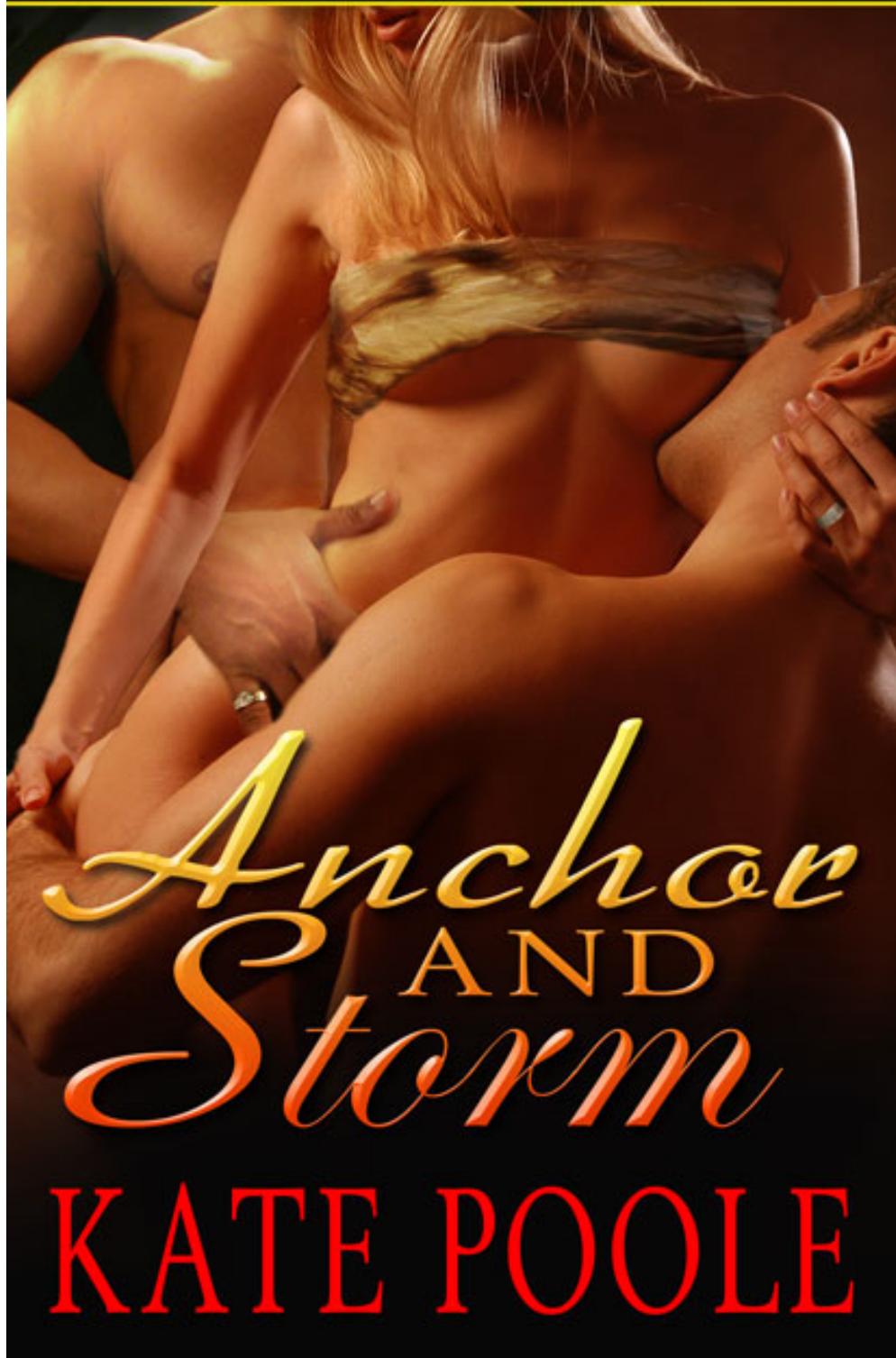


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



*Anchor*  
AND  
*Storm*

KATE POOLE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Anchor and Storm

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# *ANCHOR AND STORM*

**Kate Poole**

## *Dedication*

To my editor, Helen Woodall, for taking a chance on me. To “The Naughty Little French Tarts” – Kathy, Kate, Chris, Janet and Lisa – for encouraging me and making me finally finish a manuscript. To Bonnie, my first fan. And last, but certainly not least, to Mom and Dad, who have always been there for me.

## **Chapter One**

*St. Andrews, Scotland, 1750*

"So...what am I to do with you now, Emily?"

Emily Sinclair found herself in the position she feared most—alone with her employer. Although he was not exceedingly tall, almost everyone Emily knew was taller than she and it seemed as if he towered over her. He was advancing toward her, backing her into a corner, and she knew that soon she would be trapped.

"Sir," she said, licking lips that had gone dry with fear. "I-I was just about to take the children their tea. Perhaps we could discuss this later, when Lady Stockdale can join us." Emily knew what he wanted to discuss. His wife had badgered him until he agreed to send their children off to boarding schools. She had heard them arguing even from the upstairs room where she slept. Now they would have no further need for a governess.

She dreaded the thought, but from the leer on Lord Stockdale's face it seemed as though he had another position in mind for her. Emily's blood ran cold in her veins when the double entendre of the word "position" occurred to her.

By now he had her pinned in the corner, his foul breath washed over her and she tried to hold her own breath so she wouldn't have to smell it. She turned her head away slightly but he pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to face him.

"My wife does not need to be concerned about this. 'Twill be an arrangement just between the two of us."

Emily knew it was futile, but she had to try. "Perhaps a family of your acquaintance, sir, might require the services of a governess. If you could give me a reference—"

His snorting laugh cut her off but the humor never reached his eyes. They remained cold and black as a moonless night. "Come now, girl, you're not that stupid. You know what I'm talking about. I've waited a long time for this. If you refuse, not only will I not give you a reference, I will sully your name from one end of the Lowlands to the other. And we both know *ye canna go back to yer beloved Highlands, now can ye?*" he added, deliberately mocking the brogue she used only in unguarded moments.

His fingers left her chin and tangled in her hair as he leaned in closer. "Sir, please, I beg ye not to do this—"

"Raymond." The voice that came from behind Lord Stockdale's back was deep and firm, the message clear without anything more being said.

Her captor froze then jumped back and turned toward the man who had spoken his name. "Why, Uncle Edgar, Mistress Sinclair and I were just discussing her future plans. I was just proposing—"

"I've been standing here long enough to hear exactly what you were proposing. Mistress Sinclair, you may leave."

Emily squeezed past Lord Stockdale, her face burning with embarrassment even though she knew she had done nothing shameful. It was only that she hated having Lord Callander witness that scene. She didn't think he would blame her but he was an earl after all and blood was thicker than water. But she felt they had become friends during his stay at his nephew's home and she hated the thought that he might think ill of her. His eyes—normally a soft, warm brown—had burned black with anger. She prayed that anger was not directed at her as well as his nephew.

She ran to the garden—her place of refuge, her place of peace—and began to pace. What was she going to do? She planned ways to run away but stopped when she realized she had nowhere to go and no one to run to. It was several more months before another hiring fair would be held in Stirling and although she had a very small amount of money saved up, it was not enough to last her until then. Besides, Lord Stockdale could easily catch up to her and bring her back...or worse.

Gradually the *tap, tap, tap* of Lord Callander's cane intruded on her thoughts. Until then it had not occurred to her to wonder how he had come up behind Lord Stockdale without either of them hearing him. She guessed that her employer had been too intent on her and she too intent on her fear.

She took a deep breath and turned to face him. The bright sun highlighted the smattering of gray at his temples, in stark contrast to the midnight black waves of his hair. He was so handsome and looked so distinguished, it made Emily's heart ache. She yearned to run her fingers through those thick waves. *What must he think of me now?* "Milord, I promise ye I did naught to encourage Lord Stockdale. I would ne'er do such a thing, were he married or not. I—"

"Emily, Emily," he said, coming closer to her. "Don't fret, my dear. I know you did not encourage Raymond's advances." He leaned his cane against his leg and took both her hands in his. "*Tsk, tsk*, another skirt mussed."

"Pardon, sir?"

"You have a way of wrinkling your skirt in your fists when you are upset or angry."

Emily glanced down and noted he was right. Two creased areas showed exactly where her hands had been bunching the material. "I never noticed that before. When did you?"

He smiled. "I've been here long enough to see you do it several times, usually when Raymond is around. Has he treated you that way before?"

Emily shook her head. "No, but he has looked at me the way a cat eyes a bird on a low branch."

Lord Callander laughed but before he could respond, his nephew's footman approached them. "Excuse me, milord."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Weston says your trunks are packed and the coach should be ready to leave in half an hour, sir."

"Thank you, Robert."

As she watched the footman walk away, Emily felt as if her heart had dropped into her stomach. "Ye're leaving?" she blurted, without giving Lord Callander the proper respect.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Sit down, Emily."

She wondered if she had gone pale and that was what prompted his invitation to sit. Still stunned by the news of his sudden departure, she said, "Of course, ye must be anxious to get back to yer estate and yer tenants."

"Well, I won't be going home directly. I am planning to travel a bit before I return. It may be my last chance to do so."

"Oh don't say that, milord," she said, briefly laying her hand gently on his. But they both knew it was true. How much longer would he be able to get around well enough to travel? "Where will you go?"

"Edinburgh, of course, London and France—Paris, Rouen perhaps."

"I shall miss you, milord."

"You don't have to."

"Pardon?"

"From what I saw and heard just now, it is clear you cannot stay here," he said. "Come with me, Emily."

Emily laughed. "Oh I couldn't do that," she said. "I haven't enough money to get myself to Edinburgh, much less Paris."

"I could pay your way. You could come as my companion."

She jumped up from the bench and faced him. "You offer me the same position your nephew did? Truly, I had thought better of you, Lord Callander." Her anger loosened her tongue, again speaking to him as if she were his equal in status. "If I cannot find a position as a governess, I can be a housekeeper, or even a dairymaid—"

"No, no," he said, waving his hand back and forth. "I did not mean to imply that you should become my mistress. I simply enjoy your company. I have never had such interesting conversations with a woman before. In my experience, they only seem to want to talk about the latest fashions and the juicy gossip from court."

She stared down at him and shook her head. "Lord Callander, I—"

"Please, Emily. Hear me out." He took her hands and brought her back to sit beside him. "I have grown quite fond of you. I don't want to lose you. I had hoped that, perhaps, you felt some affection for me as well."

She looked down at their hands clasped in her lap. "I do," she said softly.

"Then know that there are no other conditions to my offer." He paused then reached over and took her hand. "Besides, I must tell you this. It has been a long time since I have been with a woman...in that way. My infirmity sometimes makes it, uh, difficult for me to perform as a man should."

Emily felt her cheeks flush. "You've really no need to tell me such things, milord."

"But I do. I want you to feel safe with me. I want you to know that when I say you will be my companion, I mean just that."

"Still, people will suspect."

"Let them. What do we care? We shall know the truth."

She was silent for some time, thinking. What he was offering her was better than she could ever hope to have on her own. She had no prospects of a position and little of ever acquiring a husband or having children. She was consigned to a life of servitude. So why should it not be with a man she cared about, even if that man could never marry her? He was much more pleasant to be around than his nephew and he certainly smelled better. She loved the subtle hint of sandalwood oil she always smelled on him. Only an earl could afford such a rare and costly scent.

And he was one of the most handsome men she had ever met, even though he was perhaps twice as old as she. If she hadn't seen his canes or his wheeled chair, she would never have suspected there was anything wrong with his health. His mind was clear and sharp. He made her think and question things, which she had not done since she was tutored.

So if he did decide to impose "other conditions" upon his offer, she knew she would not be averse to them. After all, mistresses oftentimes lived better than wives. And it would be no chore to be mistress to this man.

"I should like to go with you," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're not letting her go with him, are you, Raymond?"

Her husband sighed. "What am I to do, Caroline? She is not indentured to me and we have no position for her now that you have decided the children must be sent away to school. Why I let you talk me into that I'll never know."

"It's the best thing for them. How will they ever make their mark in society if they do not receive a proper education?"

"A proper education! Emily can give them a proper education."

"Yes, of course. Your precious Emily can do anything, can't she?"

He turned on her. "What are you implying, Caroline?"



"You care more about her than your own children." And Caroline would be damned if she was the only one in her circle whose children were educated at home. "Otherwise, why would you be so resistant to sending them away?"

"You know why," he shouted, then quickly lowered his voice, no doubt in fear that the servants, or worse yet his uncle, should hear. "You know we cannot afford it."

"Did you ask him for the money?"

"Yes, he agreed to advance me some against my inheritance, but we must be frugal with it. I don't think we'll get much more out of him anytime soon."

"We'll get nothing more out of him if she gives him a son."

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "My uncle would sooner fly to the moon than fuck a commoner. And besides, even if he did lower himself, a bastard cannot inherit. I am the heir and shall remain the only heir. Raymond Cavendish, Earl of Callander, has a much nicer ring to it than Viscount Stockdale, don't you think?"

"What if he decides to marry her?"

He shook his head. "Don't worry. He won't. He's come this far in his life without the slightest inclination to marry, why should he do so now? I often wonder if he isn't more inclined to buggery."

"If that is the case, then why is he taking her with him?" she persisted.

"I don't know, Caroline. And I do not want to discuss this any further. You've gotten your wish, now leave it be."

Afraid that she had pushed him too far, she said, "You're right, my love. I'm sorry." The words tasted bitter on her tongue. The love between them had faded long ago, if it had ever been there in the first place. "Besides, you've seen how his health has declined since the last time we saw him." She moved close to him and dropped her hand to his waist. In spite of how she now loathed touching him, she unbuttoned the flap of his breeches and slipped her hand inside. "Surely we won't have too long to wait, don't you think?"

She knew it didn't matter to her husband whose hands were inside his pants. And from the moans and gasps he gave as she worked his hardened flesh, she also knew that, at the moment, he was incapable of thought...and that was just how she wanted him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edgar Armstrong, the Earl of Callander, was a happy man. It was such an unusual state in which to find himself that it took some time for him to recognize the feeling. As a younger, healthy man, he took his pleasure with women as he could find it and they certainly were not the type of women he would want as his countess. He had thought he had all the time in the world to find a wife, produce an heir and enjoy his dotage. Then he began to notice the weakness in his legs and his world changed. Of course he tried to deny it at first, but finally the day came when he had to resort to using canes for

support. He started searching in earnest for a wife but soon gave up. Each woman he had considered looked at him in one of two ways—either with pity in her eyes, which he could not abide, or with a gleam in her eyes, which told him she was mentally calculating how long she would have to tolerate him before he died and left her a wealthy widow. He had resigned himself to a lonely life, plagued by increasing debility and ending in a lonely death, with no son to carry on his line.

The thought of his sniveling, spendthrift nephew inheriting the title made him cringe but he saw no other alternative. He would keep his promise to Emily and make no demands upon her. If he was to be truthful with himself he knew the reason was not that he had no desire for her, quite the contrary. He simply did not want her to be disappointed by his prowess—or lack thereof—or worse yet, repulsed by his weakening body. He believed she saw past his canes to the man he still was in his mind and in his heart and he had no wish to make her think otherwise. Still, he could not help but wonder...could he...would she?

For her part, Emily seemed to want nothing more than to be with him, but he needed to know that for sure. The proof he sought came as they started their journey south.

In Edinburgh, he bought her an entirely new wardrobe. “Why are you doing this, milord? I have no place to wear such finery.”

“Oh yes, you do. If you are to accompany me to dinners and balls and concerts and parties, you do.”

“But I won’t be going with you,” she protested.

“Yes, you will,” he said, giving her a sly smile.

And after some persuasion, she did. He was pleased to see that his impression of her had not been wrong. She was born to move in the upper echelons of society. She may have been a Highland lass, but she was quite well-educated and could hold her own on almost any topic. She carried herself with more poise and grace than many of the noble ladies whose parties they attended.

At just such a dinner party in the home of Lady Stair, Emily was surrounded by merchants, wealthy squires and every rank of nobility. It was the perfect place for her to snare a “protector”, one more able-bodied than himself, or even a husband, but she did not seem at all interested. She would not allow herself to be separated from his side, even though quite a few of the men tried.

He always arranged for her to stay in the room next to his and most of them had connecting doors. If that raised the eyebrows of their hosts and hostesses in each of the castles or estates where they lodged, it seemed to him that Emily chose to ignore it.

After each dinner party, concert or soirée, they would go to their respective chambers and get ready for bed. As soon as he was settled into bed by Weston, his manservant, she would come into his room and they would laugh together at the antics of the gentry or discuss the merits of Mr. Handel’s latest composition. Then he would kiss her softly on the cheek and she would retire to her own room.

And he would lie awake thinking of her so close to him, yet so far removed and longing for her warm, soft little body next to him until he finally fell asleep from exhaustion.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were almost back to the home of Lord and Lady Wilcox when their hostess said, "I hope you enjoyed the music tonight, Mistress Sinclair."

"Oh I did. Maestro Handel's music is wonderful and I had never been to Covent Garden before." Emily was amazed at how easily she had been accepted into London society. She knew it was only out of courtesy to Lord Callander, and she wondered what was being said behind her back, but she didn't care. She had never been so happy in her life.

True to his word, Lord Callander had made no demands upon her. Emily didn't know whether to be grateful for that or disappointed. She had been fond of him before but now she realized she was falling in love with him. Yet he still treated her as the companion he had proposed from the beginning. If that was what he wanted, that is what she would be. It was enough just to be around him, to see him and talk with him every day.

Lady Wilcox was speaking again. "And for Mr. Handel to compose such a tribute to the Duke was truly superb, don't you think?"

Puzzled, Emily replied, "I beg your pardon, milady?"

"He has dedicated *Judas Maccabaeus* to the Duke of Cumberland. Especially the chorus, 'See, the Conqu'ring Hero Comes'. He likens Cumberland's defeat of those rebellious Jacobites to Judas' victory over the Syrians."

Emily felt the blood drain from her face and an ache settled in her stomach. Lord Callander took her hand and squeezed it.

The carriage had barely rolled to a stop at the Wilcoxes' townhome when Emily said, "Please excuse me," and jumped down.

Behind her, she heard Lady Wilcox say, "Oh my, did I say something wrong?" and Lord Callander's reply, "Emily is a Highland Scot." Any further conversation was lost to her as she ran into the foyer, past the bewildered footman at the door and up the stairs to her bedroom.

Once there, she leaned against the window frame and stared out into the foggy London night. In her mind, however, she was seeing men slaughtered on a soggy cold moor and hearing the screams of women and children as their houses went up in flames, her own among them.

Suddenly, Lord Callander was beside her, taking both her hands in his. "Another gown ruined," he said softly. She looked down to where she had been clasping her skirt in her clenched fists, then turned to face him.

He reached up and gently wiped a tear off her cheek. Until that moment, she hadn't even been aware she was crying. "I'm so sorry, Emily. Lady Wilcox didn't know your background."

Emily shook her head. "No, of course she didn't. I am not upset over her comment. I am just more than a wee bit disappointed in Mr. Handel. How could he do such a thing, honoring *The Butcher* that way?"

"Yes, well the King is a patron to be cosseted, and praising his son is sure to keep one in his good graces."

Edgar now regretted taking Emily to the concert. Although he had not been able to fight in the Rising, he had heard what Cumberland did to the supporters of the Young Pretender after the Battle of Culloden. It was not an honorable victory to warrant such a brilliant piece of music.

If not for the Jacobite defeat, Emily's circumstances would have been much different. She would have been a lady in her own right and likely married to some Highland chieftain. For that reason he was not sorry the English had won the day. But he knew how the memories of that horrible war affected her.

Edgar leaned his cane against the wall and moved closer to her. The fresh scent of honeysuckle wafted from her hair and he inhaled deeply. "You smell so sweet."

"Thank you. You smell like cheroots and whisky."

They laughed together and it seemed to ease the discomfiture between them. When she made no move to pull away from him, he felt he was safe in taking the next step. He hooked his finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. Then he kissed her.

His kiss was soft and tender and brief. As he drew back and looked down at her, she stared up at him with a somewhat startled and dazed expression. Then she stood on tiptoes and her arms came around his neck. He kissed her forehead, her cheek and finally found her mouth again. This time his kiss was deeper and more urgent. His tongue probed between her parted lips, hungry and demanding. The very taste of her and her response to him was enough to awaken desires he had thought were long dead. He tangled his hands in her hair and pulled her against his body. Her breasts rubbed his chest and he felt her nipples harden. When he finally broke the kiss, her ragged breathing matched his own.

"Emily," he said, his breath warm against her temple, "oh Emily, I have wanted to do that for so long."

She bowed her head against his chest. "God forgive me, but I have wanted you to do it, milord."

He chuckled softly. "I think you could call me by my given name, considering the situation." She gave a quick laugh but still did not look at him. "Say my name, Emily."

"Edgar," she breathed and his lips came down on hers again.

Suddenly, he pulled back and looked into her eyes. He had made her a promise and now he found himself behaving no better than his nephew had. It made no difference that she had not seemed to mind his advances. He was taking advantage of her.

"I'm sorry, my dear. Please forgive me." He released his hold on her and turned away, closing his eyes against her puzzled expression. "I have kept you from your bed long enough. Good night, Emily."

With that, he turned and left her room.

## Chapter Two

He was out all the next day and for that she was grateful. The little bit of dinner she forced herself to eat sat in her stomach like a rock. Try as she might, she could not get warm. Her happy days with him were over and she had no idea what she had done to make him reject her so. She expected that the next time she saw him would be the last. The hours crawled by as she sat huddled in a chair, fighting back her tears.

As was her habit, she had left the adjoining door to his room open. She heard him come in and the conversation between him and Weston, his valet. Then she heard Weston leave. She didn't know what to do—should she go to him or wait for his summons?

A shadow fell across the floor of her room and she looked up to see him standing in the doorway. "Emily," he said, "may I come in?"

"Certainly, milord."

He walked over and sat on the foot of the bed, facing her, and hooked his cane around the bedpost. "I'm sorry, my dear, but there is something I must say to you."

"Aye," she whispered, dreading his next words.

"I thought this arrangement would work out, Emily, but I was wrong. I no longer want you as my companion."

She bowed her head and nodded, tears stinging her eyes. "I understand, milord, and for whatever I've done, I ask your forgiveness. If you could but help me get back to Edinburgh, I can—"

"You wish to leave me?"

"What?" She looked up at him. "No, milord, I have no wish to leave you. I-I thought you wanted me to leave."

"Why on earth would you think that?"

"Because you just said you no longer wanted me here."

"I said I no longer wanted you as a companion and I don't. I want you for my wife."

She stared at him for a moment, unsure that she had heard him correctly. His tender smile, however, confirmed that her ears had not deceived her. Now her hurt turned to anger. "Please don't insult me, milord." She jumped up from her chair and turned away from him.

"How have I insulted you?"

"Ye know ye can never marry me," she said, intentionally letting her proper English slip back into her native brogue. "Not only am I a commoner now, but the daughter of a

slain Jacobite. How would that set wi' yer fancy lords and ladies and yer friends here at Wee Geordie's court?"

"Stop it, Emily. You know you've been accepted everywhere I've presented you over the past few weeks."

"Aye," she said, pacing the room, "they can accept me as yer mistress, which they surely believe me to be, but they'll ne'er accept me as yer wife."

"Well, even if they don't, what does it matter? We will never see these people again."

"Then why have we come on this trip?"

"I did it for you. I wanted you to see York and London. I want to show you Paris and Chartres and any other city that takes our fancy. And, quite frankly, I wanted to show you off. I have waited a long time to ask someone to marry me, Emily. I had to find the right person."

With those words, all the fire seemed to burn out of her, leaving her knees weak. She sat back down in the chair and shook her head. "That's all well and good for the people we have visited or will visit, but what about when we get back to your home? What about all your friends there? And what will Lord Stockdale say?"

"First of all, Raymond has no say over anything that I do." She was surprised by the vehemence of his words. Then his tone softened. "As to my friends, well, I have very few. My illness has constrained my life in many ways and socializing is but one of them. I hardly ever leave my home these days. I only visited Raymond out of a sense of duty. In truth, Emily, I was preparing myself for death. Then, when I met you, I thought perhaps I had found a reason to go on living. For the first time in many years I actually enjoy being alive. I don't know how much time is left to me, Emily, but however long or short I want to spend it with you."

"You don't need to marry me to do that."

"No, but..." He paused and took a deep breath. "God willing, I was hoping that, perhaps, we might have a child, someday soon. If I am able, that is. And if we are blessed in that way, I don't want there to be any question of its legitimacy."

"Then why did you put me aside last night?"

"I realized I was behaving just as Raymond had toward you. I didn't want to break my promise."

She looked at him, incredulous. "Edgar, do ye no' ken the difference? I want you. I don't and never would want him."

"Well, I'm certainly relieved to hear that."

A thought occurred to her then. "But I thought you said, um, that you couldn't," she looked down, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks, "you know...."

He cleared his throat and said, "Yes, well, I don't know for sure, but I was thinking that, with your help, I might be able to. We'll never know until we try, I suppose." He

reached across the space between them and lifted her chin with his forefinger. "I love you, Emily. Will you marry me, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health?"

She rose and stepped into his arms. "Yes," she said, laying her cheek against the top of his head. "Oh Edgar, yes. *Tha gaol agam ort*. I love you."

She helped him back to his bed and that night she did not return to her room.

He held her tightly in his arms and finished the kiss he had begun the night before. Then he moved to the side, nipping lightly at her earlobes. Gooseflesh rose on that side of her body and she suppressed the urge to giggle. It tickled, but it felt wonderful at the same time. But it was nothing compared to the feeling when he kissed down her neck to the top of her nightdress. Slowly, hesitantly, he began to undo the tiny buttons, kissing lower and lower as more of her flesh was exposed. She moaned and tangled her fingers in his hair. She pressed his head closer, rather than trying to pull it away, and he seemed to take that as encouragement. He folded back the soft cotton of her gown, uncovering her breast.

"Emily," he breathed.

"Oh," she cried.

"Shall I stop?"

"No, please don't stop."

He ran his hand lightly around and underneath her breast. She trembled and her nipples hardened into stiff peaks. He tenderly licked and sucked first one, then the other until she was writhing and gasping under him. As he continued to nuzzle her breasts, he slipped his hand beneath the hem of her nightgown and gently stroked up her leg to the top of her thigh.

She gasped and raised herself up on one arm. "Edgar, what are you doing?"

"I hope that I am giving you pleasure, my dear. On the chance that I am unable to pleasure you in the conventional manner of lovemaking, I want you to know there are other ways I can make you come. Do you know what I mean by that?"

"Aye." She gave a mischievous grin. "I had twin brothers. I used to eavesdrop on their conversations sometimes."

He seemed to be greatly relieved. "Well, I am glad of that. I have never had to explain it before and I'm not sure I would be able."

Emily smiled. "Well, whether ye can explain it or no', ye surely ken how to demonstrate it."

Edgar laughed and then grew serious. He slid his hand back under her gown. "Then let me demonstrate," he whispered against her lips. As he kissed her, he moved his hand closer to her sex. "I promise you only pleasure, my sweet, only pleasure." He lightly stroked the outer petals, then probed deeper into the moist opening. While his thumb caressed her hardened nub, he slipped his finger farther inside her canal until he felt her maiden barrier. She cried out, in pain or pleasure he didn't know. He pulled out



slightly and began to move his finger back and forth. She groaned and buried her face in the pillow, but took up the rhythm, digging her heels into the bed and lifting her hips, pressing herself hard against his hand. Now the moisture poured out of her.

"Yes, Emily, that's the way. Give yourself up to the feelings." He moved his finger back inside her, pressing the heel of his hand against her hardened clitoris. Then he added another finger and another, stretching her passage wider and wider.

"Ah," she exclaimed and her whole body became rigid. "Ah, ah, ah. Oh Edgar, stop, please, stop."

He stilled the movement of his fingers but left his hand there, feeling her shudders slowly ebb and die away. It was a long time before her breathing slowed. When he finally removed his hand, she gasped.

"Edgar, what happened? What did you do to me?"

"*La petite mort*, as the French call it. The little death."

"Very appropriate," she said with a touch of amusement in her voice, "I thought I was going to die."

"But did you like it?"

She smiled. "Aye, I liked it verra much."

He loved hearing her slip back into her native brogue. He laid back and pulled her into his arms. "I'm glad, my dear."

They lay quietly for a few moments, then Emily said, "My goodness, I'm so sleepy."

He chuckled. "Yes, it can have that effect. Go to sleep then."

She rose up slightly and looked at him. "But what about you? You've given me pleasure but taken none for yourself. How can I pleasure you, Edgar? Show me. Teach me."

"We have time for that, my love. Tonight was yours."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the cathedral at Rouen, he sat in a pew and watched her as she roamed around the magnificent interior. The look of ecstasy on her face alone was worth the trip, even though the damp early spring weather of the continent was wearing on him.

She scampered up to him and knelt at his feet. "Oh Edgar, it's so beautiful. Thank you so much for bringing me here."

"It was my pleasure, my dear." He smiled as he stroked her hair.

"But I think we should go back to our rooms now. It has been a long day."

He chuckled and shook his head. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"How do you know when I'm feeling tired or unwell?"

Now it was her turn to smile. "Because I love you, of course."

They had an early dinner and retired to bed. As she snuggled in his arms, he began to caress her breasts in the manner he knew she enjoyed.

She looked up at him. "Edgar, you don't have to do that tonight."

"Oh but I want to," he said and bent his head to kiss her. "I pray God that the day I am too tired to make love to you is a long way off."

He nipped her bottom lip gently with his teeth and probed her mouth with his tongue. Her soft moan of pleasure spurred him on, for that night he had a surprise for her.

He eased her nightdress up and helped her remove it. Emily bit her lip and watched for his reaction at seeing her body fully exposed for the first time. She thought herself a bit too plump and was afraid he wouldn't like what he saw.

"Oh Emily, you are so lovely."

She breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived. Edgar began to kiss his way down her body to her belly—light, feathery kisses that tickled and excited, deep, biting kisses that sent waves of pleasure to her very core. She wanted to stop him...she wanted him to never stop.

"Hmmm," he murmured against her and continued lower. *I suppose that means he likes what he sees*, she thought and gave herself up to the incredible sensations. Gooseflesh rose on her arms and legs as he stroked her. By the time he reached the softly curling hair on her mons, she was squirming and bucking beneath him. He slid farther down the bed and positioned himself between her legs.

She heard him inhale deeply and worried about how she smelled. But soon she was incapable of thought as he continued to nuzzle her curls.

When she felt his tongue touch her sex, she jumped and tried to pull away, but he held her firmly by her hips. "Edgar, what are you doing?"

"Teaching you another way that a man can pleasure a woman."

"Oh my," she sighed, bunching the sheet beneath her with her fists. *Do men really like to do that to a woman?* She would never have thought so.

"Mmmm," he purred, "you taste so sweet. And the petals of your sex are like the roses in my garden at home—a deep, deep pink sparkling with the dew of your arousal."

"Edgar, ye're embarrassin' me now."

He looked up at her, "the dew of her arousal", as he called it, shining on his lips in the lamplight. "Don't be. Don't ever be embarrassed with me, Emily. Between two people in love, there is nothing to be ashamed of, nothing forbidden."

She relaxed under the hypnotic tone of his deep voice. He licked all around her outer lips and Emily felt the moisture flowing out of her, more than when he had used his fingers. Then he found her sensitive nub and stroked it with his tongue. She flung her arms above her head and grabbed the headboard of the bed, as a drowning man

would grab onto a floating spar. He sucked on her tender bud and she buried her head in the pillow, her groans turning to staccato cries as her crisis overtook her.

He pulled himself up to lie on top of her, his weight braced on his forearms. She felt his flesh, blunt and hard, nudging at her portal, but he didn't try to enter her. Vaguely, she wondered why but, still recovering from her climax, she was too relaxed to put her question into words.

Edgar stroked the wet hair at her temples and licked the moisture from her brow.

"Did you like doing that to me?"

"Indeed, I did." He kissed her then and waited to see her reaction.

She licked her lips and asked, "Is that how I taste?"

"You taste delicious, my love."

She smiled at him and pushed him gently back against the pillows. "Now it is your turn," she said. She pulled his nightshirt off over his head.

For a moment, she sat back on her heels and admired the beauty of his upper body. Soft, dark curly hairs covered his upper chest, narrowing to a dark line down his flat, firm belly. She was used to seeing men go bare-chested, so many of the Highland men were big and broad and muscular. Although thinner than her brawny countrymen, Edgar was sinewy, his muscles well-defined and strong. And all those beautiful muscles tensed as she licked and sucked his nipples, just as he had done so many times to her.

He combed her hair with his fingers. "Your curls feel soft as silk against my skin."

Emily gave a contented sigh as she moved lower and lower, teasing the sensitive flesh of his belly with her lips and tongue. His cock, which had begun to soften, now rose up, throbbing and yearning. She touched it gently and was fascinated to see it twitch in response.

Edgar expected her to stop when she reached that point, but instead, she continued. She laid her head on his belly, stroking his flesh with her cheek.

Suddenly she stopped and he saw her looking at his legs. Edgar knew this time would come and he had dreaded it. He had not been naked in front of her yet, so she had not seen his legs. How would she react? Revulsion or pity? There were times when he thought pity was worse.

"So this is why you wear long pants instead of breeches."

He nodded, unable to find his voice.

She slid lower in the bed and began to caress him from the top of his feet to his thighs. "Can you feel me touching your legs?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"No, not at all, but you don't have to do that."

"I want to," she said, softly massaging his wasted muscles. Her lips followed her hands as she kissed the thin limbs. Edgar was close to weeping. Instead, he gave a startled cry as he felt her tongue sliding over his cock. Just as she had done earlier, he reached up and grasped the top of the bed, struggling to contain his release.

"Emily, oh my darling Emily," he cried, as she took him fully into her mouth and began to suck his rigid shaft. He hadn't planned to ask her to do that to him, for fear she would be repulsed even by the suggestion. Yet here she was, pleasuring him in a way he had only dreamed she would.

"You're so smooth," she said, as she licked the rounded head of his cock and probed the tiny opening gently with her tongue.

Where she had warmed his flesh with her mouth, she now cooled it with her breath as she spoke and that was enough to send him over the edge. "I can't hold back! Move away, my love, quickly!"

She drew back but replaced her mouth with her hand, instinctively finding the rhythm he needed to reach his climax. He arched upward, forcing his cock against her hand, and let his release envelop him. "Oh dear God," he cried as his hot semen shot forth, spraying the dark hair of his groin and trickling through her fingers.

As his breathing slowed, he looked down to where she still lay by his hip and saw that she was staring at the creamy fluid in her palm. "Sorry, my love. Rather messy, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "I was just thinking what a shame it is to waste it. If I am to give you a son, we must put it in the right place from now on."

He smiled and reached out to caress her hair. "What a superb idea. But I'm afraid it will have to wait until another night. You have quite worn me out."

"Yes," she replied, "I am told that it has that effect."

\* \* \* \* \*

They were married in the Val-de-Grace in Paris.

"Perhaps it will bring us luck," Edgar said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The mother of Louis XIV had the church built to thank God for giving her a son, after twenty-three years of a childless marriage. Maybe we won't have to wait so long." What he didn't say, and what he knew they were both thinking, was that they would be very lucky even to have half that time together.

It was only then that Edgar realized what he had truly done. He had made her a countess, which meant she would be set for life—no worries about money or a home or King George's soldiers terrorizing her. But he would also leave her a wealthy widow, as so many of the other women he had met longed to be. That meant she would be easy prey to all manner of men, not the least of whom was his nephew. If she didn't give him

a son Raymond would inherit everything and he could do with Emily as he wanted – there was no guarantee he would let her live in the dower house.

Edgar resolved to find her a protector...and he knew just the man for the job.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edgar waited until their wedding night to try to take her virginity.

They returned to their rooms after a late evening dinner. Weston met his master at the door and took his coat. Emily followed Edgar into the room – she was his wife now and no longer needed to hide the fact that they spent their nights together.

“Lord Callander won’t be needin’ yer services tonight, Weston. Thank you.”

The manservant stuck his nose up in the air and turned to Edgar, for confirmation Emily supposed. “Yes, Weston, that will be all for tonight. My wife can assist me.”

For a moment, Weston gaped at them. Then he said, “Very well, my lord.”

After he was gone, Emily said, “I dinna think he cares for me overmuch.”

“Bah,” Edgar replied, “he’ll come around. He just isn’t used to me having a woman. As I told you, it has been awhile.” Edgar sat down on the side of the bed took Emily’s hand, bringing her to stand between his legs. He reached up and caressed her neck, coaxing her face down close to his. “Besides, it doesn’t matter. I care for you very, very much.”

Emily smiled and placed her forehead against his. “And I care for you very, very much. But there is one problem.”

Edgar drew back. *Oh God, no*, he thought. *Have I made a mistake? Is she going to be like all the rest of them – now that she has my name and wealth, will she reject me as a man?*

But before he could question her, Emily continued, “We both have too many clothes on.”

Edgar wondered if she could hear the relief in his laughter. “Well, fortunately,” he said, “that is a problem easily remedied.” He slipped the sleeves of her gown off her shoulders and kissed the swell of her breasts above her corset. “Dear God, Emily, your skin is like silk.” Her only answer was a deep sigh. His cock began to swell and ache for her. “Turn around.”

She did as he commanded. He pulled impatiently at the laces of her gown and slid her bodice the rest of the way off. He almost ripped the strings on her corset to get to the smooth flesh underneath. With that removed he encountered her chemise. And he hadn’t even gotten to her lower body yet. He growled and said, “You most definitely have too many clothes on. I had forgotten that women wear so many layers.” With that he tore the thin cotton shift in two.

Emily gasped. “Edgar, my chemise.”

“I’ll buy you a hundred more, a thousand more, for I cannot promise I won’t be ripping more of them off you in the future.”

Her laugh was cut short when he reached around to caress her breasts. Her nipples were already hard as tiny stones, the areolas pebbled. Edgar rested his head against her back and reached down to adjust his cock, which now pressed tightly against the buttons of his trousers. Then he untied her overskirt and hoops, tossing them as far across the room as he could in his eagerness to get her naked.

"God in heaven, woman, a man could come in his pants before he even gets to your skin!"

Emily giggled. She tore her shift the rest of the way down and let it fall to the floor. She stood with her back still toward him, clad only in her stockings and garters. "Lord," Edgar said softly, "what a lovely sight." He brought her closer to him and caressed her buttocks.

Emily felt the slight roughness of his beard as he rubbed his cheeks against her. In the next moment, he slid his hand between her legs and his fingers probed her swollen, moist womanhood. The sensation of him caressing her from front and behind was so overwhelming, Emily thought her legs would give out. He must have sensed this for he wrapped his other arm around her waist. He continued probing and stroking her until he brought her to a shattering climax and she did drop to her knees. She rested her head against his legs, eyes closed, trying to catch her breath.

"Are you all right, Emily?" Edgar asked. She heard the smile in his voice.

"No, ye've killed me again with pleasure. *La petite mort*, aye?"

He laughed out loud then. "Indeed, yes, the little death."

She looked up at him. "Dinna laugh. Ye're next."

"Promise?"

She turned to face him, still kneeling between his legs. "Och, aye, that's a promise." She stood and started to remove her stockings, but Edgar said, "No. Leave them on. You look ravishing." As she unbuttoned his shirt, she kissed him. His high forehead, his soft brown eyes, his strong nose, his sculpted lips, his square chin, no part of his beloved face was neglected as she worked her way down to his darkly furred chest. She pulled his shirt out of his trousers and helped him off with it. Then she gently pushed him back so that he lay on the bed with his legs over the side.

She rubbed her cheek against his erection through the material of his pants, then put her mouth there and blew softly through the fabric.

Above her, Edgar groaned. "Emily, you are driving me out of my mind."

Her only answer was to slowly unbutton his trousers. She nuzzled her nose deep into the thick thatch of hair around his erection. She licked off the drop of clear moisture on the tip of his shaft and took him into her mouth. As more and more of his flesh was exposed, she moved her mouth down until he felt his cock touch the back of her throat. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so hard. "Oh God, now, Emily, now."

He took her arms and urged her up onto the bed. "Straddle me."

She climbed over him and positioned her legs on each side of his hips. He took hold of his hardened flesh and with it stroked her cleft.

The honey poured from her, she was ready for him.

"Lower yourself onto me, love."

She did as he directed and he pushed himself inside her. He felt more like a man than he had in years and his confidence grew. He ran his hands all over her body, cupping her beautiful breasts, stroking her back. When he could stand it no longer, he held her hips, directing her up and down on his rigid shaft. When he entered deep enough to touch her maiden barrier, he raised his hips and thrust into her again, harder. She gave a small cry, of pleasure or pain, he didn't know but he was almost beyond caring. He pushed again and again and finally felt the barrier give way slightly. "I'm sorry, Emily, I have no wish to hurt you, but I must..." he panted. He arched his back and squeezed his eyes shut, thinking of anything he could to delay his release.

"It's all right, Edgar. You aren't hurting me. Come with me," she said in a breathy voice that alone was enough to make him spill. "Come now."

Together they peaked. She threw her head back, her cries of pleasure matching his own. Then she collapsed on top of him. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"More than all right. It was wonderful. Oh Edgar, I love you so much."

"And I love you. I didn't know such happiness was possible. At least, not for me, not since my illness came on."

"Edgar, ye ken I have no experience with such things, but I cannae imagine anything another man could do to please a woman that ye havena done tonight."

"Thank you, my dear, that is good to know."

Still inside her, he turned so that they lay side by side, their bodies entwined while their breathing slowed. Emily felt her heartbeat returning to its normal rate. Eventually, his flesh softened and slipped out of her. They righted themselves in the bed and snuggled under the covers.

She was just drifting off to sleep when Edgar broke the silence. "Shall we leave for Rome tomorrow?"

"Do you really want to go to Rome?"

He turned his head to look at her. "I've been there before, years ago. It's a beautiful city, my dear, and being a Catholic, I should think you would enjoy seeing St. Peter's."

She knew this trip was wearing on him and she did not want to be the cause of any further drain on his health. If it would buy her more time with him, she didn't care if she ever saw Rome.

She turned her body toward his and hugged his arm. "I want to go home."

"Emily, I know why you are saying that. I'm fine, truly I am."

"I want to go home," she repeated. "I want to start our life together. I have no need to see the great capitals of the world. You've shown me so much already, places I never hoped to see. Now I just want to settle down, with you, in our own home."

He remained silent, studying her.

"Let's go home, Edgar."

He leaned over and kissed her, tenderly. "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

"Not in the last ten minutes," she replied, then smiled and began to laugh. "And not nearly often enough."

The next morning, they left France for Scotland. On the trip home, their love for each other grew, but there was no sign of a child. Emily's courses came when she expected them to and they both tried to hide their sadness.



## Chapter Three

They arrived home in the early evening on a rainy, late summer day.

Edgar's house was large, but his staff was small. In addition to Weston and Sam, the coachman, there was Hamish, the footman, Mrs. Lamond, the housekeeper, Essie Porter, the cook and a young girl, Essie's daughter, who looked to be about sixteen years old and who served as a maid. They all stood on the front steps, waiting to greet their new mistress. Emily passed down the row, smiling and shaking hands with each person. When she came to the girl, the lass at first took Emily's hand, then abruptly threw her arms around Emily's waist.

"Welcome home, milady. I do the laundry and help make the beds and I can carry a tray up the stairs without droppin' anythin'...well, most o' the time."

Essie stepped forward and tried to pry the girl's arms from around Emily. "Fenella, that's enough now, ye musn't bother the mistress." To Emily she said, "Please, milady, she means well and she is much help around the house —"

"That's quite all right, Mrs. Porter." It was clear to see that the girl was feeble-minded, but Emily instantly took a liking to her.

"Fenella," Emily continued, speaking directly to the little maid, "I am goin' to need ye to help me. This is such a big house, I'm afraid I shall get quite lost. Will ye help me find my way around, when ye aren't helpin' Mrs. Lamond or your mama?"

Fenella's eyes lit up with her newfound importance. "Oh aye, milady, I can do that. I ken my way 'round 'cause I go to all the rooms to dust and mop and air the linens. I'll help ye."

With the introductions finished, Edgar took Emily inside and began to acquaint her with her new home. As he showed her through the wings of the house, Emily realized how he could get by with so few servants. Most of the rooms were closed off, with dust sheets thrown over the furniture. Although the rooms showed signs of being tended to, as Fenella had said, it was still apparent they had not been used for a very long time. She remembered Edgar saying that he didn't entertain much anymore and wondered if these rooms would ever be needed again.

He showed her the master bedroom. Emily began to laugh. "Edgar, that is the biggest bed I have ever seen! Four people could sleep in that."

Edgar smiled and said, "I hadn't thought about it but you might be right."

He led her through a door in one wall of the room and into an adjoining bedroom. "This is yours to use any time you wish." At her puzzled expression, he continued, "If you ever want to be alone, or if I am bothering you..." His voice trailed off.

"Then this room will get little use," she said.

They went a short way down the hall, he opened another door and they peered inside. He didn't need to tell her the purpose of this room. A cradle, a small canopied bed, numerous toys, all covered with a fine layer of dust, waiting for the children of the man who had played with them years ago. Edgar and Emily held each other tightly for a moment, then he closed the door behind them.

In addition to the coachman, Edgar's outdoor staff included a groom and a stable boy. "I shall take you to meet them tomorrow," he said, "or when the weather clears. I remember you telling me how much you enjoy riding. Angus, our groom, can accompany you and show you the estate. Then, when the weather improves, I shall take you around in the coach to meet our tenants."

Emily was surprised and pleased that he already used "our" to make her feel welcome in her new home and in her new circumstances.

They ate a light supper and retired to bed. Emily was awakened in the early morning hours by a familiar cramping in her abdomen and felt the telltale stickiness between her legs. She began to ease out of bed, trying not to disturb Edgar, but almost immediately, she felt his hand stroking her back.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

"Aye, 'tis just my courses." She added softly, "I'm sorry, Edgar."

"Oh Emily, you know it's my fault, not yours."

"It's no one's fault. If we are meant to have children, we will. I will not love you any less."

"But you won't be as happy. I want to make you happy, my love."

She reached back and stroked his cheek. "You do make me happy. Never doubt that." He nodded and she said, "Go back to sleep."

As he lay down again, she went into the garderobe. On her way back to bed, she stopped to glance out at the sky. The stars were out, promising a clear morning. A lighted window caught her eye.

"Edgar?"

"Hmmm?" he replied sleepily.

"There's a light burning in the stable."

"Oh yes. That would be Angus."

"Your groom?"

"Yes, he sleeps with a lamp burning each night." Over a yawn, Edgar added, "I hope he's not a restless sleeper. I fear that one day he'll burn up the stable and himself with it."

"Then why do you allow it?"

"We all have our idiosyncrasies, my dear, and that happens to be his." He burrowed more deeply into his pillow. "Good night, love."

Emily turned from the window and went back to bed, wondering why a grown man needed to sleep with a lamp burning.

The next morning, after breakfast, they headed for the stable. Edgar appeared rested from their journey home, he walked well, albeit slowly, using only one cane in his left hand.

"I know you want me to take up riding again, but I feel badly leaving you behind," Emily said.

"I would ride with you if I could, my dear, believe me I would," he said as they walked down the smooth dirt road leading to the stable. "It is one of the things I regret most about my infirmity. But I won't let you use me as an excuse to pen yourself up in the house. I have some fine horses, as you'll soon see. Someone needs to keep them from getting lazy."

By this time, they had reached the stable and stepped inside the large building. The stone walls kept the inside cool, a welcome change from the warmth of the day. It took Emily's eyes a few moments to get accustomed to the darkness inside, after coming in from the bright sun. She noted that the stalls were enclosed with fine, dark-stained wood, topped with carved balusters. The faint smell of manure was overshadowed by the scent of fresh straw, the whole place looked as clean and well-kept as Edgar's house.

Emily mentally caught herself—Edgar insisted that she start thinking of it as *their* house, not just his. She hadn't been there long enough yet to feel comfortable with that. She was still marveling at her good fortune to have such a kind, wonderful man fall in love with her.

"You remember these boys," Edgar said as they approached the first two stalls on their right.

"Hello, Romulus. Hello, Remus," Emily said, greeting the sturdy coach horses. "Thank you for bringing us home safely."

"And this," Edgar said, turning to the first stall on the left, diagonally from them, "is the beast I like to blame for my disability."

Emily jumped back as a huge, dark head appeared above the stall door.

"This is Tar, the pride of my small herd." Edgar patted the side of big horse's neck.

Still unsure whether or not the beast would take her arm off, Emily stepped closer and began to gingerly stroke Tar's muzzle. Now she could see how he got his name. The horse was indeed as black as tar. His coat gleamed, even in the dim light of the stable. "Oh Edgar, he's magnificent! But what do you mean, that you blame him?"

"I had always prided myself on my riding ability. The man from whom I bought him said that he needed a steady hand. I was sure I could handle him. I had had Tar for about a month. We were out one day, riding the hills to the south of here, when a fox darted out of his den and ran across our path. Tar reared back and, though I braced myself with my knees as tightly as I could, down I went. I managed to get back in the

saddle and come home, but I was a long time getting my strength back. I like to blame it on the fall, but the truth is, my legs were weakening before that. I just didn't want to admit it."

"No, of course you didn't," Emily said. "Does anyone ride him now?"

"Angus is the only one who can really handle him. He sees to it that the big boy stays fit." At a sound from the doorway, Edgar turned and said, "Ah, speak of the devil, here he is now."

Emily followed Edgar's gaze...and her breath caught in her throat.

"Emily, this is Angus MacNeill. Angus, my wife, Lady Callander."

The groom gave a short bow and said, "How do ye do, milady?"

Emily had to remind herself to breathe. Then she had to pull herself out of the past and return to the present. Just the few words he had spoken, with his soft Highland lilt, had transported her back to a time that seemed so far away, yet was only four years ago. A time when all the men she knew spoke and looked, much the way he did. It was a time she really didn't want to be reminded of.

She cleared her throat. "How do you do, Mr. MacNeill? It is a pleasure to meet you. Edgar speaks very highly of you."

"I'm glad of it, milady."

"You and Emily have much in common, I'm afraid, Angus," Edgar said, sitting down on a bench near Tar's stall.

"Is that so?" Angus asked.

"Yes. You're both from the Highlands. And you both lost your properties and some loved ones in the war."

"You fought in the Rising, Mr. MacNeill?"

"Aye, I did."

"So did my father, John Sinclair, and my two brothers."

His eyes widened, as if surprised. "Ye're Jock Sinclair's lass?"

"I am. Did you know him?"

"Aye," he replied, nodding his head. "We fought together in most of the battles. Yer da spoke of you often."

Emily felt her eyes moisten with unshed tears. "He did?"

"Ye were his pride and joy."

"I was?" she asked, forcing the words past the tightness in her throat. She knew her father had loved her, even though he had never said the words. He had told this man what he had never told her himself, what she had longed to hear him say. Now she never would. She cleared her throat and asked, "Do you know where or when he died?"

"No one told ye?" She shook her head and Angus continued, "He died at Culloden, along with many, many others."

She took a deep breath. Everyone had heard of the carnage and brutality of the Battle of Culloden. She didn't know if it made her feel better or worse that her father had died in the bloodiest – and last – battle of the war.

As if reading her thoughts, Angus said, "He died well."

"How does a man die well, Mr. MacNeill?" she asked.

"Fighting for a cause he believes in."

"Is anything worth that great a sacrifice?"

"We thought so," Angus said.

"And what did it get you, Mr. MacNeill?"

"It got me the memory o' seein' my kith and kin slaughtered before my eyes. It got me the loss of a title that's been my family's for four hundred years. And it got me imprisonment and indenture. What did it get you, Jock Sinclair's girl?"

Emily knew what he was implying and it angered her. She started to make a retort but stopped as another thought occurred to her. What if all the servants felt this way? They had seemed to welcome her and were each polite, unlike the man standing before her. But did they all believe she had married Edgar solely for his money and title? Did they resent the governess who had risen to countess in just a few short months? The idea of it frightened her and all she could think to do was escape.

"Excuse me," she said and hurried from the stable.

Angus glanced down at the earl. Despite his master's calm demeanor, Angus broke out in a cold sweat. He was sure the man would be livid with anger at the things he had said to Lady Callander. This man held his future in his hands. He could have him whipped or even hanged for what he had just done. Or sent back to prison. Angus knew he would prefer to hang.

Instead, he thought he detected a slight smile on the Callander's face as he watched his wife almost running toward the house. "Please forgive me, milord. I should no' have spoken so to milady. I don't know what came over me."

"It's all right, Angus," the earl said. "She has not had an easy time of it. Certainly not as bad as you, but bad enough for a laird's daughter, I suppose."

"Aye," Angus said, "I suppose so. Will ye give her my apology, milord?"

"Oh I think you can do that yourself," the earl said, getting slowly to his feet. "When she is rested from our trip and feeling more like herself, she'll be back and you can help her choose a horse to ride."

"Verra well, sir. I'll, um, I'll just get on with my chores then. Good day to ye, milord."

"Good day, Angus."

As he walked back to the house, Edgar pondered the scene that had just taken place. It did not go as smoothly as he had hoped...but time would tell.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Jock Sinclair's girl. What were the chances?*

Angus lay in his bed that night and gazed out at the stars he could see from his window. *Damn ye, Jock, ye old buzzard*, he thought. *Ye told me she was a sweet lass, but ye never told me how bonny she was.*

Emily Sinclair, now Lady Callander. *Em*. Although he could never call her that to her face, that is what he would call her in his mind. It is how he had thought of her for six months on the battlefields, three months in prison and the almost four years since.

## Chapter Four

She was going, only because Edgar had insisted she go. She had no desire whatsoever to face Mr. MacNeill again. She could have had him punished—severely—for what he had said to her. But try as she might, she still could not bring herself to enforce her position with the staff.

There was really no need to do so, when she stopped and thought about it. All of the servants seemed eager to do her bidding and they did their jobs well, leaving nothing for her to complain about. The only exceptions were Weston, who avoided her at every opportunity, just as he had done on their wedding trip...and Mr. MacNeill.

Now she was coming to choose a horse and there was really no way she could think of that MacNeill would not have to deal with her...nor she with him.

She stood for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light in the stable, then began to walk slowly down the aisle between the stalls. Tar stuck his head over his stall door and snorted at her. She was a little afraid to approach him without Edgar beside her, so she said, "Good day, Tar. I'm sorry but you're not a lady's mount." He snorted at her again, as if calling her a coward. She laughed and said, "How right you are, beautiful beast, how right you are."

"Right about what?"

The voice behind her made her jump and spin around. "Oh Mr. MacNeill, you frightened me. I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry, milady. I heard ye talking and wondered if ye might need some help."

"Aye, I do," she said, marveling at the ease in which she slipped back into her native brogue with him. "Edgar sent me to choose a horse."

"Do ye always do what Edgar tells ye?"

She could not have heard him correctly. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, milady."

She was not surprised that he did not have the courage to repeat such a slight.

"Will you show me some horses you think might be suitable, Mr. MacNeill?" she asked, finding it was not so difficult to act like a countess, after all.

His next words dissolved her newfound confidence. "Why do ye call me 'Mr. MacNeill'? Are ye so formal with all yer servants?"

"No, I'm not. You just seemed to be the type of man who would prefer a more formal title."

"Well, I'm not."

She wondered if he was always this surly and if so, why Edgar tolerated it. "All right then, MacNeill. Now what about this horse?" She pointed to a bay mare in the stall next to Remus.

"Jezebel? She's a good mount, but she gets skittish at times, especially when Tar is around. As I will be escorting ye on yer rides and since I'll be riding him, I think we should choose another."

"All right," she said, a little miffed at his seeming underestimation of her skills as a horsewoman.

They moved down the row of stalls and Emily noticed that a lot of them were empty. As if reading her thoughts, MacNeill said, "Lord Callander sold off a lot of his herd after the accident, or so I was told."

"You were not here when Tar threw him?"

"No, it was part of the reason he bought my indenture. He knew he would need help then."

"How long have you been with Edgar?"

"Three and a half years. How long have you been with him?"

"Five months," she answered. She took a few steps before she noticed that he had stopped. She turned and looked at him. He regarded her with an expression that was almost akin to disgust. She made a conscious decision to ignore it. It seemed important to Edgar that she get along with MacNeill and for him, she would make the effort. Perhaps it would just take him longer than the rest of the staff to get used to her presence. After all, Edgar had been a bachelor for a long time.

Emily spied a sweet-looking dun mare in one of the last stalls. "What about her?"

"Ah, now that's yer mount." As soon as the horse heard his voice, she threw her head over the stall door and whinnied. MacNeill stood in front of the wooden barrier, his legs apart and his hips thrust out.

Suddenly, Emily had a vision of a man standing like that in front of a woman and both of them naked. Her mouth went dry and she had to look away as her face flooded with heat. She told herself the man was not MacNeill and the woman was not she and forced the image from her mind.

When she turned back, she was surprised to see Angus holding the horse's harness and kissing her on the muzzle. "Ye're a good lassie, are ye no'? Yes, ye are, my sweet buttercup." His usually gruff manner of speaking was gone, replaced by a tenderness she had not thought possible in him.

Emily smiled. "Is that her name?"

"Aye, this is Buttercup. She's most often docile, but she'll give ye a good ride, if ye show her it's what ye want from her."

She stepped closer and stroked the horse's neck. "Well, she certainly seems to like you. Will you saddle her for me, please?"



Without a word, he turned and picked up a sidesaddle from a nearby rack. "No," Emily said, "a regular saddle."

"I thought all *ladies* must ride sidesaddle."

Again, she chose to ignore his slight. "I'm a Highland lass, remember? I have always ridden astride and I see no reason to change now."

He nodded with what she took to be grudging admiration and chose another saddle. Then he led Buttercup from her stall and out into the warm sunshine. The horse's pale yellow coat glowed like a faded blossom of her namesake flower.

"Wait and I'll saddle Tar. He's in need of a run too."

Emily took the opportunity to get acquainted with Buttercup. "Hello, pretty girl. Let's go for a ride, shall we?" She stroked the horse's neck and her soft muzzle. Buttercup seemed to respond to her, but as soon as the mare heard MacNeill's voice again, she started to walk toward him. Emily laughed and followed her to where he stood, holding Tar's reins.

"Do ye conquer all women as easily as ye do mares, MacNeill?"

He stared at her for a moment. Out in the sunlight, she could see for the first time the color of his eyes. They looked like shards of dark blue marble—and just as cold and hard.

"Why do you ask?"

She felt her cheeks flush. Did he think she was flirting with him? She tried desperately to think of an answer that would not further such a ridiculous notion, but fortunately, Tar came to her rescue. The big stallion snorted and pawed the ground, as if eager to be off.

"Here," MacNeill said, bending down next to the mare and cupping his hands, "I'll give ye a lift up."

Emily placed her left foot in his hands and swung her right leg over the saddle. He adjusted the stirrups for her and helped her slide her feet in.

Did his hand linger on her ankle, or was that just her imagination?

They started out slowly, until Angus was sure she could handle the horse. Then he said, "Shall we run?"

She smiled back at him and gently kicked Buttercup forward. He held Tar back, knowing that he could easily outdistance the little mare. If something went wrong and Em should fall off, he didn't want to be half a mile ahead of her before he knew about it. Lord Callander would have his head for that, for sure.

At least, that is the reason he told himself as he followed behind her.

Despite the yards and yards of material that made up her skirt, by riding astride she afforded Angus an unavoidable view of her legs, up to the knees. And a lovely sight it was. Her stockings were a pale blue to match her riding outfit. For only a moment, Angus let himself imagine running his hand from her knee, under the hem of her dress

to her thigh. He was sure it would be plump and soft just as the rest of her would be. He shook his head to clear such thoughts and reminded himself that Jock Sinclair's girl had managed to catch herself an earl.

They had gone about three miles to the top of a high hill when Angus rode up beside her and beckoned her to halt. He pointed back behind them to the mansion in the distance. From this vantage point it looked like a child's toy house.

Still breathing hard from the gallop, she said, "I didn't realize we'd come so far. Perhaps we shouldn't be here. Does the land we're on belong to anyone?"

"You," he said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

She turned to face him. "You mean this is all Edgar's land?"

"Aye." He pointed off to the east. "And to that stand of trees." Then he pointed west. "And to that loch. The northern border is that river right over there."

She sat for a long moment, looking around her. Then in a small voice she said, "I hadn't realized."

He wanted to say, *Hadn't you?* but held it back. She did seem a bit overwhelmed by it all.

She wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her gloved hand.

"There's a wee glade just over there, near a stream. We can rest for a while and give the horses a drink."

She nodded and he led the way. When they reached the spot he helped her off and led her down to the grassy bank. The water trickled softly over some rocks on its way to the distant river and swirled in a gentle eddy at their feet. Angus wet his handkerchief in the stream and offered it to her. She thanked him and wiped the dirt from her face and neck, all the while looking off into the distance. The faraway mountains were a pale blue line across the bluer sky.

"Do you miss the Highlands?" she asked.

"Aye. You?"

"Oh aye, every day of my life."

"Then why did ye leave?"

"I had to. I could no' find work there and none of my friends or relations was in any better position than I, so I left." She seemed to hesitate. "I found work as a governess and then I met Edgar."

He could hold back no longer. "Aye and now ye're rollin' in clover."

"What?" She jumped up from the log and turned on him.

"Ye heard what I said. Why did ye do it, girl?"

Her mouth fell open as she stared at him. "Do what?"

"Marry a man old enough to be yer father. And a sickly one at that."

She gasped. "I married him because I love him!"

"Ah, do ye now?" He shook his head and put his face closer to hers. "Yer own father would no' be proud of you today. Ye couldna give up yer way of living, could ye? Ye couldna be a laird's daughter again so ye set yer sights higher. And look at ye now – a countess, no less."

She slapped him then. It put an end to his tirade and made him realize that once again, his temper had put him in a dangerous situation. Her next words confirmed his fears.

"How dare you speak so to me!" Her eyes, normally as blue as cornflowers, had now taken on a gray caste, like the sky before a storm. "Yes, I am a countess and you will use the proper respect when you address me. Ye're quite aware of my station, but ye forget yer own. If it should happen again, I shall see that my *husband* takes the appropriate steps."

She mounted Buttercup without his help and galloped away. It didn't take him long to catch up with her. She had stopped at the crest of the hill and was looking around frantically. When he came alongside her, she bowed her head as if studying her gloved hands on the reins.

In a soft voice she said, "I-I seem to be lost, MacNeill."

He wondered if he only imagined the double meaning of her words. "No, ye're not, milady," he answered, giving her the proper respect. "Ye've but taken the wrong path." She looked up at him and he knew that she discerned his meaning too. He pointed to the left. "The house is that way."

They rode back together in silence. When they reached the stable yard, she slid off Buttercup's back and ran toward the house, without a word or a glance back at him.

Angus combed and fed the horses...and waited for the ax to fall.

\* \* \* \* \*

She stormed into the front hall and threw her hat onto a side table. Edgar watched this from the sitting room as her image was reflected in the large mirror over the mantelpiece. He saw her pace around in circles, seemingly trying to get her breathing under control. Her fists clenched the material of her skirt until it was sure to be severely wrinkled. He knew that was a bad sign.

When she appeared to have calmed a bit, he called out to her, "Emily, is that you?"

He heard her take another deep breath, then she appeared in the doorway with a smile on her face that he knew was forced. "Yes, of course it's me." She crossed the room and gave him a quick kiss. "How are you doing?"

"Oh I'm fine," he said. "Did you have a nice ride?" He couldn't wait to hear her answer.

"Oh it was grand." She did not sound convincing.

"Where did you go?"

"There's a stream over the hill and a nice wee glade. We rested the horses there, then came back."

She walked around the room, adjusting a vase of flowers here, a porcelain figure there. Anything, it seemed, so that she didn't have to look him in the eye.

"You seem troubled, my dear. Is something the matter?"

"No," she said, concentrating on a piece of lint on her skirt.

"Emily?"

She sighed and turned to face him. "It's Angus MacNeill. Really, Edgar, he is so surly and," she hesitated, "and insolent. I don't know why ye tolerate him."

Edgar hid a smile behind his hand. "I admit Angus can be rather gruff at times. He has never shown any insolence to me, however, and he is very good with the horses." He casually lifted two fingers away from his lips in a gesture of nonchalance that he didn't feel. "But if he displeases you so much I shall sell his indenture. They always need strong workers for the colonies."

"No!" she cried, too quickly. "That is, if you are satisfied with him I don't want you to dismiss him just for my sake."

Edgar bit the inside of his jaw to keep from smiling outright. After Angus' remarks in the stable yesterday, he could only imagine what had happened between them today. He had seen Angus' temper a few times, but Emily's only rarely. Yet he knew that throwing the two of them together was sure to create sparks.

"Shall I have a talk with him?"

"No, Edgar, I can't have you fighting my battles for me."

"A battle, is it?"

"Oh nothing as serious as that. I shall deal with Angus MacNeill myself. I'm going to go freshen up before dinner."

As she left the room, Edgar wondered just how she would deal with his surly, insolent groom.

## Chapter Five

She closed herself up in the house for another week, despite the lovely weather. MacNeill's chastisement had affected her more than she cared to admit. She had observed the rest of the staff for any signs of resentment but, except for Weston, did not detect any. Finally, she figured out why MacNeill's disapproval bothered her so much.

He was a Highlander, a fellow countryman. Although it was true they were all Scots, the Highlanders had always been more like a country unto themselves. Their lifestyle, religion and ideals were very different from Lowlanders like her husband. Edgar had acknowledged this when he proposed to her. But it seemed that MacNeill did not accept the fact that a Highland laird's daughter could ever find love with a Lowlander.

And that was the other issue. He was right about the difference in their situations since the Rising. Although it had never been her intention and although she had lost her father and her brothers, she was now even better off than she had been before the war. While MacNeill, who should have been a great chieftain, was little more than a slave. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was somehow obligated to make it up to him.

So she bolstered up her courage and headed to the stable, hoping that she and MacNeill could establish a relationship that was more of a friendship than master-servant. If he tried to apologize for his behavior, she would brush it aside and tell him they must start afresh.

He did not apologize.

They rode in silence to the top of the hill. Or rather, MacNeill rode in silence. After a curt "Milady" as she entered the stable, he replied to her attempts to make conversation with a "hmp" here and "aye" or "nay" there. She noticed too that he barely looked at her. By the time they reached the glade by the stream, she had decided to stop trying and simply accept the silence, no matter how uncomfortable it was.

The ride, however, seemed to have lightened his spirits. When they had dismounted and walked to the water's edge, he again offered her his handkerchief, saying, "'Tis a hot one today, is it no'?"

"Aye, it is," she replied, wiping the sweat from her face.

They sat down on a log and he began to remove his boots.

"What are you doing?"

"Cooling off a bit before we ride back." He waded a little way out into the water, then threw back his head and sighed. His sun-streaked brown curls fell back between his shoulder blades as the tendons in his strong neck tightened. A wave of heat spread

up Emily's own neck and she again dabbed at her skin with the handkerchief, looking downstream, upstream, anywhere but at MacNeill.

"Come on," he said.

"What?"

"Come on in. It feels great."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Why not? If ye're afraid it wouldn't be proper, I promise not to sneak a peek at yer bare legs."

The sly grin on his face made her laugh out loud. She sat for another moment, staring at the water trickling over the rocks, thinking how refreshing it looked. Then she quickly stripped off her boots and stockings and hitched up her skirt before she could change her mind.

"*God Almighty, it's cold,*" she cried.

He roared with laughter. "Tsk, ts. Such language from a countess."

"Well, ye could ha' warned me."

He continued to chuckle as he turned and began to cross the stream, hopping nimbly from one rock to another. Then he stopped and looked back at her. "There's a blackberry bush over here. Come and get some."

She looked down at the water swirling around the rocks and shook her head.

"Ye're not afraid, are ye?"

A memory came back to her—an eddy, a deep pool, water filling her mouth and nose, choking her. She shook her head to dispel the images and hoped he would believe it to be a denial of fear. "I just don't feel like it and I-I don't like blackberries."

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed, as if he could see right into her soul. "Never known a highland lassie afraid to cross a stream."

She was, but she would never let him know it. She headed back toward the shore.

"I am not afraid, I tell you."

"Yes, you are."

She sat down on the log again, her back to him, and over her shoulder said, "All right, perhaps I am, but at least I'm not afraid of the dark."

"*What?*" He was beside her before she knew it. He grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "What did you say to me?"

"You heard me," she said, hoping that her voice sounded more assured to him than it did to her own ears.

"Afraid of the dark? What do you know of fear?"

She tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip on her shoulders.

"Do you know what they did to me after Culloden?" He didn't wait for her to respond. "They threw me into a hole in the ground—constant darkness with no

window to tell me if it was day or night. I was blind for two days when they brought me out. The only air came through a small grate in the top of the cell and then precious little. And when the guards wanted a bit of fun, they would piss down on me from up there."

She squeezed her eyes shut to block out the horrible images and tried to turn her head away, but he wouldn't let her. He took her chin in his hand and propped one foot up on the log. "Look at this," and when she kept her eyes closed, "Look!"

She glanced down at his ankle and gasped. His skin was covered in scars, some faded to a pale silvery sheen, others an angry red. She couldn't begin to count how many there were.

"Do ye ken what they are?" She shook her head briefly. "They're rat bites."

"Ah," she cried.

"I could feel them crawling over me day and night, waiting for me to sleep, then I'd awaken with them gnawing on me. This went on for three months, until I almost lost my mind."

His image blurred as tears filled her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'm no' askin' for yer pity. I only want ye to understand what real fear is and why I must beg yer indulgence for a steady supply of lamp oil." He pushed her head away and turned his back on her, his chest heaving as if he were having trouble catching his breath. Then he sank down on the log next to her and dropped his head in his hands.

"I am sorry, Angus. I should no' have said to ye what I did. I-I didn't know."

"No, of course ye didn't." He sniffed and pressed his fingers against his eyes. She gently laid a hand on his back, but he shrugged it off. "I don't want yer pity."

"Aye, so ye said. But it's not pity I'm offerin' ye now. Oh Angus, why must we always be at odds with one another? Can't we just be friends?"

He turned and faced her, the sheen of tears still brightening his dark blue eyes. "We can be friends when I am no longer yer servant, *milady*." He rose and headed toward the horses. "It's time we got back."

It was another silent ride home, with Emily wanting to say something, anything to take away the hurt she had caused him. But she knew he would reject any further apology or offer of sympathy. She had reopened the wounds to his pride, which she suspected went a lot deeper than the bites of rats.

When they reached the stable, he leaned forward and braced his arm on Tar's neck. He gave a deep sigh and turned to her. "Milady," he began, "I...um, I am truly sorry that I railed at ye that way."

"It's all right, Angus. It was mean of me to say that to you." If he noted her continued use of his given name, he said nothing about it.

"Still and all, I should not have spoken to ye in that manner. If ye wish Lord Callander to sell my indenture, I'll understand."

"I have no intention of telling him what happened between us today, much less asking him to sell your indenture. It was my fault after all."

As he helped her dismount, he seemed to hold her closer to him than he ever had before and did not let her go after she was on the ground. She looked up at his face and was surprised to see a ghost of a smile.

"Who was it, the twins?"

"The twins?"

"Aye, yer brothers. Who pushed ye into the river."

She turned her head away from him, trying to hide her smile. She didn't have to nod for him to know he was right.

"I thought so. They were always ones for playin' tricks, even during a war."

She suddenly became aware of their position and knew that they could be seen from the house. She patted his arm and stepped away. As she walked up the lane, she heard him say, "Perhaps I will teach ye to swim someday."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Not in that cold water, you won't."

From his window, Edgar saw them return to the stable yard. He watched Angus lift her down from her horse and continue to hold her, longer than necessary. He noted the smile on Emily's face and her flushed cheeks. It seemed she had found a way to handle his surly and insolent groom. For a moment, Edgar felt a pang of jealousy toward Angus, but it quickly passed.

Edgar did not doubt for one minute his wife's love. She showed it in every possible way—their marriage bed being no exception. Apart from his disability, his life was perfect except for one thing—he more and more wanted an heir and he was more and more frustrated that he had yet been unable to produce one.

*Still, he thought, the fun is in the trying.*

As the weeks went on, Emily became more comfortable managing Edgar's household. They even received a few guests from time to time—people Edgar had known most of his life, who came from neighboring estates. If they had opinions regarding Edgar's marriage to her, they kept them to themselves. She heard no untoward comments.

Apart from that, her life began to fall into a pattern. By day, she rode with Angus. By night, she lay in her husband's arms.

And she wasn't sure which one she looked forward to the most.



## Chapter Six

*"He has married the little bitch!"* Caroline stomped into the room, waving a piece of paper above her head.

Raymond felt a shock from his head to his toes. He knew what his wife was talking about—few other things could make her that incensed—but he decided to feign ignorance, hoping against hope he was wrong.

"Who has married whom?" he asked in a patient tone of voice that only served to further irritate her.

"Your uncle, you dolt, has married our former governess, that conniving, sneaky little—"

He interrupted her before she could cast any additional aspersions on Emily's character. He knew from experience she could never be sneaky or conniving, it just wasn't in her nature. "Well, what does it matter, Caroline? It won't change anything."

"Oh won't it?" His wife brandished the paper again. "They were married in May, in France. Lady Burlington writes that she and Lord Burlington crossed the channel on the boat with them and that Edgar looked healthier than she had seen him in a long time. It is now the end of September, Raymond. The little strumpet might already be pregnant."

Raymond didn't want to admit how much that thought bothered him...and not just for the reason that was causing his wife's agitation. He had tried to forget Emily, but it was impossible. She haunted his dreams, with her sky blue eyes and golden curls. He sometimes went into the room she used to occupy, her scent, that sweet aroma of honeysuckle, still lingered but it was growing fainter as the weeks passed. His cock began to harden just from the memories. The thought of his aged, infirm uncle enjoying her body made him feel ill.

He lived for the day that his uncle died. Then he would get his fortune and, hopefully, Emily. He had no qualms about throwing Caroline over. He could buy her off with the money he would get. But he would be just as happy to have Emily as his mistress. When he cut off her allowance as the dowager countess she would have no choice but to come begging at his door—the door of the mansion that was hers for now.

"I tell you, Caroline, he's not able. Don't you think at least one by-blow from Uncle's younger days would have shown up by now if he were so inclined? Not only is his health failing, but as I've said, I truly believe he prefers men." At least, Raymond hoped he did.

He was startled to hear his wife echo his thought. "I hope you're right. Still, I think we owe your dear, decrepit uncle a courtesy visit—to congratulate him on his nuptials."

Raymond's first inclination was to object but he stopped himself. It really wasn't such a bad idea.

He would get to see Emily again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh no," Edgar sighed and let the letter he was reading drop into his lap.

Emily looked up from her embroidery. Her husband rubbed his eyes hard, as if to erase the images of the words he had just read.

"Is something wrong? Is it bad news?" He looked so weary, yet it had been a good day for him. His disease sometimes affected his eyes, however, and she worried that such was the case at the moment.

Edgar gave a short laugh. "Yes, it is rather bad news. It seems we are going to have houseguests and they will most likely arrive at week's end."

A feeling almost of panic swept through Emily's body. Today was Wednesday, how could she possibly have the house ready, meals planned and all the other chores that went along with entertaining guests done by the end of the week?

All her mental planning stopped suddenly when she realized she had forgotten to ask her husband the most important question. "Who is coming?"

He gave her a steady look as he said, "Raymond and Caroline, *sans enfants*, it seems. I suppose we can be grateful for that."

Emily's feeling of panic deepened. They were the last two people she ever wanted to see again. And how dare they invite themselves like this! It was gauche, but she should have learned to expect that from them by now. "Why do you think they are coming here?"

"To see if you are pregnant yet, my dear."

"What?" Emily laughed, a bit taken aback by Edgar's bluntness. "You're right, of course. They have always worried that you would procreate and cheat Lord Stockdale out of his inheritance. I overheard them talking about it more than once." Then a thought occurred to her and she sobered. "Edgar, that is not the real reason you want a son, is it?"

"Oh my darling, no, no, definitely not. As much as I dislike the thought of Raymond succeeding me as the tenth Earl of Callander, if that is the way it turns out, so be it. I will make sure you are well provided for in a way that he can't change." He leaned toward her and took her hand. "I want a son for you. I saw you with Raymond's children, you will be such a wonderful mother. I want to see you with a baby at your breast."

"And I want to dandle a baby on my knee while I'm still capable of moving it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning the household went into a frenzy of activity. Linens were washed and hung out to dry, curtains aired, dust covers removed and the furniture underneath polished until it gleamed. Against Mrs. Lamond's protests, Emily even helped make up the beds. She was determined that her former employers would have to fabricate any fault they may find with her management of the house and staff.

On Friday, Emily and the housekeeper and Fen had just finished hanging the curtains in the guest bedrooms when the carriage rolled to a stop at the front steps. Emily hurried to join Edgar in the drawing room and waited for Weston to announce their uninvited guests.

Lord and Lady Stockdale sauntered into the room as if they already owned the place. Emily watched Caroline Cavendish look around, no doubt taking inventory – what to keep, what to discard to make space for her own *objets d'art* – that is, if there were any she hadn't sold or pawned yet.

"Dear Uncle, how are you feeling?" Raymond approached Edgar and took his hand, as one would do with an elderly grandparent who had one foot in the grave. He reinforced this perception with his next words. "You don't look at all well. Has the physician been to see you of late?"

Edgar gave a rather tolerant smile. "On the contrary, Raymond, I have not felt this well in a long time."

Raymond looked over at Emily. "Then marriage must agree with you." He did not smile and Emily saw a muscle in his jaw twitch.

"Aren't you going to congratulate us?" Edgar asked.

"Of course. How very rude of me," Raymond said, never taking his eyes off Emily. "My sincerest congratulations on your nuptials, Uncle. And to you, Emily."

"That's Lady Callander, nephew," Edgar reminded him.

Raymond inhaled deeply and his nostrils flared. He made a slight bow and said, begrudgingly, "My apologies, my lady."

It occurred to Emily that Caroline had not said a word since entering the room. She turned and looked at her former mistress only to find that one glaring at her. If looks could kill, Emily thought, Edgar would be a widower now.

"Caroline? Aren't you going to congratulate the happy couple?" Raymond prompted. His snide tone of voice was not lost on Emily.

She wondered how long they planned to stay...and how she would be able to hold her tongue for the duration.

Dinner that evening was the longest two hours Emily had ever endured. Raymond continued to stare at her. And now that she had found her tongue, Caroline chattered almost nonstop.

"...and it is costing us a small fortune to keep George at Haddington and Sylvia at Mrs. Rosemont's Academy, as you know, Uncle. I just don't know what we're going to do. I so want them to have a decent education."

"There are certainly less expensive schools that will give the children a more than adequate education, as I'm sure you know," Edgar said.

"Yes, I know, but Haddington is your *alma mater*, is it not? As I understand it, all of the Earls of Callander have been educated there. I would not want to break with family tradition."

Emily didn't know whether to be angry or upset. Caroline clearly believed she was raising the eleventh earl and at the rate things were going, she just might be right. It was hard enough to picture Raymond in that position, much less his son. She remembered the boy as rather bright but sneaky and, at times, simply mean.

Emily resolved to pray extra hard that night. Surely, God wouldn't want to see events take that turn either.

"We shouldn't keep you up any longer, Uncle. You look tired." Raymond rose to help Edgar out of his chair.

"On the contrary, I never go to bed this early." Emily knew he was lying to save face and to irritate Raymond further. Edgar often needed to retire early—more frequently than Emily wanted to think about.

"Shall we all move to the drawing room for tea and brandy?" Emily suggested, although she wished Raymond and Caroline would themselves retire.

Alas, her wish was not fulfilled.

The conversation in the drawing room was just as awkward and stilted as at the dinner table. Too often, Raymond found a way to stand behind her chair or sit near her and touch her arm or hand in some offhand, innocent gesture that Emily feared was not so innocent. She saw Edgar's gaze follow his nephew's movements and watched his brows knit together, but when their eyes met, he gave Emily an apologetic smile.

"How long are you and Caroline planning to stay with us, Raymond?" Edgar asked.

Caroline let out an irritating, high-pitched giggle. "What? Tired of us already, Uncle? Why, we've only just arrived."

It was not lost on Emily that she didn't actually answer the question.

"I thought I might go riding tomorrow. I trust you still have a fine stable," Raymond said.

"In truth, I have sold off a lot of my stock. There are some good horses left, though. MacNeill can see that you are outfitted properly."

"Won't you join me, Emily? I mean, Lady Callander."

"No, I, uh...." She certainly didn't want to be out alone with Raymond.

Edgar came to her rescue. "Emily has been feeling a bit under the weather lately. I have advised her to refrain from too much exercise until she regains her strength."

Emily raised her hand to her mouth to hide her smile, but nodded her thanks to Edgar for so quickly coming up with an excuse.

Raymond and Caroline exchanged a quick glance. Emily could swear there was almost a look of fear in their eyes.

"Well, I shall have to go alone then. Do you still have that exquisite stallion? Tar, I think you called him."

"I do, but only MacNeill rides Tar."

"Indeed? Why is that, if I may ask?"

"Because no one else can handle him."

"Are you telling me that that Highland savage is better able to ride than I?"

"Yes, Raymond, that is exactly what I'm saying. MacNeill rides as if he had been born on a horse."

Under his breath, Raymond commented, "Huh, more likely born in the stable that housed the horse."

Edgar smiled and said, "Perhaps he was, after all. It would seem a good omen to me. Was not our Lord born in a stable?"

Raymond's mouth fell open, then closed, repeatedly, making him look for all the world like a landed fish. Emily took a sip of her tea to hide her grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She hasn't been feeling well. He won't let her ride." Caroline barely waited until they got to their rooms before her tirade began.

"So?"

"What does that tell you, Raymond? She's pregnant. I'll wager anything on it."

The thought again made Raymond physically ill. How could she swive that invalid? He had to make her see that his uncle was fading rapidly – and perhaps find a way to hasten the process – and that her only option was to let him help her in her widowhood. His help would, of course, come at a price.

"And, pray, what would you wager, Caroline? We have blessed little left, as you may recall."

His wife gave a dramatic sigh. "It was a figure of speech, you dolt. We have to find out for certain."

"What, are you just going to come right out and ask her?" Raymond laughed.

"Not her, the staff. They would know. And I'll start with that mousy little idiot maid, whatshername, Fannie, Finla..."

"Fenella," Raymond offered, ignoring his wife's questioning glance. He didn't see her as mousy. She was rather pretty in a childish sort of way, probably still a virgin, he thought. And just stupid enough not to surmise his intentions until it was too late. This trip might prove to be entertaining after all.

But first, he and Emily had to get reacquainted.

Emily was just leaving the kitchen, after approving the evening's dinner menu, when Raymond stepped out from the darkened doorway of the laundry. She jumped in surprise, then realized who it was.

Her relief didn't last long, however, when she saw the look on his face.

"Hello, Emily." He stood in front of her, so close that she had to back into the wall to put some distance between them. Then she could go no farther and she realized with alarm that he had literally backed her into a corner. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She wondered where Hamish or Weston might be at that moment. Was there anyone to help her if she needed it?

"What do you want, my—" She stopped herself before she addressed him as "my lord". She outranked him now, as incredible as that might seem. "What do you want, Raymond?"

She noticed that his nostrils flared at the familiarity of the address.

"We started something last spring and I intend to finish it now."

A chill suffused her body as she realized what he was talking about—another day that he had pinned her in a corner. A day that had ended in a very unexpected way and that had ultimately led to her present happiness. She refused to let this man taint that memory by repeating his rude and unwelcome overture.

"Let me pass, Raymond."

"Oh I don't think so. Not yet at least. You owe me and I will collect the debt now."

"I owe you nothing."

"Don't you? What did you have in your purse when I found you at that hiring fair? How long would it have been before you had to sell that plump little body of yours just for the price of a meal? I saved you from all that, fed you, clothed you, gave you a roof over your head." He leaned closer until his ugly face filled her vision. "You *do* owe me."

"I owe you nothing," Emily repeated, between gritted teeth. "I worked for every scrap of cloth, every morsel of food. Do you think it was easy trying to teach those brats of yours? Caroline has coddled and spoiled them so that they think they own the world."

He reached out and grabbed her by the upper arm. "Take your hand off me *now*," Emily said, "or I will scream this house down. How do you think your uncle will feel about that?"

"How will he feel when I tell him what a little whore you are?"

Emily smiled, knowing Edgar would never believe that since he was the one who took her virginity.

Her smile seemed to unnerve Raymond. He let her go and backed away a step. "How will *you* feel when Uncle dies and you are left with nothing? Think about that, *my*

*lady,”* he sneered. He began to walk backward down the hallway, saying, “You won’t be so high and mighty when I turn you out into the street.”

Emily watched him go and suppressed a shudder, not only because of how loathsome Raymond was but because she knew he was right. Edgar had said she would be well cared for after he was gone, but there was no guarantee of that and they both knew it. As Earl of Callander, Raymond would be able to do whatever he wanted...even getting rid of her altogether. She wouldn’t put it past him.

Rubbing her arms for warmth, as much as to erase the feel of Raymond’s hands, she went into the library and huddled in front of the fireplace. She silently prayed that something would happen to change the course of her life, which she now feared was inevitable.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angus watched the man as he came toward the stable. He knew the Viscount Stockdale, having met him once before, and had hoped never to see him again. Yet here he was and he appeared to be in quite a huff.

Angus gave a quick bow as Stockdale stormed past him, pacing up and down the floor of the stable and looking into all the stalls. “I wish to ride,” the viscount said, as if just realizing that Angus was standing there.

“Aye, milord,” Angus said, in the tone he would use with a child who was being a pest. Stockdale must have sensed it, for he turned and glared at him. Choosing to ignore it, Angus continued, “Buttercup here is a fine mount—”

“Ah, you’re the Highlander my uncle bought, aren’t you?”

Although it was the truth, Angus still bristled at the thought that he had been *bought*. He took a deep breath, resisting the urge to punch the man in the jaw. “I am of the Highlands, aye.”

“Hmm, yes,” Stockdale said. Then he pointed to Tar. “Saddle that one for me.”

“I’m afraid I cannae do that, milord.”

“Of course you can. It’s your job.”

“I know my job well enough,” Angus said, still trying to keep his patience. “Lord Callander wants no one to ride him.”

“But you ride him, don’t you?”

“Aye, I do, but I have his permission.”

“How do you know I don’t have his permission?”

“He would have told me himself or sent a message and as I’ve received none, I willna let Tar out of his stall.” That wasn’t exactly true, but Stockdale didn’t need to know that. Callander didn’t allow anyone else to ride Tar because he feared the beast would kill a less assertive rider. With Angus, the horse knew who was in command.

Angus straightened up to his full height, which was about six inches more than Stockdale's. "If ye'll choose another horse, I'll be happy to saddle it for ye."

"No. I will ride the stallion."

The two of them faced each other in silence for a moment.

As a servant, Angus knew he had to back down first. "All right," he said. He was sure that Lord Callander would understand the predicament he was in and not punish him for it. Besides, Callander would probably enjoy the show that was about to start as much as Angus planned to.

He saddled Tar and led him out of the stable. As Stockdale mounted the big stallion, Angus could see the horse's nostrils flare and noted the look in his eyes. Only his firm grip on the reins kept the horse from bolting immediately. He let go to shorten the stirrups, a fact that he knew was not lost on Stockdale, as the man wouldn't even look at him, and Tar began to prance skittishly. "Easy, my lad," Angus said, patting the horse's neck. Tar calmed slightly at the sound of his voice.

As Stockdale slipped his foot back into the stirrup, he—intentionally, Angus was sure—caught Angus's finger between his boot and the metal. Angus pulled his finger away before the man could injure him further and stepped back, letting Stockdale have full control of the horse.

Before he had ridden a hundred yards, Stockdale was on the ground...and Tar stood about ten feet past him, snorting and shaking his head, as if laughing at what he had done.

Angus took his time walking up to the man, then he spoke to the horse first. "Tar, that'll do," he said, using the command he used to give his sheepdogs. The horse came back to him as docilely as his dogs had.

"Are ye all right, milord?" Angus asked, leaning down to help him to his feet.

Stockdale ignored his proffered hand, got up slowly and limped back to the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What have you found out?" Raymond asked Caroline as he changed his clothes.

"Nothing. The stupid maid was too afraid of me to say anything."

"Well, you can be rather intimidating."

"I assure you I was sweet as honey to the little imbecile." She turned from straightening the wig she had just donned. "What happened to you?"

Raymond could see she was trying not to smile at his bedraggled appearance. "That barbarian Uncle Edgar calls a groom put a burr under Tar's saddle. The beast threw me to the ground."

"Hmmm," she muttered. The doubt in her voice was clear. "He told you not to ride him and we must not do anything to antagonize him. Our future depends on it."



She crossed to the wardrobe on unsteady feet but her new heels were so high, she tottered like a child just learning to walk. Raymond wondered how much they cost. He had a sudden urge to wrench them from her feet and beat her with them.

"So what are we going to do?"

"I don't know, Raymond. Why are you always turning to me for answers? Why don't you come up with some ideas of your own?"

"Well, I can't ask him for any more money. You heard what he said at dinner last evening."

"Yes, yes, I know. But we must think of something soon. Despite what you say, I am sure he is poking her and he may plant the next heir any day now."

"Don't be crude, Caroline." Raymond held out his arm. "Shall we go down to tea?"

She placed her hand on his proffered arm and they both pasted smiles on their faces. They had to present the picture of a model married couple, in hopes of impressing Uncle Edgar.

As he held the door open for her to leave the room, Caroline muttered to her husband, "Uncle is quite unsteady on his feet. With any luck, he'll fall down and crack his head open while we're here to see it."

Raymond's forced smile turned sincere and he began to formulate a plan.

"Of course I miss them dreadfully," Caroline droned on and on as usual.

Emily was only half paying attention, but the woman's next comment certainly changed that. "You'll understand one day when you have children of your own. That is, if you can...or if Uncle can, rather."

Emily felt a pain shoot through her body. She tried to catch Edgar's eye, but he was looking at Caroline with a stunned expression. Was it so painfully obvious that something they wanted so badly was proving to be so difficult for them?

She knew Caroline was fishing for information, but she never thought she would be so bold as to ask outright. "I assume you are trying, aren't you, my dear?"

With that, Emily's anger overcame her embarrassment. She'd be damned if she would give her any satisfaction and she would not let Edgar come to her defense this time, as he had done the previous evening. In a soft, but firm voice, she said, "Lord Callander and I prefer to keep our personal life private, Caroline. I trust you will respect that."

As Caroline began to stammer an apology or a defense, Edgar spoke up. "It's such a lovely day. Why don't we all go for a walk in the garden?" he suggested.

"Are you sure you're up to it, Uncle?" Raymond asked. His voice was full of concern, but Emily knew it was insincere and she was sure her husband knew it too.

Edgar had been doing so well these past few weeks. He only needed to use one cane and his gait was as steady as she had ever seen it. Even his ability to make love

had improved, not that she had ever been dissatisfied. She dared to hope that his disease would not worsen again for a long time.

"You must stop asking me that, Raymond," Edgar said with finality. "If I didn't feel up to it, I would not have suggested it." He rose and offered his right arm to Emily, grasping his cane in his left hand.

They made their way slowly out onto the terrace. Emily was somewhat surprised that Raymond and Caroline stayed behind them. She wondered why, for she was sure it was not out of respect for rank.

When they reached the top of the steps down into the garden, Edgar paused and looked around, taking in a deep breath. It wrenched at her heart to see him take such joy in each day, as if he feared that one might be his last. She held his arm more firmly and said, "Come, I'll help you down."

But before they could start, Edgar pointed to the small vegetable patch Emily had planted near the house. "Oh no, Emily, look. The rabbits are at your turnips again."

"Oooo, those sneaky wee beasties! Wait here for me while I chase them off."

Raymond stepped forward. "That's all right, Lady Callander, I can help Uncle on the steps."

Emily hesitated, but Edgar laughed and gave her a gentle push. "Go on, or you'll have no 'neeps', as you call them, left to eat."

Emily ran to the turnip patch, flapping her cape. "Away, away wi' ye, ye nasty varmint, or we'll serve you up wi' the neeps." She watched the rabbits scatter in all directions. "Well, I've run them off for a little while at least."

She turned back toward the terrace—just in time to see Edgar fall headfirst down the steps.

## Chapter Seven

"I'll be fourteen next month, Angus."

"Will ye now?" He glanced down at the boy sitting next to him polishing a saddle. He reached over and tousled Willie's dark brown curls. "Ye're growin' up too fast, lad."

"I've been thinkin'..."

When the boy hesitated, Angus asked, "Aye? And what have ye been thinkin'?"

"Well...Lord Callander takes good care of me and my folks, but...."

"But?"

"But I've been thinkin' I'd like to see some of the world."

Angus felt a chill of fear over what the boy would say next.

When Willie spoke, his words came out in a rush. "I'm goin' to join the regiment."

"No," Angus said firmly, "you are not."

"Why not?"

"Ye're yer mother's only son. Ye'll break her heart if you leave."

"I won't be gone forever. I'll come home when my stint is up."

"Sure of that, are ye? Listen to me, lad." He stood up, towering over the boy and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Ye'll see more than the world. Ye'll see pain and blood and death. And ye'll learn there are *worse* things than death. Ye might even—"

The scream came from the garden of the house and Angus knew instantly it was Em's. He took off running, with Willie following close behind. They charged through the side gate and up the main pathway.

Angus could not believe the scene before him.

Lord Callander lay at the foot of the terrace, with his head on the ground and his legs still on the steps. Em sat next to him, stroking his face and calling his name, begging him to wake up. Lord and Lady Stockdale stood at the top of the steps and watched. They made no move to assist their uncle.

By the time Angus reached them, the rest of the staff had come running out of the house. Weston was the only one with status enough among the servants to even think of touching their master and he was the first one to reach him. He began to lift Lord Callander.

"No!" Angus yelled. "Don't move him. He may have an injury to his neck."

Weston bristled at being given a command by a groom. "What are we to do then, leave him lie here?"

Angus didn't have time to worry about the manservant's feelings. Nodding at Weston, he said, "You and Hamish, go and bring the door off the pantry. Willie, take Jezebel, ride into town for the doctor." As the boy nodded and started to run off, Angus called after him, "And don't come back without him!"

"Is he going to be all right?" Em's voice was so soft, Angus almost didn't hear her.

He wanted to reassure her, but even as he opened his mouth to say "Yes" the pain and fear in her sky blue eyes stopped him. He couldn't lie to her. "I don't know," he whispered. When she covered her mouth to muffle a sob, he hurried to try to give her some hope to cling to. "It's too soon to tell, milady. Let us wait and see what the doctor says."

A short while later, Weston and Hamish brought the door. At Angus' direction, they laid it against the steps and, in one motion, moved Lord Callander onto it. Then they each took hold of a corner, but they needed one more man.

Angus looked up at Lord Stockdale. "You." Gesturing with his head, he said, "Take that corner."

The man looked indignant at Angus giving him orders but lifted his edge of the door, nonetheless. They carried Lord Callander upstairs to his bedchamber and slid him, again in one motion, onto the bed. Lord Stockdale turned to Em and said, "Oh my poor dear." He put his arm around her shoulders and Angus saw her stiffen. "No matter what happens you know I will take care of you. Have no fear." From the intonation of the man's voice, there was no mistaking his meaning.

The sound of a sharp inhalation of breath made Angus turn to his right. Lady Stockdale stood just inside the door, staring at her husband with a look of pure hatred. Then she turned and flounced out of the room.

Em had her eyes closed and couldn't see the leer on Lord Stockdale's face, but Angus could. He clenched his fists to keep from punching the bastard.

Em opened her eyes and took a deep breath, her nostrils flared. "Leave this room, Raymond," she said slowly, emphasizing each word.

Stockdale gaped at having been spoken to like a child in front of the servants. Angus had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

But his laughter died when he saw Stockdale's look of cold anger and he wished Em had not antagonized the man. Stockdale was a prick and who knew what he might do for revenge.

Without another word, Stockdale left the room.

When Raymond left his uncle's room after being so rudely dismissed by Emily, he saw Caroline just going into her bedroom. He hurried after her, intending to speak to her about what had happened and to make plans for their future—which to him seemed bright indeed. As he got to her door, however, he distinctly heard the latch click as she locked it.

He went quickly through his own bedchamber, then through the sitting room that divided it from Caroline's. But he heard her lock that door too. "Caro, we must talk." There was no answer from the other side. He jiggled the handle as if that would do any good.

*Damn the woman*, he thought. He was doing this for her as well as for himself. She liked the good life and he had tried desperately to give it to her. So desperately that they were only a few pounds away from bankruptcy and in debt up to their eye sockets. If his uncle didn't die soon they would be forced to begin selling the silver plate.

Surely he would die now. And Raymond would be earl. If Emily were pregnant, it didn't matter to him. Until the child was born, she would be dependant upon him and oh how he would enjoy that. If it was a girl, no problem. If it was a boy, well, many babies die in infancy. *As do their mothers*. But he didn't want to think about that. He wanted to think about Emily and how she would have to beg him for every crumb of food and every rag on her back. Oh yes, he would enjoy that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fen sat on the window seat for a long time, trembling. She could not have seen what she thought she just saw. *Ye're stupid, Fen, everyone has told ye that*.

"What are ye doin' sittin' here, child?" Her mother hurried down the hall toward her. "Come and help. The master has been hurt."

"I know, I—" Fen stopped. No one, not even her mother, would believe her if she said that man had tripped his uncle and made him fall down the stairs. No, she must have seen it wrong.

Her mother was already past her. "I'm coming, Mama," Fen said.

Weston had shooed Hamish and the women servants out of the room so that he could remove his master's clothing. Angus supported Lord Callander's head while they took off his jacket and shirt. Then together they worked his pants down over his hips, taking care not to jostle him overmuch. He and Weston each took one leg and peeled down his stockings. Startled, Angus stopped for a moment and stared.

He had never really noticed how thin and shriveled Lord Callander's legs had become. It was no wonder he had fallen down the steps. He was amazed the man could walk at all.

He darted a quick glance at Em, but she was still totally absorbed with her husband, holding his hand and stroking it against her cheek. Then she took her handkerchief out of her sleeve, moistened a corner of it with her tongue and began to wipe his face. For the first time, Angus noticed the swelling on the side of Callander's forehead and the blood still trickling down into his hair.

He stepped out into the hall, not surprised to see the other servants lingering there, waiting for news. "Fen," he said, "bring some very cold water and some cloths, please.

Hamish, we need more firewood for this room, lots of it, please and then if ye could keep watch for Willie and the doctor?"

"Aye, Angus," they both said in unison, never questioning his right to take charge in this time of crisis.

"How is he?" asked Essie.

Angus shook his head. "He's still unconscious. I'll stay with her until the doctor comes."

Essie nodded and, wiping away tears with her apron, went downstairs.

Angus went back into the room and stoked the glowing coals of the fire, then added more wood. Once he felt the room heating up, he went to the bedside and gently laid his hand on Em's shoulder. "Let me take yer cloak, milady," he said.

Em allowed him to remove her cloak, still not taking her gaze from Lord Callander. Angus might not have been in the room for all the attention she paid to him. He tried not to let it bother him, but he couldn't deny that it did.

His thoughts were interrupted when Fen returned with the water and cloths.

"Thank you, Fen," Em said. She wet a cloth and wiped the blood from Callander's face. Then she wet another one and laid it on his forehead. "Edgar, my love, wake up. Please wake up." Through it all, Angus noticed that her eyes were still dry.

He went to sit in the chair by the hearth, while Weston began to pace the room. He kept the fire going with the wood Hamish brought in from time to time. The mantle clock ticked away the hours, as they waited for the doctor to come.

The room grew dark as night came on and Weston lit the lamps around the bed. The older man's face was ashen and he looked as if he had aged ten years in the past few hours.

"Go to yer bed, Weston. I'll look after them."

He glanced at Angus, then at Em and said, "No." As he started pacing again, Angus saw him sway, then catch himself by grasping the bedpost.

"Ye're dead on yer feet, man." Angus jumped up and took him by the shoulders, but Weston shrugged him off.

"I'll not leave you alone with her," he said under his breath. "Do you think I haven't noticed the way you look at her?"

"For Christ's sake, Weston, what do ye think I'd do to her wi' her husband lyin' there on the bed?"

"Neither of you need stay with me."

Both men turned in her direction. Weston seemed as surprised as Angus to hear her speak to anyone other than Lord Callander.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. Angus went to open it and ushered the doctor inside.

"Please wait outside, my lady, while I examine him," Dr. Stevenson said.

"No, I'll no' leave him."

Dr. Stevenson looked up at Weston, but the older man still held onto the bedpost, his head bowed. Then the doctor turned to Angus, who shook his head. "She needs to stay."

"Very well." Dr. Stevenson examined Edgar from head to toe—looking into his eyes, tapping his elbows and knees, poking his fingers and toes with a pin. As far as Angus could see, there was no reaction to any of the tests and the doctor's face gave nothing away.

Finally, Dr. Stevenson straightened up and sighed. Em looked up at him with hope in her eyes. "Lady Callander, your husband has a severe concussion."

Em gasped and, with a trembling voice, asked, "Will he be all right?"

"I cannot say, my lady. Only time will tell."

"Can ye no' do something?" Em asked, but Angus knew from experience there was little anyone could do...except wait.

The doctor said, "If he begins to show signs of bleeding into the brain, I can do trephines to drain the blood—"

At that point, the dam burst. Em gave a cry that sounded as if it had come from the depths of a horrific nightmare and tears poured down her cheeks.

A surge of anger swept through Angus' whole body. He wanted to believe it was all an act for the doctor's benefit, but he couldn't do so. He had to admit to himself that she loved her husband and any dreams he had of her being with him, loving him, were dashed in that moment.

"I will stay the night if you wish, my lady, and re-examine him in the morning," the doctor offered.

Em looked up and nodded, wiping her tears away with the heel of her hand. "Yes, Dr. Stevenson, I would appreciate that very much. Angus, would ye ask Mrs. Porter to prepare a room for the doctor?"

He escorted the doctor into the hallway and turned him over to the care of the housekeeper. He headed back to the room, on the pretext of seeing if Em needed him to do anything more for her. But in his heart, he knew he just didn't want to leave her.

For a moment, Angus wondered why he had been so quick to help Callander, but then answered his own question. If Lord Callander died without a son and it didn't look as though there was going to be one now, Stockdale would become the next Earl of Callander. The staff had talked about this eventuality and they all dreaded it, but it now seemed inevitable. Angus could almost hear the prayers of the other servants. He knew he should be praying too, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to pray for.

He knocked lightly on the door. "Come in."

Weston had fallen asleep in a chair. Em still kneeled by Callander's bed, holding his hand and talking to him in a voice choked with tears.

"Don't leave me, Edgar, my love. Please don't leave me. Ye said we'd have time together, but it's hardly been any time a'tall. I love ye so much, my darlin', please wake up. Ye must wake up." She looked up as if suddenly noticing Angus standing there. "Oh Angus, what am I going to do? What am I going to do if he dies?"

Angus felt his ire rising. Just as she had nothing to worry about now, she would have nothing to worry about when her husband died. Surely Callander would have made certain his wife would be taken care of, knowing his time on this earth was limited. With no son to inherit the title, she would only have to change her place of residence. Her future was secured no matter what happened.

"Don't worry, milady. I hear the dower house is quite comfortable."

She couldn't have looked more hurt if he had slapped her.

He bowed his head in shame and left the room.



## Chapter Eight

Caroline was a firm believer that if you wanted anything done properly, you must do it yourself. That was why she found herself walking to the stable while it was still dark outside, trying her best to swallow her fear of horses.

She had lain awake most of the night, torn between anger at that stupid husband of hers and fear. Fear that Edgar wouldn't die or that Emily was carrying his child. Or both. Finally, in the darkest hours of the night, she came up with a plan. Raymond had had the right idea, he simply chose the wrong person. And she knew why. She didn't care if he ran off with the little bitch, as long as she got what she was entitled to. She hadn't pretended to love Raymond all these years just to be cast aside with nothing to show for it.

The moon was bright enough to light her way to the door of the stable. Once inside, she removed the dark cloth she had placed over the lamp she carried. It gave her enough light by which to see but created shadows that threatened her from every angle. After taking a few minutes to distinguish reality from illusion, she started to walk down the row between the stalls. She looked from right to left and into every corner.

She had no idea where the saddles might be kept.

Halfway down the aisle, one of the horses snorted and stamped its foot. Caroline jumped away from the stall door, stifling the scream that rose to her throat. The sounds, the smells, all brought back the memories. She remembered the pain from being thrown by a horse and she remembered her father complaining again that he had been cursed with a daughter...and a clumsy one at that. When the years passed without the birth of a son, he began to drown his disappointment in whisky. From that point on, her life had been hell and it still was. That was why she decided to take matters into her own hands.

Finally, at the end of the aisle, she saw a rack holding an array of saddles. She remembered and had seen enough to know that a "lady" rode sidesaddle, if Emily could be considered a lady. To Caroline, she was just a grasping little whore.

As she suspected, she noticed a sidesaddle at the end of the rack. She examined it more closely with the lamp. It didn't look as if it had been used much, but of course Emily had not been riding lately. *That must be hers*, Caroline thought.

She took the sharp knife she had pilfered from the kitchen and scraped it across the girth on the underside, cutting through the leather just enough to weaken it without the damage, hopefully, being noticeable.

The next time Emily rode, the girth should give way, taking care of her and any child she might be carrying.

Caroline turned and headed back down the aisle. She was almost to the door when a huge head came over one of the stalls and snorted at her. She screamed and scrambled backward.

But instead of the wooden door of the opposite stall, she felt warm, solid, living flesh against her back.

After leaving the house, Angus had gone to his room in the stable and sat on the side of his bed for a long time, his head bowed, his hands hanging loosely between his knees. The shame and the pain in his heart permeated his whole body.

*Why did I say that to her?*

But he knew why. He had wanted to hurt her the way he had been hurt when he was finally forced to face the truth. *She loves her husband.*

In the stories her father had told of her, she sounded like the kind of lass who did not care about possessions and titles. When he found out she had married Callander, however, Angus had begun to doubt Jock Sinclair's assessment of his daughter. Every father thinks the best of his child, doesn't he? So it was easy for Angus to believe that Em was not how Jock had painted her, but rather like any woman who had fallen on hard times and found a way out.

But when he saw the pain his remark had caused her, Angus could no longer deny that she had indeed married for love, not riches. He had to apologize to her, but would she allow him to? Would she even listen?

He finally lay down, but sleep eluded him. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the look on her face and his heart began to hurt again.

Dawn was still a few hours away when he gave up and went into the stable, hoping work would take his mind off Em.

He was surprised to find that he was not alone. It was all he could do not to laugh when the woman backed into him.

"May I help ye, Lady Stockdale?"

She gave a screech and scampered away from him, bumping into Tar's stall. The big stallion swung his head toward her and bared his teeth. She screamed again and jumped away from the stall. Angus moved to catch the lamp before she dropped it in the dry straw at the edges of the aisle.

He again had to stifle a laugh. She looked for all the world like a billiard ball bouncing from one side of the table to the other. "Ye're out and about verra early, milady."

"Yes, um, yes," the woman stuttered. "I could not sleep, you know, what with all the excitement last evening."

"Aye, of course." He remembered her husband saying that she was afraid of horses and wondered what she was doing here in the stable. He decided to egg her on.

"Would ye like me to saddle a horse for ye?" he asked. "We have a fine sidesaddle ye can use."

"No!" she blurted, her eyes as big as saucers. One hand covered her heart, as if it threatened to pop out of her chest. She held the other hand stiffly by her side, within the folds of her skirt. Angus had a strange feeling that she was hiding something, but he couldn't see anything.

"No," she repeated, seeming to have gained back some of her composure. "I just wanted to see this stallion everyone was talking about."

"Well, ye've seen him and rather closely," Angus said, nodding at the big dark head that still peered over the stall door.

"I understand he threw my husband yesterday."

"Aye, that he did."

She had a slight smile on her face now, which appeared to be one of satisfaction. Then, she turned to him and her expression changed. As she eyed him up and down, she looked like a cat that had just lapped up the cream. He was surprised when she completed that impression by licking her lips.

"Or perhaps I came to see you."

A shock ran through him. Surely, she could not mean what he suspected she meant. Did she think he was an amenity provided by the estate, along with her meals and clean sheets?

"The horses are available for riding, milady. I am not."

She gasped. "*How dare you* suggest such a thing?" She raised her hand to slap him, but he caught it in mid-air, his fingers tightening around her wrist.

"An ye'll excuse me, milady, I have work to do." He handed her back the lamp and turned away. He heard her spluttering behind him for a moment, then the sound of her footsteps receded in the direction of the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fen labored up the stairs, burdened by an armful of Lady Stockdale's petticoats that Mrs. Lamond had just finished pressing. She dreaded having to take the clothing to the lady, she frightened Fen so. She was mean and Fen wasn't used to mean people. No one on milord's estate treated her meanly, neither her mother, nor Angus, nor any of the other servants would allow it.

As she neared the door to the guest bedrooms, she heard loud voices and stopped in the hallway, afraid to knock.

"What have you done, Caroline?" she heard the man say.

That nasty woman replied, "You had the right idea, Raymond, but with your usual incompetence, you chose the wrong target. But don't worry, I have taken care of it myself."

The man said again, "What have you done, Caroline?"

And the woman said, "Let's just say that she will get a surprise the next time she goes riding."

Suddenly the door opened and the woman came out. She almost ran into Fen before she stopped. "What are you doing here?" she yelled.

Fen shook so badly she dropped the bundle of petticoats, then she turned and ran back downstairs.

Angus did not go up to the house until suppertime. He had no appetite, so it didn't matter to him that he missed meals. At midday, he had eaten a stale bannock he had found in one of his pockets. He wasn't hungry now, but he wanted to find out what was happening with Lord Callander...and Em.

He had taken only a few bites of Essie's rabbit stew when Fen came in, carrying a tray.

"Well?" asked Essie.

Fen shook her head. "She willna eat nor drink. She just cries." Angus noticed the gleam of tears in Fen's own eyes.

"All right then," Essie said. "Go about yer chores, girl."

Fen set the tray down and left the room. Angus tried to finish his meal, but the food stuck in his throat. He finally gave up and stood to leave.

"Will you take the tray up to her, Angus?"

Startled by her words, he turned to the cook and asked, "Why me?"

"Because o' the way ye took charge after the accident. Lord Callander is a strong master, despite his weak legs. The lass is strong too, in her own way, but this has taken all the starch out of her. She needs a firm hand right now, otherwise she'll end up worse off than milord and he'll need her when he wakes up." Essie said it as if Callander were only sleeping. "I've ne'er seen two people more in love. I pray God milord recovers from this and they can at least have a wee bit more time together."

The cook's words forced Angus to again realize what a fool he had been and how badly he had treated Em. He picked up the tray. "I'll see what I can do."

As he ascended the stairs, his heart grew heavier with each step. He had to face her sometime, now was as good as any. His mind raced to form the words of his apology and he *thought* he had it ready when he got to Lord Callander's bedchamber.

He knocked on the door and heard a soft voice say, "Come in."

Angus shifted the tray to one arm and opened the door. The only light in the room came from the fireplace. He was glad to see that Hamish had kept the fire burning brightly, but no one had bothered to light the lamps.

Emily knelt in the shadows next to Callander's bed, her eyes closed and her hands working the beads of a rosary. She glanced up as Angus entered but went back to her prayers without acknowledging him.

*This isn't going to be easy*, he thought. But he knew it was no less than he deserved.

He walked around the bed to the side where Em knelt. A lamp and a bowl of clean water holding several linen cloths took up most of the space on the nightstand. He glanced at Lord Callander and saw that Em had applied the rags to the knot on her husband's brow.

Angus moved the bowl to the floor and pushed aside the lamp, then set the tray down. "Orders from Essie," he said. "Ye must eat."

She ignored him. He watched her delicate fingers caress each bead as she prayed and thought of how those hands would feel on his body. He shook his head to clear his mind of that thought. Why torture himself with something that could never happen?

He reached down to light the lamp on the bedside table. When he saw her face clearly for the first time since entering the room, his carefully crafted apology fled his brain. "Holy God, lass," he breathed and dropped into a chair next to the table.

Her eyes were nearly swollen shut and red-rimmed from crying. Red streaks from wiping away the tears stained her cheeks and her nose was almost raw from blowing it.

"Ye've nearly cried yerself dry."

She slowly turned her face toward him. Her voice hoarse, she asked, "Why should you care?"

He squeezed his eyes shut against her frank look and hung his head, shaking it from side to side. "Milady," he began softly, "I dinna ken how to ever tell ye how sorry I am for what I said to ye. Ye didna deserve it and it was mean of me."

"Why did ye say it then?"

"I—I don't know." He knew, of course, but he couldn't add his own hurt feelings to the burden she carried. Not now that he had realized her true feelings for her husband. To try to avoid the subject, he reached down and took a cloth in the bowl of water. "Come here," he said.

After a slight hesitation, she leaned toward him and he wiped her face with the cool cloth then laid it against her forehead. Closing her eyes, she sighed and said, "Ah, that feels good." She held the compress in place with her own hands, covering his as she took the cloth from him.

He jerked away from her as if he'd been burned. Her sigh, her words and the touch of her hands conjured up vivid images of those hands caressing his body—and his cock responded instinctively.

When he saw her giving him a questioning look, he said, more gruffly than he intended, "Put the cloth against yer eyes, 'twill take some of the swelling down." Then he turned and poured her a cup of tea. "Essie made her rabbit stew for us tonight. I

think the beastie was one that was after yer neeps," he said, in an attempt to make her smile.

His attempt failed. "I cannae eat." Her gaze went back to her husband. "I've a lump in my throat and naught will go past it."

He handed her the cup. "Drink some tea then. It will go down easy."

"All right," she said. She accepted the cup from him, but her hands shook so much that he reached out to help her steady it. She did not pull away from his touch as he had from hers. She took a sip and finally gave him a quick smile. "It's good. Thank you."

He nodded and they sat in silence for a few minutes as she finished her tea. He refilled her drink and gave it back to her, noticing that her hands appeared a bit steadier. She still had her beads wrapped around the fingers of one hand.

"May I ask ye something, Angus?"

He felt a little uneasy as to what her question might be. "Aye?" he replied softly.

"How did ye know the way to handle Edgar when he fell?"

"Oh that," he said. "Well, after one of the battles, we came across a young lad who had fallen off a large rock. He said his legs felt tingly and he couldna walk, so we lifted him to carry him back to our lines. We neglected to hold his head and when it fell backward, he died instantly." Angus closed his eyes, seeing again the boy's face as if it had only happened yesterday. "The surgeon later told us his neck had snapped. Had we but kept it still, he might have lived."

She placed her hand gently on his. "But, Angus, ye're not a surgeon. Ye couldn't have known."

"Aye, but 'tis bad enough to be killed by the enemy, let alone yer own men."

They fell silent again. Em's innocent question had stirred up a host of images that raced through Angus' mind – memories that invaded his waking thoughts and haunted his dreams so that he awakened screaming and in a cold sweat in the dark of night.

He squeezed his eyes shut briefly to clear the visions away, then looked over at Em. "Milady? May I ask *you* a question?"

She nodded.

"What happened to ye, when ye were turned out of yer house, I mean?"

For a moment, she stared off into space as if seeing it all played out again before her eyes. Then she began, "I left my home with only the clothes on my back and what little food I could carry and hid in the woods and in caves, traveling only in the dark, trying to get to a town, a city, anywhere that I might find work and a safe place to stay. One night I was sae tired, I fell asleep in a ditch by the road. I awakened to find a man staring down at me. It turned out to be one of my father's tenants. He and his family were heading to Stirling, hoping to find work there, and they took me with them. I went to the hiring fair and that's where Lord Stoc – Raymond found me and hired me as governess to his children." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "I didna ken at the time that he would want something more."

Angus felt a sudden urge to go and kill the man. Then he began to wonder – did Callander take Em away from Stockdale because he truly loved her, or just to deny his nephew of her? But no, he had seen his master and Em together. There was no doubt Callander loved her as much as she loved him.

“I met Edgar at Raymond’s house the last time he came to visit.” Her voice broke with tears again.

Angus had heard enough. He couldn’t stay in the room any longer. If he did, he knew he would have Em in his arms, comforting her, consoling her, loving her. He stood up quickly. “Ye were lucky twice over then. Try to eat the stew before it goes cold.”

He felt Em’s gaze on his back as he almost ran from the room.

## Chapter Nine

Emily had finished bathing Edgar and set the basin of water aside. Weston helped her dress him in a fresh nightshirt and now Emily and Fen were changing the bed linens.

"How is he today?"

From the corner of her eye, Emily saw Fen jump as if she'd seen a snake. *Perhaps she has*, Emily thought, as she looked up to see Raymond and Caroline standing in the doorway. She knew the inquiry had been voiced by Raymond, although the man had made an attempt to sound concerned, Emily heard no sincerity. She knew they had been hoping to find that Edgar had died during the night.

"He is the same," Emily replied. She tucked in the last corner of the sheets and positioned Edgar on his back again, fluffing the pillows under his head.

"Oh dear," said Caroline. "Poor old Uncle Edgar."

*Old?* Emily bristled at the description. Edgar was barely forty and two, hardly old, even though his disability might make him seem that way. His hair was still dark and thick and only a smattering of gray graced his temples.

"You've been with him day and night now for two days, my dear," Caroline continued. "Why don't you let me sit with him awhile and you go and get some fresh air?"

"I'm fine, Caroline. I shall stay with him."

"But you're so pale, Em—" At a look from Emily, she corrected herself. "My lady. Why don't you go riding? It will put some color back into your cheeks."

Emily thought she heard a small squeak from Fen, but the girl was always skittish around strangers and Caroline was enough to frighten anyone. She picked up the bowl of water and turned to the little maid. "Will you take the water away and bring fresh for me?" She started to hand it to her when she noticed that Fen was staring at Caroline and trembling. "Fen? Are you all right?" Emily asked.

Fen continued to stare until Emily touched her shoulder, then she jumped again. To Emily, she looked as if she had come out of a trance. "What is it, Fen? Is something wrong?"

Fen's gaze darted back to Caroline, then she said, "N-no, milady."

*Why don't I believe her?*, Emily thought. The girl was clearly afraid of Caroline but Emily didn't know why. She only knew that if Caroline had done something to hurt Fen—physically or emotionally—she would throttle the woman within an inch of her life. She decided she would have a talk with Fen later. For now, she just wanted those two out of Edgar's room.



"All right, Fen. You may go and help Mrs. Lamond." The young girl curtsied and almost ran from the room. Emily turned to Raymond and Caroline. "I shall stay with my husband. Thank you both for your concern." The words tasted sour on her tongue. "You may go now."

Emily was somewhat surprised that they did.

Angus balanced the tray on one arm and tapped lightly on the door.

"Who is it?" came the curt reply.

*Something must be very wrong*, he thought. He had never heard her be so abrupt or so challenging to anyone. "'Tis only Angus, milady. May I come in?"

"Aye." It was said more softly, but still he feared what he would find on the other side of the door. Had Lord Callander taken a turn for the worse? Her voice, however, did not sound as if it came from her husband's bedside. That in itself was worrisome, since she had hardly gone more than a foot away from him since his accident. He entered cautiously, looking first at the spot where she usually sat. Her chair was vacant.

He peeked around the door and saw her then. She was pacing back and forth across the room, her hands bunching and wrinkling the material of her skirt. He knew now that something other than her husband's illness was upsetting her, he had seen her do that before when she was angry or worried.

"I've brought you some breakfast. 'Tis porridge, it will go down easy."

"Take it away. I don't want it." She continued to pace, but she seemed too weary to put one foot in front of the other. At one point she swayed and only kept from falling by grabbing the back of a chair.

"Milady? What's wrong? Tell me."

The commanding tone of his voice stopped her. It seemed as if she were going to reproach him for his disrespect, but she must have seen the concern in his eyes, concern not only for the woman he loved but for a friend. *Yes*, he thought, *now we can be friends. If I can't have her as my wife, my lover, I shall settle for friendship.*

"Oh Angus. I canna bear it anymore, those two, hanging around, sticking their noses in, like a flock of vultures circling, waiting for the carrion. And Fen is afraid of Caroline and I don't know why, but if she has hurt that child, I swear I will...oh I just wish they would go home."

Angus set the tray down on a table. Then he crossed to the chair nearest the path Em paced as she continued to ramble, giving voice to all her pent-up anger and frustration. He perched on the arm and grabbed her hands, pulling her toward him. "Listen to me."

His tone of voice seemed to startle her into silence and she stared at him.

He gave her hands a quick shake. "Tell them to leave."

She sighed. "I canna do that. Raymond is his nephew and his heir if Edgar and I—" She stopped, apparently not wishing to discuss her and Callander's intimate relationship with him.

"He is not the heir yet. Lord Callander still lives. You are the Countess of Callander. This is *your* home. Your rank is superior to theirs. Tell them to get the bluidy hell out!"

She looked at him for some time and he watched the change come over her. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, then walked to the bell pull. When Weston responded to the call, she said, "Weston, please tell Lord and Lady Stockdale I wish to see them at once."

"They are not here, milady. They've taken the coach into Stirling for shopping."

Em gave a short laugh. "Shopping with what, when they have no money? Thank you, Weston. Please bring them to me upon their return."

She went back to the chair by Edgar's bedside and sat down. She began to rub her hand around her neck and stretch it from side to side. Before he remembered his place, Angus positioned himself behind the chair and began to massage the tight muscles of her shoulders. Instead of stopping him, she let her head fall back against his stomach. "Mmmm, that feels good. My neck is so stiff."

"That's because ye've been sitting here for two days, hunched over his bed. Why don't ye go and lie down for a bit? I'll watch over him for ye."

"No, I don't want to leave. But my neck hurts and my back."

"I have some salve that I use on the horses for muscle strains." Out of the corner of her eye, she gave him a doubtful look. "Don't worry. I've used it on myself," he said. "It works and it smells of mint. Trust me."

"All right," she said, with a slight smile, "but if I develop a taste for alfalfa, I'll know who to blame."

He took it as a good sign that her sense of humor was coming out again. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be here," she said, taking Edgar's hand and rubbing it against her cheek.

"Oh that feels so good," Emily sighed as Angus rubbed the liniment into the muscles of her neck and shoulders. "And ye were right, it doesn't smell bad at all." She tried to focus on that and not how wonderful Angus' hands felt on her skin. It seemed to her that he was massaging her more as a lover would than as someone just trying to help her soreness, but it must be her imagination. She wouldn't acknowledge her deepest thoughts—that it could be wishful thinking. Her husband was lying there comatose, possibly dying, how could she let herself think of another man in that way?

At the knock on the door, Angus jumped away from her as if guilty. She felt a blush rise in her cheeks, feeling slightly guilty herself. "Yes?" she called.

Weston entered. "Lord and Lady Stockdale have returned, milady."

"Thank you, Weston. Please show them in."

She rose from her chair and went to sit at Edgar's desk. From the corner of her eye, she saw Angus take up a position at her side, but slightly behind her, his arms crossed over his broad chest. He looked intimidating to her – she hoped he would also appear that way to the Cavendishes.

Raymond strode into the room and Caroline flounced in, both of them acting as if they hadn't a care in the world. Weston remained standing by the door as if he suspected he might be needed. He was as protective of Edgar as Emily herself was.

"Any change yet?" Caroline asked. There was a hard edge to her voice. Emily's anger grew to the point where she could barely breathe. She vowed to herself at that moment that she would do anything she could to give Edgar a son – anything!

Before she could answer, Raymond reached over and shook Edgar's shoulder. "Uncle Edgar? Wake up, Uncle," he said loudly.

Emily jumped up out of her chair. "*Don't you touch him!*"

Angus made a move toward Raymond, but Emily held out her arm to stop him. Raymond jumped back as if he'd been burned. It must have surprised him to hear Emily speak so. She did feel rather like a kitten that suddenly had learned how to roar like a lion.

She sat back down at the desk and took a quill from its stand. There was silence in the room as glances passed among Angus, Raymond and Caroline. She could feel them all watching her at times too and was pleased that she had them wondering what she was up to.

Finally, she finished writing and rose, holding out a piece of paper to Raymond. "This is a bank draft for five thousand pounds. That should be enough to pay your tailor's bills and get you back to your home in comfort. You will take it and you will leave this house within the hour."

"But-but Uncle –" Raymond began.

"If Edgar's condition changes, I will certainly notify you. At this time, however, we don't require your help or your attentions. Mr. Weston?"

"Yes, milady?"

"Will you please see that Lord and Lady Stockdale's carriage is made ready?"

Weston gave a deep bow and when he straightened up, Emily thought she saw the ghost of a smile on his face. "Yes, milady." He held the door open.

Raymond and Caroline stared at her for a few seconds. Then Caroline huffed, stuck her nose up in the air and strutted out of the room. Before he left, Raymond gave Emily such a look that it frightened her for moment. Then Angus moved to stand at her elbow and she was overwhelmed by a feeling of security she had not known since before the war. Edgar had given her love and comfort, but she knew he was physically unable to help her if she were truly in danger.

But Angus was there. He would protect her. She didn't know why, but she felt there was more to his protectiveness than simply that it was expected of him, as she was the countess.

Em went back to Edgar's bedside and took his hand in hers. Angus wanted to stay but he couldn't think of a reason to do so now. "If ye'll not be needing me, milady, I'll get back to my chores."

"No, Angus, please stay," Em answered quickly. "I—I don't want to be by myself just yet."

"Of course I'll stay." He crossed to the chair he had sat in the night before, next to Edgar's bedside table. He watched Em closely, she seemed to sway in her chair and could barely keep her eyes open. "Lass, will ye please go and lie down? Ye're ready to drop. Ye'll be no good to him when he awakens."

If she noticed his slip of etiquette by addressing her so informally, she didn't acknowledge it. "No, I don't want to leave him."

The note of finality in her voice stopped Angus from pressing the issue further. Instead, he moved his chair closer and began to massage her shoulders again. She sighed and laid her cheek against one of his hands. They sat in silence for some minutes, then Angus heard voices and the rumble of carriage wheels in the courtyard below.

Em must have heard them too for she rose and went to the window. Angus came to stand behind her. "They're going. Thank God," Em said, the relief clear in her voice.

"Aye," he said, "good riddance to bad rubbish."

Em giggled then began to laugh outright. Soon, she was laughing so hard she was holding her stomach. Angus chuckled and smiled at her as tears of mirth ran down her face. But gradually, he noticed she was no longer laughing—rather, now, she was crying just as hysterically as she had been laughing. She was still doubled over, clutching her stomach, and Angus caught her before she fell to the floor.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his collar. "Oh Angus, oh God, I am so afraid."

"Shh, hush now, there's naught to be afraid of now they've gone." He sat down in a chair near the fireplace, with her in his lap. "Ye dinna have to worry about them coming back here, at least for a while." He stroked her damp hair back from her face and whispered in her ear, "Hush now, everything is goin' to be fine. I'll never let any harm come to ye, so long as I live."

She hugged him tighter. Eventually her sobs diminished to occasional hiccoughing sighs and her hold on him relaxed. A short while later, he realized she had fallen asleep. Still he held her, taking advantage of the unexpected opportunity to kiss her cheek and then her lips—gently, softly, so as not to awaken her.

The room grew dark as the sun began to set. Angus knew that soon Hamish would come in to light the fire and he would be discovered holding the lady of the house in an amorous embrace.

Reluctantly, he rose and laid her down on the bed next to her husband. He lit the fire himself then went to sit in Em's chair...at Edgar's bedside.

## Chapter Ten

Angus heard a soft moan from the bed and was surprised to see it was Lord Callander. Em had curled up on her side against her husband and was still fast asleep.

"Welcome back, milord," Angus said.

Lord Callander turned his head slightly and looked at Angus. "Where have I been that you're welcoming me back?" Then he groaned. "Lord, I feel as if I've been trampled by Tar. I wasn't, was I? Please tell me I didn't try to ride again."

"No, milord. Ye-ye merely fell down the steps."

Callander groaned again. "Oh how foolish of me. And I had been doing so well lately." Then he noticed Em lying by his side. "Is Emily all right?"

"She's well, aye, merely exhausted. She's no' left yer side since ye fell."

"So you've looked after her and me both? Thank you, Angus."

"It was no trouble, milord."

Callander turned slightly toward his wife. "Oh my poor dear," he said, stroking her cheek. "I'm such a burden to you."

Em stirred at his touch and opened her eyes. "Edgar?" She leaned up on one arm and looked down at him. "Oh Edgar, oh my God. Ye're awake, oh thank God." She wrapped her arms around him and held him close. "Are ye all right, my love?"

He smiled at her and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. "I'm fine, my sweet, I'm fine."

Angus left the room and closed the door quietly behind him. Then he leaned against the wall and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to get the image of Callander and Em on the bed, holding each other, out of his mind. Who was he trying to fool? He could never be merely friends with Em, he loved her too much for that. He had a decision to make. It would mean breaking his promise to always take care of her, but there was no help for it.

If Lord Callander continued to recover, Angus knew what he had to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, Emily sat at Edgar's bedside, looking somewhat refreshed, but Edgar could tell she was still anxious. "How is your head? Do you want another cold cloth?"

"Stop fretting, my love. I feel much better. My pride is more sore than my head. 'Twas so clumsy of me to take a tumble down those steps. By the way, where is my doting nephew?"

Emily hesitated and he saw her hands fisted around the material of her skirt. Finally she said, "I sent them packing."

Edgar almost choked, trying to stifle his laughter. "You did what?"

"They were grating on my nerves. I told them to leave." She hesitated again and he waited for the rest of the story. "I gave them five thousand pounds. I hope that was all right."

"Of course it was. What's mine is yours, you know that." Then he did laugh. "I daresay it was worth every penny."

"I'm afraid he will still try to make trouble for us."

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. He would reassure her even if he didn't feel confident himself that they'd heard the last of his nephew. "Don't worry, my love. I will make sure you are well protected before I leave this world." The man he had in mind for the job had already shown himself to be capable of and amenable to the task.

There was a soft knock at the bedroom door. "Come in," he said.

Weston entered. "Milord," he said, then turned to Emily and smiled. "Good day, milady. I trust you're feeling more rested."

Edgar looked from one of them to the other, puzzled. Weston had opposed his marriage to Emily. Even though he had never said so, Edgar could tell by the man's cold demeanor toward her. But Weston's feelings had clearly changed for some reason.

Emily returned Weston's smile but appeared puzzled herself. "I am, Weston. Thank you for asking."

"Dr. Stevenson and another gentleman are here, milord."

"Thank you, Weston. Show them in."

After he left, Emily turned to Edgar and pulled a face. Edgar laughed. "Whatever you've done, my love, it seems you've conquered Weston."

"I'm glad of it. Perhaps the Cavendishes were grating on his nerves too."

"No doubt."

They were still laughing together when Stevenson entered, accompanied by a man Edgar hadn't seen before. "Lady Callander," Dr. Stevenson said, bowing to Emily. Then he turned to Edgar. "Well, I see my patient is awake. Lord Callander, this is Dr. Montgomery, a colleague of mine from Edinburgh, who is visiting me for a few days. I told him about your case and he asked to come along."

Dr. Montgomery bowed. "It's a pleasure to meet you, my lady, Lord Callander."

"And you, doctor," Edgar replied.

"We were wondering if you would mind if Dr. Montgomery examined you as well, my lord."

"No, of course not," Edgar replied.

Dr. Stevenson looked at Emily. "If you'll excuse us, my lady?"

"I am not leaving, doctor. I am well aware of my husband's condition."

Dr. Stevenson caught Edgar's eye. Suddenly, Edgar was filled with a sense of foreboding. "It's all right, Emily, I'll call you when the doctors are finished with me and tell you everything they said." Emily looked doubtful, but he squeezed her hand and nodded.

With great reluctance, he could tell, she rose and left the room.

For the next half hour the two physicians put him through his paces. They poked and prodded, pinched and palpated him from head to toe. They had him lift his legs, push against them with his feet and hands, tapped his knees and elbows with a small hammer. Because of their blank faces Edgar could not tell which tests he passed or failed.

Finally Dr. Montgomery straightened up and gave a deep sigh. "Dr. Stevenson tells me, my lord, that you are aware your condition is progressive and irreversible."

Edgar nodded, unable to find his voice. Of course he knew about his disease, but it still hurt to hear it spoken aloud.

"Has the fall weakened you more than usual, my lord?"

"I cannot tell, for I have not been up and about as yet."

Dr. Montgomery looked stern. "You must be very careful, my lord. Each fall you take can hasten the damage caused by your illness. May I ask about your children, my lord?"

Edgar saw Dr. Stevenson cast a quick glance at his colleague, then at him. "I have no children, doctor, although my wife and I are trying."

"I would advise against that, my lord."

Edgar's mouth went dry. "Why?"

Instead of answering Edgar's question, Dr. Montgomery asked another one. "What of other members of your family, my lord? Your father, grandfather? Were either of them afflicted so?"

Edgar thought for a moment. "My grandfather died before I was born, but I was told he used a wheeled chair. My father used a cane in the years before he died." Edgar's speech slowed as the meaning of his memories became clear to him. "He died early in his fifties. Oh God."

"Yes, you have discerned why I asked that question. I have seen this particular condition run in families and I fear any children you have may be likewise afflicted."

"I see," Edgar managed to say. His heart felt like lead in his chest. "Do not tell this to my wife. I will break the news to her when I feel the time is right."

"Very well, my lord," Dr. Stevenson said. "I will be back to check on you in a few days."

Edgar could not face Emily yet. He knew that, after the doctors left, she would come back to him immediately. When he heard the door open, he pretended to be asleep.



Emily woke Edgar to have him take some dinner. He seemed cheerful, but she suspected for some reason that it was forced. From the way he watched her as she prepared for bed that night she knew something was wrong. She sat down next to him in the bed and confronted him. "Edgar, what is it? What did the doctors say?"

Edgar took her hand and squeezed it tightly. "Emily, tell me, are you pregnant?" He appeared frantic to know the answer.

For a moment she was speechless. Then it dawned on her. *He's dying. The doctors told him he hasn't long to live. He's hoping I'm carrying his child.* She could not hold back the tears as she replied, "No, my love, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I'm not."

His grip on her hand eased. "Oh thank God," he said, rubbing his other hand across his forehead.

"What?" Emily cried. "Edgar, I thought you wanted a child."

"I do, but listen to me, Emily. You cannot have a child by me."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Why not? I know it hasn't happened yet, but we can keep trying—"

"No!" The vehemence of his tone frightened her. He must have seen it in her eyes for his voice softened as he explained, "Dr. Montgomery said he has seen this disease run in families, passed down from parent to child. When I think back on it, both my father and my grandfather may have had this."

"Oh dear God."

"I will not sentence a child of mine to this torture. It would be too cruel."

Emily nodded her agreement even as the sadness threatened to overwhelm her. It was possible their child would escape the illness, but she knew Edgar would never take that chance.

What were they to do now? She wanted a child...no, she wanted Edgar's child. But now that was not to be.

Edgar seemed to have read her thoughts. "There is another avenue open to us."

Emily stared at him, puzzled. "Do you mean take in someone else's child?"

"No." Edgar took a deep breath and tried to stop his voice and his body from shaking. With his next words, he could lose the only woman he had ever truly loved. Would she be so appalled at his suggestion that she would leave him? Or, if she agreed to his proposal, would he lose her to the man she chose?

"I have been giving it some thought, Emily."

When he hesitated, she said, "Aye?"

"I think you should take a lover."

She was silent for a moment then she began to giggle. "Oh Edgar, do be serious."

"I am being serious."

She stopped laughing. Then she wrapped her arms around her knees as if to protect herself from him and his suggestion. "Is this a trap?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"What? No, of course it isn't a trap." It never occurred to him she would see it that way. "What do you mean?"

"Are ye trying to find a reason to divorce me?"

"No, absolutely not! Why would I want to do that?"

"If I can't give you a child, ye no longer need me. I thought you loved me."

"I do love you, Emily, with every bone in my body."

"Then how can you ask me to do such a thing?"

"Because I think it may be the solution to our problem. It is not unusual for a man to have a mistress or a woman to take a lover."

"No," she breathed, then more strongly, "*no*, not this woman. I won't do that, I cannae do that. I love *you*, Edgar. I don't want to lie with anyone else."

He pulled her down beside him and laid his hand on her cheek. "Please, love, hear me out. I—"

"No, I won't listen. There has to be another way. Perhaps Dr. Stevenson could do something."

"You know there is no other way, my love. The child will be raised as mine and if it is a boy, he shall become the tenth Earl of Callander." As if anticipating her next question, he said, "I will not love him or her any less than I would a child of my own."

He could see the unshed tears in her eyes. He wondered if this idea was causing her more pain than it was really worth. Then he remembered the way Raymond had acted toward her and he knew it had to be done.

His decline in health had been so gradual that most of the time he had been able to accept it. Now all the agony and frustration of his slowly failing body welled up inside him. He had done her an injustice by letting her fall in love with him. He had known it was possible he would be unable to father a child and he had told her that from the start. But he never suspected that he would be forced to *choose* not to.

His mouth was so dry, he could hardly force out his next words. "There is something else, my love."

"What? What else are ye not tellin' me?"

"I know you have had no experience of men, Emily, but you must realize that I am not, well, as able as a normal man is."

"I don't understand."

"I...I want you to know how it feels to have a real man inside you."

"Oh Edgar, don't say that. You *are* a real man, you are a wonderful lover."

He chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. "But you have no basis for comparison, my dear."

"And I don't want one."

He had one more card left to play. "Emily, I want to see your child, our child, before I die."

At that, she did begin to cry. He held her tightly and pressed her head against his shoulder. He ran his fingers through her soft, golden curls and inhaled her scent, just as he had done the first night she lay by his side. When his time on earth was done, the only regret he would have was leaving her. He had to make sure she would be taken care of and he trusted her to choose the right man. The same man he had thought of as simply her protector—the one who might now be her lover.

“Hush now,” he said. “We will talk more about it in the morning.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Breakfast the next morning was a very quiet affair. Emily struggled even to keep her eyes open until she had had her first cup of tea. She had lain awake most of the night, listening to Edgar breathing beside her. She could tell that he had not slept either. Now she stole glances at him across the small table in his room, but when she found him looking at her with a tender smile, she immediately averted her gaze. To his credit, Edgar didn’t press her, he seemed to sense that she needed time to digest the plan he had put forth.

For the next few days, neither of them mentioned it. Edgar was able to get up and move around, ironically somewhat better than he had before the fall. He even walked a bit in the garden and that seemed to bolster his strength even more.

But it was still a dark cloud hanging over their heads.

After breakfast one morning, about a week after Edgar had proposed his plan, they settled in the library as was their habit. Emily sat and stared into the fire for a long time before she said anything. Then she haltingly began to ask questions.

“Do you still want me to go through with this?”

“Yes.”

She drew her legs up under her in the chair and hugged a shawl tightly around her shoulders, yet she still felt chilled. “Whom should I pick?”

“The choice is yours, my dear. You will have to be intimate with this man. I cannot make that decision for you.”

She began to nibble at her fingernails. “Should the man have dark hair, like yours?”

“It doesn’t matter. You are fair, I am dark. Any child of the union could be said to take after either of us. Of course, a redhead might raise some eyebrows.”

She gave a short laugh and turned a smile on him, appreciating that he was trying to find some humor in the situation. “What of his education?”

“That doesn’t matter either, as long as he is intelligent enough to be discreet. I would expect him to appreciate the gravity of our situation and not take advantage of it.”

He seemed to have it all figured out. She herself was still trying to get over the shock of her own husband telling her to take a lover. She sighed in frustration. “But I

don't know anyone, Edgar. Except for your tenants and the staff and a few couples of your acquaintance, we haven't seen anyone since we got back from the Continent."

He sat for a moment as if thinking. "You're right, my dear. We have shut ourselves off. That has been the case with me for quite some time, but it is not fair to you. We will give a dinner party and perhaps a gaming night afterwards. I can invite some married couples as well as unmarried men, it would look less suspicious that way. Shall I send out the invitations?"

Reluctantly, she agreed, yet she still worried about what would happen when she went through with his plan. And she wondered if she could indeed go through with it at all.

## Chapter Eleven

This one had horrible teeth, that one had body odor and the one over there dressed like a fop. There was not one man at the soirée whom Emily could stand to have touch her, much less make love to her. And worse yet, possibly father her child!

Edgar looked at her across the card table, where he was trying to lose each hand as a courtesy to his guests and shrugged his shoulders. She tried to smile, but her lips wouldn't make the necessary movement. Her head was pounding and the smell of the cheroots the men were smoking was making her queasy. She needed some air. As soon as she was sure that the few women in attendance were settled in the library with their tea and tarts, she made her escape to the garden.

She scurried down the steps and into the side rose garden, so that no one would see her and try to lure her back inside. Edgar's favorite pink roses glowed a ghostly white in the moonlight. She remembered how he had told that her womanhood reminded him of these flowers –

*"...the petals of your sex are like the roses in my garden at home – a deep, deep pink sparkling with the dew of your arousal."*

She quickly put that thought from her mind. A feeling of despair washed over her. What was she going to do? She didn't want to disappoint Edgar, she loved him so much she would do anything he asked. But what he was asking her to do now seemed more than she could bear.

They had discussed it further and he still believed it to be the best plan. For him, she would go through with it. She turned to go back to the party and find the man who was the least repulsive.

As she took one last deep breath of the rose-scented air, another fragrance caught her attention. It was smoke, but of a different type from the smelly cigars of Edgar's guests. It was sweet and rich, like cherry wood burning in a fireplace. She followed her nose to the honeysuckle arbor. "Angus?"

He jumped up from the bench and gave a quick bow. "Milady, forgive me for taking my leisure in the garden." He gestured with the pipe he held in his hand. "I like to have a pipe sometimes and I dinna like to smoke near the stable."

"That's all right, Angus. You may come into the garden anytime you wish. I was just startled to find you here at this hour. Is all the noise disturbing you?"

"Och, no," he replied. "'Tis good to see Lord Callander entertaining again. I never thought he would."

"Hmm, well, it's not all that entertaining," Emily mumbled.

"I beg yer pardon?"

"Oh nothing." She looked toward the house, dreading the thought of going back inside. She felt much more at ease here in the garden with the scents of honeysuckle and pipe smoke and Angus' soft, lilting voice. Perhaps that was the root of her problem. She was a Highland lass tossed among Sassenachs and Lowlanders. Except for Edgar, she wouldn't give tuppence for the lot of them.

Angus' voice snapped her out of her reverie. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked.

"I was just sayin' that's a lovely gown. I usually only see ye in yer riding clothes."

"Oh uh, thank you, Angus." His comment made her take note of what he was wearing. The laces of his rough linen shirt were undone, revealing a smattering of dark curls on his chest. His breeches fit his hips and thighs like a second skin and his white stockings accented his muscular calves. To Emily, this was how a man should look—not like those prancing peacocks in her drawing room, with their gaudy brocaded jackets, padded hose and, she suspected, equally padded pants.

His voice again interrupted her thoughts. "Are you all right, milady?"

She realized she must have been staring at him and she felt a flush rise in her cheeks. "Aye, yes, I—I suppose I should go back to our guests."

"Aye, ye probably should," he said with a smile.

"Good night, Angus."

"Good night, milady."

She turned and reluctantly made her way back to the party. Her feet grew heavier with each step she took toward the house. When she reached the stone terrace outside the drawing room, she turned and looked back at the garden. She thought she saw a shadow on the path she had just taken, but in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sky had not yet begun to lighten when Angus finally gave up trying to sleep. He had watched the people moving around inside Lord and Lady Callander's parlor for quite some time after she left him. Then he had gone to his bed and tossed and turned most of the night. Each time he had managed to drift off, a vision came to him—a wee Highland lass in a gown of sky blue silk that matched her eyes, the bodice cut low to reveal the swell of her plump breasts. Both the cloth of her gown and her creamy skin glowed in the light from the windows when she had turned and looked back at him. His breath caught in his throat and he stood mesmerized, hoping to catch a glimpse of her again among the crowd of guests.

Before that night, he had known he loved her and wanted her. But he still had thought of her only as the young girl her father had spoken of. He had watched her mature into her role as countess over the past few months but never really thought of her body as being that...ripe.

The sight of her awakened feelings in him that had been buried for a long time. He still had nightmares about his time in prison and there was no room left for more pleasant dreams. Now it occurred to him how long it had been since he had lain with a woman. He had gone straight from the jail into Lord Callander's service with no time in between to even look at one.

Here on the estate, there really had been no one to tempt him. He now realized that the urge to make love had not completely deserted him, even if the opportunity to do so was not forthcoming. *After all, a man has his needs.*

But he could not imagine having anyone fulfill those needs except Em.

*She came to his bed, her gown the color of a summer sky. His cock rose and swelled just at the sight. He stood behind her and loosened her bodice, sliding it off her arms, then untied her skirt, letting it pool around her feet. One hand reached up and pulled the combs from her hair, curls the color of spun gold cascaded down her back. At the same time, his other hand came around her, under her chemise to clasp her plump breast. She leaned back against him and her buttocks rubbed against his shaft, hard now and straining at his breeks.*

*She turned around and undid his laces, then reached inside and grasped his flesh, sliding the smooth skin up and down his hard length. With a sly smile, she knelt at his feet and he gasped as her mouth closed around –*

Angus awoke with his cock in his hand and warm cum seeping through his fingers.

Emily could feel Edgar studying her across the breakfast table the morning after the party. She knew he was waiting to see if she had reached a decision—she hadn't and was reluctant to tell him so. His efforts at small talk were admirable, but only served to make her more ill at ease.

"What are your plans for the day, my love?" he asked.

"I think I shall go for a ride." She hoped some fresh air and exercise would clear her head.

"That's a good idea. It seems a beautiful day for one."

With that, she rose, gave him a quick kiss and headed to the stable.

Angus approached her as soon as she entered. "Good morning, milady."

"Good morning, Angus. Will you saddle Jezebel for me please?" Buttercup was too docile a mount for the ride she needed today.

"I know ye can handle her, milady, but with Tar along –"

"I shall ride alone today, Angus," she responded, more curtly than she meant to. She turned her head away to avoid his curious gaze.

He was silent for a moment then said, "As ye wish, Lady Callander." She was surprised that he addressed her with her full title but supposed her demeanor this morning had prompted it.

When he had finished saddling the mare, he led her out into the yard and helped Emily into the saddle. As he adjusted the stirrups slightly, he said, “Ye seem troubled today, milady. If there is anything I can do for ye—”

“Ha!” She let go a short burst of laughter then said, “Oh Angus, if only ye knew what it was ye could do for me, ye might not be so quick to offer.” With that she turned Jezebel’s head and kicked her into a gallop.

As she rode to the top of the ridge, a host of sensory images swirled through Emily’s mind—dandies in peacock-toned brocades and silks, stale-smelling cigar ashes, overwhelming spicy-scented cologne and foul breath. Then fresh air, the faint perfume of dew-covered roses and honeysuckle, fragrant pipe smoke, clean linen and snug, fawn-colored trousers.

The answer hit her with such force, it felt like a blow to her stomach. Suddenly, she knew the only man, other than Edgar, whom she could imagine touching her in that most intimate way. The only man her body could possibly welcome inside. She yanked back on Jezebel’s reins so hard that the mare skidded to a halt and reared back on her hind legs.

*“Angus MacNeill!”*



## Chapter Twelve

Emily sat on the rug, her arm resting on the raised hearth. Despite her nearness to the flames, her whole body trembled with chills. She wrapped her shawl more tightly around her nightdress and took yet another deep breath, dreading the encounter that was to come at any moment.

When she heard the tapping of Edgar's cane coming down the hallway, she knew it was time to face him. She had no idea how he would respond and hoped that perhaps her decision would make him abandon this whole idea.

As he entered the room, he said, "Emily? Are you all right?"

She nodded, trying to swallow past the knot of nervousness in her throat. Her heart pounded in her chest and her hands shook. She felt the beginnings of a dreadful headache.

He sat down in one of the two chairs in front of the fireplace and leaned toward her. "Something is troubling you, my dear. Can't you tell me what it is?"

She took a deep breath and glanced up at him, then quickly looked away again. "I-I have decided."

"Oh I see." There was no need for him to ask her what she had decided.

"You said his coloring didn't matter."

"That's true, I did."

"Nor his education or status in life."

"No. If there is a child from the union, I will claim it. He or she will have the best education available, so it matters not how schooled the father is."

He waited for her to continue, but her courage again failed her. "So who is it to be?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and in a shaky voice whispered, "Angus MacNeill."

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the crackling of the logs in the fire. The small pang of fear that had started in her stomach now spread to her chest and she found herself holding her breath, waiting for his reaction. From his stunned silence, she suspected it wouldn't be good.

Then he started to laugh. A more apt term, she thought, would be guffaw! He threw his head back against the chair and tears ran down his cheeks. Although he had an easy wit, she had never seen him laugh so hard.

"Edgar, that is unworthy of you!" She had worried over what his reaction would be, but she never suspected *this*. She suddenly found herself defending her choice. "Angus is an educated man. And he would have been a great chieftain, had it not been for the Rising. He —"

Edgar was shaking one hand at her and wiping his eyes with the other, his mirth finally subsiding. "I know, I know."

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Oh my dear," he said, clearly making an effort to control himself, "Angus was my choice all along."

Now it was her turn to be silent. She stared at her husband in disbelief. When she saw he was being serious, she asked, "Then why didn't you tell me?"

All the laughter drained from his face, replaced by a tender smile. "As I told you before, I could not choose the man with whom you would be so intimate. I trusted you to pick the right man and you did."

"Oh Edgar," she replied, shaking her head. Her headache was becoming worse, she pressed the heels of her hands to her forehead. "It doesn't matter. He'll never agree to do it."

"Are you so sure of that?"

"Aye, a cat and a dog get along better than we do."

"From the way he took care of you when I was ill, I suspect he will not object." He reached over and took her hands away, then leaned down to peer into her face. "Shall I speak to him tomorrow?"

She nodded. "But if his reaction is no, as I'm sure it will be, don't tell me what he says. I don't think I could stand to hear it."

"All right."

"And tell him that, when we go riding together after, we will never speak of it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Angus was just lifting a bale of straw to spread in Jezebel's stall when he saw Lord Callander enter the stable. "Good day, milord. Can I do something for you?"

He made to set the bale down but stopped when the man said, "That's all right, Angus, finish what you were doing. Then I should like to have a chat with you."

"Aye, sir," Angus replied. He suddenly felt the way he had when his father used to prepare him for a dressing down and his mind raced to figure out what he had done. Of course, there had been his many episodes of insolence with Em, but those had been some time ago and he thought he had made up for his temper since then. If the ax had finally fallen, it had certainly taken a long time to do so.

As he pondered his predicament and continued to spread the straw, he saw Lord Callander move to Tar's stall. "Hello there, big fella. How have you been?" he said as he stroked the stallion's thick neck.

Not for the first time, Angus felt sorry for the man. In the years he had been with Callander, he had seen his condition worsen. In the early years of his indenture, Angus had helped him ride Jezebel, then as time passed, Callander could only handle

Buttercup. But in the last year or so, he could not ride at all. Angus knew it was a great disappointment to the man—anyone who owned such fine horses must surely want to use them.

He felt a flush rise in his cheeks as a parallel situation occurred to him. Lady Emily Callander was a fine woman. He wondered if Edgar had trouble riding *her* too! He shook the image from his mind and went to face his master.

Callander sat on the bench beside Tar's stall. "Have a seat, Angus."

There being no bench opposite Lord Callander, Angus sat down on a bale of hay. "Is everything all right, milord?"

"Well, not really." Angus' heart sank in his chest. He was afraid of what was coming and prayed only that he wouldn't be sent back to jail. But Callander was speaking again. "I'm here to ask for your help with a rather, um, delicate situation."

"Sir?"

"Lady Callander and I have been married for some months now, as you know."

The man seemed reluctant to continue, so Angus, his curiosity piqued, said, "Aye?"

Lord Callander's next words came out in a rush. "We want children, an heir for my title especially, and I have been told that my infirmity could be passed on to my offspring."

Angus sat quietly, wondering why his master would be confiding such a problem to a servant.

His nervousness clear in his now hesitant speech, Lord Callander continued, "Emily and I have discussed the situation and we have decided that we should use a surrogate, so to speak, to father a child for us."

Angus just sat and stared at the man, still unsure why he was telling him this.

"The decision as to who the man should be was left up to Emily and she has chosen you."

The full import of Callander's words did not hit Angus for a moment. When it did, he felt a pang of fear go through him such as he had not known since his days in prison. It took him some time to find his voice, then he said, "I never suspected yer wife was such a vindictive wee—" He stopped before his words made the situation worse...if that were possible.

"Emily? Vindictive? You cannot be serious. She hasn't a vindictive bone in her body."

"So this is how she plans to send me back to the jail?"

"What in heavens' name are you talking about?"

"She's tryin' to trap me."

Callander's mouth dropped open, as if in surprise that Angus would see it that way.

"You walk in on yer wife and me, then the both of ye cry 'rape', and that quick, I'm back in that hole, or hangin' from the nearest tree. I choose the tree, thank ye kindly." He got up and turned his back on the man, too disappointed and disgusted to look at him any longer.

"That's amazing," Lord Callander said.

Angus' curiosity got the best of him and he turned to face Callander again. "What do ye find so amazing?"

"Emily had the same reaction. She thought I was trying to trap *her* because I wanted to get rid of her, have our marriage annulled. Are all you Highlanders so suspicious?"

"Aye, usually. Don't we have a right to be? And ye must admit, this is a verra strange proposition ye're putting to me."

"Yes, I will admit that. But why would I want to trap you? And why would Emily?"

"Well, we've had some spats, as ye probably know. I thought she had decided at last to get her revenge."

"Did you have a spat while I was ill?"

Angus remembered his cruel words to her. "Only once, but I apologized."

Callander nodded. Then they were both silent for a time, staring, as if sizing each other up.

"I shall claim any child of the union as my own." Lord Callander's voice grew quite firm with his next words. "I would expect you to relinquish any rights to the child."

Angus stared at him for a few moments, trying to figure out how he felt about that stipulation. He had always wanted as many sons and daughters as his wife could give him. With each passing year, his hope of fulfilling that dream seemed to fade. He still had eleven years left on his indenture. When it was finished, he would not be an old man but he would be homeless and penniless, unless Callander deigned to be generous toward him. He had heard there were opportunities in America and his plan was to somehow get enough money for a passage. But if there was a child in Scotland who was his, he knew he could never leave the country. He doubted he could ever leave this estate. Everything that made him who he was had been taken away from him, could he lose his child too? Callander's whole proposal suddenly seemed ridiculous.

"What if I decline yer offer?" Angus asked.

Callander sighed. "Then Emily and I will have to find another man."

"Another stud, ye mean?"

Lord Callander ignored that remark. "If I die without issue," he said, "Lord Stockdale will be your new master."

Angus was able to suppress a shudder but not, apparently, the expression of disgust on his face. Lord Callander saw it and commented, "Yes, the idea is abhorrent to me also and to Emily. She'll be well provided for in my will, of course, but I suspect Raymond will still make trouble for her."

Angus leaned against the stall behind him and studied the man again. Callander sat with his head bowed, his hands crossed over the top of the cane he held in front of him. He couldn't be more than ten years older than Angus, yet he seemed much older due to his infirmity. Death was creeping up on him, taking his mobility away from him slowly, yet steadily, day by day.

Angus himself had faced death many times in the Rising, but he had not feared it—he had the strength to fight against it. In prison, he had felt that strength ebb away from him with each passing day and knew that when death came for him, he would not be able to fight it off. Now, despite everything he'd been through, he was hale and hearty again—in body if not completely in spirit.

For the first time, he had some inkling of the pain and fear Callander must be suffering. Were they both destined to die childless?

Then another thought occurred to him. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife*. Would his Catholic upbringing let him go through with this? He had met many attractive women who were already married and each time had channeled his desires in another direction. Never once had he allowed his lust to overrule his brain and put himself, and especially the woman, in a bad situation. Even if he had, he would not have been living under her husband's roof, his future at the mercy of the man he was cuckolding!

But then, on the other hand, the husband had never invited him to do it. And remembering the sight of Emily Callander in that gown... His cock twitched slightly in his breeches. He admitted to himself that he had been coveting Em since the first time he saw her. *Aye*, he thought, *I can do it*.

As if reading Angus' thoughts, Callander said, "I am so in love with my wife, I can't understand why anyone would not want to make love to her. But if you feel you really cannot do it—"

"It would be no chore."

Callander gave a short laugh and nodded. "I am prepared to make it worth your while." When Angus didn't answer, he continued, "On the day my son turns five years old, I will give you your freedom and enough money to go anywhere you want and do whatever you want to do."

Angus' knees gave out and he sat back down again, stunned. He had not counted on this. But the thought again occurred to him that if the son were his, there was nowhere else he would want to go. If he couldn't acknowledge the boy as his own, at least he could watch him grow and perhaps help guide him through life after Callander was gone.

"I want to talk to yer lady first."

He found her in the rose garden. She sat in the sunlight, a book open on her lap. But instead of reading, her eyes were closed. She had her elbow propped up on the ornately carved back of the stone bench and her hand rubbed her forehead as if it hurt. In that

moment, he realized Callander wasn't the only one feeling the strain of their predicament.

"Milady?" he said softly, so as not to frighten her.

She startled anyway, both hands grabbing her book to keep it from falling off her lap. "Oh Angus, I didn't hear you." Then, obviously realizing why he was there, she looked away from him and blushed to the roots of her hair.

"I didna mean to frighten you." She made a dismissive gesture and he asked, "May I sit?"

"Of course."

He took a seat on the bench opposite her and began, "I spoke with Lord Callander this morning."

Before he could continue, she shook her head. "Please, Angus, don't say anything more." She again closed her eyes and clasped her book in both hands, her knuckles white with the strain. "I must apologize to ye. Dear God, what ye must be thinking of us. 'Tis a preposterous thing we're asking of you. I don't blame ye for saying no. If ye can forgive us and try to forget that this ever happened, we'd be most grateful." Finally, she turned to face him, her expression pleading. "Edgar thinks so highly of ye, I know he doesn't want to lose ye."

Now it was Angus' turn to shake his head and stop her protests. "Lord Callander explained the situation to me. 'Tis not preposterous." Then he couldn't help but smile, as he said, "More than a wee bit unusual, certainly, but not preposterous."

She again blushed and looked down at the book in her lap.

"And I havena said no." Her head snapped up and she stared at him as if unable to believe what he had said. "I told him I must talk to you first."

She nodded and waited for him to continue.

"Why are you agreeing to this?"

Tears glistened in her eyes and she looked up at the sky, as if that would keep them from falling. "I love my husband."

"Aye, so ye've said before."

"He wants a son. It's the only thing I can possibly give him." She met his gaze, frankly. "I have nothing else."

He wanted to scoff at her, she who now had so much, but he realized this was the one thing that all of Callander's money could not buy him. "So ye're willing to sleep with another man, to prove ye love him?"

"If that's what he asks of me."

Before Lord Callander's accident, he would have said, *Aye, milady, ye'll do anything he asks of you, just so long as he keeps you in luxury*. But seeing Em's expression, it occurred to him that if a woman's heart could actually hurt—a physical pain, not just an emotional one—her face would look like this.

So he grudgingly admired the “sacrifice” she was making. To please her husband, she would lie with a healthy stronger man, one who could accomplish what Callander dare not risk. In this arrangement he was to be little more than a stud, no different from Tar being put to Jezebel or one of the other brood mares. So why did it matter who did the deed?

“Why me?” he asked.

She smiled and shook her head, again avoiding his gaze. “Because ye were familiar.”

“Familiar?”

“Aye. That first day I saw you, ye took my breath away. Ye were all the braw lads I’d grown up with, all the strong chieftains who fought so bravely and deserved better than they got. I-I thought I would feel more comfortable with you.”

He laughed at that. “Comfortable? We’ve been at each others’ throats ever since that first day. I made my opinion of ye clear from the very start. Why would ye think I would want to make love to ye?”

She flinched and he realized his words had sounded harsher than he had meant them. He opened his mouth to apologize, but before he could do so, she said, “I didn’t think ye would. I just felt ye were the only one we could trust—not because Edgar holds yer indenture, but because I think you are a good man, Angus. Ye helped me so much when Edgar was ill, I thought perhaps any hard feelings between us were over.”

They studied each other for another moment, then he stood and cocked his head toward the honeysuckle arbor where they had met the night of the party. “Come here.”

She followed him until they were hidden from the house, among the vines and flowers that were her signature scent. It was one of the reasons he had been sitting there that night, the perfume had made him think of her. He had been regretting the way he had treated her and vowed to himself that if Callander would not release him from his indenture or sell it he would make it up to her. But he never dreamed this would be the way he might do it.

He took her hands in his. “Ye’re asking me to make love to you and I’ve barely ever touched ye. Would ye have me buy a pig in a poke?” He leaned down and caught her mouth with his, gently at first, then harder, more demanding, forcing her mouth open and reveling in the taste of her. Her arms came around his neck and she pressed herself against him. Her breasts brushed his chest and he felt her nipples peak with the contact. His cock hardened painfully in his breeks.

When they separated, they were both breathing hard, as if they had ridden fast over the hills. “Let me know when the arrangements are made,” Angus said and walked away before he threw her down on the ground and took her there and then.

## Chapter Thirteen

Weston let Angus in by a little-used side door and took him upstairs to a bedchamber, which Angus assumed was Em's. If the manservant knew the purpose of Angus' visit, he of course gave no sign of it. He was as taciturn and unblinking as usual, now that Lord Callander was out of danger.

The fire burned brightly in the grate, spreading warmth throughout the room. The bed curtains of cream and green brocade had been tied back and the bedsheets turned down. Angus bent and ran his hand over the soft linen pillow slips. It had been a long time since he had felt such fine fabric. He noted the expensive furnishings and ornaments scattered around the room, which rivaled those he himself used to own.

Putting those thoughts from his mind, he opened the bundle he had brought with him and began to change his clothes.

Now he stood with one foot propped up on the hearth, staring at the ornate cloisonné clock on the mantel. Waiting, wondering if this was really going to happen. Over an hour had passed and he was beginning to doubt it.

Finally, he heard the sound of the latch being lifted on the adjoining bedroom door.

Emily backed into the room and closed the door but still stood facing it, afraid to turn around. This was the room Edgar had designated as hers to use if she ever felt the need, but she never dreamed she would be using it for a purpose such as this. She had wanted to go to a different wing of the house altogether, but Edgar said that if his son were conceived this night, at least it would happen close to his own bed.

She knew Angus was somewhere behind her in the room, but where? And in what state of dress? Fully clothed and sitting comfortably in a chair...or lying nonchalantly naked on the bed?

She leaned her forehead against the cool wood, hoping it would ease the heat welling up in her cheeks. Although she was wearing her nightdress and a heavy velvet robe, she felt naked herself. She wished she had worn a dress and all the underpinnings...or, better yet, every dress she owned.

Now that the time had come, her courage threatened to fail her. How could she ever have thought she could go through with this? She would send him away and explain it to Edgar, she was sure he would understand.

From somewhere behind her, Angus cleared his throat. "Milady?"

She took a deep breath, turned around...and froze in shock. "Angus, my God, what – what are you doing?"



He stood at the foot of the bed, dressed in his usual creamy-white linen shirt, the laces hanging loose to reveal the muscles of his upper chest. Over this, however, he was wearing the *breacan-féile*, a belted plaid in soft hues of tan, brown and black. It was secured around his narrow waist with a wide, brown leather belt and at his shoulder was a pewter brooch, worked in the design of a Celtic cross. His strong legs were bare beneath the hem. Once again, Emily had the sensation of traveling back in time, before the Rising, Culloden and "Butcher" Cumberland had destroyed the Highlanders' way of life.

He spread his arms out at his sides, as if offering himself to her. "You said I was familiar to ye. This is what ye're familiar with. Had ye known me before, this is how I would have looked. I thought it would make ye feel more comfortable about tonight."

"But-but you could be arrested. Ye ken 'tis against the law now and someone might have seen ye come in."

"I wore my breeks and changed when I got to this room. And there's only you and me here now. Ye'll no' report me, will you?"

"Of course not. But how did you get it? And where?"

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "I have my ways."

The realization that he didn't trust her not to turn him over to the authorities hit her like a fist to the chest and she fell back against the door. "Oh Angus, for God's sake, I was only curious. How could ye think I would ever do such a thing?"

"No, I suppose ye wouldn't. Then ye would lose yer stud."

Those words were like a blow to her stomach. "I can see this was a mistake. Good night, Angus," she said and turned to open the door.

Suddenly he was behind her, engulfing her, his strong arms braced against the door on each side of her head. "I'm sorry," he cried. Then more softly, "I'm sorry," his warm breath stirring strands of her hair. "Don't go. I promise to behave myself." He bent and nipped lightly at her earlobe. She heard the smile in his voice as he said, "Or misbehave, if that's what ye want of me."

She turned around but still leaned back against the door. He was so tall that all she could see was an expanse of plaid-covered chest. "I always forget how tall you are."

"Lord Callander and I are of the same height, when he is able to stand upright."

Emily didn't want to think about Edgar at the moment. She reached out her hand toward him but, overcome by a feeling of shyness, quickly pulled it back.

"'Tis all right," he said, "you can touch me."

With the backs of her fingers, she smoothed the soft fabric, tracing the pleats up to the brooch at his shoulder. Then she laid her head against his chest and sighed. "I'd nearly forgotten what a *plaid* feels like."

He combed her hair with his fingers and wrapped his other arm around her to hold her tighter. "Mila—" he began, then stepped back and held her away from him, looking down at her. "Am I to call you 'Milady' tonight?"

She gave a short, embarrassed laugh. "No, I don't suppose so, given the circumstances. You may call me 'Emily'."

"No, *he* calls you 'Emily.' I shall call ye – Em."

She stared up at him. "That's what my da called me."

"Aye, I know. He told me. May I call ye that?"

She nodded, unable to speak.

The clock on the mantle chimed midnight. Angus turned his head to look at it, his expression seeming a cross between agitation and fear. "We had best get started then."

She shook her head. "'Tis all right. We have the night. Though ye must be out before cockcrow."

He looked surprised for a moment, then nodded and held out his hand. "Come to me, Em."

She stepped forward and placed her hand in his. He bent and scooped her up in his arms, then carried her to the foot of the bed and set her down. He knelt before her and unhooked the fastenings of her robe. As the material slipped down over her shoulders, she felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. Just the light touch of his hands over the sleeves of her nightdress made her shudder...but with desire or fear? She couldn't tell and she wasn't quite ready to find out.

When he began to untie the ribbons of her gown, she grabbed his hands. "No," she cried, holding his gaze with her own, hoping he'd understand. "I want to see you first."

"All right." He gave a slight smile, stood and took a step back. Emily rose up in front of him and loosened the brooch at his shoulder, letting the tail of his *plaid* fall behind him. She reached out to undo his belt, but her shyness overcame her again and she hesitated.

"Shall I?" he asked.

"Please," she whispered.

He unclasped the belt and caught the yards of freed woolen material with one hand, tossing it nonchalantly into a nearby chair. Now he stood in only his shirt, which came to just below his hips, leaving his legs exposed to her gaze. The firelight caught in the fine hairs there, giving them the appearance of burnished gold.

Emily was struck by how long and straight and strong his legs were. She hadn't realized she was staring at them until Angus, looking down at his legs too, said, "Is something wrong? They're clean."

"What?" She gave an embarrassed laugh. "Oh no, I'm sorry, I didna mean to...it's just that...may I touch yer legs, Angus?"

"Aye, if ye want. Though I don't know why ye find them so...oh." He stopped as if he suddenly realized why she was so taken by the sight of his legs. "Aye, do whatever ye like."

She knelt before him and ran her hands up his calves to the back of his knees. Above her, he gave a soft moan. She laid her head against the firm muscles of his thighs and felt them tighten under her cheek.

"Christ, lass, what are ye doin' to me?"

She looked up to see his shirt tented outward just above her head. "Oh my," she said, feeling the urge to tease him, "did I do that?"

She could swear he growled at her. "Ye'd best get on wi' it before I lose my mind."

She giggled and reached for the hem of his shirt as she stood up. He raised his arms over his head to help her, then took the shirt from her and threw it on the chair with the *plaid*. As he turned back toward the light, Emily gave a small shriek of anguish when she saw that his chest and abdomen were covered with an assortment of scars that almost rivaled those on his ankles.

"Oh Angus," she said, reaching out to touch a thin silvered line on his upper chest, "how did you...?"

"Prestonpans. We won that one."

"And this?" she asked, pointing to a still reddened gash under his right arm.

"Culloden." The one word was all he needed to say. No Scot living, especially one such as Angus, who had survived the slaughter and its devastating aftermath, would ever be able to hear that name without shuddering, as Emily did now. She tried to think of a way to steer them back to the matter at hand, but she was intrigued by a perfectly round, shiny scar on his upper belly. She stroked the circle lightly with the tip of her finger. "What about this?"

"The biggest, nastiest, smelliest bull my father ever raised. Once I was able to stand upright again, ha, let's just say, we dined well that winter."

Emily giggled then grew serious as she realized she still had her hand on his belly and that she had been caressing each part of his body as she inventoried his wounds. Now she was only inches away from his risen flesh and she wasn't sure what to do next.

Angus made the decision for her. "Keep going." The pleading tone of his voice made her look up into his eyes. In the flickering glow of the lamps at the bedside, they shone like sapphires. "Touch me." When she still hesitated, he said, "Surely he's taught you how after all this time."

"I know how," she replied, suppressing a slight twinge of anger at his remark. There was no place for anger in this situation. She needed this man and what he could do for her. Best to let his taunts roll off her back and get through this night. She would worry about how to face the morning when the time came.

Still holding his gaze with hers, she stroked him lightly with the backs of her fingers. His breath hissed out and he bent forward, reaching up to grab the canopy frame. He was so close to her now that it seemed natural to lay her head against him. The golden curls on his chest felt soft and warm against her cheek. She was becoming

lost in the scent of him—that fresh linen, leather and sunshine smell that she always associated with him. But tonight there was another—a clean, familiar smell—and Emily had to bite her lip to keep from laughing again as she realized he had used Mrs. Lamond’s laundry soap to bathe with.

He brought one hand down and combed it through her hair, then began to nuzzle her neck. Gooseflesh rose up on that half of her body and her knees went weak. She felt the moisture flowing between her legs, as she wrapped one arm around his back to steady herself. Her fingers moved over the tip of his hard flesh and, encountering a bead of his own fluid, she smoothed it around the head of his shaft. His groan of pleasure was a vibration under her cheek. She then grasped him more tightly and began to massage him, while she took one of his nipples into her mouth.

He inhaled sharply and pulled away from her. “Stop, Em, stop now,” he moaned, grabbing her hands.

The look of agony on his face frightened her. “Did I hurt you?”

He gave a strangled laugh. “Ye’re killin’ me. And if ye don’t stop now, I’ll no’ be able to fulfill my purpose here tonight.”

Emily felt the heat rise in her cheeks. “Oh I see.”

“But ye don’t have to stop touchin’ me altogether.” He placed her hands on his sides and pulled her close. As his lips closed gently on hers, she caressed his back then grew bold and dropped her hands lower to smooth them over his taut buttocks. She felt his flesh pulsating against her belly.

He raised her face to his and his dark blue eyes bored into hers. “Now it’s your turn.”

He let go of her and walked around one side of the bed to the nightstand. Then he bent over the lamp there, as if to turn it down.

“What are you doing?” Emily cried, stopping him before he could extinguish the light. “You’re afraid...”

“*Hmph*. Aye, but wi’ you here, I think I’ll be all right.”

“Oh,” she replied. Then as the truth dawned on her, she turned away so he wouldn’t see the tears welling up in her eyes. If he wanted the room dark, that could only mean one thing.

“Em?”

She didn’t answer him. She couldn’t find her voice.

He came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “What is it, lass? What’s wrong?” She shook her head, but he persisted. “Tell me what I’ve done.”

“You don’t want to see me.”

“*What?*” He turned her around and made her look up at him. “Lord, woman, have ye lost yer mind? Of course I want to see ye.”

“Then why did you want the lamp out?”

He shrugged one shoulder. "Ye seemed shy about showin' yerself. I thought 'twould make it easier for ye."

"Oh." She gave a small laugh. "Most likely it would."

"Come here." He sat on the edge of the high bed and drew her between his legs. He was still erect, a hard rod of flesh poking at her belly. "Do ye remember when ye held that party and ye found me in the honeysuckle arbor? I've carried in my mind the vision of yer breasts swellin' over the top of that gown ye wore. Ye made me do something that night I've no' done since I was a green lad." He untied the remaining ribbons on her gown and slipped it off her shoulders, leaving her standing naked before him. "God almighty," he breathed, "look at you."

Embarrassed by his intense perusal, Emily made a motion to cover herself with her hands.

"Don't."

"Please don't stare at me so, Angus." She could feel the flush not only in her cheeks but over her whole body.

"Why not? Ye're a beautiful woman, Em. Ye should be stared at. Doesna Lord Callander stare at ye?"

"Aye, but not like this."

"How then?"

"He looks at me when we're lying abed."

Angus moved back and stretched out on his side. "Get into bed then, so I may look at ye."

She lay down beside him, still fighting the urge to cover herself. Then she thought to reach for the blankets, but before she could do so, Angus began to cover her – with his own body. He slipped one arm beneath her shoulders, the other around her waist and pulled her close.

"God, but ye're a soft woman."

"I'm too plump by half."

He raised up and looked down at her. "Who told you that? Did *he* tell you that?"

She was surprised by the anger in his voice. "No, I've just always believed it."

"Well, ye're not. Ye're fine the way ye are. Besides, who wants to lay atop a bag o' bones?"

When he said that, Emily felt herself begin to relax a bit. She had wondered why Angus would want to have intercourse with her when he didn't love her. She felt better knowing that it was not only the incentive offered to him, whatever that might be, that spurred his desire but that he found her body desirable as well.

When he began to touch her, however, she felt a tension of a different sort. His hand roamed over her breasts, stroking lightly with the backs of his fingers. She moaned and arched her back to press harder against his hand.

Through the fog of passion he aroused in her, she thought she heard him ask, "Does *he* touch you this way?"

But before she could reply, he had taken her nipple into his mouth and she was incapable of speech.

"Yer breasts are beautiful. Does *he* suck yer nipples?"

She knew what he was asking, what he was trying to do to her by his questions. She wanted to say, *Don't do this*, but all that came out was, "Ah," as he moved down her body. He rubbed his cheek along her belly and she felt his warm breath ruffle the soft hair on her mons. A draft of cool air brought a strange sense of loss when he took his arm from underneath her.

"Open yerself to me, Em," he said and with his hands stroking her hips and sliding around to the tender skin of her thighs, she could do no less. She spread her legs and he lay down between them.

Then she was lost to the sensations of his fingers and tongue—teasing, stroking, licking. She grabbed a handful of his hair, intending to pull him away, but her crisis was approaching quickly. She held the back of his head firmly, urging him on.

For a moment, he raised his head slightly and murmured, "God, yer cunny is so sweet. Does *he* do this to you?"

It was too much. "Stop," she said, pulling back from him.

"What?"

"Stop it, Angus."

"Why? Did I hurt you? I—"

She sat up and hugged her knees to her chest. "We both of us know there are three people in this bed tonight, but if we are to do this thing, we cannot speak of him." Her voice broke. "*We will not* speak of him."

He moved next to her and wiped a tear from her cheek. Then he sighed. "Ye're right, lass. I'm sorry. 'Tis only that, well, I suppose a man likes to know how he compares." He wouldn't meet her eyes and Emily had the feeling he was embarrassed. His next words nearly melted her heart. "Ye see, it's been a verra long time since I've done this."

"Angus, ye don't mean...?"

"Aye, not since before Culloden." He gave a short, self-conscious laugh. "I wasna sure I remembered how."

She reached out and pulled him close. "Oh Angus, don't worry. Ye're doing fine. Ye've no need to be concerned over how ye compare with any man." She kissed him tenderly on the forehead, then the cheek, then the mouth. She moved lower, finding a small hollow above his collarbone. She kissed then licked the spot, drawing a deep groan from him. Then her mouth returned to his.

He crushed her to him and deepened the kiss. She was not surprised to find that he tasted as good as he smelled and felt. Then he laid her down and stretched out full-length on her body. His hardened flesh pressed against her thigh.

Despite her words to him, however and as much as she tried, she could not help but make comparisons between Edgar and Angus. The soft brush of Angus' unruly, sun-streaked curls was so different from the silken caress of Edgar's thick dark hair. The delicate rasp of Angus' scant beard felt nothing like Edgar's clean-shaven cheeks. The calluses on Angus' fingers brought new and different sensations to the same actions performed by Edgar's smooth hands.

She forced the images of her husband from her mind and concentrated on the man in her bed.

Boldly, she reached between them and stroked him, feeling him lengthen and harden even more.

He gasped and grabbed her hand. "Careful, lass. I cannae take much more."

"Then don't," she said.

"Are ye sure ye're ready?"

"Aye, I'm ready."

He moved between her legs again and positioned himself at her entrance. He pressed in slightly and the image of him standing in front of Buttercup in the stable that day, legs spread, hips thrust forward, came to her mind. Her moisture flowed around his flesh as he pushed again. This time, she felt a slight pinching as her inner flesh stretched to accommodate his length and thickness—another comparison to her husband she could not avoid making. Although Edgar never failed to satisfy her when making love, he never filled her like this.

Angus misinterpreted her gasp of pleasure. "I'm sorry to hurt ye, Em, but if ye make me stop now, I shall die for sure."

"Don't stop. Please, Angus." She was just as sure that she would die if he didn't fully enter her soon.

He pulled back and thrust once more, then he was completely inside her. She cried out at the unexpected feeling. It was a little painful, a little frightening and...wonderful. She bit into his shoulder to quiet herself.

"Shh." He smoothed the hair back from her cheek and whispered into her ear, "Hush, now. It's done. It's done."

He stayed still while her breathing slowed and her grip on his arms relaxed. When she looked into his eyes, she was surprised to find an expression of concern that she had never seen before. "Are ye all right, Em?"

She nodded, but her mouth was too dry to speak.

"I have to move, lass, I'm sorry. I cannae hold back any longer."

She remembered Edgar saying those words to her the first time she took him in her mouth. *I can't hold back.* And Angus' words, *It's done, it's done.* Aye, it was done now. This is what Edgar had wanted.

It was only now that Emily was beginning to realize just how much she had wanted it.

"I'm all right, Angus." She raised her hips slightly and that was all the encouragement he needed. He began to move inside her and any thought of her husband was forgotten.

His thrusts were so strong, her breath was forced out with each stroke. She had never felt so full, so stretched. She felt another crisis coming on and raised her hips to press her sensitive nub against him.

Suddenly, he froze above her, braced on his arms and threw his head back. She felt his cock pulsing inside her and it sent her over the edge.

They peaked together, a climax so strong it left both of them drained and exhausted.

In the adjacent room, Edgar Callander sat with his ear pressed to the door. He heard his wife cry out – with pain or pleasure? – followed by a silence that worried him even more. Then he heard the sounds of her passion – and hoped he had not made a big mistake.



## **Chapter Fourteen**

The chiming of the clock on the mantle woke Angus, then he heard it strike two. For a moment, he thought nothing had changed—that he was home again, tucked in a warm, soft bed with a warm, soft woman snuggled against his side.

Then reality hit him like a punch in the gut.

The warm, soft bed and the warm, soft woman belonged to another man, the man to whom he was essentially enslaved for the next eleven years of his life. And tonight he was playing the stud for that man...and for the woman who should never have been Callander's in the first place. Anger boiled up inside him so strongly he could hardly breathe.

He looked down at Emily Sinclair Armstrong, Countess of Callander, nestled sound asleep in the crook of his shoulder. She had seemed, in turns, so innocent and then so bold when he took her tonight. Was this a game she was playing with him? Well, he could play games too.

He shifted onto his side and grasped her chin in his hand.

She stirred and looked up at him, puzzled at first, then her expression softened as she too must have remembered where they were and what had transpired between them. "Angus," she sighed and began to lazily stretch her arms above her head.

At that moment, he brought his mouth down hard on hers. She gasped in surprise and he captured her tongue, her lips, sucking, biting, bruising her soft flesh. He felt her beating at his shoulders and back with her small fists and trying to push him away, but her strength was nothing to his. His mouth left hers as he moved to her neck and her breasts, again biting and sucking, leaving his marks for her husband to see in the morning.

"Angus, stop it, please. What are you doing? What's wrong?" she pleaded.

He grabbed a thick rope of her hair and wrapped it around his hand, forcing her head back. "I thought this was what you wanted, milady."

"No," she cried. "Not like this. Please let me go."

"Oh no. If it's a stud ye're wantin', milady, it's a stud ye'll get." He drove his knee between her legs, forcing them apart, and lay on top her. His cock was hard from anger...and from the taste of her mouth, the feel of her breasts, the musk of her sex that lingered from their first encounter.

He pushed himself inside her and began to move, all the while still nibbling her neck and smothering her protests with his kisses. His grasp on her hair eased and changed to a caress as he brought both hands up to cradle her head, taking his weight on his elbows.

He detected the exact moment that her cries and moans of resistance became cries and moans of passion. She began to move with him, thrusting her hips up to meet his. She pulled him closer, rather than trying to push him away and returned his kisses with an abandon she had not shown before.

They peaked together, but as he began to relax down onto her body, she summoned a strength he never knew she had and threw him off. Then she jumped out of bed, grabbed her nightgown and, holding it around her, headed for the adjoining bedroom.

His voice stopped her as she reached the door. "Where do ye think ye're goin'?"

"I'm leaving."

"Oh no, ye're not." He lay across the bed and braced himself on his elbows. "Ye said I had ye for the night. The night's not over yet."

"It is if ye're goin' to act like that!"

He smiled inwardly to see that he had riled her enough to bring out her brogue in full force. His eyes feasted on the sight of her still clutching her nightdress in front of her. He wondered if she really thought she was covering enough of her body to prevent enticing him. She wasn't. The outer swell of her breasts and the curves of her hips peeked out from each side of the limply hanging garment. His cock began to stir again underneath him. "You enjoyed it and ye know it, *milady*. Admit it."

"Ye hurt me and ye frightened me. Why, Angus?"

She wasn't standing so far away and the room was not so dark that he couldn't see the look of pure anguish and utter betrayal in her eyes. He wished then that he had extinguished all the lamps in the room when he had the chance.

"Ye said it yerself," she continued, "I am yours for the night. There was nay need to do *that*. I would have let you."

"Ye're the one who chose me. Ye got what ye wished for." Even to his own ears, his words sounded so cruel that he would have taken them back immediately if he could have.

"I chose ye because I trusted you," she almost hissed at him in her anger. "I have given you my body this night, that should be my husband's only. I thought ye would honor it. I didna think ye would use me that way."

That undid him. "Oh Christ, lass, I'm sorry." He rolled onto his back and threw an arm over his eyes.

"Just tell me why, Angus."

There was a moment of silence as he tried to speak past the lump in his throat. Finally, he said, "Ye were supposed to be mine."

Then it was her turn to be silent, as if it was taking a while for his words to register in her mind. "What—what do you mean?"

Without looking at her, he reached out and patted the side of the bed. "Come and sit and I'll tell ye." When she hesitated, he said, "I promise I'll no' hurt ye or frighten ye again, Em."

She padded softly to the bedside and sat down on the edge. His right arm lay palm up on the mattress, his left arm still covered his eyes. He hoped the next time he looked at her face that, instead of the raw pain he had just inflicted, he would see a little understanding. Not that he deserved it.

"Yer father and yer brothers and I fought together through most o' the battles. It seems yer da took a likin' to me and before Culloden, well," his words came out in a rush, "he promised me yer hand in marriage when the war was over."

"Oh Angus," she sighed. He sensed her surprise, but he still could not face her. Too late he worried that telling her this would dredge up memories of her family and make her even more sad, but it was out in the open now and the truth had to be told.

"I assured him ye'd be well provided for and ye would have been, had things turned out differently. He seemed satisfied with that. Yer brothers—" He stopped when he realized he probably shouldn't tell her exactly how her brothers felt about the arrangement.

But she wouldn't let it pass. "My brothers...?"

He cleared his throat. "Yer brothers threatened to cut off my ballocks if I didn't take good care of ye. If they knew what I'd just done, I'd be a gelding tomorrow."

When he heard her muffled, sobbing noises, he thought, *Oh no, I've done it now*. But just as he started to lean over to try to console her, she threw her head back and fell over into the bed, rolling from side to side, *laughing*. Her head happened to land on his thigh and her silky curls tickled those same ballocks, which he was very glad he still had, and the attached part, which was now growing again. Before he lost control completely, he put his hand on her forehead to stop her movements. "What in God's name is so funny?"

Between gasps of laughter, she said, "I just have this image of Da sitting in Purgatory, laughing his arse off at how we managed to meet each other, when the odds were so against it."

Seeing her point, Angus began to laugh too. "What about yer brothers?"

"Oh I'm sure they passed by Purgatory and went straight to Hell." She was laughing so hard, she could hardly get out her next words. "And I doubt there's too much to laugh about down there!"

He pulled her up in the bed and wrapped his arms around her. A strip of material came between them. "Get this out of here," he growled, flinging the nightgown onto the floor again. "I want to feel you."

She was still hiccupping with laughter but gradually grew serious as he continued to hold her and smooth the damp hair back from her temples.

"Forgive me?"

"Aye." They settled back into each others' arms to sleep, but after a moment she said, "Hmph."

"What is it?"

"I was just wondering if it's still considered adultery when yer husband gives ye permission."

The next time Angus awoke, the room was dark. The wicks of the lamps on each side of the bed had burned down, but he could still the outline of the furnishings around him...and the woman sleeping next to him. He raised his head and looked toward the window. His fear was confirmed.

The patch of sky outlined by the window was a dull gray, rather than the pitch black he had hoped to see. His time with Em was almost over. He knew it was to be only one night—if she conceived—and a night only lasted so many hours. So why then was the thought of having to leave this bed—and Em—creating such a pain in his chest?

Was it anger? They had used him, after all—but he had let them.

He tried to tell himself it was just that he hadn't been with a woman in so long and he hadn't enjoyed the luxury of a soft mattress and linen sheets in so long. It was cruel, really, to give him a taste of his old life, then snatch it away from him until the next time he was needed to stand stud—if there was to be a next time.

But if he were honest with himself, he had to admit that Em hadn't taken advantage of the situation. She had treated him with more respect than he had shown her, in truth. And she really was as sweet as she tasted. His usual morning erection stiffened even more at the memory of her kisses...and the honey between her legs. *Callander is lucky to have her*, he thought.

*Aye, Callander is lucky to have her, but for tonight, she's mine.*

And there it was. The reason he hated and feared the oncoming dawn. He loved her. She was meant to be his. Here in his arms is where she belonged, but he had to give her back to her husband. The lump growing in his throat threatened to cut off his breath.

He glanced at the window again and that slight movement was enough to awaken her. She stretched her arm across his chest and snuggled closer.

"'Tis almost dawn," he said.

"No," she sighed softly, rising to look at the window. Then she said, "Oh," and caught her bottom lip in her teeth, as if she realized she should not have had that reaction. She lay back down and put her head on his shoulder.

They were both silent for a time, then she said, "Angus?"

"Aye?"

They spoke quietly as if afraid to shatter the stillness of the night that remained.

"Thank you."

What was he to say to that? To say *it was nothing* would belittle the honor she had given him. *The pleasure was mine* sounded a bit lecherous, even though it had been. In the end, he simply said, "Ye're welcome, lass."

There was another period of silence. Angus knew he should get up and leave, but he just couldn't do it, not yet. The light from the window was a lighter shade of gray now. "Em?" he said, somewhat surprised by the tone of desperation in his voice.

"Aye?"

"One more time? Can ye bear it?"

She didn't answer right away and it felt as if his heart stopped beating. Then she whispered, "Aye, Angus, I can bear it," and moved her fingers to lightly stroke his nipple.

He was instantly, painfully hard. With no foreplay, he moved on top of her. His time was running out and he needed her *now*. She was still wet from their previous couplings and he slipped easily inside her. He brought his mouth down on hers, caressing, sucking, devouring, engulfing her as she took his cock deeper than she ever had. He felt the head butting up against her womb and the shaft scraping the walls of her cunny. She had to be sore, but he was past caring.

When she wrapped her legs around his waist and rose up to meet him, he knew he could hold back no longer. Over his own grunting noises, he became aware of her cries—not cries of pain or the soft, whimpering sounds she had made earlier, but deep, guttural moans that signaled her approaching crisis. It was then that he realized he had not given her the kind of climax that he should have. He had certainly taken his, but not paid attention to her.

He sat back on his knees and pulled her up onto his thighs, thrusting into her until her dark blonde fleece met his own.

"Ah," she cried, as if the air had been forced out of her lungs. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on.

In this position, his hands were free to go to work. With his left hand, he reached up to caress her breasts. With his right, he stroked the swollen nub at the top of her slit.

"Oh Angus, oh my God, *Angus*," she cried. It only took a few strokes to send her over the edge.

And Angus followed right behind her. He threw back his head and grunted his release, a climax so strong he felt as if his life's essence drained out of him. He collapsed on top of her, his cock still buried deep inside her body.

They lay that way for a few moments as their breathing slowed and the sweat cooled on their skin. But, suddenly, he felt moisture on his neck that he knew wasn't sweat. He raised his head and looked down at her. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she stared into his eyes.

Her expression startled him. It was more than one of mere physical gratification. He had seen that look before, on the faces of the lassies who had loved him and whose hearts he had broken.

He wondered how Callander would feel if he knew his wife had fallen in love with his groom.

"Let me up," she said, pushing against his chest. When he didn't move, she pleaded, "Angus, *let me go.*"

There was no mistaking the double meaning of her words. He rolled off her and watched as she jumped out of bed, threw on her nightdress and ran into the adjoining bedroom without looking back.

Could she really be as in love with him as he was with her? He didn't know, but it gave him no small measure of satisfaction that Lord Callander's wife was fleeing back to his bed...with Angus' seed running down her legs.

## Chapter Fifteen

Edgar Armstrong, Earl of Callander, stared at his wife across the breakfast table and wondered yet again if he had made a big mistake. It had been over three weeks since she had spent the night with Angus and at times she had seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts, gazing off into space as she was doing now.

She had not changed toward Edgar in any way that he could detect. In fact, their lovemaking was better, even though he dared not enter her.

He had asked her not to ride, on the chance that if she were carrying a child, she would not risk a miscarriage. She readily acquiesced and as far as he knew, she had not even gone to the stable to see Angus. But still he wondered. Was she thinking of Angus when she was making love to him? Was she remembering how it had felt to have Angus inside her...and did she long to feel it again?

Edgar himself would never forget that morning. He had slept fitfully, knowing what was happening in the next room and wondering if he would come to regret instigating it. He came instantly awake when he heard the door open and then Emily was in his arms. She was crying and shaking and holding onto him as if her very life depended on it.

"My dear, what's wrong? What is it?" He tried to hold her far enough away to see her face, but she wouldn't let him go.

"Nothing," she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

Edgar's voice became stern. "Emily, did he hurt you?"

With that, she did pull away slightly and look up at him. "No, Edgar, he didn't hurt me, I promise. Just hold me." And she wrapped her arms around him again, though not quite as desperately as before.

A movement in the doorway caught Edgar's eye. In the dim, gray light of dawn, he looked up to see Angus standing there, totally naked, his arms stretched above his head, holding the top of the doorframe. He was staring at them...or rather, staring at Emily, with such an expression of longing that Edgar almost felt sorry for the man. Angus' cock, although not fully erect, was turgid and gleamed with a sheen of moisture.

Angus' eyes shifted briefly to Edgar. He knew Angus had witnessed the entire scene between himself and Emily. He stared back at him for a moment, then Angus turned away and left. In another few minutes, Edgar heard the sound of the hall door closing in the next room.

Emily had fallen asleep in his arms. He lay back against the pillows and held her, trying to make sense of the feelings that warred inside him. Emily swore Angus had not

treated her badly, but if he had, it was their own fault. They had asked for this, hadn't they?

Still, it was unnecessary for him to flaunt his prowess in Edgar's face.

Edgar forced his mind back to the present. Emily continued to stare out the window and like every other morning, she had taken little of her breakfast.

"Why don't you go to the stable this morning, my love?"

She turned to him with a startled expression, as if he had discerned her thoughts. "You – you don't want me to ride."

"I don't. But that doesn't mean you can't go to the stable."

"If I am not to ride, there is no need for me to go there." She made a great show of folding her napkin neatly and laying it next to her plate.

"You will have to see him at some point in time. Someday, you will begin riding again. Is there some reason you are afraid to face him?"

"No," she answered too quickly, "I am not afraid. I-I simply have no reason to."

"Emily, I am well aware that you have feelings for him." Her head snapped up and she looked into his eyes. She shook her head and opened her mouth as if to deny it, but he cut her off. "You must have, after what the two of you shared. I am not asking you to avoid him completely. You can't. I only ask that you not forget to whom you are married." Now it was he who turned his gaze to the window, embarrassed by the note of desperation in his voice.

She came around the table and knelt at his feet. "Edgar, you know it is only you I love. Haven't I told you that enough times for you to believe me? Haven't I proven it to you? What more do I have to do?" She laid her head on his knee.

He bent over and kissed the top of her head. Sliding his hands down her back to her waist, he urged her up to sit on his lap. They held each other in silence for a while, then he said, "It really is a lovely day outside. Why don't you go for a walk, get some fresh air?"

"Will you join me in the garden?" she asked. "We can read to each other, it will be the way it was when we first met."

"I have some correspondence to attend to, but I can join you in about half an hour. How would that be?"

"Delightful," she said and gave him a kiss that left no doubt that she still loved him.

Emily retrieved the book of sonnets she'd been reading from the library and walked out the rear entrance of the house. She stood on the stone terrace overlooking the gardens and gazed around. It was indeed a beautiful day, the warm sun on her face almost chased away the chill she felt down to the marrow of her bones, as she thought back to the events of the past month.

The man whom she loved more than her own life had asked her to have intercourse with another man. She couldn't call it making love – that's what she did with Edgar.



Even though he no longer entered her, they made love in other ways—the ways he had shown her on their trip to the continent. But when she thought back to their lovemaking before the accident and the revelation about his illness, there was no comparison between what she had done with Edgar and what she did with Angus three weeks ago.

She knew Edgar had her feelings in mind as much as his own when they made love. He always saw to it that she was being fulfilled and he never hurt her or frightened her. Even the feel of his manhood inside her used to be comforting—not too large, not too hard. Making love with Edgar was warm and gentle and tender and safe.

With Angus, however, it had been powerful, overwhelming, frightening. *And wonderful*. She felt a blush rise in her cheeks at this last thought. It wasn't supposed to have been that way. It was one time only—hopefully—a service done and that was all. But even as she lay with Edgar, even as he did things to her body that brought her to overwhelming climaxes, she remembered the feeling of fullness Angus had given her. And was ashamed because deep inside, she longed to feel that full again.

That is why she didn't want to face Angus and the longer she could avoid it, the better. It was still too soon after their night together. She was afraid she would give her feelings away—by a look, a brush of her hand against him, something, anything that would let him know she wanted him. Oh she was sure Angus wouldn't want her, there was no worry there. She just didn't want to make a fool of herself the next time she saw him.

And yet, if it had only been the physical longing, she thought perhaps she could have handled it. But deep inside, she knew there was more to it than that. They had shared an intimacy that night that went beyond the mere joining of two bodies. That's why she had been avoiding him. She didn't trust herself to face him again.

She wondered how her father had known they would be such a good match.

She prayed that she had conceived, so that she would never have to be unfaithful to her husband again, with her body or with her heart. Angus MacNeill was like a rare delicacy—once tasted, the memory of it only made one want it that much more. But delicacies came at a high cost. And she would not pay by risking her marriage.

At the foot of the stairs from the terrace, the path to the stable led off to the right. She could see the stone building in the distance, but there was no one moving about. With a heavy sigh of resignation, she descended the steps and followed the path straight in front of her, down into the garden—being careful to avoid the honeysuckle arbor.

From the shadow inside the stable door, Angus watched Emily standing on the terrace. *She'll come to me now*, he thought. *Finally, she'll come.*

When she hadn't shown up for her rides after their night together, he had not been surprised at first. He had imagined she wanted to spend most of her time with Callander, to try to convince herself that she loved him again.

But as time went on, he began to wonder why he never saw her. Then one day, he asked about her when he went to the kitchen for his supper.

"How is Lady Callander, Essie?"

"What, lad? Oh fine," the plump, little cook replied, "why do ye ask?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "'Tis just that she hasn't come for her rides lately. I thought she might be ailin'."

"Och, no, she's more than fine." Essie giggled, the sound too young for one with so much gray in her hair. "Why, she and the laird are billin' and cooin' like a pair o' turtledoves. I dinna think I've ever seen two people so happy wi' each other."

He wanted to laugh and say, *It's an act, can't ye see that? It's me she loves, not him.* But he knew his position. Any such comments would only backfire on him and he would find himself in prison again, despite Callander's promise to the contrary.

So with the passage of each new day, Angus' mood blackened even more, waiting for the time he could finally speak with her. He considered himself more than patient for not forcing a confrontation with her before now. More than once, he had been tempted to march up to the front door of the house and demand to see her.

She had used him and cast him aside like so much offal. He had not expected his position on the estate to change after the service he had done them, but he had not expected to be ignored either. *How dare she treat me like this,* he thought.

So now, when he saw her disappear from sight as she descended the stairs, he waited. The stone wall surrounding the garden and the high trees inside it hid her from view, but soon she would emerge from the side gate. Then he could ask her why she had stayed away. Then he could see if that look was still on her face. He refused to admit, even to himself, that he hoped it was.

But the gate didn't open.

*Damn her!* If that was the way it had to be, he didn't care anymore, he would make the first move.

He hurried up the road and let himself in by the side gate, then started down the path. He expected to find her in the honeysuckle arbor, but the bench there was empty. He continued on to where the main path from the terrace intersected the one he walked, to the spot where he had stood and watched her the night of the party. At that point, a narrower path went off on an angle, into the rose garden. He saw her then.

She sat with a book in her lap, but her eyes were closed and her head lay against the back of the stone bench. It reminded him of her pose the day he had come to talk to her about Callander's proposal. She seemed just as strained then, but today, she was even more beautiful. Her hair appeared as spun gold in the sun and the warmth of the day gave a rosy glow to her cheeks. It was only when he looked closer that he saw the dark circles under her eyes.

He still stood a good distance away, hidden by the trees lining the main path and he knew he hadn't moved or made a sound. But suddenly, she sat up and looked straight

at him, as if she had sensed he was there. Then she stood and took one, two, three hesitant steps toward him before she stopped and just stared. Her hands clenched and twisted the fabric of her skirt and she seemed to be imploring him with her eyes not to come any closer.

But he would not be put off this time. He wanted to know why she had been avoiding him. What she felt about him after their night together. What she felt about her husband now.

He took a step forward but saw her turn and look toward the house. Then he heard it—the sound of slow, hesitant footsteps crunching in the gravel path. She ran forward...but not to him.

Callander embraced his wife as she threw her arms around his neck. They turned their backs on Angus and made their way deeper into the garden.

*Damn the both o' them!*

Angus went back to the stable, trying to convince himself that what he was feeling was anger, not hurt.

## Chapter Sixteen

Emily's courses started two days later. Neither she nor Edgar could hide their disappointment and he knew she had the same thought in her mind as he did – should they call on Angus to try again?

Edgar could feel her sneaking glances at him, but he could not bring himself to face her. Despite the fact that he had initiated this entire plan, the thought of her lying with Angus again bothered him more than he cared to admit. He still could see Angus as he appeared that morning, standing in the doorway between the two bedrooms. It shouldn't have bothered him so much. He knew he was taking a risk, that he could lose Emily to Angus completely, but he had to take that risk. He had expected the two of them to fall in love and he needed that to happen, to be sure that Emily would be protected after he was gone. And he had wanted Angus to be the father of his child, Edgar knew enough about him to know he could look far and wide and not find a better man.

*But what of me?*, Edgar thought. *I'm not dead yet.* He knew they would have to try again – if Emily and Angus agreed to it. The only problem was, he could not tolerate lying in the adjoining room as he had done the first time and knowing what was going on between them. Or rather, not knowing. Could the reality be any worse than what he pictured?

Another plan took shape in his mind, one that he was sure the two of them would object to. But if he presented his reasons, perhaps they would take pity on him and agree to it. Perhaps they would even enjoy it.

Emily certainly should.

Emily sat on the footstool at Edgar's feet with her head resting on his knee, as she often did in the evenings, and stared into the fireplace. The nights had grown much colder, the days gloomier now that autumn was drawing to a close. It seemed to match their mood perfectly.

Edgar's right hand idly caressed her head. He had not said anything about the fact that she hadn't conceived. She wondered if he was going to give up the idea, some small part of her hoped he would. Yet on the other hand, she longed to lie with Angus again. She hated herself for feeling that way, but there was naught she could do about it.

As if he read her thoughts, Edgar said, "Shall we try again?"

Emily stared at him, shocked. But she couldn't deny that a shiver of longing ran through her body as she remembered her night with Angus. His scent, his touch, his

strength. And the way he filled her, a sense of fullness so complete she didn't know where his body ended and hers began.

Then she remembered her reaction to him the last time they made love that night. No, it would be too easy to lose her heart, as well as her body, to him. She couldn't do it. She couldn't risk betraying Edgar that way. "No, I can't do that again. I'm sorry."

"You have my permission, my blessing, Emily." When she shook her head, he continued, "You know what happens if we don't have a son. And although that is not the primary reason I want us to have one, it is a consideration."

If she needed any excuse to make love with Angus again, that was it. "I don't know that he will agree to it."

"Oh I think he will." Edgar squeezed her hand tighter. "Only this time, there is one condition."

"What is that?"

When Edgar told her what he had in mind, she knew all hope was lost. Even though his proposal shocked her and thrilled her at the same time, she had no doubt that a man like Angus would be appalled. "He will never agree to *that*."

"Would you be agreeable to it?"

Emily felt a shudder run through her body. She was certain what he was suggesting was a sin, it had to be. The church would surely never allow anything so wicked...nor so exciting. But if Angus consented, she would gladly burn in hell for eternity. It was the only way she knew to have both the men she loved.

"Aye," she whispered, "I would."

"Good day, milord, milady," Angus said as he stood before Em and Lord Callander. He had been somewhat surprised when he received the summons to see them at the mansion. Were they going to ask for his "services" again? He wouldn't do it. He couldn't. His love for Em now ran so deep that he couldn't bear to lie with her again and walk away, as he had done before.

He was also glad for the summons because he had wanted to talk to Callander. He planned to ask the man to sell his indenture, *now*, before he let slip his feelings about Em and found himself back in the jail, despite Callander's assurances.

But when he saw her again, his resolve began to falter. She sat huddled in the chair before the fire, wrapped up in a shawl as if she couldn't get warm. Her head was turned away from him and her husband, both. Angus could see she was trembling and her hands clutched and twisted her skirt. *Not a good sign*, he thought.

"Thank you for coming, Angus," Lord Callander said. "Have a seat, won't you?"

"No, thank ye, sir, I'd rather stand."

"As you wish." Now Callander himself turned his face away from Angus. "I imagine you can guess the reason I've called you here." When Angus didn't answer, he cleared his throat and continued, "It seems we have need of your services again."

Angus almost laughed aloud at hearing Callander use the exact words he had thought himself.

But before he could respond, Callander began to speak again. "This time, however, I must change the arrangement somewhat."

"Aye?" Angus said, his curiosity piqued and waited for the man to continue.

Instead of presenting this change in "the arrangement", Callander said, "Knowing that you were making love to my wife in the next room was more, uhm, upsetting than I had anticipated."

"I can well imagine," Angus replied, trying not to sound too smug. He wondered why the man had not realized from the start that he would feel that way.

Em had not moved nor shown any response to this strange conversation.

Callander spoke again, his voice so soft Angus could hardly hear him. "If I cannot father a child, I would at least like to be present at its creation."

Angus froze, almost in a state of shock. Surely the man could not mean what Angus thought he meant. "I beg yer pardon, sir?"

Callander cleared his throat again and took a deep breath. "I should like to be present when you make love to Emily again."

"Ye mean, in the room?" Angus tried to keep from laughing at the very idea.

"No," Lord Callander said, with hesitation, "in the bed."

Angus could hold back no longer. "*What?* Have ye lost yer mind?"

"I dare say it seems that way. But think about it, Angus, I-I can...help."

Images, unbidden, clouded Angus' mind. He and Callander, one on each side of Em, stroking her, licking her, driving her wild. Then Angus mounting her while Callander caressed her breasts, Em's hand squeezing her husband's cock.

His own cock twitched and swelled in his breeks. But it was wrong...wasn't it?

"*Ye're a bluidy pervert!*" Speaking to Em, Angus asked, "Do you agree to this?" When she did not respond, he crossed the room and bent over her, his arms braced on each arm of her chair. "Look at me, Em. Answer me!"

Slowly, she turned her face up to his. He had expected her to be crying, embarrassed by such a bizarre proposal. Instead, she met his gaze steadily and said, "Aye."

Angus sank to his knees. "Why?" he asked, shaking his head. "Why would ye do such a thing?"

"I want to give Edgar a child."

"*Bah.*" Angus rose to his feet and moved away from her for fear he would grab her and try to shake some sense into her. "That's it. I'm finished wi' the lot o' ye."

Em had turned her face away again, leaning against the side headrest of the wingback chair. Lord Callander rubbed his temples as if suffering from a severe

headache. *Perhaps he is*, Angus thought, *else why would he make such a ridiculous suggestion?*

"Milord, I am askin' ye to sell my indenture."

At that, Em's head whipped around to face him. "*What?*"

"They need workers in the colonies, or in Australia," Angus continued, not looking at her, for fear he would change his mind.

She rose from her chair and almost ran to stand before him. "Angus, why?"

"*Why?* Why do ye think?"

"I thought...I thought ye cared for me, perhaps just a little. Was I wrong?"

"No, ye weren't wrong. Of course I care for ye, I do." He grabbed her by the shoulders. "That's why I have to leave, don't ye see?"

"No, I don't see. Why?"

"Because...because..." Angus hesitated, then could hold back no longer. "*Tha gaol agam orst!*" he shouted. Then, more softly, dropping his hands to his sides again, "*Tha gaol agam orst.*"

Em gasped and glanced quickly at her husband. Angus followed her gaze and was surprised to see the man looking straight ahead of him, smiling. "It's all right, Angus, you may say it in English. She has said it to me many times."

"Aye? Then I will." Angus faced Em, bending slightly to meet her eyes. "I love you. Ye've no idea how long I've loved ye."

"But ye've only known me a few months."

"I fell in love with ye before I met ye, from the stories yer da told me about ye."

"Oh Angus, I didna ken."

"Aye, well then, now ye do."

"If ye love me, then ye'll help us. Can ye no' understand how he feels?"

"No, I canna understand how he feels, for if ye were mine, I'd no' share ye wi' another man. And especially no' in the same bed." Angus turned back to Lord Callander. "I trust I may take my clothes and personal belongings wi' me when I go?"

"You may take anything you like," Callander said.

"Including yer wife?" Angus could not resist the jab.

"No," the man answered in a soft, but firm, voice, "you may not take my wife."

Angus left without looking back at either of them.

## Chapter Seventeen

Emily and Edgar sat in silence until night fell. Essie brought their meal up to them but neither of them ate a bite. Once again, Emily sat on a footstool next to Edgar's chair, her head resting on his knee.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, her voice slightly hoarse from not speaking for so long.

Edgar did not answer for such a long time, Emily thought he had not heard her. Just as she was about to speak again, Edgar said, "Go to him."

"Edgar, I—" she began to protest.

"Listen to me, Emily. I told you that Angus was my choice for our surrogate. Well, there is a reason for that. I have to be assured you will have someone to look after you when I'm gone—"

"No, don't—"

He took both her hands in his. "Listen, my love. I pray God we have many more years together, but you know we cannot count on that. I knew that you and Angus belonged together. I knew that he would love you as I do."

"You planned this whole thing?"

"Not at first, no. But when I saw how the sparks flew between the two of you, I knew it was only a matter of time. Then, when I found out the possible consequences of fathering a child, I hoped you would pick him. I cannot think of any other man whose child I would be proud to give my name. He will take care of you and your children."

"You speak of pride. He is a proud man too, as you know. This arrangement you desire has hurt his pride."

"If he loves you as I know he does, he will relent." When she remained silent, he continued, "Emily, for all that this was my suggestion from the start, I cannot bear the thought of spending another night alone while you lie with him. But for this one night, I will bear it."

"Go to him. Do anything you need do to make him stay."

She found him sitting on the side of his bed in the little room over the stable, his head in his hands. He looked up at her and she noticed his eyes looked reddened, as if he had been crying. But she got only a quick glance for, as soon as he saw her, he stood and turned his back on her. He braced his arms against the window frame, facing out into the night. "What do ye want?"

"You."



"Huh," he said, but did not turn around.

She watched the play of muscles in his back. How much would that stiff back be willing to bend for her, she wondered. She came up behind him and placed her hands on his strong, broad shoulders.

He spun away from her. "*Don't!* Dinna touch me."

She held her ground but in the small confines of the room, she was still very close to him. It surprised her that he didn't just leave the room altogether if he was so determined to get away from her and that raised her hopes slightly. "Look at me, Angus."

"No, I willna. *Piseag!*"

Emily winced. She had heard that word before but never thought she'd be called a "cunt". Especially not by a man who professed to love her. "Ye may call me what ye will, Angus. I'll no' leave until ye hear me out."

"Did he send ye here?"

"Aye, he did. I would no' have come otherwise."

"And what are ye supposed to do to get me to stay? Throw yerself at me?"

"If 'tis what I need do, aye."

"What makes ye think I want ye now?"

"Ye wanted me a wee bit over a month ago. Has Edgar's new condition to our lying together dampened yer ardor?"

"How do you know I wanted ye then, eh? How do ye know I wasna just doing it for what he offered me?"

"What did he offer you?"

"He didna tell ye?" he asked, turning around to face her. When Emily shook her head, he continued, "On the day that *our* son turned five, I was to be a free man, with money enough to go anywhere I wanted."

That stunned her for a moment. Why would he be willing to give that up? "Are ye so uncertain of yer prowess in bed, Angus, that ye would forego the chance to be free, rather than perform in front of a man a dozen years yer senior and wi' shriveled legs?"

"You yerself told me I had no worries there."

She knew she was baiting him and it was time to spring the trap. "Ah, then ye were lyin' when ye said ye loved me, is that it?"

He bent toward her, his face close to hers, his voice low and not a little frightening. "No, ye wee baggage, I wasna lyin' but I'm starting to rethink my feelings now. But you, why are you willin' to make a *striopach* of yerself for that man?"

Emily gasped. She could not believe he saw it that way. "A whore sells her body to any man who has the price. I did not sell myself to you."

"A whore sells her body for what she can get from a man. You can get a bairn from me, how does that make you any different?" he yelled at her.

She yelled back, "Because a whore does not usually love the man she fucks!" *There!* She would show him she knew some nasty words herself.

For a moment, she thought it was that word that made him draw back and stare at her. But then he pointed his finger at her and began to shake his head back and forth. When he spoke, he sounded even angrier than before. "No, ah, no. Don't be comin' to me now, sayin' ye love me when we both know 'tis no' true. Ye think that will soften me up, since I've told ye how I love you. No, it willna work. Emily, I saw how ye were with him when he was ill, so save yer breath. Ye love yer husband, ye made that perfectly clear from the start."

"I love both of you. God help me, but I do." Even to her own ears it sounded like a desperate attempt to convince him. She dropped down on the side of his bed, afraid now that all hope was lost.

"Ye cannae love both of us."

"Why not, Angus? Tell me why I can't love two men the same."

He stared at her, his mouth working, as if searching for a reason. Finally, he said, "Ye just can't, that's all." He turned his back to her but still did not leave the room. She took that as a good sign.

Softly, she asked him, "If I didna love ye, why would I have come here, to try to make ye stay? If I didna love ye, why wouldn't I tell Edgar we'd have to find another man?"

"Find one," he said, still not turning around.

Emily sighed. She knew it was no use to argue with him anymore. *Damn his bluidy pride!* She rose and walked slowly to the door. "All right, if that's the way ye want it." She was just reaching for the door handle when she felt herself lifted off her feet.

Without a word, Angus turned and threw her down on his small cot. Then his mouth was on hers, forcing her lips open, his tongue dueling with hers. Emily twined her fingers in his hair and kissed him back with all the passion she had felt for him, all these months, afraid that it would be the last time she could touch him, kiss him, embrace him.

He moved lower, kissing and biting at her neck, sending shivers all through her body. She heard a ripping sound as he tore the material of her bodice. He reached inside her stays and lifted her breast. His touch and the cool air in the room hardened her nipple into a stiff peak. He rubbed his finger over it, more gently than she would have thought him capable in his present state, then took it in his mouth and suckled. The incredible sensation went through Emily's body, straight to her womb and the honey poured from her.

"Oh my God, Angus."

His only response was a moan that vibrated her nipple. She arched upward to press it farther into his mouth, but he pulled back. When the cold air hit her moist nub, it hardened even more until it was almost painful. She tried to press herself against him for warmth, but he had shifted to her other side.

He released her other breast, but her stays did not seem to allow him the room he wanted. He growled and reached under the pillow beneath her head and brought out an object she couldn't see.

Suddenly, she felt cold metal between her breasts.

"*Ah, no,*" she cried, afraid that, in his anger, he intended to stab her.

Instead, she heard the soft whisper of cloth being cut as he slid the blade between the boning of her corset, then the clatter of the knife hitting the floor. He peeled back the stiff material and turned his attention to her other nipple—licking, sucking, caressing it and driving her wild.

His erection pressed against her leg. She reached down and undid the buttons on his breeches, then slipped her hand inside and stroked him.

He pulled back as if her hand had burned him. With a growl—that sensual sound she remembered from the first time they made love—he grasped the hem of her skirts and pushed them up, bunching them around her waist. He positioned himself between her legs, his hard flesh nudging at her portal.

She was more than ready for him. She opened her legs wider and wrapped them around his back.

He pushed into her so forcefully that she slid up farther on the bed. His cock filled her, stretched her, touched the mouth of her womb. "*Angus,*" she sighed.

"Damn you!" he answered.

She didn't know what she expected him to say, but it wasn't that. Even so, his words could not stop the thrill of her approaching crisis.

"Damn you," he cried with each thrust. "Damn you, damn you, *damn you,*" he cried, in time with each stroke of his shaft.

Every muscle in her body tensed, readying her for the climax. Each stroke of his cock sent her higher and higher, until it felt as if lightning flashed from her head to her toes. One last deep thrust sent her over the edge. "*Angus!*"

He gave one last shove and froze, his arms braced on each side of her. She felt his seed spurting out and prayed silently, *Let it take root.*

"I love you," he shouted, then collapsed on top of her.

She hugged him tightly and wound her fingers in his hair, loosening the ribbon that held his curls back in a queue. "I love you too," she whispered into his ear.

Without withdrawing from her, he moved to lie next to her. She felt him softening and slipping out of her before they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Angus awoke to find Emily watching him in the gray light of dawn. "What is it?"

"I was just wondering," she said, "why it is ye sleep with a knife under yer pillow."

"You of all people need to ask me that?"

"Ye're safe here. Ye must know that."

"We're not safe anywhere, you and I, not while Wee Geordie is on the throne."

As she pondered this, Angus began to drift back to sleep. But soon he felt her scooting to the end of the bed and away from him.

"Where are ye goin'?"

"Back to the house." She stood up and tried to smooth the wrinkles out of her skirt. Her dress was still undone above the waist and he began to grow hard again just looking at her beautiful breasts.

He didn't have long to look. She slid the remnants of her corset from behind her back and threw them on the bed next to him. "Something to remember me by," she said. Then she pulled her torn bodice up, covering herself as best she could.

He turned and sat on the side of the bed. "Come with me."

She shook her head. "Don't force me to choose between the two of ye, Angus. Ye'll lose. I love you, I truly do, but he had my heart first."

She hesitated a moment as if waiting for him to say something. He didn't.

She turned and left the room, leaving him sitting, staring after her.

He picked up the stays she had left behind and pressed them to his nose. The faint fragrance of honeysuckle and Em lingered on the material.

"I can't do it," he said aloud to the empty room.

Emily found Edgar in his upstairs sitting room. She saw him take in her bedraggled appearance. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Aye."

She knew he was waiting for her to say more, but she couldn't find her voice. Her expression, however, said it all.

"He won't do it?"

She shook her head and sat down on the footstool next to him. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"I don't—"

Before Edgar could finish his sentence, they heard the front door of the house slam, then heavy footsteps on the stairs. Angus burst into the room.

"I've ne'er worn a nightshirt in my life and I'll no' start now."

Emily and Edgar stared at him, in shock. "Is that clear?" Angus asked.

After a moment of stunned silence, Edgar nodded and said, "Considering the reason for this arrangement, I don't think that will be a problem."

"Oh," said Angus and ducked his head briefly. "All right then."

Another period of silence followed as they all stared at one another. Finally, Angus asked, "So...what do we do now?"

Edgar frowned. "I don't really know."

"Ye don't?" asked Angus.

"Lord, man, I've never done this sort of thing before."

"Oh," from Angus. "I thought perhaps ye had."

Edgar looked at Emily and shrugged. He said, "We'll work out the logistics eventually, I suppose."

Silence again. Emily watched the men's expressions, their brows were drawn together and they avoided looking at each other and at her. Then she began to giggle. The giggle turned into a laugh and she laughed until tears ran down her cheeks.

Edgar smiled at her. "And just what is so funny, milady?"

Between gasping for breaths, Emily said, "The two of you. Ye're actin' as if ye're terrified." She looked from one of them to the other. "I'll no' bite...unless ye want me to."

Both men's eyes widened until Emily was afraid they might pop out of their heads. Edgar fidgeted in his chair and Angus tried to discreetly cover his crotch.

Emily bent over double with laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emily helped Edgar to his side of the bed and began to remove his shirt and breeches. Angus stood at the foot of the bed and watched. She could see by his expression that he was still in disbelief over what they were about to do. That she was going to let them both make love to her at the same time. *Good heavens*, she thought, *what woman wouldn't?*

That morning, they had decided that Angus should come to the house around midnight, when the rest of the staff was sure to be asleep. The side door had been left open for him, but this time Weston would not be there to escort him.

Since Angus had entered the room there had been no conversation. Quick glances were exchanged between the three of them, but no one seemed to know what to say. So Emily took the initiative and led Edgar to the bed. He wanted this, Angus had shown that he wanted it and Emily certainly wanted it. Better just to plunge in and hope that the awkwardness would go away.

Emily tossed Edgar's clothes on a nearby chair. He sat on the side of the bed, his legs dangling down. Emily knelt on the bed steps and ran her fingers lightly over his chest and arms. She stroked the fine black hairs on his chest and followed the dark line down to his groin, where it fanned out in a soft, curly pelt. Then she moved up again, licking and sucking his nipples, stopping occasionally to kiss him, caressing his lips and teeth with her tongue. But soon she returned to his groin, where his cock twitched and swelled with each kiss, each lick, each suck. Edgar gasped and leaned back, bracing his arms on the bed, allowing her easier access to his hardening flesh.

And all the time, Emily was conscious of Angus' eyes following her every move. She could not miss the swelling at his own groin.

Keeping her gaze on Angus, Emily took Edgar's cock in her mouth. She could tell that he wished it were his flesh she was sucking and stroking. *Don't worry, yer time will come*, she thought and turned her full attention to her husband's erection.

She was surprised when she felt Angus' hands on her waist. He had come up behind her and was loosening the back of her gown. He slipped her bodice off her shoulders and undid her stays. "No knife this time?" she asked softly, rubbing her cheek against Edgar's cock.

Angus chuckled. "No, not this time."

"I think I'm glad I don't know what prompted that exchange," Edgar said.

Emily just smiled and returned to caressing Edgar, running her hands along his thighs and belly, stroking his cock with her cheek and tongue. Angus' arms came around her from behind, he took her breasts in his big hands and tweaked her nipples with his thumbs. "Ah," she cried and surged forward, her belly brushing Edgar's hard cock.

Gooseflesh rose all along the skin of her arms and side when Angus leaned over her and nuzzled her neck. They had only been together twice, but he had already figured out one of the things that made her wet.

As if he knew her thoughts and wanted to see for himself, Angus slid his hands up under her skirt, up her thighs and around her buttocks. He reached between her legs and moistened his finger with her honey. Emily jumped, the movement caused Edgar to gasp.

The next moment she felt a sense of loss as Angus removed his hands and began to untie her skirt and petticoats. He quickly pulled them off and they pooled with a soft whisper around the steps on which she knelt.

Edgar still leaned on his elbows, observing the scene before him. His cock had hardened even more. For the first time, Emily realized that she was not the only one who would derive pleasure from this arrangement. She learned that a person can become aroused by watching others make love. The feel of Angus' hard shaft pressing against her now naked body gave further proof of that.

As Angus ran his hands down her body to her flanks, she leaned forward and took Edgar in her mouth again. She sucked his shaft and caressed his ballocks while Angus' hands moved down to the soft curls of her mons. Then he brought his finger up between the divide of her buttocks and she cried out at the feel of him probing her puckered opening. Even Edgar had never done that to her. His thumb edged in, just a little way, then he stopped as if to let her get used to the feeling. It was a very strange sensation, a little uncomfortable...and sinfully exciting.

She suddenly became aware of Edgar's gasps and moans, signaling his approaching crisis. "Move away, love," he said.

Instead, Emily shook her head and continued to suck until he spilled his seed in her mouth. Another strange feel and taste, but not unpleasant. And it was clear that Edgar

had enjoyed it immensely. He had fallen back on the bed, his arms thrown out at his sides.

"You didn't have to do that, Emily," he said between deep, ragged breaths.

"I didn't mind it. If I cannot take yer seed into the proper place, I can at least take it in that way."

He pulled her up his body and tangled his hands in her hair, bringing her face down to his for a deep kiss. "Is that how I taste?" he asked, echoing her words to him the first time he took her in his mouth.

"You taste delicious," she replied and smiled as she too remembered that night.

She caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and it was only then that she realized Angus had stepped away from her and gone to the other side of the bed. Even though he still watched them, it was as if he didn't want to intrude on Edgar and Emily's intimate moment.

Edgar raised himself in the bed until he rested against the pillows. Emily moved to lie beside him. She had pleased Edgar, but Angus had lit a fire in her body that had yet to be quenched. And by the bulge in his breeks, she knew he was ready.

Holding her gaze with his, Angus began to remove his clothes. Her breath caught when he tossed his shirt aside and she saw again his broad, sun-bronzed chest. He unbuttoned his breeks and slowly eased them down his legs. His turgid cock rose and swelled until it pressed against his belly.

Emily felt a tingling desire that started at her breasts and ran down her body to center in her cunny. She needed Angus to fulfill that desire. She scooted to sit on his side of the bed and reached out for him. She could feel Edgar watching behind her but he said nothing.

Angus stepped up to her. The height of the bed brought his cock level with her mouth and he leaned forward, obviously wanting what she had done to Edgar. But Emily had other plans for him first. She raised her arms and stroked him from his neck down to the strong muscles of his chest, stopping to tease his nipples until they rose up as stiff as her own. His cock twitched against her neck but she moved back, prolonging his arousal. He let her do as she wished, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Her hands caressed his belly and circled around his erection, down the front of his strong thighs then around and up to grasp his firm buttocks. She stroked the furrow between his cheeks but she was still too shy to probe there, as he had done to her. She would save that for another night.

It seemed to have achieved the effect she desired, however.

"Christ, lass, what are ye doin' to me?" As he had done on their first night together, Angus reached up to grab the curtain frame to hold himself up.

Emily suppressed a giggle and reached out to pull him closer. She took his huge cock in her mouth. She suckled, then drew back to run her tongue all around the swollen tip. A drop of clear, silky fluid flowed from the tiny opening and she licked it

off, then took as much of his shaft in her mouth as she could. A different taste, a different smell, but she loved it just as much as she did Edgar's.

Suddenly, Angus drew back. "Enough, Em. I can't take any more."

She slid back and lay down, chancing a look at her husband. She feared she might see anger or disgust or regret, at least, for suggesting this arrangement. But all she saw was desire and when she glanced lower, she saw that his cock had risen again, just from watching her and Angus. A feeling of relief almost overwhelmed her.

As if he could not wait a moment longer, Angus kneeled on the bed and pulled her toward him, wrapping her legs around his waist. He took hold of his throbbing cock and guided it into her. She was wet and ready for him and he slipped in easily.

She felt the walls of her cunny stretch to accommodate his girth. That incredible feeling of fullness stole her breath. At the same time, Edgar leaned over and kissed her, opening her mouth as Angus opened her passage, licking and stroking her tongue and lips with his own. She reached down to massage Edgar's cock and his moans of pleasure mingled with hers. *Surely this is heaven*, she thought.

But it was nothing to the sensations she felt when, still holding her mouth captive with his own, Edgar began to caress her breasts. With Angus thrusting forcefully into her with his rapidly approaching climax and Edgar tenderly stroking her, Emily feared she would swoon from the pleasure.

Soon she was engulfed in a crisis so strong, she screamed. Angus gave one more hard thrust then froze above her as he shot his seed against the opening of her womb. She heard Edgar cry out another climax and felt his cum seeping between her fingers.

It was some time before their breathing returned to normal. Angus pulled his softening cock from her body and collapsed next to her, his arm encircling her waist. Edgar's hand still rested at her breasts.

Before they drifted into sleep, Emily said, "I wonder if 'tis possible to die of pleasure."

"Lord, lass," Angus sighed, "I hope not."

Angus awoke just as the sky began to lighten to a dull gray. It took him a moment to remember where he was, then the memories of the night before caused his cock to awaken as well and the heat rush to his cheeks.

Edgar and Em were still sleeping on their sides, facing each other. He knew instinctively that they slept that way each night. It would have bothered him before, but now he knew that he would always be a part of Em's life and that she did love him, as well as her husband. He could live with that.

He hated to leave the bed, but he knew he had to go before the rest of the household was up and about. He rose and dressed, then opened and closed the door very quietly.



He backed into the hallway and turned around...and ran straight into Mrs. Lamond.

## Chapter Eighteen

Angus was almost afraid to go to the kitchen for breakfast that morning. He imagined Mrs. Lamond to be the soul of discretion, but one never really knew. He resolved to walk in and say his "Good mornings" as if nothing in his daily routine had changed.

Mrs. Lamond, Essie, Fen, Weston, Sam, Willie and Hamish all sat around the table...staring at him.

*Oh God*, he thought.

Sam was the first to break. "So, Angus, how are ye feelin' this fine morning?" he asked with a huge grin.

"Fine. Why are ye askin'?" Angus growled.

At that, everyone broke into laughter. *So Mrs. Lamond is not as discreet as I thought.*

He had to pass by Hamish to get to his chair and as he did so, the young man slapped him on the back. "Don't worry about it, man. We've talked it out and we're all for it."

Angus' jaw dropped even as his body dropped into his seat. "Wh-what do you mean?" he asked, still hoping to bluff his way through this somehow.

Mrs. Lamond spoke up. "I overheard the physicians talking after Lord Callander had his fall. I know that he would never risk passing his illness on to a child."

"So what has that to do with me?"

"Listen, lad," Essie said. "We know ye're helping them to have a bairn. None of us wants to see that pawky nephew o' his as the next earl. You can give them a fine son who'll be worthy of milord's name."

Angus was so stunned he couldn't speak. They all knew and they didn't care?

"I know how much you love her." This came from Weston, who had done little prior to this to hide his dislike of Em. Angus stared at the older man. As if reading his thoughts, Weston continued, "I know I thought ill of her at first, but I have never seen his lordship so happy. She'll need a strong man to care for her when he's gone. I'm glad it will be you."

As Angus continued to sit in stunned silence, Essie said, "Eat up, lad. Ye're goin' to need yer strength."

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next fortnight, Angus came to their room each night. Occasionally, Edgar was too tired to participate more than gently fondling Emily's breasts while Angus took

her, but he still encouraged Emily and Angus to make love...as long as he was there in the room.

It didn't take them long to become easy with the arrangement.

*How many positions can three people make?*, Emily wondered as she kneeled astride Edgar's legs. She bent forward and took his cock in her mouth, her breasts brushing against his thighs. Edgar combed his fingers through her hair and cupped the back of her head, guiding her as she began to suck his hard flesh.

Angus knelt behind her and probed her opening, coaxing the honey from her. She moaned with each stroke and watched as the vibrations against Edgar's cock spurred him toward his climax. Angus slid one finger, two, then three inside her, stretching her, drawing her closer to the edge.

But he wouldn't let her go there just yet.

He withdrew all but one finger and turned it, rubbing that certain spot on the front of her passage that he knew would drive her wild.

And it did. Emily cried out her climax against Edgar's cock and felt his seed spurt into her mouth. At the same time, Angus replaced his finger with his hard shaft and began to thrust. Emily braced her arms on each side of Edgar's chest and he reached up to lightly caress her breasts.

Angus bent over her and slid his hand down her belly to spread the lips of her cunny, finding her swollen nub and teasing it. She was so wet, so ready, as she felt another crisis coming on.

And when Angus' thumb probed her puckered opening, she could hold back no longer. The combined sensations of Edgar caressing her breasts, Angus stroking her bud and plunging into her and stretching her most private spot were too much to endure. She grunted and pushed back to meet each of Angus' thrusts and then froze as her climax washed over her like the waves of the sea.

Angus pushed once more and came, shooting his seed deep into her. At the same time, Emily felt Edgar's come soaking the mossy curls of her mons. She and Angus collapsed on the bed next to Edgar and they slept, entwined in each others' arms as had become their habit.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Checkmate."

"Bah," Angus said, leaning back in his chair. "I dinna ken why I bother to play this game with you, for all that ye beat me every time."

Edgar began replacing the pieces in the proper place on the chessboard. "Not every time."

"No, but more often than not."

Angus thought back to the past four months. Their lives had fallen into an easy pattern. Edgar had released Angus from his indenture and made him his factor. Willie

had taken over as groom. Angus moved into the adjoining bedroom—the one that had been Emily’s—which he liked very much, because it held fond memories of his first night with her. But he spent little time there, as most of his nights passed in Edgar’s big bed, the three of them entangled in various positions before Angus took Emily.

He couldn’t remember ever being this happy.

“Where are you from, Angus?”

Edgar’s question brought Angus out of his reverie. “Pardon?”

“It has occurred to me that I know nothing about your former life, except that you were a Highland laird. Where was home? What was your title?”

“I was Laird of Glenelg, a wee lovely place on the Sound of Sleat.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve been through there before. Isn’t that strange that we could have met then, instead of under these circumstances.”

“Aye, I suppose it is.”

“What happened to your lands and title, do you know?”

“No, but I was the only holdout in that region against the MacLeods. Since they stayed out of the Risin’, I imagine they’ve taken it over now.”

“Hmm, perhaps,” Edgar said thoughtfully. “I believe it’s your move.”

But before he could make his move, Emily came in from her dressing room, ready for bed in her nightgown and robe. She went over and sat down on the arm of Edgar’s chair. She wrapped her arm around his shoulders and leaned her cheek against his hair. “May I interrupt yer game for a moment?”

“Please do. He’s beatin’ the pants off o’ me again,” Angus said.

“I have something to tell you.”

Angus and Edgar looked at each other, eyebrows raised, then up at Emily.

“I’m goin’ to have a baby.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Edgar exclaimed, “Oh that’s wonderful, Emily.” He hugged her to his side.

Angus could not speak. So many thoughts ran through his mind. *My child and I can never claim it.* But he had agreed to this, so he vowed to get used to the idea. At least he would be here to watch the child grow and have a hand in guiding it through life.

He got up and headed for the adjoining bedroom. As he passed Em, he cupped her cheek in his hand. She brought her hand up to press his closer and leaned her head into his caress. “Congratulations, my *jo*, my darling,” he said.

Then he left the room.

After a few moments, Edgar said to Emily, “Go to him. It is his child, after all.”

“Aye. But I’ll come back to you tonight.”

Emily entered Angus’ room to find him sitting on the side of his bed, his head in his hands. She sat down beside him and put her arm around his bent shoulders. “Thank you,” she said softly.

He turned to her and took her in his arms and together they fell back onto the bed. He rested his head on her breast. She felt moisture on her nightdress and knew that he was crying. She suspected it wasn't entirely out of happiness. She smoothed his curls back from his forehead. "He will know. Someday, he will know."

He glanced up at her, his brows drawn together in puzzlement. "Who will know what?"

"Yer son. He will know that you are really his father."

He shook his head. "I'll no' tell him. 'Twould not be fair to Edgar."

"Ye won't have to tell him. He'll know." He smiled at that. "Come back to bed now," she said.

"Are ye sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Tonight is for you as much as it is for Edgar and me." She grinned at him. "We could no' have done it without you."

## Chapter Nineteen

Caroline stared at the letter in her hand. Her fingers shook with rage, even as the rest of her body froze.

*Edgar Alexander Armstrong, Ninth Earl of Callander, and  
Lady Emily Sinclair Armstrong  
announce, with great joy, the birth of their son,  
John Alasdair Andrew Armstrong,  
on Friday, the fifteenth day of November, 1751.*

"Caroline, are you well?" Raymond asked as he came into the dining room and saw his wife sitting as still as a statue at the table. "You look rather pale."

"It has happened," she said.

"What has happened?" he asked in between slurps of his turnip soup. "And why are you whispering? Really, Caroline, I don't know what has come over you—"

"*Shall I scream it then?*" she asked, doing precisely that. "She has given him a son!"

Raymond's spoon clattered loudly into his bowl and broth sprouted up like a geyser. "Oh God no."

"Oh yes. It seems your uncle is capable, after all."

"What are we going to do?"

"Why," Caroline replied with a sweet smile and wide, innocent eyes, "pay them a visit to congratulate them, of course."

Raymond knew that look...and it chilled him to the bone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can I see the bairn, milady?" Fen peeked around the door of Edgar and Emily's bedchamber...just as she did at least ten times a day.

Emily smiled. "Of course, ye can, Fen. In fact, he's starting to fuss. I think he wants his supper. Would you like to hand him to me?"

"Oh can I, milady, can I?"

The girl fairly skipped over to the baby's cradle. "Just be sure to hold his head when you pick him up," Emily advised. She knew Fen would never intentionally hurt him, but she wasn't sure if the lass had ever handled an infant. Just to be safe, she added,

"You may hold him whenever you like as long as Lord Callander, or Angus, or I am there to help you."

"Thank ye, milady. I won't pick him up until ye're there, I promise." She gingerly lifted the tiny bundle and handed it to Emily as if it were made of the finest crystal.

Emily opened her nightdress and held the baby to her breast. Fen watched, fascinated, as he clamped his little bow mouth around his mother's nipple.

"Fen? Are ye up there?" Essie's voice called from downstairs. "I need ye to gather the eggs."

"Uh oh. I forgot," Fen said, her eyes wide with surprise. "Coming, Mama." She turned to Emily, "I have to go now."

Emily had to laugh. "That's all right, sweetie. Go and help yer mama, now that ye've helped me."

The girl had no sooner left the room than Edgar and Angus entered. Edgar eased down on the bed while Angus sat next to her. The third man in her life still suckled greedily at her breast.

The tug of her son's lips created an almost sensual feeling that went straight to Emily's cunny, as Angus liked to call it. She couldn't wait for the day she could have intercourse again, but Essie, who had attended her as midwife, had told her she should wait at least a few weeks. And she had to admit, she was a bit sore.

Still, as she looked at Edgar leaning against the pillows on her right and Angus, perched on the side of the bed, she longed for the touch of their hands, the taste of their lips and the fullness of Angus inside her.

She brought her attention back to the men's conversation. Dair, as they had begun to call him, had his little fists clenched around the index finger of each man. "Will ye look at that, he's a strong wee lad, no?"

"Yes, he certainly is. He takes after his father," Edgar replied.

The baby gave an especially hard tug on her breast and Emily gasped.

"Are ye all right? How are ye feeling?"

"I'm fine, Angus. It has been two weeks, after all. And no matter what the two of you and Essie say, I am getting out of bed today."

Angus started to protest, but before the words left his mouth, the sound of the front door slamming and raised voices interrupted him.

Edgar said, "What in heaven's name—" but stopped when he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Suddenly, the door burst open and there stood Caroline Cavendish, her mouth hanging open. "Well, isn't this a cozy scene?" she said.

Emily was so shocked she made no effort to cover her breast...until she saw Raymond looming behind his wife. But she refused to allow them to interfere with Dair's nursing. She pulled the blanket over his head and across her breast, just enough to hide it from Raymond's sight.

"How dare you barge in here," Edgar said. "Leave this room at once."

Weston's voice came from the hallway. "I'm sorry, milord, I tried to stop them, but they insisted."

"It's all right, Weston."

Raymond stepped forward. "Why, Uncle, we've only come to congratulate you and to pay our respects to the next Earl of Callander." It was impossible to miss the hatred behind his statement.

Both Caroline and Raymond were staring at Angus. Emily was glad he hadn't jumped to his feet when the two of them entered the room. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on here and as conniving as the Cavendishes were, Emily knew they had certainly surmised the arrangement she, Edgar and Angus had. But, like the brave man he was, Angus held his ground.

He stood now and bowed to Edgar and Emily. "Milord, milady, if ye'll excuse me, I'll just go and see if Jamie Ross' cow has calved yet."

Edgar nodded and Angus moved to the door. Raymond blocked his way for a moment, but the scowl on Angus' face was enough to frighten even the bravest of men – which Raymond certainly was not. He stepped aside to let Angus pass.

"Aren't you going to let us see our new cousin, Emily?"

Emily chose to ignore the informal address. "You may see him later, after he's finished nursing." She hoped that would get the two of them to leave the room.

Raymond glanced over his shoulder. "We are tired from our journey. Have our bedrooms prepared."

Then Weston's voice, "Milord?"

"Yes, Weston, have Mrs. Lamond and Fen prepare the guest rooms. In the meantime, the two of you may wait in the drawing room...*downstairs*," Edgar emphasized.

They left in a huff, but at least they left.

Emily finished feeding Dair and put him back in his cradle. He had fallen asleep as soon as his little tummy was full. She turned to Edgar. "Well, shall we get this over with?"

Edgar rose from the bed and reached for his canes. "Yes, I suppose. We knew this time would come."

"And we knew they wouldn't take it well," Emily said as she stepped into her clothes.

"No, but there is nothing they can do about it now."

They went downstairs to the drawing room. Raymond and Caroline stood by the long windows, whispering, but broke apart when Edgar and Emily entered.

"Congratulations again, Uncle. You must be very proud."

"Thank you, Raymond. Indeed I am."



"Oh," said Caroline, "I have forgotten my shawl. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

"I can send Mrs. Lamond for it, if you wish."

"No," Caroline quickly replied, as she edged toward the door. "It will take but a second, I know just where it is. No need to bother anyone."

With that, she was gone. Emily watched her go, thinking that something in her demeanor was very strange, she appeared almost nervous. But then Caroline always was rather strange, in Emily's opinion.

Fennella came in from the henhouse, her apron full of eggs. She had just finished placing them carefully in the big bowl on the kitchen table when her mother came in. "Ah, there you are. I need ye to go upstairs, get some clean linens and help Mrs. Lamond."

Her mother appeared somewhat fashed, but Fen didn't wait to ask her what was wrong. She liked making up the beds—the smell of the sun-dried cloth was so nice. She scampered through the house toward the big, curving staircase.

As she passed the drawing room, she heard voices. She recognized milord's and milady's, but there was another—a man—and it sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it.

To get to the linen closet, Fen had to pass milord's and milady's bedroom. Just as she had done every chance she got since Dair was born, she slipped into the room to peek at him.

But someone had gotten there before her. That nasty lady stood by the cradle, holding the bairn up in the air, staring at him. Dair was still drowsy, but was beginning to fuss.

"Ye canna pick him up unless milord or milady or Angus is with ye." Fen forgot her fear of the woman in her concern over the baby. "And ye have to hold his head. Ye're not holding his head right."

"Shut up, you little imbecile. Get out of here."

"No, I won't go until milady comes. Ye're not supposed to hold him unless she's here." Fen's voice grew louder in her concern for Dair. "I'll go get her, then ye can hold him."

"No!" the lady yelled at her. "I'm putting him down, see. You're right, I will wait until later to hold him." She came to the door and waited for Fen to move out of her way. Then she went downstairs.

Fen walked over and knelt next to Dair's cradle. He was still fussing, so she patted him to get him back to sleep. "Dinna worry, baby, I won't let her hurt you."

Suddenly, a chill ran through Fen's body. *Why do I think she would hurt Dair?* Then the memories came back to her in such quick flashes, it almost made her dizzy. Milord

falling down the stairs. Then that nasty woman's words, "*You tried to kill the wrong person*" and "*She'll get a surprise when she goes riding.*"

Suddenly, it all became clear to her. They tried to hurt milord and milady, now they might try to hurt Dair.

Fen knew what she had to do. "I ken I'm no' supposed to pick ye up by myself, but I have to. I think yer mama will understand. I know someone who can keep ye safe until those people leave."

She lifted Dair out of the cradle, being very careful to hold his head, and wrapped his blankets snugly around him. She took the back staircase, even though she knew she would have to go past her mother to get outside. But she couldn't risk letting that woman see her. "What's that bundle o' rags ye've got in yer arms, lass?" her mother asked over her shoulder as she kneaded bread for dinner.

"Just some rags, mama," she answered and ran outside before her mother could stop her.

Mrs. Lamond came into the room just as the door closed behind her. "Fenella, come back here. We need to make up the rooms," Mrs. Lamond called after her, but she kept running.

She ran into the stable and looked around, but Angus wasn't there. Neither was Willie, so she couldn't ask him where Angus had gone. She went up the stairs to Angus' room and sat down to wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edgar took a deep breath to calm himself. Caroline had been talking for the past half an hour, giving every detail of her two pregnancies and births. Raymond interjected his own comments, which would have someone who didn't know him believe him to be the most doting husband and father on the planet.

The Cavendishes were more irritating than ever, now that they'd seen their inheritance go up in smoke. Edgar once again thanked God that Angus had given him a son to claim the title, rather than have it go to this fool before him.

"If you'll excuse me, I should like to rest before dinner and I have to check on the baby," Emily said.

"Of course, my lady, you must still be weak from your ordeal," Caroline simpered.

"It was no ordeal. In truth, compared to what you say of your own, it was an easy birth. But this is my first day up and about and I am a bit tired."

"I shall be up in a few minutes, my dear," Edgar said.

"All right." She kissed him and left the room. Edgar looked up just in time to see Raymond's nostrils flare and vowed his nephew's visit was going to be a short one.

Caroline resumed where she left off in her discourse of her daughter's birth and Edgar stifled a yawn. *Time to put an end to this*, but before he could say anything, the scream from the upper story stopped him.

He went to the foot of the stairs as quickly as he could and looked up. Emily leaned against the banister, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"He's gone. Dair is gone!"

Edgar moved as quickly as he could to the stairs.

Raymond lagged slightly behind with Caroline. "What have you done?" he whispered.

"Nothing. I tried, but that little imbecile of a maid saw me." By then, they had joined everyone else at the foot of the staircase.

Emily came down the stairs slowly, staring straight at Caroline. "What have ye done with him? *Where is he?*"

"Me? I've done nothing. Why do you accuse —"

"Because ye went up to get yer shawl, but ye're not wearing it, are ye, Caroline? What have ye done with my son?" She reached out and grabbed the taller woman by her shoulders, preparing to shake the truth out of her.

By this time, Essie had joined Edgar and the Cavendishes at the staircase. "Oh dear God," she said.

Emily turned to her. "What is it, Essie?"

"Oh my God, milady, I'm so sorry."

Emily dropped her hands from Caroline's shoulders and turned toward the cook. "For what, Essie, what's wrong?"

"'Tis Fen. She ran outside a wee while ago and she had a bundle in her arms."

"*What?*" Emily could not believe what she was hearing. "Fen loves Dair, she wouldn't do anything to hurt him."

"I ken, milady, but —"

"Where would she go?" Edgar asked.

"I don't know, sir. But she can't have gone far and she wouldna go off the estate."

"Hmph," Raymond grunted, "well, that narrows it down to several hundred acres."

Edgar ignored him and spoke again to Essie. "Find Angus and all the other men. They can search the grounds while you and Mrs. Lamond search the house and outbuildings."

"Aye, sir, right away."

Angus was riding toward the stable when Hamish stopped him and gave him the news. He felt as if his heart had fallen into his feet and his chest grew tight. When he got his breath back, he tied Tar to garden gate and organized the search.

They had covered the gardens, the henhouse, the smokehouse, any place they could think that Fen might be hiding. Hours had passed, but there was still no sign of the girl

or the baby. It would be dark soon and he, like everyone else, was growing more frantic with each passing minute.

Angus had stopped in once to check on Em. She lay on her bed, her eyes red from crying. "Is anyone with you?" she asked.

"No. Edgar is in the library with *them*."

She threw herself into his arms. "Oh Angus, what are we going to do?"

"We'll find him, don't worry." He smoothed her hair away from her wet cheeks and rubbed her back.

"She wouldn't hurt him, would she?"

"I've never known Fen to hurt a bug. She loves Dair, ye know that."

"I know, but why would she take him?"

"She must have had her reasons. I'd best go and look around some more."

Em nodded against his shoulder. He kissed her tenderly and left.

Now he stood in the lane surrounding the house and watched the sun sink below the faraway hills. Willie came up to him. "Are we going to stop for the night?"

"No," Angus replied, "we can't. Get lanterns from the coach house and give them to the men. I'll get the ones from the stable. We have to find them."

"I'm sorry, Angus," Willie said.

He had been able to keep his emotions in check until that moment, but the boy's words finally cracked Angus' shell. In a tear-choked voice, he said, "Thank ye, lad," patted Willie on the shoulder and almost ran to the stable.

As soon as he opened the door, Angus heard the baby crying. The sound came from the loft where he used to sleep. He took the stairs two at a time.

Fen walked in circles around the small room, the baby on her shoulder. She patted his back and crooned to him. "Dinna cry, baby, dinna cry. I'll take ye back when those people leave."

"Fen?" The girl startled and turned around. "What is going on, lass? Why did ye take Dair away?"

Her words came tumbling out so quickly, Angus had no idea what she was saying. He caught the words "tripped" and "killed", but the rest was a jumble.

"Slow down, *nighean*, little one, ye're not making any sense."

"They mean to hurt Dair and milady like they did milord."

"No one has hurt Lord Callander. He's doing verra well."

"No, no, the last time they were here. That mean man, he tripped milord."

A chill ran down Angus' spine. "Are you sayin' that Lord Stockdale tripped Lord Callander on purpose?"

"Aye, I saw him do it, from the window in their room. And then I heard that nasty lady say, 'She'll get a surprise when she goes ridin'.' Lady Callander is the only woman around here who rides. Mama is too fat and Mrs. Lamond never goes near the stables. That nasty woman was trying to get milady to go ridin'."

"But Lady Callander *has* gone riding, many times, since they were here last and no harm came to her. Fen, are ye sure of what ye're tellin' me?"

"Aye, Angus, I am sure. I ken that I'm an ejit—"

"No, lassie, ye're not an idiot. Ye're only a wee bit slow to catch on to things." He knew the girl was weak in her mind, but he also knew she would never lie. He gave her a hug and took the baby from her. "Let's go back now. Dair is hungry and needs his mama."

They made their way down the steps and began to walk through the stable, Angus holding the baby with one arm, his other one draped around Fen's shoulders.

"I swear it, I know what I saw."

"I believe ye, Fen, but milord is all better and milady hasn't been hurt, so I dinna think there's anything to worry about."

Angus had listened to Fen's story skeptically, but now his mind raced. He'd been thinking it strange that Lord Callander fell—he had been doing so well of late and he always took extra care on stairs. Then Angus remembered the morning he had seen Lady Stockdale in the stable. Why would she come there when she was so afraid of horses? She hadn't done anything to harm them, he knew, because he checked them every day. What else could she have done?

The answer hit him like a fist to the gut. "Wait here," he said to Fen, handing her the baby. He went to the tack room and examined Em's saddle closely, but he could find nothing wrong with it. "Everything seems to be all right, Fen. I really don't think milady is in any danger." He let Fen continue to hold Dair, as the baby had settled and now sucked his fingers contentedly.

"Did I do right, Angus?" Fen asked as they started to walk back to the house.

"Aye, lass, ye did right. Thank ye for telling me."

"I ken how much milady loves to ride her horse," Fen continued, but Angus was only half listening to her. His mind still went over any possible danger to Em, but there didn't seem to be any, the horses were fine, the saddle was undamaged. "Mr. Weston says 'tis sinful how milady rides like a man," Fen continued, "but I think she's—"

Angus stopped and grabbed Fen's arm. "Wait. What did you just say?"

"Milady loves to ride her horse—"

"No, lass, after that."

"She rides like a man, with her legs on each side."

"That's it!" Angus ran back into the tack room and checked the lady's sidesaddle. It had not been used in years and was covered in dust, so he could clearly see the handprint on the seat, even though the print was now covered with a slightly thinner

layer of dust. This saddle too appeared undamaged...until he examined the girth. The underside of the leather had been scored with a knife, so that the strain of galloping would cause it to tear apart.

This attempt on Em's life had failed. Edgar had survived his fall. But what would they plan next? *And what had they planned to do to Dair?*

He took the girth off and hurried from the stable. When he caught up with Fen, he hugged her again and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. "Thank you, Fen, ye might have just saved Lady Callander's and Dair's life."

The girl's face lit up and she squealed, "I did right!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Emily was up and dressed and sitting by the fire, with Edgar in the chair across from her, when Angus returned. She had expected him to still be out looking for Dair and was surprised he had come back so soon. She was even more surprised when he ushered Fen into the room with him, the baby nestled in her arms.

Emily gave a startled cry. She jumped up and ran to Fen, almost snatching Dair from her arms. The infant began to fuss again. "Fen, why did ye do this? Ye know better than that. We trusted you —"

"Easy, Em, easy. The bairn is fine, she didna hurt him." And before Em could say anything more, he asked, "Where are they?"

"Resting from their long journey," Edgar said, the first words he'd spoken since they brought Dair back. "They must have driven all night, once they received the birth announcement."

Angus noticed how drawn and tired the man looked. What they were about to tell him wouldn't make him feel any better either.

Emily sat back down and put the baby to her breast. She looked from Fen to Angus and asked, "Why?"

"We've a tale to tell ye," Angus said, "and ye won't find it pleasant."

"What is it?" Edgar asked.

Angus turned to Fen and cocked his head toward Emily and Edgar. "Go ahead, lass."

Between the two of them, they told the story of what Fen had seen and heard. Even though Emily loved the girl and believed her smarter than most people gave her credit for, she still couldn't believe what she was hearing. Edgar sat in silence, his face blank and unreadable.

When Fen had finished, Emily looked at her husband, then at Angus, he read the question in her eyes, asking him to confirm what she had just heard.

He nodded and held up the girth. "I found Lady Stockdale in the stable the morning after you fell, Edgar. This is what she was doing there."

When Emily saw the cuts in the leather, she felt the blood in her face drain out. "Oh my dear God."

The room was silent for a moment then Edgar said, "Thank you, Fen, for telling us this. You may go now."

The girl turned to leave, but Em stopped her. "Fen? Please forgive me. I didn't mean to scold ye that way. Th-thank you for taking care of Dair for us."

She ran to Em and hugged her tightly. "I'm sorry I broke my promise to ye, milady."

"Oh Fen, dinna fash yersel' about that. Ye did the right thing."

The girl looked at Angus with a bright smile. "I did right," she said and ran giggling from the room.

After Fen left the room, Emily rose and walked to the window. She leaned her forehead against the cool glass pane. "I knew they were greedy," she said, "but I never suspected they were so impatient as to hasten Edgar's death or plan mine or Dair's."

No one spoke for another few moments. Finally, Edgar said, "Angus, would you be so kind as to ride into Stirling and bring back the constable and his men?"

"Of course, but what are ye goin' to do?"

"Have them arrested, of course."

Angus sighed. "Edgar, I want to see them punished as much as you do, but no judge will ever believe Fen, ye know that."

"No, but he would believe us."

Emily turned from the window and, still holding their son as if afraid to let him go, sat back down in her chair. She placed her hand on Edgar's knee. "But we weren't witness to any of this. If we say we were, we'd be guilty of perjury and Raymond and Caroline know that."

"We don't have to perjure ourselves. There's a way we can get them to confess."

Angus grinned. "What are ye, plannin', Edgar?"

Edgar smiled back. "You'll see."

Weston knocked and entered. "Lord and Lady Stockdale, milord."

Caroline immediately caught sight of the baby and came toward Em where she stood by the window. "Oh you've gotten him back, oh I am so glad. And don't worry, my dear, you are right to dismiss that horrible girl, how could she do such a thing?"

Caroline made a move to take Dair from Em's arms. "Don't ye dare touch him." Em's voice was so cold, even Angus felt the chill of it. Caroline hastily retreated to her husband's side.

"You wanted to see us, Uncle?" Raymond asked.

Edgar sat at his desk, writing. As he finished and sanded the paper, he said, "This is a bank draft for ten thousand pounds. Spend it wisely for it is the last money you will get from us."

"What?" Raymond asked. "Are you punishing us, Uncle? We did not kidnap your child. Surely you would not cut me off so."

"I would and I am," Edgar said. "It is certainly more than you deserve for trying to kill me and Emily."

"What?" Raymond and Caroline exclaimed at the same time. "Uncle Edgar, what are you saying?" asked Raymond.

Em stepped forward. "I know you caused Edgar to trip and fall down the steps."

"That's preposterous. Uncle is unsteady on his legs. He fell, that is all."

"With help from you, Raymond." Emily said. "You tripped him."

"What game is this?" Raymond scoffed. "Uncle, surely you can't believe that."

Edgar simply stared at his nephew and said nothing.

"You have no proof of that." Beads of sweat had broken out on the man's forehead.

"No?" said Emily "I saw you do it."

"That's impossible. Your back was turned."

The room fell silent for a moment then Caroline gasped. "Raymond, how could you? I assure you, Uncle, Emily, I knew nothing of this. Had I known, I would —"

"Not have bothered to cut the girth on the sidesaddle?" Em nodded to Angus. Taking the cue, Angus brought the leather strap out from behind his back.

Caroline's mouth worked, but no sounds came out. Angus thought she looked like a fish floundering on the beach. "Was this the reason for yer early morning visit to the stable?" he asked.

"How dare you speak to me that way! Who do you think you are?"

"He's the man who will testify against you at your trial for attempted murder, Caroline," Edgar said.

"Hah," Caroline exclaimed. "Who will take his word over mine? He's a groom, I'm a viscountess."

"He is no longer a groom. He is my factor."

Caroline flicked her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Whatever. He is still a traitor to the crown and will not be believed."

Angus shrugged. "Let's just see, shall we?"

"So what if I did? It didn't work, did it? Emily was not harmed, though I can't understand why."

Raymond went to his uncle's desk and grabbed the bank draft. "Come on, Caroline. Don't you know when you've been beaten?" He turned toward the door. "Let's go before —"



There in the open doorway stood the constable and three of his men. "Raymond Cavendish, Viscount Stockdale, and Caroline Cavendish, Viscountess Stockdale, I place you both under arrest for the attempted murder of Edgar Armstrong, the Earl of Callander, and of Emily Sinclair Armstrong, the Countess of Callander. You will come with me now."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I pity whoever buys his indenture," Edgar said, shaking his head. "The man's never done a lick of work in his miserable life."

Edgar and Weston returned from Stirling three weeks after Raymond and Caroline's arrest. A brief trial had been held, with the constable testifying that he had clearly heard the Cavendishes' confessions, and Raymond was sentenced to fourteen years' indenture for attempted murder.

"Maybe this will teach him how," Angus said. What he didn't say, and what everyone in the room knew, was that Angus hadn't needed to be made a slave to learn how to work. He had worked all his life, but for his people and himself.

"What of Caroline?" Emily asked.

Edgar came forward and took her hands. "I'm sorry, my dear, but she was let go. You weren't harmed after all."

"No, no, I am not upset. I was wondering what would happen to the children if she too had to go to Australia."

"I have agreed to a yearly stipend for her and the children," Edgar continued. "But I have also promised her that if she ever comes near you or our child again, I *will* have her transported."

"Will she listen, d'ye think?" asked Angus.

"Oh yes, I think she is sufficiently frightened to keep her distance. After all, if Raymond has done no work, she's done even less."

## Chapter Twenty

October 1756

The blanket slipped off Edgar's lap. Angus leaned over to adjust it then sat back down on the bench next to Edgar's wheeled chair. "Are ye too cold? Do ye want me to take ye inside now?" he asked.

"No," Edgar replied, struggling to draw in enough breath for speech. "The sun is warm...despite the chill in the air. I want to enjoy it...as long as I can."

Angus was silent. What could he say to that? Edgar's health was failing rapidly and they all knew it. *Yes, let him feel the sun on his face as long as he can.*

He followed Edgar's gaze out to the lawn in front of them. Dair, now five years old, sat atop his pony while Willie led them in circles around the fountain in the center of the topiary garden. Emily and the three-year-old twins, Hannah and Heather, ran across the grass, catching butterflies in their nets then releasing them. Their giggles carried clearly in the crisp autumn air.

"The girls look so much...like Emily."

"Aye, they do. Thank God," Angus said, laughing.

Edgar gave a short laugh then began to cough. When he was able to catch his breath again, he asked, "What will you tell Dair?"

"About what?"

"When he asks you why...he looks exactly like you."

Angus thought for a moment. "Until he's old enough to understand why we did what we did, I'll tell him he is a very special lad. He had two fathers where most boys have only one."

Emily leaned against the oak tree and rubbed her eyes to try to hold back the tears. She and Angus had left the children with their nurse and settled Edgar into bed—even sitting in the garden for half an hour had worn him out and his breathing was becoming more labored.

"Go for a ride...you two. I am going to take...a bit of a nap."

"I won't leave you, Edgar," she had protested.

"So...you are just going to...sit there and watch me sleep?"

"Aye, that I am."

He had turned to Angus. "Take her out."

She noted the look that passed between them. Angus nodded. "Let him have his rest, lass."

They rode to their special glade by the stream. So much had happened between her and Angus in this spot—anger, friendship, love. Now sorrow would always be a part of this special place too.

Angus came up behind her and put his arms around her shoulders, pulling her close to him. She leaned her head back against his chest. “We’re losing him, Angus.”

“Aye, we are.”

She felt a quick wave of anger shoot through her that he didn’t deny it and try to make her feel better. But it was no use doing so. They had had more years together than either Emily or Edgar ever thought they would have, but they always knew this time would come. Still, Emily could not help but feel adrift.

“I don’t know what I shall do without him. Ever since the day I met him, he’s been my anchor.”

“Can’t I be yer anchor?”

She turned and, hugging his waist, looked up into those deep blue eyes that always sent shivers of longing through her body. “No, ye great silly man. Ye’re my storm.”

By the time they got back to the house, Edgar was burning up with fever. Emily and Angus took turns bathing him in cool water and coaxing him to take some sips of tea, wine, anything they could get in him.

When his body finally cooled and he fell asleep, the two of them crawled into bed beside him, as was their habit—Emily in the middle, with Edgar on her right and Angus on her left. Emily enfolded Edgar in her arms and Angus did the same to her.

In the early hours of the morning, Emily dreamed that she was walking through the snow in only her nightdress and she was so cold, she feared she would freeze to death. She looked all around, searching for shelter, but there was no house in sight. She saw a man in the distance and ran toward him. As she came closer, she realized it was Edgar. He was pale as the snow around her and when she reached for him, her arms slipped right through his body. She drew back in horror, but he smiled at her and said, “You are safe. He will keep you safe. And I will be waiting for you both. We will see each other again some day.” Then she felt warmth at her back and turned into Angus’ waiting arms.

She came awake with a start. Something was wrong.

The warmth at her back was Angus, lying as he had fallen asleep, with his arms around her. Edgar lay on his side facing her, but instead of the fever that had gripped him earlier that night, he now shivered so badly the bed shook. His breath rasped in his throat.

“Oh Edgar, my love. Ye’re freezing.”

“S-sorry...I woke you...my dear.”

“Dinna be silly. Turn over and I’ll get another blanket to wrap around ye.”

“No, I can’t. My back...hurts too badly...to lie on it. But I feel so...cold.”

She took him in her arms. "Here, let me warm you."

Behind her, Angus stirred. He got out of the bed and went to the fireplace to stir the embers to life. In the light from the rekindled fire, his naked skin glowed golden like some ancient Viking prince. For the briefest of moments, his obvious health and strength sparked her anger – that he should be so when Edgar was dying. But she knew Edgar himself would not hold that against Angus – he was leaving her in Angus' care, after all.

She expected Angus to return to his side of the bed, but instead he went around to Edgar. He reached down and put his arms under Edgar's chest and hip. "Here, scoot yerself over."

Emily moved back as Angus slid Edgar's body to the center of the bed. Then he lay down next to Edgar and pressed close to him. Edgar glanced back at Angus with a sly smile. "Why, Angus...I didn't know...you cared."

"Aye, well, don't get any funny ideas, ye old bugger."

They each laughed briefly then settled down, with Emily and Angus hugging Edgar between them to give him their warmth. But before they fell asleep, Emily had some news to share. She was afraid to wait another moment, afraid that Edgar might not live to hear it.

"Edgar, I have to tell ye something."

"Yes, my dear?"

"I'm going to have another child."

Angus' head popped up above Edgar's shoulders. His look of surprise slowly turned into a broad smile.

Edgar was smiling too. "Angus, you dog."

"What can I say?" Angus laughed. "'Tis a fertile field and my seed takes to it well."

"Oh you." Emily smacked Angus playfully on the arm.

Edgar began to laugh too but was stopped by a fit of coughing. When he was able to speak again, he said, "I am so happy...for both of you."

He raised his hand to caress Emily's cheek. She could tell it took almost more strength than he had to do so. She held his fingers in hers and turned them to kiss his palm. "Thank you, Emily."

"For what? 'Tis I who should thank you for all ye've given me." She knew that he would understand she did not mean the material things he had provided, but rather his selflessness in giving her a lover, a protector and a father for her children in Angus.

"For making my last years...the happiest I...have ever known." He took a deep breath. "I love you, Emily."

"I love you too, Edgar, my darling."

The first sound Angus heard upon awakening the next morning was Emily's muffled sobbing. He knew instantly what had happened. He raised himself up on one elbow.

Emily leaned against the pillows, holding Edgar's head against her chest, her face buried in his hair.

Angus took her hand. "Em."

She looked up at him, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. "Oh Angus, he's gone."

## Epilogue

*Seven months later*

Emily finished nursing Duncan and laid him down next to her on the bed, just as Angus came back into the room.

"Who was at the door?" she asked.

"Neil Guthrie."

"Edgar's solicitor?"

"Aye. He delivered two letters—one for you and one for me." Angus handed a folded piece of stationery to her.

Emily looked at the handwriting and a small shock ran through her. She didn't have to open it to know the letter was from Edgar. She unfolded it and, after reading Edgar's words, felt another shock when she saw the date it had been written. Two years before his death. She was amazed that he had penned the letter so far ahead of time...and even more amazed by his words:

*My darling Emily, congratulations to you and Angus on the birth of another child (or two, perhaps?). Be it a boy or a girl, he or she could not ask for better or more loving parents. I often wonder what I would have done if you had chosen someone other than Angus to be your lover, or if he had refused to do it. I imagine I would have had to lock you both in the stable until you came to your senses.*

Emily laughed even as the tears ran down her cheeks.

*You must know that I finally would have acquiesced if Angus had still not agreed to my suggestion of a mènage à trois, but you did enjoy it, didn't you?*

"Oh yes, my love, I did," she said softly. She glanced up at Angus, but he appeared absorbed in his own letter.

*Know that I loved you with all my heart and you made my life happier than I ever dreamed it could be. If there is a Heaven, as I pray there is, I will see you again some day.*

*All my love,*

*Edgar.*

Emily gasped, recalling the dream she had the night Edgar died. How strange it was for him to have written the same thing he had said to her in her dream.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Emily looked up to see Angus shaking his head, an expression of amazement on his face. "What is it, Angus?" she asked.

"He did it. I canna believe he did it."

She assumed his letter was also from Edgar. "What did he do?"

"He bought it back for Duncan." Angus handed her his letter.

*Angus, my friend. Congratulations on the birth of another son. I assume you'll name him Duncan, after your grandfather, but whatever you call him, his title will be Laird of Glenelg. My solicitor has the papers, all it needs is for the name to be filled in.*

*You are too good and your blood is too strong to let the title be usurped by a lesser man.*

*I know you love her as much as I did. Take good care of her.*

*Yours,*

*Edgar.*

## About the Author

Kate Poole always thought she knew what she wanted to be when she grew up—a nurse. She did that for a long time. Then she got interested in the law, so she became a nurse-paralegal for a law firm in Baltimore City. She has been doing that for a long time, too.

About eleven years ago, Kate found out she could put words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages together to tell a story, and now it's on to Career #3. It took her much longer to complete a novel than it did to get her college degrees!

Kate lives in Maryland with two of the sweetest cats that ever wore fur. And she wants her ashes scattered on the Isle of Skye...with a kilted piper in attendance, of course.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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