

MIDNIGHT WHISPERS

By Lynette Marie

CHAPTER ONE

Duncan McKleighan walked purposefully down the wharf, his mind on the meeting ahead. As much as he loved his ship, he was happy to finally set foot on solid ground. It had been an exceptionally long trip from England to Virginia, and once he finished his business, he'd be free to find comfort in a large tankard of ale and a warm, willing wench, not necessarily in that order. He took a deep breath of the fresh air, the sun beating unmercifully on his wavy black hair.

A booming voice caught his attention, and he moved closer to the action, a frown forming on his handsome face. A row of small cages lined the wharf, and in front of them stood a man the likes such as Duncan had never seen. He was a portly fellow, dressed in striped breeches and a purple frock coat, a riding crop held firmly in his hand. Duncan might have laughed had he not known what the man was about. There were women in those cages, little more than girls, about to be sold to the highest bidder. Since he was not the kind of man inclined to spend his free time watching the torture of women, he turned to fight his way through the throng of people that had accumulated. He was too late, however, for the man had

begun his auction, and the crowd was too thick to penetrate.

As he looked for an alternate means of escape, his eyes came to rest on the first girl who was brought forth. She stood proud and erect, her head held high, her dirty hair falling to her waist in a golden tumble. She had a definite aristocratic air about her, and Duncan admired her spirit.

For reasons he could not fathom, he found himself propelled forward towards the girl, as if by a hidden force. The man in the ridiculous attire took Duncan aside for a few moments to speak about her.

Listening to the auctioneer with half an ear, Duncan watched as the small woman took a deep, shuddering breath. He knew she must be frightened, but the proud tilt of her chin hinted at a strong determination not to reveal her emotions. She watched him warily from the corner of her eye, suspicion evident, yet a reluctant gleam of--could it be trust--began to surface. Slowly, her eyelids drooped as her small shoulders heaved with a sigh.

When she opened her eyes, he was standing before her. Her eyes were deep teal green, bordered by dark lashes so long they cast a shadow upon her face. Beneath the grime, her

skin looked to be quite fair. But it was her eyes to which Duncan's attention returned. Fear was present of course, but more than that burned something he could not understand. The gleam of some emotion that was hers alone, unfathomable to the ignorant male mind. It drew him in, swallowed him whole, and he found he could not move away had he wanted to.

She presented him with a deep curtsy, seemingly unmindful of her filthy and tattered clothing. "Good day, milord."

Duncan was shocked by the gesture, having expected open hostility, not polite conversation fit for a proper drawing room. He was convinced more than ever of her high breeding. He bowed slightly. "This gentleman tells me your maidenhead is still intact. Is that true, have they harmed you?"

Humiliation shone momentarily in her eyes before she forced it away and answered, "You ask two questions, my lord. Yes, I am still pure, but I have not gone unharmed."

Her captor bristled. "I will not have such impertinence!" He raised the riding crop, prepared to bring it down upon the girl's shoulder.

Grabbing his hand in mid-air, Duncan warned, "I would not do that if I were you."

The man sneered. "Then 'tis a good thing you're not me." He pushed away and once again raised the crop.

With lightning speed, Duncan grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him up against one of the cages, the cold blade of a dagger held against his throat. In a low voice, he demanded, "Unchain the lady so she can leave with me." He pushed the blade further against the skin, coaxing a small droplet of blood to surface. "And give the rest of these women their freedom as well." He smiled coldly, "Go ahead and protest, I'll run you through right here and now."

The man fumbled for his keys and Duncan claimed the golden-haired girl. He watched closely as each and every one of the others were set free, then turned to his new companion. "Shall we?" He took her arm and led her away.

Cathrynn followed behind him, shocked at what she had just witnessed. One moment she had been standing upon an auction block like chattel, the next this man was whisking her away at a clipped pace. She wondered idly if she were jumping from the frying pan into the fire, but what choice did

she have? She was at his mercy.

She had to admit he was very handsome. He had coal black hair and eyes so dark a blue they were almost black. The tan frock coat and tan breeches he wore fit his muscled physique perfectly, the air around him so noble it could not be mistaken. The timbre of his deep voice held a warm quality that she instinctively trusted.

Maybe he wouldn't be so horrible, after all. But if he had been so kind as to liberate the other women, why then hadn't she been set free? He had definite plans for her, she was sure, but she did not want to think about what they were. If only she could have a hot meal and a warm bed, she'd be able to deal with the handsome stranger later.

Cathrynn was surprised at the lack of fear she was feeling as she raced to keep pace with the tall man in front of her. Her future was as uncertain as it had ever been, but she felt a strange sense of safety with him. What kind of man would stand up in front of so many witnesses and do what he'd just done? Most people believed that the young girls sold into slavery were orphans that no one wanted. That wasn't true,

but none of those so graced to have been born into an upper class cared to worry about that. Although obviously this man cared. The thought warmed her heart, and a faint flicker of hope shone in her green eyes.

A few moments later they entered a hotel and Duncan arranged for their quarters. Looking at his watch, he said, “I have an appointment, but I’ll return shortly. I booked adjoining rooms for us, and I should like to speak to you upon my return.”

She nodded demurely and followed the clerk to her room. Cathrynn squealed with delight when she saw the tub full of steaming water. Without waiting for the chambermaid, she shed her clothing and sank into the wonderful water. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had an actual bath, and she scrubbed her body until her skin hurt. The chambermaid came in some time later, her arms overflowing with boxes. She set them on the bed and helped Cathrynn from the tub.

Taking some undergarments and a dress from the packages, the maid said excitedly, “Mr. McKleighan sent these for you.”

“Mr. McKleighan?” Cathrynn asked stupidly.

“Your intended,” the maid giggled.

“Oh. My intended. Of course.”

Cathrynn dressed hurriedly and viewed herself in the mirror. The dress was a lovely baby blue satin, with snowy white lace spilling from the half-length sleeves. She twirled around, feeling like a princess. She hadn’t thought she’d ever feel the whisper-soft touch of satin again, but suddenly here she was, looking almost the same as she had back home.

Dismissing the maid, she sat down heavily on the chair and gazed at herself. She wasn’t the same, though, would never be the same. The silly, carefree girl she’d once been was gone forever, and she wasn’t sure who she was anymore.

For the past two months she’d endured endless hours of humiliation at the hands of her abductor. She’d been locked in a cage, fed only one meal a day, and had even, on occasion, been beaten when her spirit refused to break. The nights had been the worst, when she’d sat alone in her cage, her stomach rumbling from lack of food, and listened to the moans of the other girls around her. Many of them had been physically and sexually abused, and it galled her that she could do nothing

about it. Oh, she'd tried in the beginning, but when food and the one blanket they gave her had been taken away, she'd had to admit there was nothing she could do. Luckily, the men did not approach her with their baser needs because, as her captor informed her while leering at her, drool dripping down his chin, she would draw a better price as a virgin. She'd heard them talking, and she wasn't sure how, but evidently there were ways a man could tell if a woman had been deflowered. As she'd stood before all those people today, her entire body quaking with fear, she'd promised herself she would not show weakness. She would not, under any circumstances, bow to the demands of a man.

But this man, McKleighan, had caught her off guard. He had so shocked her with his kindness and understanding that she'd found herself following along behind him like a baby duck. And now, after all she had been through, she found she could not summon the energy required to fight him.

She jumped as a knock sounded on the door. "Come in," she called hesitantly.

Duncan strode into the room and smiled. Cathrynn could tell that he'd been stunned practically speechless by her

appearance. She was aware that her golden blond tresses tumbled wildly down her back, as she hadn't had the time to pin it up. Cathrynn stood up. "Mr. McKleighan, my name is Cathrynn Blaine."

Duncan took her hand and kissed it. "You're a lovely lass, Cathrynn," he said softly, and she was surprised to hear an unmistakable, albeit soft, Scottish accent.

"Thank you, sir." Duncan's smoldering gaze sent her heart aflutter, and she took a step back, as if burned.

"I've arranged for our dinner downstairs. I thought it safe to assume that you were hungry."

He offered his arm and she took it without thought. When they reached the private dining room and ordered their dinners, he began the introductions. "You might want to know a little bit about me, Cathrynn. My name is Duncan McKleighan, Earl of Willoughby."

"I'm not an expert on English nobility, milord, but I thought it was reserved for Englishmen." Her tone was slightly sarcastic.

Duncan sighed wearily. It was going to be a long night. "So it is. We can discuss my heritage at a later date. I

thought it more important to speak of our future.”

Cathrynn clasped her shaking hands in her lap. She was sure she knew what Duncan McKleighan had in store for her, and bitterness swelled within her. He would use her to his satisfaction and throw her away like a piece of refuse. With her limited choices, the most she could hope for was a position as his mistress. She could not bear the thought.

“Mr. McKleighan, please, I must speak my mind. I was stolen from my parents to be sold into slavery. I can see you are a respectable gentleman. Please return me to my parents, they will pay you most handsomely.” Tears shone in her teal green eyes. “They must be beside themselves with worry.”

“You are from a wealthy, high bred family?”

“Oh, yes! My father will pay you any price you ask for my safe return.”

Shaking his head, he said, “I’m sorry, lass, I have more than enough money. I’ve brought you here for an entirely different reason.” Cathrynn closed her eyes and braced herself. “I want you to be my wife.”

Her eyes flew open and her breath caught in her

throat. She could not speak, did not know what she'd say even if she could. His wife! This unexpected turn of events had her totally taken aback. Recovering her voice, she said, "Certainly an English nobleman doesn't need to buy a wife, milord. There must be many ladies in England more than willing to become Lady Willoughby."

"My situation is a strange one, Cathrynn. Although everyone has accepted me and I'd wager, actually like me, there are still those who cannot forgive me for being Scottish. As coveted as the title is, there aren't many Englishmen who wish to give their daughters to a Scot."

"Why choose me? There is any number of women right here who would marry you."

"I cannot wed just anyone. I could tell from the first time I saw you that you are a lady. I want to marry *you*, Cathrynn, and take you home with me." His voice was soft, his eyes beseeching. This was perhaps as humiliating for him to ask as it had been for her to remain standing proudly before a crowd of people.

She lowered her eyes. "Can I at least send word to my family?"

Duncan nodded. "Come now, it is late and we have a big day tomorrow."

The next morning when Cathrynn awoke, she felt wonderful, despite her circumstances. Duncan McKleighan, Earl of Willoughby, seemed to be a kind man, and for that she considered herself very fortunate. For the last few months her life had been uncertain, at best. She had fully expected to be purchased by a drunken sailor and used for his pleasure.

Cathrynn called for the chambermaid and dressed hurriedly in the gown Duncan had given her the previous night. Just as she finished, he rapped on the door that joined their rooms and strode in. "Good morning, my lady," he said cheerfully, sweeping a bow before her. He cut a dashing figure in his black breeches and matching coat.

Surprised, she giggled. "Good morning to you, Lord Willoughby."

He ushered her outside and, as they walked along, revealed their destination. "I'm taking you to a seamstress to be fitted for new gowns. Choose whatever you like, and keep in mind that you will be Lady Willoughby and must dress

appropriately. I have a number of appointments today, but I will collect you at midday for lunch.” When they reached the small building, he spoke quickly with the seamstress, instructing her to follow his fiancée’s every whim. He turned to Cathrynn, and she looked up at him expectantly. To her surprise, he kissed her cheek and strode out the door. Her skin tingled where he had touched her, and she brought an unsteady hand to her face, staring after him in disbelief.

The woman he had left her with was very large, the orange gown she wore causing her to resemble nothing so much as a pumpkin. She bounced over to Cathrynn and clasped her hands warmly. “What an exciting time for you, my dear. Weddings are such fun to prepare for! I am Mrs. Farley, but no time for small talk. We must get to work if we want to have everything ready within a fortnight!”

Cathrynn’s head was spinning. Mrs. Farley chattered non-stop while showing her silks, satins, and lace in a rainbow of colors. They went over dress patterns, which were “all the latest rave”, according to Mrs. Farley. Cathrynn took her time matching the colors and materials to the patterns, for she wasn’t exactly sure what was expected of nobility. Just after

the last measurements were taken, Mrs. Farley exclaimed, "Oh, Lord Willoughby, would you like to see the materials Miss Blaine has selected?"

"No, I'm sure whatever she chose is fine," he said as he waited in the doorway.

With a disappointed air, the robust woman snorted and rolled her eyes. "Your lady has impeccable taste, milord. It is a pleasure to work with her."

Duncan smiled down at Cathrynn as she met him at the door, and she felt herself blush. She took his proffered arm, and the handsome couple walked happily from the store.

During the next week and a half Duncan and Cathrynn spent as much time together as possible, making plans for the wedding, and getting to know each other better. She found him to be every bit as kind as she had first suspected, and was genuinely looking forward to their wedding day, if not the night. She knew instinctively that she could be content with Duncan McKleighan, and already felt herself falling irrevocably in love with him. His strong voice with its light Scottish accent was enough to set her heart to pounding

in her chest.

One morning at breakfast, a few days before the wedding, Duncan said, “I’ve been invited to a ball this evening and I’d like you to attend.”

She looked up at him through her long, dark lashes. With their wedding just days away, she was a mass of nerves, and her usual sunny disposition failed her. “You don’t allow much time to prepare for anything, do you? Two weeks for a wedding, a few scant hours for a ball. Have you always been this spontaneous, or is it a condition you’ve just recently developed?”

Duncan raised an eyebrow at her, his midnight blue eyes lit with amusement. “We don’t have any other engagements tonight. I don’t see what the problem is.”

“Exactly my point. I’ve been constantly running errands to prepare for the nuptials and the subsequent trip since I met you, and I thought tonight I could retire early,” she said, realizing her voice was dangerously close to a whine.

“I daresay there will be plenty of time for sleep on the trip to England. I’d really like you to go with me.”

Cathrynn bristled. She didn’t want to go, and she

didn't like the fact that he was ordering her to. She stood up and swept him a deep curtsy, the skirts of her mint green gown rustling as she moved. "Yes, milord, whatever you say. What time may I expect you to call upon me?"

"Two o'clock sharp. The gentleman's house is a couple hours ride from here. I appreciate your cooperation," he said with a grin, barely containing his amusement at her behavior.

Cathrynn turned and swept from the room, his laughter echoing behind her. She scowled and marched up the stairs to her room, muttering all the while. She flung open the door and examined the contents of her wardrobe, unable to decide on which gown to wear. She rang for the chambermaid and busily set about yanking out each and every ball gown, which had just recently been finished by Mrs. Farley's seamstresses.

A moment later the maid appeared in the doorway, a perplexed look on her face. "Is there a problem, Miss Blaine?" she asked uncertainly.

Cathrynn looked up and sighed. "I need help, Clarice. Lord Willoughby," she said in a dramatically haughty

voice, “has just informed me that we are attending a ball this evening, and I shall be waiting in readiness at two o’clock. I cannot choose a gown.”

Clarice looked at the pile of gowns strewn haphazardly upon the bed and sighed. It would be a long morning. She picked up each of the dresses and returned them to their original place. With great care, she removed a gown of rose satin with petticoats so pale a pink they were almost white. “Might I suggest this gown, Miss Blaine? It is very lovely.”

“Thank you, Clarice. This will do nicely.”

As Cathrynn sat quietly before the mirror, Clarice dressing her hair, she closed her eyes, nervousness washing over her. It had been quite a long time since she’d attended a ball, and she felt like a different person now. The last time she had danced with a gentleman, she’d been a silly girl, secure in the cocoon of her parents’ love. But now, everything had changed. She had been taken from that security, forced to live like an animal, and brutalized by her captor. And now because of Duncan she was once again clad in beautiful gowns and moving within the circles of polite society. Cathrynn was

terrified. Even though it hadn't actually been more than a few months since her last ball, it felt like a lifetime. She was a different person now, and she wasn't sure she'd fit in with the women of high society anymore. She sighed wearily, dreading the evening to come.

When Duncan called for her at a quarter to two, she was ready. Cathrynn opened the door and strode haughtily past him without a word or a glance in his direction. He followed her down the stairs, chuckling. "Are ye still miffed with me, Cathrynn?"

She didn't speak to him at the hotel, or on the long ride out to his friend's house. They sat in silence, Cathrynn staring out the window, Duncan staring at Cathrynn. When they finally arrived, she said, "I will be civil with you to keep tongues from wagging, Duncan, but don't expect me to enjoy myself and, if I have anything to do with it, neither will you."

Shaking his head, he led her toward the mansion. He had known this bout of temper was coming, he had seen it below the surface since they had met, and he welcomed it, realizing that it meant she now felt comfortable enough with him to express her emotions and not fear his wrath.

The couple smiled through the receiving line, and began dancing immediately because, as Cathrynn had put it, “if you think I’m staying long you can think again!”

Duncan put his hand on her waist and drew her into his arms, his eyes smiling down into hers. His embrace was warm and gentle, and she felt herself relaxing. They moved effortlessly around the dance floor, each marveling at the other’s skill. “We fit together perfectly,” he whispered in her ear, “as if we were molded into one being, uncertain where one begins and the other ends.”

Cathrynn looked up at his handsome face. He was smiling at her, an impish dimple dancing near his mouth, his midnight blue eyes twinkling. She put a dainty hand up to his clean-shaven cheek. “I’ve been horrible today. I’m sorry.”

“I understand.”

She couldn’t speak, her throat tight with unshed tears, because she could see that he really did understand. A sense of peace washed over her as she felt a bond forming between them. She smiled at him, and his arms tightened around her. She couldn’t explain it, but it was the most natural feeling in the world. The dance ended, and he reluctantly relinquished

her. "Let's get something to drink," he suggested, taking her hand and leading her off the floor. She sat down gratefully while he went in search of the beverages.

Resting her head against the wall, she sighed. She was having a very good time, much to her surprise. When Duncan had held her while they danced, a feeling of well-being had come over her, expelling all her negative feelings. The nervousness had disappeared, and she felt able to face anything.

Duncan appeared a short time later with another gentleman. He was a stout fellow, his brilliant red hair graying slightly at the temples. His light blue eyes danced merrily as his gaze lit upon her. She stood up and curtsied obediently. He bowed low and took her small hand into his, touching it lightly to his lips.

"Angus McCleod, my fiancée, Cathrynn Blaine."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir," she said pleasantly.

He smiled widely at her. "The pleasure 'tis all mine, Miss Blaine." He turned to Duncan. "Ye've made a fine catch, lad."

Cathrynn marveled at the man's sing-song Scottish accent and wondered if Duncan's had ever been that pronounced. She liked Angus immediately, his cheerfulness warding off the last of her melancholy. She caught Duncan's eye, and he smiled at her with a proud possessiveness. "Angus was a friend of my father's back in Scotland," he explained. "So what brings you to the States?" he addressed his friend.

The big man shrugged. "My children grew up, and I found myself with an abundance of time and no way to spend it, so I surprised the wife with a trip to see America."

"How is Mrs. McCleod? Is she here?" Duncan looked around.

He nodded. "Somewhere. Ye know how she likes to gossip. I suspect she's holed up with a group of ladies, trading secrets."

Duncan laughed. "Same old Mrs. McCleod. It's nice to know some things never change," he said softly, a note of sadness creeping into his voice.

"'Tis never too late to come home, your old homestead is still where ye left it," he began, but cut himself off at Duncan's sharp look. In a fatherly tone, he asked, "How

are things for ye in England, lad?”

“Tolerable. I fit in as well as can be expected, and I’m content enough. Though there are times when I feel like leaving everything behind and returning to Scotland.”

“The right path isna always the easiest, but I’m sure ye know that by now. Ye’ll find your way, son, dinna doubt it.”

Duncan nodded thoughtfully. Cathrynn noticed his accent became more distinct as he spoke with his old friend. The sound was very pleasant, and she listened to them talk, their voices soothing her. When Duncan saw how sleepy she was becoming, he turned regretfully to his companion. “It was wonderful to see you again, my friend. If you’re ever in England...”

“Have a safe trip home, my boy. I’m sure you’ve heard the Black Knight is roaming the seas?”

“Aye. I’ve already posted several extra watchmen for the journey.”

“What is the Black Knight?” Cathrynn asked.

The two men looked at one another, unsure how to answer her question without alarming her. “He’s a pirate,

honey,” Duncan finally replied.

“The few who’ve survived an encounter with the rogue say he wears a black mask and fights with a fairness that is no less than noble,” Angus contributed.

A group of men who had been standing nearby warmed to their topic of conversation and moved closer. One pompous young dandy stepped forward in an attempt to impress the lovely Miss Blaine. “What makes this Black Knight so formidable? The fact that he can brandish a sword? I’d like to come across him one dark night and show him some real skill.”

“Don’t be a fool, son,” another man cautioned. “I have come up against the famed Black Knight, and it was a scene I’d not want to repeat.” Everyone crowded around the gentleman, hanging upon his every word. “The Black Knight was garbed in black from head to foot, and he wore a mask over his face, but never will I forget the steel glint of his eyes as we clashed swords. His gaze was penetrating, unyielding, and unnerving. Although he must have fought and conquered a dozen men before me that night, his arm never weakened, his guard never faltered. At that moment I realized I was readying

to take my last breath.”

“What saved you, sir?” Cathrynn asked in awe.

“As it happened, my sweet wife accompanied me on that particular voyage. I had ordered her to hide below decks, but fear for my life brought her out. She called to me, and although the Black Knight’s eyes never wavered from my own, I know he saw her standing there, terrified, her hands resting on her swollen stomach as if to protect our unborn babe. He held up his hand, and with only a gesture ordered his men off my ship. Then he said, ‘It was a pleasure unloading your cargo for you, sir, but I cannot deny your lady the safety of this ship. Take your vessel and be gone.’ And he disappeared.”

The group released their pent-up breath as one and began talking amongst themselves. “Do you suppose we’ll be in any danger, Duncan?”

“I think not. Pirates normally attack ships carrying valuable cargo. I’m sure we’ll be safe. ‘Tis time we headed back to the hotel, we have a long journey ahead of us.”

The men clapped each other on the back and said their goodbyes. Duncan ushered Cathrynn into the waiting carriage, and they began the long drive back to the hotel. “He

seemed very nice,” she commented.

“He is. Angus was my father’s closest friend.”

“Tell me about your parents.”

He looked at her in surprise. “It was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter now.”

“Of course it matters. They were your parents.”

Duncan gazed into her eyes for a long time without speaking, wondering about this sweet girl. He had bought her like a slave, was forcing her to marry him, and yet, somehow, she held no ill feelings for him. Her teal green eyes were encouraging him to confide in her, but he couldn’t find his voice, couldn’t think about anything but her beautiful face, so close to his...

“Duncan?”

His eyes focused once again and he smiled sheepishly. “You did promise to tell me about your heritage.”

His midnight blue eyes took on a faraway look as he remembered his parents. He sighed. Where should he begin? “My mother was the only child of the Earl of Willoughby, much to his dismay. She had many suitors, since her father was the last male in the family and any title and money would

fall to the son-in-law.” He smiled wistfully. “My mother was a very stubborn woman. She told my grandfather that she would not be used as bait to catch the best candidate to inherit his fortune.” His jaw hardened, and his eyes darkened until they were almost black. “He banished her to a convent in Scotland for her impertinence, planning to leave her there until he had arranged for a suitable marriage. He had always resented her for not having been born a male.”

Cathrynn laid her hand on Duncan’s leg in a gesture of understanding.

“She met my father in Scotland. He would volunteer his time now and again to make repairs to the old building that housed the nuns. Mother did not last more than a fortnight in the dreary confines of the convent before my father stole her away. Michael McKleighan was very wealthy in his own right, so she thought he would be accepted into her family. Instead, however, her father was so furious that she’d disobeyed him that he cut her completely out of the will.”

“What did she do?”

He shrugged. “She didn’t care. She was very much in love with my father. They had something special together.

I remember Momma used to say they were soul mates. We were very happy, until the day my father died. After that, my mother wasn't the same. I was fifteen at the time, and I felt I had to take care of her. She could not stay in our house with all the memories surrounding her, so we sailed to England and I had the grand pleasure of meeting my grandfather for the first time."

"He had never even tried to see you?"

"My mother had never told him about me. I was the only heir to the title and fortune and, had he known about me, he would have tried to keep me with him in England."

Cathrynn shuddered. "He sounds like a horrible man."

Duncan nodded sharply. "My mother didn't last long after we arrived. I truly believe she died of a broken heart. And I've never been able to forgive myself for not helping her enough, for not saving her from her grief."

Cathrynn saw the anguish in his eyes and her heart went out to him. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, tears threatening. She could tell he was still very emotional about his parents, although he didn't let it show. She laid her hand

softly on his cheek. He stared deep into her teal green eyes. Suddenly, before either of them knew what was happening, his lips touched hers. She took a shaky breath, and he applied more pressure, sliding one of his hands around to rest at the small of her back. Cathrynn returned the kiss, reveling in the feel of his lips against hers. She had been kissed by a few of her suitors when she had lived with her parents, but never had she felt such a strong reaction as she did with Duncan. Her lips burned where he touched her, her skin heating to such an intense point that she was sure she was melting. Ever so slowly, his lips left her mouth and traveled down her jaw line to her neck, leaving a wake of such powerful emotion that she began to tremble. She sighed softly, placing one shaking hand upon his shoulder and giving herself up to the moment.

Suddenly, the carriage came to a halt, and the embrace was over. Their gazes locked, each wondering what might have happened if they had not reached the hotel when they did. Duncan helped her down and they walked silently to their rooms. At the door, Cathrynn turned and said softly, "I had a wonderful time, Duncan. Thank you for inviting me."

Duncan swallowed hard. Every bone in his body

screamed out at him to take her. After all, they were but mere days before the wedding, and it certainly would make the marital night more comfortable. But one look into her trusting green eyes, and he knew he couldn't do anything to hurt her. She trusted him. And for right now, he was all she had in the world. So, he bent down, touching his lips to her cheek, and pushed her gently through her door. He closed it softly behind her, his hand gripping the handle in an effort to gain control of his rampaging emotions. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, willing his blood to stop racing through his veins. Resting his forehead against the cool door, he wondered how he would **get through** the next few days.

And nights.

The morning of the wedding, Cathrynn was awakened by a loud knock. She climbed out of bed and threw her wrap around her shoulders. When she opened the door she was accosted by Mrs. Farley and numerous other women. At the large woman's orders, they swarmed around her like ants to a picnic, pinching her cheeks, touching her hair, and creating all manner of chaos.

“What’s going on, Mrs. Farley?” she asked sleepily.

“It’s your wedding day, child!” she exclaimed. “We have to get you ready!”

“I have a chambermaid. I don’t think--”

“A chambermaid, indeed! I have worked with you for the past two weeks on this wedding and you expect me to trust you to a chambermaid!”

Cathrynn smiled weakly. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Farley. I would be delighted to have your help today.”

The jolly woman ordered the other women to pack the new gowns while she began her ministrations on the bride-to-be. Cathrynn sat obediently at the vanity while Mrs. Farley wound her long, golden locks onto her head, leaving a few tendrils to fall softly around her face. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was done to perfection, but her cheeks were a little too flushed, her eyes a little too bright. The combination of excitement and nervousness was overwhelming, and she took a deep breath. It was surprising how rapidly one’s life could change. One moment she was held prisoner, waiting to be sold as a slave, and the next she’s betrothed to a handsome English nobleman.

A loud knock sounded at the door, startling both Cathrynn and the seamstress. “Cathrynn? Can I speak with you for a moment?”

Mrs. Farley gasped and waddled to the door. “You can speak through the door, sir. ‘Tis bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

“That’s nonsense. Cathrynn, I need to see you. Open the door,” he called, his voice rising, his accent becoming more pronounced.

She looked from Mrs. Farley to the door and back again. She was becoming more nervous by the minute, and didn’t think she could face him right now. “Mrs. Farley is right, Duncan. I cannot allow you to see me before the ceremony.”

She heard a long string of curses, loud footfalls, and the slamming of a door. Cathrynn bit her lip. The last thing she’d wanted to do was anger him, but she just could not see him. Her hands were shaking almost uncontrollably, and she felt as if she would faint.

Mrs. Farley rushed to her side, rubbing her back and speaking gently. “Take a deep breath, Cathrynn, dear. This is

very normal, all brides are nervous. I remember when I wed my own darling Charlie.” She shook her head, her chins flapping. “I was so afraid I had to be pushed from my bedchamber! I lost my footing and fell down the steps, and Charlie carried me down the aisle.”

Cathrynn smiled at the thought of some poor man trying to carry the rotund woman. “There now, that’s better. Let’s get that beautiful gown on you.”

Duncan sat in the smoking room, pipe in hand, feeling like a fool. He had lain awake all night, thinking about Cathrynn and how frightened she must be. He had wanted to speak with her, to reassure her that although they were embarking on a long voyage and a new life together, she had nothing to fear from him. His midnight blue eyes softened as he thought of her. His thoughts seemed to turn to her more and more lately. She was most definitely a beautiful lady, and he had no doubt that she would be accepted in England, but she was so much more than that. She was sweet and innocent, soft and compassionate, and he couldn’t wait to really get to know her. He looked forward to seeing her every morning,

and she was the last thought on his mind at night.

Duncan shook his head and smiled sardonically. He was being ridiculous. He'd barely known the girl a fortnight, and here he was daydreaming like a schoolboy. Those days were long past. He was a man now, and he'd act like it. He stood up, pulling himself to his full six feet, and strode confidently from the room. He'd be damned if he'd let a mere slip of a girl affect him like this. Duncan had, through his parents, seen how wonderful true love could be. But watching his mother die slowly of a broken heart had erased any desire he might have had for a loving relationship. He had sworn never to succumb to love. Cathrynn may be sweet and beautiful, and he may enjoy her company, but he would never allow himself the luxury of losing control of his heart.

Cathrynn looked fearfully at Mrs. Farley as the music started. She wasn't sure she could walk out that door and marry a man she barely knew. She took a deep, calming breath. Two. Three. With one last sigh, she threw open the door and walked determinedly down the aisle. She was surprised to see that the small church was awash with people.

As she walked slowly toward the preacher, she glanced up, her eyes meeting Duncan's. Her heart skipped a beat, and she knew in that moment that she was in love with him. He stood so proudly in his place, his dark blue eyes trained on her, hands clasped behind his back. His coal black hair shone in the late afternoon sun streaming through the window. He smiled as she neared him, and she couldn't help but return it. He took her hand, and together they faced the minister.

Cathrynn didn't seem able to keep her mind on the ceremony, she was instead thinking of the night to come. She took a shaky breath and somehow repeated the preacher's words, then listened as Duncan did the same. His large hand was also somewhat unsteady as he slid the gold ring on her small finger. She looked up. Their eyes met.

"You may kiss the bride."

Cathrynn unconsciously wet her lips. Duncan put his arms around her and leaned forward, his lips touching hers. She closed her eyes, praying her legs would not buckle. It was only a short kiss, but a shock ran from her lips down to her toes, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. She smiled up at him weakly.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present for the first time Mr. and Mrs. Duncan McKleighan, Lord and Lady Willoughby.”

A cheer went up and Duncan ushered her out the door. He helped her into a waiting carriage and jumped in after her. “I hope you don’t mind, Mrs. Farley has planned a surprise reception for you. If you’re too tired, we can return to the hotel.”

Alarms sounded in Cathrynn’s head. She wanted to postpone their evening together as long as she possibly could. “Of course I don’t mind,” she responded quickly, turning her head to look out the window and missing Duncan’s knowing smirk.

The reception was in Mr. Farley’s saloon, and although Cathrynn didn’t approve of this, she didn’t want to hurt her friend’s feelings. “What a wonderful surprise, Mrs. Farley! Thank you so much.”

She sat down at a table, half listening to the woman’s chatter. She watched her new husband across the room. He was sitting at the bar with Mr. Farley, a tankard of ale in his hand. He threw his head back and laughed, the sound deep

and masculine. As if sensing her attention, he turned, his eyes finding hers across the smoke-filled room. He winked. Cathrynn smiled and lowered her eyes, trying to concentrate on her conversation.

Duncan watched her covertly as he spoke with his companions. There were a number of men around her, “congratulating” her upon her nuptials. Standing, he sauntered over to her table. He bowed and held his hand out. “Are you ready to depart, Mrs. McKleighan?”

Her heart beating double-time, she took his hand and followed him out the door. They rode in silence for a while, each lost in thought. “Ye look lovely, Cathrynn.”

She couldn’t find any appropriate words, so she said nothing. The night air was crisp, and she shivered slightly. Duncan shed off his overcoat and draped it across her shoulders. “I know you’re probably exhausted, as am I, so I think it best if we retire to our own separate rooms tonight. We sail for England tomorrow, and we’ll have plenty of time to consummate our union aboard ship.” He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms right now and enjoy her numerous charms but, for some reason, he didn’t. She was

very frightened, he could tell, and he imagined the abuse from her captor was still too fresh in her mind. No, he would wait until she was less afraid, if it killed him. And the way tension was building inside him right now he feared it just might.

Cathrynn sighed with relief and closed her eyes sleepily, her head falling to rest on Duncan's shoulder. He smiled down at her, gently caressing her golden locks, most of which were now tumbling down about her in disarray. Her hair felt so soft, smelled so sweet, that he couldn't resist letting his own head rest against hers. His eyes drooped, and he fell asleep with her enfolded in his arms.

Cathrynn rang for the bellboy and checked her appearance one last time. She was wearing a pale yellow gown accented by an abundance of creamy lace. Duncan strode through the adjoining door without knocking, startling her. He came up behind her, his twinkling eyes meeting hers in the mirror. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of him. His resplendent attire reminded her again of who he was, and what she was to become upon their arrival in England. He looked so regal, so noble, that she felt unworthy of him. She

lowered her eyes.

“Everything is packed and ready for our departure.”

Duncan stepped in front of her and, with one finger under her chin, lifted her gaze to meet his. “I know this must be frightening for you, Cathrynn, but I swear I will not do anything to harm you. Ye needn’t be afraid of me.”

“I’m not,” she answered honestly. It was the strength of her own emotions that she feared. “You’ve shown me every kindness, Duncan, and for that I am grateful. Although I would like to get a letter to my family so they know I am well.”

“We’ll take care of that on the way to the ship.”

She nodded as a weight lifted off her shoulders. She didn’t want them to worry any longer than necessary.

On the way to the wharf, he spoke quietly about his ship. “The atmosphere is an informal one on the *Highlander*. We do not use our titles, or lack thereof, aboard ship. When we go out on a voyage, it’s for vacation and relaxation purposes as well as for business. I know it will be difficult to adjust to, but I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

Duncan jumped from the carriage, assisted his wife,

and began overseeing the loading of their belongings.

Cathrynn sighed and wondered what fate had in store for her.

CHAPTER TWO

Cathrynn gazed up in awe at the large gray ship they were preparing to board. *Highlander* was printed in bold black letters upon the hull, staring down at her intimidatingly. The wind began to whip angrily as if in warning. She hurried onto the ship with Duncan, and he saw her to their cabin. Despite their plans to leave early, it was nearing sunset, and there was still much work to be done.

“Will you be alright here alone while I oversee the loading of the supplies?”

She smiled brightly. “I have just as much work to do right here. Go ahead, and I’ll meet with you later.”

On an impulse, Duncan drew her against him and kissed her quickly, then turned and strode out the door, whistling. Cathrynn stared at the closed door, a silly smile lighting her features. Shaking her head, she turned to the job

of unpacking their trunks.

Though surprised at the lack of servants aboard a nobleman's ship, Cathrynn found it strangely exhilarating. She busied herself immediately, humming songs that her mother had sung to her when she was a child. She found herself thinking about Duncan. Since they had slept apart on their wedding night, tonight he would surely insist on consummating the marriage. She waited for the fear and dread to come, but instead she was filled with an excitement and longing like she had never before experienced. She knew she was in love with Duncan and, besides that, nothing else mattered.

When the last article of clothing was put away, she turned her attention to the cabin. There was a bed in the left-hand corner, a desk in the right, and a small table with two chairs in the middle of the room, assumably for private dining. All the furniture was secured firmly to the floor.

Cathrynn sat gingerly upon one of the chairs and laid her head on the table. For some reason, they'd had to travel more than an hour to reach the secluded spot where the ship was docked. Duncan had explained that he didn't want a

crowd gathering to watch Lord Willoughby and his new bride depart, but Cathrynn would have much preferred a crowd of well-wishers instead of the tiring journey.

Sighing, she pushed herself up from her chair and forced the weariness from her body. With a last, wistful glance at the bed, she quickly left the cabin in search of her new husband. As she swept along the deck, the sun dipped lower onto the horizon, sending a myriad of colors out upon the sea. She stood for a moment, captivated by the beauty. Two seagulls swooped by, dipping into the water and creating a pallet of multi-colored ringlets upon the surface. Reluctantly, she turned and walked down the deck toward the masculine laughter that was echoing through the wind. A cluster of about five men stood near the railing, deep in conversation. She thought their dress was a little strange but, since she wasn't familiar with normal sailor's attire, she dismissed it as unimportant. Duncan had mentioned, after all, that they did not stand on ceremony here.

The tallest man seemed to be the leader. He was clad in black breeches and a black shirt with long, flowing sleeves. The only splash of color was the blue sash tied to his waist and

whipping in the wind. She was standing about five or six feet from him, but even at that distance she could feel a strong sense of masculinity exuding from him. He was standing with his back to her, unaware of her presence until she tapped his back. "Excuse me, sir," she said, raising her voice above the wind.

He turned just as a gust of wind blew her long, golden tresses into her face. Impatiently brushing it aside and tucking it behind her ear, she looked up. Their eyes locked. She paled, taking a step back, one hand desperately trying to tame her wild hair so she could get a better look at him and reassure herself that her eyes were playing tricks on her. She peered up cautiously, again taking in his strange black clothing and moving up to his eyes. She gasped and stumbled backward. He held a hand up to stop her, a black velvet mask dangling from his fingers. With a strangled cry, Cathrynn turned and ran down the deck toward her cabin, the strong wind making her progress frustratingly slow. When she finally reached her destination, she slammed the door and threw herself into a chair, sobbing uncontrollably.

Cathrynn heard the door open and close, and she

jumped up and moved to the other side of the cabin. “Don’t you come near me!” she screamed.

Duncan sighed. “Calm down, Cathrynn. I know what you’ve seen has shocked you, but screaming at me isn’t gonna help. Let me explain.”

“Explain! Can you explain how I unknowingly married the most feared pirate that has ever graced the seas!” She paced the floor, ranting and raving. Duncan crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door. “Can you explain how in one day I have gone from being Mrs. McKleighan to being the Black Knight’s woman?! Oh, what has my life become? It’s a dream. It has to be a dream!”

“Cathrynn, you’re hysterical.”

“Hysterical?! Of course I’m hysterical! I don’t know who I am. I don’t know who you are. I thought I was marrying a nobleman, but instead I find myself with a notorious pirate! The wedding ceremony was a hoax too, wasn’t it, so that you could take advantage of me? Well, you’ll have to take me kicking and screaming!”

Duncan’s midnight blue eyes narrowed, but still he spoke softly. “I’ll not force ye to my bed, Cathrynn. You’ll

come willingly or not at all.”

“Why would I, when I don’t even know who you are?” She knew she was being dramatic, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. All the emotions from the past few months had welled up inside her, and now everything she had fought so hard to hold in came pouring out. “Which one of your personalities is real, I’d like to know.”

He crossed the room in two quick strides and pulled her against him, her hands pinned to his chest. She could feel his heart pounding beneath her fingertips. “I am real, Cathrynn. *I* am real. I play many different roles in my life, but if I had to choose just one, it would be this life aboard my ship, where I am free to be myself.” He looked deep into her eyes and spoke quietly. “Ye wanna know what’s real? It isn’t the titles, the fancy clothes, the vast amounts of money. It’s me. Just me.” He released her so suddenly she almost fell, and strode out the door, clicking it firmly behind him.

The next morning Cathrynn awoke early, her eyes red and puffy from crying. Duncan had not returned to their cabin at all during the night, and she had had much time for soul

searching. In the bright morning sunlight, everything looked clearer than it had last night. She had been terrified of the twists and turns of her life that she was helpless to control, the newest being a shock that surpassed all else. However, Duncan had been a constant source of strength for her throughout the last two weeks. He had proven to her that, no matter what else he was, he was always a gentleman where she was concerned. She was ashamed of the way she had acted last night, lashing out at him in anger and confusion.

Hurriedly donning a lilac gown, she went out into the beautiful day and strolled along the decks. Cathrynn was sure Duncan would be at the wheel of the ship, and she wasted no time in looking for him there. When she saw him, her heart caught in her throat, and she walked quietly up to him.

He stood stiffly, his hands steady, his gaze upon the horizon unwavering. The tension seemed to hang thickly in the air between them like a fog. She touched his muscular arm hesitantly. "Can we talk?"

His gaze held firm upon the ocean. "I tried to talk to ye last night."

Guilt washed over her at the way she had treated him.

She should have at least given him a chance to explain. “I’m truly sorry, Duncan,” she whispered. “The shock was just too much for me. I’ve had time to think about it now, and I’d like to learn more about this part of your life. Can we talk?” she repeated.

He motioned one of his crew to take over for him and accompanied her to their cabin. They sat across from each other at the table and he asked tonelessly, “What do you want to know?”

“What happened in your life to make you turn to piracy?”

He sighed wearily, fighting the memories she was asking him to dredge up. He began speaking reluctantly. “Not long after my mother and I came to England she died. She loved my father so completely she was lost without him. Once I was safely set up as her father’s heir, she simply wasted away. I rarely saw her during the day, and every night when she came to my room to wish me goodnight she looked a little thinner and a little more tired. I’ve always wondered if she took me to him because she thought I would be safe with her family, or if she were giving me to him as an apology for

disobeying him when she married my father.”

“Oh, Duncan, surely not.”

“My grandfather was a dark, brooding man. Having an heir wasn’t good enough for him, at least, not when that heir was Scottish born. At first, I tried to be everything he wanted me to be. I tried to please him, but nothing I did was good enough. My every word evoked a dangerous look from him that sent the servants scampering, for my accent reminded him of my lineage. I learned to disguise my voice the best I could to sound more like a true Englishman, but to no avail. Ye can’t impress someone who doesn’t care. And I think it would have killed him to have been in the same room with me and refrain from reminding me that my love wasn’t strong enough to save my mother.” His voice broke on the last word and he turned his head away, clearing his throat. “Finally, when I turned eighteen, I ran away. Three years with Grandfather had changed me from a boy to a man, so I left the mansion and signed on with the first ship I saw. Just my luck it was a pirate ship.

“Captain Jake worked my fingers to the bone, but when I was off duty, we were the best of friends. He taught

me a lot about what it really means to be a man, and he encouraged me to always speak freely. For the first time since leaving my homeland, I was truly happy. Then my grandfather passed away, and it was time for me to go back to England and accept my responsibilities. I felt I owed it to my mother to accept the responsibilities of the title.

“The minute I walked through the door of the mansion, a knot of tension settled in my stomach, and all the freedom I had felt aboard the ship was washed away on a wave of bitterness. It clings to me, Cathrynn; the hate, the anger.”

Cathrynn touched his knee. “I didn’t know you had led such a difficult life, Duncan. I’m sorry.”

He smiled, covering her hand with his own. “Once a year I spend a few months on this ship that Captain Jake left me, and it enables me to return to Willoughby again.”

She looked down shyly. “I shall endeavor to make Willoughby more of a home for you, Duncan.”

He smiled sadly. “‘Twould be a miracle, Cathrynn. One I don’t have much hope of receiving.” He stood abruptly. “I have duties to see to now, but I’d like for us to dine together this evening. In the meantime, feel free to go wherever you

like.”

Closing the door softly behind him, Duncan strode to the edge of the ship and leaned on the railing, inhaling deeply of the fragrant ocean breeze. Unknowingly, Cathrynn had opened up the door to his soul, and he was fighting hard to close it. All the emotions, the fear, the dread, the pain, had been opened up like a deep, festering wound, and he struggled within himself to stitch it together again and send it back to the deep recesses of his consciousness from whence it had come.

He bent his head over his arms, trying to concentrate on the soothing sounds around him, but to no avail. He had thought he'd finally gotten over the death of his mother, but with just one word, he'd been sent spiraling back to the past. His grief, his raw, aching guilt that he couldn't save his mother would never leave him. She hadn't loved Duncan enough to hold on to a life that, to her, was too empty without her beloved husband. Or, had he not loved her enough? Had he really spent enough time trying to cheer her out of the grief that she'd worn like a shroud? Or had he allowed his grandfather to poison his mind against her even from the beginning?

Shaking himself and swearing violently, he stalked away in search of hard manual labor to help exorcize his demons.

Cathrynn walked across the deck and watched the sunbeams bounce upon the waves of the sea. She was appalled at what Duncan had told her about his life with the former Lord Willoughby. She really hoped she could make his home a happier place, for every day that she spent with Duncan found her more deeply in love with him. There was no denying that he was a very strong, stubborn man. But whether he wanted to admit it or not, he had a definite tender side that just needed to be drawn out of him. He was a good, honest, responsible man, and Cathrynn wanted to help him break through the barriers that kept him from happiness. Smiling secretly to herself, she decided to start right away.

When Duncan strode into their cabin that evening, Cathrynn smiled prettily at him. He was surprised to see that the small table had been covered with a yellow cloth and beside it was a tray heaping with food. Two plates and a

single candle graced the table. He returned her smile and held a chair for her. She flushed and daintily took her seat, watching as Duncan sat opposite her.

“This is a very nice surprise. What’s the occasion?”

“We’ve been married for two days, Duncan. I thought it was time we celebrated.”

The invitation was clear. Cathrynn knew it. Duncan knew it. Taking a deep breath and forcing down her nervousness, she looked up at him. His midnight blue eyes were alight and a smile touched the corners of his mouth. She quickly began dishing the food onto the plates with trembling hands. “Did you have a good day?”

Duncan laughed heartily. “Never had a bad day on this ship. She’s been good to me.”

“Do you use it for recreation, or do you still attack merchant ships?”

“Both. I mostly leave people alone, but there are a few I’ll go after. Some start to run away the minute they see us, whether we send a warning or not. I canna resist a challenge.” His eyes twinkled merrily.

Cathrynn sighed softly. “I love your accent.”

Duncan looked at her from the corner of his eye. “Ye do?”

“It’s beautiful. So warm and melodic. I’ve never heard anything like it.”

He looked up at her, his fork poised in midair.

“Thank ye, Cathrynn,” he said quietly. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard anything but scorn for the way I talk.”

“I find nothing scornful about you, Duncan.”

Slowly he stood, as if moved by a power not his own. His dark eyes held hers as he moved around the table to where she sat. She knew the time had come, but she was not afraid. He held his hand out for hers, and she gave it, standing up to meet him. He encircled her in his arms, savoring the feel of her, moving to and fro in a sensual dance.

They moved as if in a dream. He reached up and pulled the combs out of her hair, letting the long, golden locks cascade down her back. He took a lock between his fingers. It was so soft. Never had he felt anything so soft. “I love your hair, Cathrynn,” he whispered next to her ear. “I love to see it flow down your back in shining ringlets. Would that it were the only thing you were wearing.”

Cathrynn did not blush at his shocking words, she was too caught up in the moment. His hand gently caressed her back, and she let her head rest on his chest, taking in the wonderful scent of him.

Duncan closed his eyes and pressed his lips to the top of her head. Damn, how he wanted her! He knew he had to take it slow, for although she had claimed her maidenhead was intact, he had no way of knowing how badly she had been treated by her captor. She had told him she'd been mistreated, but would say nothing else about it. He didn't want to frighten her. He wanted to love her, to show her how wonderful making love could be for them both.

He lifted her chin with his finger so that she was looking at him. He lowered his head ever so slowly and pressed his mouth to hers, gently at first, but becoming increasingly demanding. His hand moved from her back to cup a breast, and he groaned with the pleasure of it. He untied the bodice and helped her out of her clothes, pleasantly surprised at her lack of modesty. Quickly stripping himself, he again took her in his arms, their warm flesh meeting.

Cathrynn gasped as they made contact, reveling in the

feeling of their nakedness. She felt no shame, only a deep, urgent need that only Duncan could fulfill. She ran her long fingers through his thick hair, pulling his head down to hers. She sighed as his kisses left her lips and traveled down her neck to her collarbone. He cupped her breast in his hand and she cried out as his warm tongue touched the sensitive nipple.

Suddenly, he could wait no longer, and he picked her up and carried her to the bed, covering her with his weight. She clung to him, whispering his name over and over again. He poised above her and dove deep inside. It took all his control to hold still while she grew accustomed to him. After a moment, she began to slowly rock back and forth with him, feeling as though she would explode. Cathrynn cried out, soaring to heights she'd never known existed. She collapsed next to Duncan, snuggling close and laying her hand possessively on his chest.

He smoothed the golden hair from her forehead tenderly. His whole body still tingled from their lovemaking. He'd known instinctively that their union would be explosive, but never had he imagined that he would feel so--complete--with her. As if, for his whole life until this moment, he had

only been part of a whole.

Cathrynn sighed contentedly against his chest. She hadn't known exactly what to expect, but it was more wonderful than she had ever dreamed. And now, lying in his arms, she felt safe and happy. Cuddling closer against him, she fell into a peaceful sleep, a smile still touching her lips.

CHAPTER THREE

Cathrynn awoke the next morning to bright sunlight upon her face. She stretched sleepily and smiled, remembering the details of the previous night. She sat up and looked around the cabin, but Duncan was nowhere to be found. Cathrynn chose a dainty mint green gown with crisp white petticoats and set out to find her husband. On her way to the wheelhouse, she was surprised to find Duncan standing at the rail with his back to her, looking out upon the sea. His arms rested on the rail, his clasped hands hanging over the edge. So intent was he on his thoughts, he didn't hear her approach.

Hesitantly, she touched his arm and smiled up at him.

“Good morning.”

He put his arm around her and pulled her close.

“How do you feel, Cathrynn?” he asked, his eyes guarded.

“Happy,” she said softly, her eyes shining. Wanting to keep the mood light, she stepped back and said, “Your clothes don’t seem so offensive today. Black is a good color for you.”

He laughed and swung her around. “Ye don’t have to dress so formally here, Mrs. McKleighan. I don’t think my men would gossip too much if you left your petticoats in the cabin.”

Cathrynn gasped scandalously. “I couldn’t do that! How indecent.”

Taking her hand, Duncan led her back to the cabin and pulled a package from under the bed. “I bought this for you before we left Virginia. ‘Tis a lovely gown, but I understand ye may not feel comfortable wearing it. I’ll leave you alone to try it on.”

Cathrynn opened the box and drew out the gold satin dress. She held it up, blushing when she saw how little there

was of it. Curiosity overcoming her, she tried it on and glanced in the mirror. The bodice fit tightly, revealing a deep decolletage, and tapered to her small waist. The skirt flared out flatteringly, ending with a scalloped edge just above her ankles. There was no room even for undergarments, not to mention petticoats! She decided she liked the way the satin brushed her bare skin, and the freedom she felt without the heavy petticoats.

“Ye look lovely.”

Cathrynn spun around and saw Duncan leaning casually against the door. She hadn’t heard him come in, and she wondered how long he’d been standing there. As if reading her mind, he strode across the room and took her into his arms. He spoke softly against her ear. “I only came back for my compass, but the sight of you nearly took my breath away.” His hand slowly slid up and down across her back, the satin of her gown clinging to both his flesh and hers. She sighed sweetly, lifting her lips up to meet his, and drowning in the midnight depths of his eyes as he kissed her. She melted into Duncan’s arms as he carried her to the bed, once again taking her into the sweet ecstasy of his lovemaking.

As the days that passed on the ship turned into weeks, Cathrynn began to envy the their immodesty. The clothes they wore varied, the only common piece being the pair of tight fitting black breeches. Some of the men wore shirts, but most didn't. So, Cathrynn joined the comfortable atmosphere and quit wearing petticoats. Although she felt much lighter, the voluminous skirts of her dresses were cumbersome.

Finally throwing caution to the wind, she dined the golden gown Duncan had given her and quickly left the cabin before she could change her mind. The surprised, yet appreciative, looks from the sailors made her nervous, but she knew she had nothing to fear, for Duncan would kill any man who laid a finger on her, and well they knew it!

She stepped into the wheelhouse and saw him standing alone at the wheel, staring fixedly ahead across the beautiful blue of the ocean. She tiptoed up behind him and put her arms around his waist.

Duncan gathered her into a warm embrace, his eyes darkening with desire when he saw her in the dress. He kissed her forehead and turned his attention back to the wheel. "I

wish I could spend the day with ye, lass, but I have important business to attend to today. I promise we'll have a quiet dinner together. Tonight."

Unable to find anything of interest on deck, she returned to the cabin and curled up on the bed, determined to catch some much needed sleep.

Cathrynn sat bolt upright in bed as the thunder sounded again. Her heart was beating so hard she could hear it. As she looked around to orient herself, another clap of thunder came so forcefully it caused the ship to shake. Closing her eyes, she took some deep breaths to calm herself. When she again glanced around the cabin, the panic returned and seized her in its iron grip. Whatever the frightening noise was, it wasn't thunder, for she could see the sun shining happily through the porthole. Cathrynn was paralyzed with fear as horrible images floated through her mind.

Suddenly the door was kicked open, and she instinctively cowered against the wall. The first mate, Ian, grasped her arms and pulled her gently but quickly from the bed. "Come with me, Cathrynn, Cap'n needs to speak with

you on deck.”

“What’s going on, Ian?”

The first mate didn’t answer, only took her hand and led her onto the deck. She looked through wide eyes at the panorama around her. There were men everywhere, running this way and that, calling to one another. In the midst of it was Duncan, shouting orders and making certain they were carried out exactly as he stipulated. Ian gave her over to her husband, then left to do his own work.

Cathrynn grabbed Duncan’s hand. “What’s happening?” she asked, fear causing her voice to tremble.

“We’re readying for battle, lass. I need ye in a safe place.”

“I thought you weren’t going to attack any ships while I’m on board with you.”

Duncan ran a hand through his hair agitatedly. “I know I promised to keep you from danger, honey, but it couldna be helped. Ye see that ship in the distance?” He pointed past his wife, her troubled green eyes following his finger. “She’s firing on us.”

“What kind of insane person would attack a pirate

ship?!”

“Another pirate.”

“Don’t you people have some kind of unspoken friendship, or anything?” she demanded.

Duncan threw back his head and laughed sardonically. Cathrynn realized with a start that he was absolutely wound with excitement for the coming battle. “A pirate has no friends, honey. I don’t have time to explain it to you right now, I have to get you out of sight, they’re approaching fast.” He pulled a dagger from his boot and handed it to her. “Can ye use one of these?”

“Duncan, I--”

“Can you use it?!” His tone called for nothing but an answer.

Cathrynn nodded. “Yes, but--”

He took her hand and pulled her toward the lookout tower. “I want you to climb up there and stay put. Lie down if you have to to avoid being seen.” He took her face gently into his hands and looked deeply into her eyes. “That’s the safest place for you, sweetheart.” He kissed her gently, then he was gone, swallowed up by the crowd of men readying for battle.

Cathrynn scurried up the ladder and crouched on the floor of the lookout. She put her head on her knees and prayed for Duncan's safety, and everyone else aboard the *Highlander*. She could still hear the shouts of the men as they scurried to defend their vessel. The sun beat down upon her unbearably, with only a few clouds rolling in to offer their protection. Another boom sounded, causing her to jump fearfully. Her pulse quickened, her heart beat harder in her chest. Where was Duncan?

She couldn't bear it any longer, she had to know what was happening! Crawling over to the rail of the lookout, she peered cautiously over the side. She was shocked to see pirates from the other ship climbing aboard the *Highlander*. Cathrynn watched as each one was either thrown overboard, or immediately engaged in battle. Her eyes searched for but could not find her beloved captain. She saw many men go down, but was unable to tell whether they were dead or only injured. Still more men flowed over onto the deck, filling her with fear and hopelessness.

The battle waged on, oblivious to her watchful eye. Where was Duncan? She knew he would never leave his men

to fight alone, so what did that mean? Was he hurt? Or worse? She sank down to her knees with a groan. "Please, God," she whispered, "keep Duncan safe." She didn't want to look--didn't want to see him lying on the ground. But at the same time, she had to know.

Wiping tears from her eyes, she crept to the rail again. The few clouds that had sailed across the sky earlier had met up with more, covering the sky in a dark eeriness. Even though it was only midday, it was as dark as twilight. A few drops began to fall, but Cathrynn didn't notice.

Finally, she found Duncan. He was in a corner, sword drawn, battling with a fearsome-looking man. His skill took her breath away, for although she'd seen her brothers and fiancée from home at fencing practice, she'd never seen any with such finesse. His actions were calculated, his moves so liquid the sword seemed to be a part of him. Within seconds, Duncan's opponent was down, and he moved on to the next. Her eyes were fixed on her husband, her hands gripping the rail so tightly they were numb. She felt as if she were staring into his soul, willing him to live. Cathrynn watched anxiously as he went from one pirate to the next, easily besting them.

She took a moment to look around, and noticed that the other members from the *Highlander* were also faring quite well.

When her teal eyes found Duncan once again, she gasped as she saw a rapier headed straight for his heart. Before she could see the outcome, however, the ship pitched and she fell to the floor. The wood was slippery from the rain, and Cathrynn had a hard time getting a good grip on the rail. Again the ship heaved, and she was viciously thrown to the other side of the lookout, slamming her head into the floor.

When she came to, the wind and rain had diminished, and the clamor of the battle had all but stopped. Shaking her head to clear it, she began crawling across the slick floor, tears of fear and frustration running down her cheeks. She grasped the rail tightly and peered over the side, afraid of what she might find. To her surprise, all the pirates from the opposing ship had been tied and put into lifeboats, and members of the *Highlander* were busying themselves with putting it to sea.

Cathrynn's eyes raked over every inch of deck until she spotted her husband. He stood facing her, the lifeboats at his side. He was saying something to Ian, totally absorbed in the conversation. The gentle wind carried the wonderful

sound of his laughter to her ears. Smiling, she stood up to wave to him, but something directly behind him caught her eye. Cathrynn's breath caught in her throat, the smile fading from her lips. She screamed her husband's name as she reached for the dagger and held it high above her head.

Duncan was pleased with the outcome of the skirmish. His crew had easily won the fight, with little injury to themselves. He was talking to Ian when he heard his wife's scream. His heart leaping into his throat, he looked up, thinking one of the other pirates had crept away and discovered her. What he saw took his breath away. She was standing in the lookout, her golden hair and matching gown tumbling about her in wild disarray, the wind whipping them this way and that. She looked like an angel from the heavens, so lovely he could not turn away. Staring at her in awe, he did not even see the knife she held in her hand.

As she let the weapon fly, Ian said, "God a'mighty, Duncan, she's tryin' to kill ye."

The men stood transfixed, as if they were bolted to the deck. "The little lady's done gone crazy," another crewmate said under his breath. All at once they moved into

action, running to protect their captain. But it was too late. They heard a loud thud and stared in disbelief at the scene before them.

Duncan swallowed hard, turning around slowly. A man lay sprawled on the ground, cutlass beside him, blood covering the deck. He knew with one look the pirate was already dead. Turning to his men, he asked, "Which one of you did this? Which of you just save my life?"

The men stared at him as if he'd taken leave of his senses. They looked at each other, then back to their captain. What could they say? Hadn't he seen his own wife send the dagger slicing through the air with deadly accuracy?

His midnight blue eyes burned into each of them. He turned to his first mate. "Ian, tell me the truth. Who killed this pirate?"

Ian cleared his throat. "'Twas your wife, Duncan. She saved your life."

Looking toward the tower, Duncan saw Cathrynn running toward him, tears streaming from her pretty eyes. He opened his arms, and she fell gratefully into them, clutching his back as if trying to reassure herself that he was, indeed,

alive. She sobbed brokenly against his chest. “Oh, Duncan, I was so afraid for you! I thought it was over, but then I saw him behind you with his sword raised above your head. I thought--I thought--” she took a deep, shuddering breath. “I didn’t know if I had time to get to him. No one else saw him. Only me. I was so frightened. Thank God you’re alive!”

Duncan held her to him, rubbing her back gently. With a flick of his wrist, he gestured the others to throw the body overboard so Cathrynn wouldn’t have to see it. He let her cry out all her emotions until she was spent, then picked her up and carried her to their cabin, laying her carefully on the bed. Fetching a wet cloth, he removed her tight dress and bathed her, then clothed her in the softest nightgown he owned and tucked her securely into the covers.

Pouring himself a generous dose of brandy, Duncan sat across from the bed and watched his lovely wife sleep. A soft smile curved his lips. Even though he had basically forced her into marriage, stolen her from her homeland, and shocked her with his secret identity, she still remained loyal to him. Why? The answer eluded him. He realized then, if not before, that he was dealing with a special lady.

Setting down his glass, he slid into bed beside her, smoothing her hair from her forehead and kissing it. She sighed and snuggled closer into the warmth of his arms. Although he wasn't yet aware of it, she was slowly but surely finding her way into his heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cathrynn awoke to the bright morning sunshine and, as usual, Duncan was already gone. Heavy depression hung in the air around her as she remembered the horrors of the day before. Thanking God profusely for saving Duncan's life, she climbed out of bed and donned a light pink gown. Feeling too alone inside the cabin, she went out onto the deck.

"Good mornin', little lady," one of the crewmembers said as he sloshed the clean deck.

Cathrynn was taken aback, for normally the sailors ignored her presence. "Good morning to you, Dale," she said brightly. "Might you know where the captain is this morning?"

“He took some of the men to the island to check it for safety.”

Turning quickly, she saw that they had laid anchor near a small island. “Will we be going ashore?” she asked excitedly.

Dale shrugged. “Don’ rightly know, little lady.”

She saw the small dinghy returning to the ship and ran to the rail, waving to her husband. When he climbed aboard, she flew over to him. “Is the island safe?”

He smiled at her and draped one arm around her shoulders. “I think so. Go pack some clothes, sweetheart, and we’ll spend a while on dry land.”

Duncan followed her to the cabin and watched her as she tried to pack. She held up a few dresses then discarded them. She turned to her husband, a look of consternation on her face. “What should I wear? I don’t have any old gowns, and the rest I’ll need in England.”

Smiling devilishly, he held up the forgotten gold dress. She quickly changed her clothes and they took the boat to the shore. The crew was staying behind to make some repairs on the ship, so they would have the whole island to

themselves.

Cathrynn squealed with delight as she stepped into the warm sand, her bare toes digging into the soft ground. Duncan pulled the boat away from the tide and began gathering sticks for a fire while Cathrynn playfully skipped through the sand. When he was satisfied with the amount of wood he'd stacked, he sat down on the ground to take off his boots. With his head bent over his laces, Cathrynn took the opportunity to splash him with water. His head snapped up and he glowered at her as he pulled off his second shoe. Before she knew it, he was up and running toward her. She didn't even have a chance to react before he was on her, wrestling her to the ground. She lay laughing in the warm sunshine, the water lapping at her legs, her husband kissing her neck.

Duncan smiled down into her beautiful green eyes. Cathrynn touched his cheek softly, feeling the dark stubble that was already apparent, even though it was only nearing noon. How she loved him! She hoped that her tender touch conveyed what she could not put into words. Knowing that theirs was only a marriage of convenience, she dared not tell

him how she felt for fear of alienating him. They had settled into a warm, comfortable relationship, and Cathrynn didn't want to ruin what small chance she had for happiness. She had to face reality: no matter how much she cared for him, Duncan may never fall in love with her.

Anger suddenly overwhelming her, she pushed Duncan away and stood up hurriedly. Her husband sat sprawled in the sand, water lapping at his feet, a perplexed look on his handsome face.

"I need some time to myself," she said quietly. She offered no explanation, and he demanded none.

Duncan stood up slowly, brushing the sand from his breeches. "The island is safe, you can go for a walk if ye like."

Turning from him before her tears fell, she walked away down the shoreline. Cathrynn breathed deeply of the fresh sea air, and turned her face up to the bright sunlight. Her thoughts turned to her relationship with her husband as she moved slowly along the beach. She wondered what her life would be like once they reached England. Would Duncan still be considerate of her, or would she only be part of the

decoration, something he wanted when he needed it, but otherwise went unnoticed. She could see herself presented at the most extravagant balls on the arm of the handsome Lord Willoughby, then left to entertain herself while he searched out more desirable company.

No, it wouldn't be that way, she told herself firmly. If she ever wanted a real relationship with him, she would have to stop thinking so negatively. She couldn't run away from his every time she remembered that he didn't love her. What really mattered was that she loved him, and, if she loved him enough, maybe one day it would be returned to her. Until then, she had to make the best of every moment.

Cathrynn looked around, realizing she'd wandered farther than she'd planned. As she turned to go back, a vine covered with brilliantly colored flowers caught her eye. She stepped over to it and plucked a deep purple blossom, impulsively putting it behind her ear. She giggled amidst the fragrant blooms and searched for another to match it. Parting the greenery, she reached into the center and lost her footing, falling forward into the vine. When she looked up, the flowers were behind her and she was in a small cave.

Excitement overcoming her, Cathrynn scrambled to her feet and looked around. As a child, she had loved exploring with her two older brothers, and was thrilled to have the chance to do so again. The cave was barren except for a tiny stream that split it in two. She followed it to the other end of the cave, where she found another opening. When she stepped through, she gasped in disbelief, for it was the most beautiful clearing she had ever seen! The little stream emptied into a large pond so clear she could see the bottom, the grass around it thick and green and spotted with wildflowers. Birds sang sweetly in the trees above, and the rabbits and squirrels scurried about for food.

Cathrynn walked to the pond and touched one toe gingerly to the water, sighing in pleasure to find that it was fed by a hot water spring. Without a second thought, she shed her clothes and sank into the warm water.

Duncan glanced satisfactorily at the small campsite he'd erected. A pile of logs and kindling stood in readiness for a fire, and their blankets were stretched out nearby in a lean-to he'd quickly constructed. Sighing, he set out to look for his

wife. As his thoughts turned toward Cathrynn, he again wondered what had come over her earlier. Although he understood that her life had taken a dramatic turn and she was very confused, he'd like for her to turn to him, not away. Of course, since he was the one responsible for turning her life upside down, he had no right to expect her to confide in him. They had a comfortable relationship, and that was all he could ask for. Suddenly, he heard her singing, and followed the sound of her voice.

Playing in the warm water happily, Cathrynn hummed her favorite song, reveling in the feel of the sun on her bare skin. When she looked up, she saw Duncan standing beside the pool. Her heart began to beat thunderously within her chest, her breath catching in her throat. Her eyes traveled to where her clothes lay upon the grass. Duncan's followed. Remembering her vow to turn her marriage of convenience into a happy union, she held out a hand to him and smiled.

Duncan moved as if in a trance. He tore his clothes off, his midnight blue eyes never leaving hers, and strode into the water. He stopped just short of her, the tips of her breasts

lightly touching the soft hair of his chest. Cathrynn closed the distance between them, and his arms wrapped gratefully around her, his mouth coming down hard on hers. Duncan kissed every inch of her face until her knees were weak with desire, then he trailed his hot tongue lower to her creamy white neck. The warm water lapped pleasantly about their bodies, caressing places which were momentarily neglected by the lovers.

As her husband's mouth closed around her taut nipple, Cathrynn cried out in sweet torture, clutching at him as if she would never let him go. She combed her fingers lovingly through his thick black hair, pulling his lips back to hers. She poured out all that she felt for him in that kiss, in every tender touch she bestowed on him. She closed her mind and let her heart lead the way, giving all of herself and asking nothing in return. If only she could believe that he might love her, too. Closing her eyes, it wasn't hard to imagine, for Duncan was such a considerate lover. His every touch was so gently, awakening feelings in her she hadn't known existed. Her heart skipped a beat as he smoothed her hair away from her neck, slowly leaning in to nip the sensitive skin just behind

her ear. Cathrynn gasped, and as her knees gave way beneath her, was swept up into strong arms and carried to the thick, fragrant grass. There among the blue jays and wildflowers she became one with Duncan, in a moment so exquisite she knew it would live in her memory forever.

Still basking in the afterglow of her love, she moved next to her husband, resting her head on his chest, her hand over his heart. She felt as if she were floating somewhere above in the clouds, and her eyes drooped as she gave in to the sleep that beckoned. “I love you, Duncan,” she whispered.

Her eyes flew open and she clamped her hand over her mouth. Oh, dear God, what had she said?! *What had she done?!* Cathrynn didn’t want him to know how she felt, not until she was reasonably sure that he reciprocated. Now it was too late. He wouldn’t spend time with her anymore, for fear that an emotionally dependent wife would demand too much of his valuable time.

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. He hadn’t said anything, maybe he was asleep. Maybe he hadn’t heard her confession.

“Cathrynn.” Her hopes fell with alarming speed,

crashing into a million tiny pieces at her feet. He knew.

She walked unsteadily to the spot where her clothes lay, and quickly pulled them on. She ran her shaky fingers through her long hair to return some semblance of neatness to it.

“Cathrynn. Turn around and look at me.”

She couldn’t. She couldn’t look into those beautiful blue eyes and see nothing reflected there but pity. “I’m sorry, Duncan,” she whispered, willing the tears from her voice. “I didn’t mean to tell you. I know our marriage is one of convenience only, and I’ll not jeopardize that. I know you aren’t in love with me. I don’t expect you to be. I just--”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, hot scalding tears spilling onto her cheeks.

Duncan put his hands on her shoulders. “Cathrynn, please--”

She pushed him away from her with more strength than she knew she had. “Don’t! Don’t feel sorry for me because I’m a foolish girl with foolish dreams! I’m intelligent enough to know the difference between fantasy and reality, and I don’t confuse the two. Just leave me alone for a while so I

can pull myself together. Please.” She bowed her head, her glorious hair spilling downward like a golden wave.

Duncan took her cold hand and led her back to the spot where they had made love. He leaned against a tree and she sat down beside him, still unable to meet his eyes. He held her hand, stroking it gently. “You’re in love with me?”

Did he have to torture her? “Yes,” she whispered, her heart thudding painfully beneath her breast.

“I can’t tell ye that I love ye, Cathrynn.”

Her heart constricted still more, as if he physically squeezed it in his hand. “I know.”

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to.”

She was sure she was taking her last breaths, for her throat was tightening against the tears that threatened to fall. “I know.”

“Cathrynn, look at me,” he demanded sharply.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes to meet his. He was looking at her much as he always did. She saw no pity, no ridicule. He tucked her hair behind her ear and stroked her cheek. “You think I have no feelings for you. You’re wrong. I knew from the first moment I saw ye that you were special.

I'll never forget the way ye stood on that platform, your head held high and your eyes flashing. I've never met another woman who possessed such inner strength. And since then, I've grown to know ye much better. Ye bring so much into my life, Cathrynn, that I haven't felt in years. Laughter, companionship, intimacy. I care what happens to you. I enjoy being with you. Obviously, I enjoy our lovemaking. But is that love?" He shook his head. "No. Years ago I swore I would never fall in love. There are those who've been destroyed by it."

"And others who've been saved."

"After my father died, I watched my mother slowly waste away, presumably from a broken heart. Did love save her?"

"I believe it did. Would it have been better had she lived a lonely existence in a convent all her life, never to know the joys of having a husband and son to care for?"

Duncan evidently had never considered that, for he stood up and took a few steps away from her. As he turned back, his midnight eyes were unreadable. "I do care for you. I'll be faithful to you, and take care of you, but please don't

ask that which I cannot give.”

She stood up and put her hand on his arm. “Let’s forget about everything we’ve just said, Duncan, and go back to the way we were just a few short hours ago. I’m happy being here with you, and we have so little time left before we reach England. Let’s just enjoy ourselves.”

He draped his arm casually about her shoulders and they returned to the lean-to for the night, but it was a long time before Cathrynn could fall asleep.

Cathrynn sat on a large boulder at the base of the shoreline, watching the sea gulls and brushing her hair. As Duncan emerged from the woods, he thought it was the loveliest sight he’d ever seen. She said nothing as he sat down beside her, but continued stroking her hair, her eyes fixed on the ocean. Duncan cleared his throat. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Mhmm.”

“About what happened on the ship the other day.”

She looked at him. “What is it?”

He shook his head. “Something I don’t understand.

How did you ever manage to hit that man with the dagger I gave you? Lady Luck surely was on our side.”

She raised an eyebrow and said haughtily, “Luck had nothing to do with it. I never miss my mark.”

Grinning, he asked in a condescending tone, “Would ye like to elaborate?”

“When I was a child, I used to tag along with my older brothers. They would practice throwing their knives at trees, and they taught me. They said I had a natural talent.”

Duncan laughed. “I can see little Cathrynn in her pink petticoats brandishing weapons like a tomboy.”

Raising one dainty foot, she pushed him off the rock into the shallow water. “I was very good, thank you very much. Even better than my fiancée.” Her hair glistening in the sun, she set the brush aside and began a search for seashells.

“Your fiancée? You never mentioned you were engaged.”

“Why? Would it have made a difference to you?”

“Does it to you?”

She shrugged. “When I was born, my parents

arranged the union between our property and that which adjoined us. Austin was five years older than me, and he and my brothers were good friends. I grew up knowing that I would marry him, but I never felt anything more for him than I felt for my brothers. I was kidnapped just three days before the wedding.”

“I would think you’d have had a tremendous amount of suitors. What made them arrange the marriage for you?”

“I think my parents just wanted to secure my future with a nice family that would treat me well. And also to ensure that I would always be close to them.”

Duncan took her hand and pulled her to him. “Gather your things while I pack up our blankets, it’s time we get back to the ship.”

He strode away, leaving Cathrynn to look one more time upon the beauty of the warm island. She breathed deeply of the air perfumed with the scent of wildflowers, watching the trees sway gracefully in the gently breeze. Impulsively, so that she would always have a part of the lovely island, she put the shells she had been gathering in her pocket, then hurried after her husband.

The sailors had been much more receptive to her since the day of the battle when she'd saved Duncan's life. Cathrynn began spending most of her time either with Duncan, or helping Dale in the galley. She enjoyed the older man's company and the fatherly way he treated her. On one such occasion, Duncan found her baking and speaking to the cook. He stood in the doorway for a while watching her, marveling at the quiet camaraderie between the two. Feeling his presence, Cathrynn turned toward him in greeting, but was surprised when he burst into laughter. Looking down, she realized she was covered with flour from head to toe as a result of losing her footing and tossing the sack of flour into the air, only to have it come down on top of her head.

Putting her hands on her hips, she tapped her foot impatiently while waiting for his laughter to subside. "What is so funny?" she demanded.

Duncan made an effort to control his merriment. "I know ladies are supposed to have creamy white skin, sweetheart, but that's taking in a bit far."

He took her in his arms and kissed her until she was

laughing along with him. “Run along to the cabin and wash up, there’s something I need to speak to ye about.”

On her way to the cabin she ran into Ian, his eyes widening when he saw her disarray. “God a’mighty, Cathrynn, who dumped ye in the flour bin?!”

She smiled at her friend and stopped to talk. “I had a little accident in the kitchen.”

“I’ll say! You look like you poured a whole bag of flour over your head.”

Giggling, she put a hand self-consciously to her hair. “I did.”

He shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Leave it to a woman. I do have to admit, though, you look quite fetching.”

“I would so love to stay here and continue to let you insult me, but if you’ll excuse me, I must get to my room.”

Ian moved into a sweeping bow before her and, taking her hand, made a dramatic play of kissing it soundly. “Lady Willoughby,” he said as she scurried away, laughing.

A few hours later, she was clean and freshly clad in a pale blue dress. She was just finishing setting out the food

she'd brought from the galley when Duncan came in. He looked haggard, his face drawn and the dark growth on his chin standing out against the unusual paleness of his skin. He sat down with a sigh and began eating without a word. Cathrynn watched him for a while, worried about his strange behavior. When she finally found enough courage to ask him what was bothering him, he pushed away his half-finished plate and looked at her wearily.

“We'll reach England tomorrow.”

Cathrynn dropped her fork, the clatter as it hit the plate sounded deafening in the silent room. “So soon?” she whispered.

He shrugged. “We had an easy trip. The weather was fair, the wind on our side. I thought we had more time,” he said, more to himself than to her. “We should reach the country estate by dinnertime.”

Cathrynn was in shock. She thought it would be weeks yet before they reached their destination. She wasn't ready to start a new life yet, especially one so stressed with the pressures of society. Although she had moved through the social circles all her life, she had never been a noblewoman

before. What if the rules were vastly different between England and America? Oh, dear Lord, she didn't even know what time to have tea! What if she failed Duncan?

Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm herself down. Of course, the staff at Duncan's estate would know everything, and she would learn quickly. Her experiences from her parent's house in Virginia would give her more than enough confidence to plan and carry out as many glorious balls as her husband needed. What if she couldn't do it?

"What are ye thinking?" he asked from across the table.

She looked up into his midnight eyes, whispering, "I'm afraid I can't live up to your expectations of me."

Duncan walked around the table and knelt down until he was at eye-level with her. He touched her cheek tenderly. "Ah, lassie, I don't expect anything of ye. I just want someone to be there when I come back from business trips, someone sweet and warm who will make that old house feel more like home. I know without a doubt, sweetheart, that you'll have no problem there. Come, let's get to bed, we have an early morning tomorrow."

CHAPTER FIVE

Cathrynn sat tensely in the stagecoach, staring blindly at the passing scenery. She couldn't help imagining hundreds of problems that might arise once she reached the Willoughby estate, and was terrified that even the smallest could prove too difficult for her. She had so foolishly assumed that her experience in hostessing balls in Virginia would put her in a position to do the same in England. She shook her head. How could she ever possibly pass herself off as nobility? What if she weren't accepted by the other noblemen and ladies? Would this marriage hurt Duncan more than help him? She put a dainty hand to her temple in an effort to still the dull throbbing that had been with her all morning.

"Cathrynn." Startled, she turned to see Duncan smiling at her. He put his arm around her shoulders and nestled her head on his chest. He spoke so softly his words were barely a whisper. "Relax. Rest until we get there, lassie. 'Tis a long road ahead of us." His soothing touch and deep

accented voice did, indeed, relax her, and she fell into a troubled sleep.

Waking with a start, Cathrynn glanced around and realized they had arrived at Willoughby Manor. The house was a breathtakingly beautiful three story brick, with more windows than could possibly be counted, all gleaming spotlessly in the late afternoon sunlight. A curving brick sidewalk led the way from the drive to the house, and was surrounded by rosebushes of every color imaginable. Cathrynn smiled slightly, feeling some hope return, for the house was so bright and pretty it couldn't be as bad as Duncan had led her to believe. Taking a deep breath and straightening her shoulders, she willed the fear from her body.

The coach door opened, and Duncan helped her safely reach the ground. He spoke not a word, but tucked her hand through his arm and proceeded down the walk. When he reached the door, he paused for a moment. Again, Cathrynn breathed deeply, as if the rose-sweetened air could give her the courage she needed.

Suddenly the door swung open and they were greeted

by an elderly man with thick white hair and a frown that seemed to be etched onto his features. He bowed stiffly.

“Welcome home, Lord Willoughby.”

Duncan walked past him, stopping short upon seeing the entire staff gathered at the bottom of the stairs before him. They bowed and curtsied as one. “Welcome home, Lord Willoughby.”

Duncan passed a weary hand over his brow. He put an arm around Cathrynn and said, “This is my bride, Lady Willoughby. She will be in charge of running the household from this moment on, so if there are any questions, please contact her. Now if you will excuse us, we’ve had quite a long journey.”

Cathrynn glanced sharply at her husband as he ushered her up the large winding staircase, so shocked at his behavior she didn’t notice anything but him. Gone was the beautiful, lilting accent and deep voice that turned so soft when he spoke to her. It was replaced instead by a solemn, business-like tone that sounded so English she had to strain to hear a difference. Beneath her hand his muscular arm was

clenched tightly, tension choking the air around him. When they reached her bedroom He opened the door for her and turned to leave. “Duncan,” she said quickly, waylaying him with but a touch of her hand. “I should like to speak with you for a moment.”

“I have business to attend to right now, Cathrynn, but we can speak after dinner this evening.” He walked away abruptly as the servants brought the trunks in to be unpacked. She stared after him for a moment, wondering what had just happened. Once inside her room, curiosity overcame her and she looked around at the lovely room. A rose-patterned quilt and matching curtains gave the room a very dainty look, with a pink rug and rosebud wallpaper accenting them nicely. After ringing for the maid to help her unpack, she sat down at the vanity to freshen up.

There was a soft knock on the door and a petite girl stepped in and curtsied. “Pleased to meet you, milady. My name is Megan, I’ve been assigned to be your personal maid.”

Cathrynn smiled at her. “Thank you for responding so quickly, Megan. I’d like to unpack the trunks before I dress for dinner. I believe if we hurry we’ll be able to finish.”

The girl nodded, but didn't move toward her. She stood with her eyes downcast, twisting her apron in her hands. "Are you alright, Megan?"

The girl looked up with wide blue eyes and spoke shyly. "I feel I should tell you, Lady Willoughby, that I've never been a personal maid before. I'm so afraid I'll disappoint you because I don't have experience. I'll understand if you want someone older."

Smiling Cathrynn said, "You aren't the only one new to these surroundings, Megan. You don't know how to be Lady Willoughby's maid. I don't know how to be Lady Willoughby." She paused for a moment, overwhelmed by her feelings of fear and inadequacy. "Maybe we can help each other."

Megan smiled brightly while dropping another curtsy. "Thank you, Lady Willoughby."

Cathrynn held her hand up. "Please, call me Lady Cathrynn."

Duncan escorted Cathrynn through the oak doors into the dining room. A long table dominated the room along with

a slightly less impressive buffet. They were both made of a dark wood, with a pea green rug on the floor and similarly distasteful pictures hung on the wall. She sat down in the chair her husband held for her and folded her hands in her lap demurely.

Dinner was an agonizingly slow eight course meal served by people who looked incapable of cracking so much as a slight smile, and Duncan was so far away Cathrynn practically had to shout to speak to him. After a while she gave up and they ate their meal in silence. When all the dishes had finally been taken away, Cathrynn asked, "Can I speak with you now, Duncan?"

The butler, Cooper, cleared his throat. "There is a matter of utmost importance that I must confer about with you, Lord Willoughby."

"Go on ahead of me, my dear, I'll join you shortly."

With a look of annoyance on her face, she swept angrily from the room. Once back in her bedchamber, she changed into a cream silk nightgown and pulled the brush through her hair over and over again, fuming at the impertinence of the butler. How dare he interfere with the

plans she'd made with her husband. Cooper acted as if he were lord of the manor instead of a mere servant.

The door opened to admit Duncan and she rushed to him, putting her hands on his cheeks and searching his eyes with her own. His face looked drawn and tense, his beautiful midnight blue eyes clouded over so that they were unreadable. "It is getting late. I've come to say goodnight before I retire to my own chambers."

Cathrynn's eyes widened and she took a step away from him, shock registering on her face as if she'd been slapped. Indeed, she *felt* as if he'd slapped her. They had never slept apart since their first intimate encounter on the ship, and she had grown accustomed to having him with her every night. He turned to go but she grabbed his arm.

"Cathrynn, please," he grated. "I'm very tired and I have a long day tomorrow. I need to get some sleep."

"Not until you talk to me."

"I *am* talking to you."

"I don't know whose voice you've borrowed, Duncan McKleighan, but I don't like it. Where is your lovely accent? I can hardly hear it at all," she added softly.

“I told you my Scottish heritage is greatly resented among the nobility here in England. There are many things I must do in order to be accepted, and disguising my accent is one of them.”

She knew he was becoming agitated, but she drove him still further. “Do you think talking like an Englishman will earn the respect of your peers?”

He slammed his hand against the vanity. “Dammit, lassie, how many times do I have to tell ye--”

He stopped short when he saw her smile. She wrapped her arms around his waist, melting into him. “I needed to hear you, Duncan,” she whispered. “In a house full of things strange and new to me, only you are familiar. I understand your need to disguise your accent from the other noblemen, but please don’t hide it from me, I find it so soothing.” She looked up at him, tears swimming in her teal green eyes. “Please don’t go to your room tonight, I don’t want to be alone. Please stay with me.”

Duncan’s eyes softened as he looked down at his sweet wife. He picked her up and carried her to the bed, sliding beneath the covers with her and drawing her into his

arms. She closed her eyes and reveled in the feel of his strong arms wrapped securely around her. Only then was she able to relax enough to fall asleep. And, once again, she spoke without meaning to. “I love you, Duncan.”

Duncan smiled at his wife over the rim of his coffee cup as she swayed into the dining room for breakfast. His mood was greatly improved after a night spent in her loving arms. “You’re a vision of loveliness this morning.”

Cathrynn returned his smile as she wondered if she would ever get used to his new manner of speaking. She sat down in the chair directly to his right and gingerly placed the drab green napkin on her lap. A young servant boy rushed to fetch her breakfast, and Cooper looked down his nose disapprovingly at her.

“Lady Willoughby, your place is at the head of the table.”

Returning his gaze unflinchingly, she said firmly, “I prefer to sit beside my husband.”

“Your dishes are set at the head of the table, my lady,” he said woodenly.

Folding her hands and straightening her shoulders, she fixed her cold stare on the butler. “Then you must retrieve them and set them here before me, Cooper. I do not wish to sit there.”

The butler sighed in irritation and slammed the plates in front of Cathrynn before stalking from the room. She sipped her coffee calmly while trying to bring her temper under control. “Aren’t you going to do anything about that?”

Duncan shrugged. “That’s Cooper’s way.”

“So you just let him behave however he wishes with no consequences?”

“What do you want me to do, Cathrynn? He’s been here longer than I have.”

“Who is the lord of this manor, the butler or you?”

“How would you like a tour of the mansion?” he asked abruptly, taking her arm and leading her from the room.

They started in the grand hall and proceeded from there into all the adjoining rooms. With every step they took Cathrynn felt her hopes for a lovely home being dashed, for the decor of the mansion was a nightmare. Never before and she seen such dark, drab colors, and in such abundance! All

the beautiful windows were covered with heavy draperies blocking out most of the sun, giving the rooms a chilly feeling. She waked into the study with dread, only to happily surprised at the warmth of the room. The fireplace displayed a lovely mantelpiece upon which were many small trinkets, and a large desk by the window occupied most of the room. The colors, although dark green and burgundy, were warm and inviting rather than depressing like the rest of the house, and the room had a comfortable feel to it. She smiled at her husband. "This is your room, isn't it? The one room in the whole house you've claimed as your own."

She never ceased to amaze Duncan with her perceptiveness. "I like the study. I had it redecorated after my grandfather's passing, and this is where I spend most of my time. So what do you think of the grand mansion?"

She made a face. "I'm sorry, but I've never seen anything so horrid in my life! How can you live with all these dark, depressing colors around you?"

"You can do whatever you like with it, Cathrynn. I never had the time or the inclination to bother with it and I have every confidence that you could turn this old abomination

into something wonderful.”

Cathrynn smiled slowly. “I do love a challenge.”

Duncan led her to the kitchen and leaned against the door as he watched her take in the surroundings. The kitchen, too, was a nice room to look at. Decorated in yellow and white, it produced a feeling of peace and happiness. An older woman walked out from what Cathrynn assumed was a pantry, wiping her hands on her yellow checked apron. When she saw the couple standing in her kitchen, she dropped a curtsy and smiled warmly at the new lady of the house. “Good morning, Lady Willoughby. ’Tis a pleasure to meet ye.” Smiling secretively at Duncan, she turned and called, “Husband, come out here and meet Lady Willoughby.”

The man strode through the door, a big welcoming smile on his face. Cathrynn squealed in surprise and threw herself into his arms, unable to contain the shock and excitement of the unexpected meeting. “Good mornin’, little lady,” Dale greeted.

“How happy I am to see you, Dale, and you must be his lovely wife, Marian. I am so pleased to meet you.” Turning on her husband, she slapped him playfully and

admonished, “Why didn’t you tell me Dale would be here?”

His eyes danced mischievously. “Because then I wouldn’t have gotten to see your reaction.” He grabbed for her waist, but she quickly evaded him, running past him through the door and into the hallway. Duncan caught up with her easily, hauling her into his arms and carrying her up the stairs as if she were light as a feather. “I think it’s time I showed you to your bedchamber for a nap,” he whispered seductively in her ear.”

Cathrynn threw herself back onto the bed in mock exhaustion, not caring that her shift slipped up to the top of her thighs. “I wish I’d never have to attend another ball again as long as I live,” she moaned woefully.

Her husband smiled down at her as he lightly caressed her satin smooth leg. “We needn’t stay long if you don’t feel like it, although we do need to put in an appearance and I have a few business contacts to make. We’ll come home early tonight,” he promised. Taking her dainty hand into his, he pulled her from the bed and proceeded to help her into her ball gown.

The couple that strode confidently into Lord and Lady Appleby's house was a breathtaking sight. Duncan was clad in burgundy breeches and neck cloth, with a midnight blue frock coat that made his eyes seem almost black, and Cathrynn looked dazzling in a burgundy velvet gown with a plunging neckline. Smiling, they greeted their hosts and began mingling among the other guests.

Cathrynn saw many faces that she had become familiar with in the two weeks since her arrival at Willoughby Manor. Almost immediately she was accosted by the most outrageous lady of society. Lady Ambrosia was very tall and round, and definitely had her own unique style of clothing, which might have caused her ridicule had her husband not been one of the oldest and wealthiest men in London. Tonight she was gaily clad in a royal purple gown that was drawn up to reveal petticoats dotted in every color imaginable, with a hat of purple velvet decorated with the largest plumes Cathrynn had ever seen, each one a different color to match those on her petticoat. As if that wasn't enough, a large emerald brooch that was later identified as a turtle adorned her bosom. Cathrynn smiled genuinely at the older woman, for she was as

kind as she was different. “Good evening, Lady Ambrosia.”

The robust woman hugged the smaller lady to her.

“How pleased I am to see you again, Lady Cathrynn. How are you this fine eve?”

Smiling mischievously, she whispered close to her friend’s ear, “I have been to five balls and ten teas in this past fortnight. I may faint from exhaustion!”

Lady Ambrosia laughed wildly at this, patting her back and reassuring, “The balls won’t last much longer, my dear. You’ll settle down into a nice routine and the ladies of high society will stop welcoming you and start gossiping about you.”

“You speak nothing if not the truth.” Cathrynn smiled as her husband joined them. “Oh, there you are, my lord.”

Duncan bowed low before the women, taking Lady Ambrosia’s large hand and kissing it carefully, as if it were made of the most delicate porcelain. “You look lovely this night, my lady,” he said with a smile. “May I have this dance?”

Cathrynn watched them as they blended onto the

dance floor, smiling at her husband's generosity. Lord Ambrosia was getting on in years, and many of the younger men were loath to dance with the rotund woman.

"Lady Cathrynn," a high pitched voice called insistently. "Lady Cathrynn, I'm so happy I found you. I told my husband I simply *must* speak with the new Lady Willoughby this evening."

Cathrynn's greeting was less genuine this time as she turned at the sound of her voice. Lady Erica Merriweather was the complete opposite of Lady Ambrosia. Lady Erica was very thin and pale, and she was dressed meticulously in a light pink gown. She seemed to be the town gossip, the instigator of them all, and Cathrynn preferred not to spend much time in her company. So it was with a forced smile that she said, "It is nice to see you again, Lady Merriweather."

"And you also, Lady Cathrynn. I should like to invite Lord Willoughby and yourself to tea at our house tomorrow. I wanted to have a ball but our servants have been so disgustingly lazy I fear I cannot trust them to perform all the duties that come with such a large social gathering."

Cathrynn's cheeks ached with the effort of keeping

the smile on her face. Erica was the last person she wanted to have tea with, but she'd been caught off guard and could think of no excuse to free her. Just as she was about to accept, Duncan strode up to them and asked, "Would you care to dance, my dear?"

"Lady Erica has generously invited us to her mansion for tea on the morrow."

"I'm terribly sorry, but I've planned a surprise holiday for my wife and myself tomorrow. Perhaps another time."

Duncan swung her out onto the dance floor as she laughed gleefully. "Thank heavens you came to my rescue, Duncan!"

"I will forever be your knight in shining armor, my love," he breathed against her ear, his husky voice spreading heat within her. Her heartbeat quickened and a smile lit her eyes as she looked up into the dark eyes of the man she loved. They swayed slowly to the soft music, moving together as if molded into one being. Their lips were but a breath away, their eyes locked in a mutual surrender. Cathrynn's dance steps were automatic as she lost herself in the smoky dark

pools, feeling trapped and unable to free herself from their magnetic power, and yet, not wanting to.

Cathrynn's eyes glowed with love so brightly Duncan could no longer deny what she had told him. Even though he knew it to be the truth he had refused to accept it, for love did not fit into this plans. Love changed the rules. *She* changed the rules and as he gazed down upon her, their breath mingling in the short space between them, he felt something deep within him also change, and with it the realization that he may possibly have been wrong about love. As he touched his lips to hers, the electricity between them exploded and they gasped, so surprised they stepped apart and stared at each other, speechless. The other dancers swayed around them, but they were oblivious to everything except the powerful strength of their own feelings. Slowly, Duncan held out his hand to Cathrynn and drew her against him. Slowly, they began to move to the waltz, still dazed with the electricity that tingled between them. Duncan gently pulled her closer, resting his cheek atop her head and breathing in the sweet fragrance that was hers alone. He'd never been so aware of a woman before. His skin burned where they touched, creating a fire in him so

hot he was tempted to pick her up and carry her upstairs this very minute.

The tap on his shoulder came unexpectedly and he ground his teeth against an angry retort. Turning graciously, he delivered his beautiful wife into the arms of his neighbor, Lord Chutney, trying not to notice how empty his arms felt when she stepped away from him. Turning on his heel, he strode toward the balcony, hoping the cool night air would ease the ache Cathrynn had caused in him.

Cathrynn watched him go, cursing Lord Chutney for interrupting such a lovely moment. Her body still tingled where Duncan had touched her, and this time she was sure he had felt it, too. The energy emanating from him had been so strong it took her breath away, his eyes--

“How are you this fine eve, Lady Willoughby?” Lord Chutney asked, forcing her thoughts from Duncan.

“I am well, thank you. How is your wife faring? I heard the childbirth was difficult for her.”

Lord Chutney nodded his fair head solemnly, his clear blue eyes clouding. “Yes, there were so many complications, I was afraid for her.” He brightened, and his

smile mirrored his love for his wife. “She’s doing well now, although still somewhat weak. I’ve no doubt she’ll be fully recovered in no time.”

“I’ve wanted to pay Amanda a visit, but I wasn’t sure if she was ready for company.”

“I know she’d be happy to see you, Lady Cathrynn, and to have you meet our new son.”

The dance ended, interrupting any reply Cathrynn might have made. She curtsied politely to her partner and escaped through the balcony and down into the garden. Sinking onto a stone bench, she closed her eyes, breathing in the heady scent of roses and the soothing sound of water bubbling through a fountain. Her lips turned up into a sweet smile as she remembered the special moment she’d shared with Duncan. Was it too much to hope that his feelings for her had changed in such a short time? The rush of emotion she’d felt as they kissed took her breath away. She was sure he’d felt it, too. Maybe her dreams for a happy marriage would come true, after all.

Cathrynn raised her face into the cool breeze, a soft sigh floating away with the wind. Slowly, a conversation some

men were having intruded on her solitude. She decided to rejoin the party before she was missed, but stopped abruptly when she realized what they were talking about.

“He’s a menace to the seas,” one of the men said roughly. “The Black Knight should be hunted down and brought back to hang so that every man can see the face he hides so well. His day will come, and when it does, I want to be there to see it.”

A grumble of agreement ran through the small gathering. “I hear tell he has a woman riding the seas with him now. A golden haired vixen who wields a dagger with deadly accuracy.”

Another man chimed in. “What a coincidence that Lord Willoughby also has a beautiful new wife with golden hair,” he said sarcastically.

Cathrynn threw a hand to her mouth to suppress a gasp. How could they possibly know about Duncan? Her heart thudded in fear, her breath almost non-existent as she waited for them to search out and accuse her husband.

“That’s just ridiculous. The Black Knight has never ridden with a woman and I’m sure he never will. Can you

imagine the bad luck a woman would bring to a ship full of pirates?” Cathrynn frowned, the voice sounding oddly familiar to her.

The men laughed at this last comment. “I still believe Lord Willoughby is the Black Knight.”

“I’m sure you’ve all heard about the latest escapade two nights hence involving one of the ships owned by Lord Ambrosia? It was on the first leg of its journey to the States. How do you suppose Lord Willoughby had time to sail out, conquer it, and return in time for an early tea at Lord Merriweather’s estate the next morning? It couldn’t be done.”

This seemed to break up the conversation and the men went their different ways. Cathrynn, however, was rooted to the spot as all the information washed over her. How, indeed, had he done it, she wondered. Then she recalled how late he’d been to breakfast the morning before. He sauntered in halfway through the meal and ate quietly, downing at least twice as much coffee as usual. At the time it hadn’t seemed strange, but now...

Cathrynn’s fear was quickly turning to anger. It made her furious to think that while she had been sleeping peacefully

Duncan had been riding the seas, fighting, conquering, and who knows what else! She had assumed that since they had reached England he would be concentrating on the business of his estate, not gallivanting around all over the ocean trying to prove to himself that he was nothing like his grandfather.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she stood up from the bench and walked toward the ballroom. Cathrynn tried to keep her anger under control, but as she crossed the threshold, she caught a glimpse of her husband escorting a young girl off the dance floor. He was immediately surrounded by a crowd of debutantes who flirted outrageously with him. Cathrynn knew the girls found him attractive, and it had never bothered her until now. If he could so easily slip away from her for an entire night, what else had he been doing behind her back? Enjoying the favors of one of those beautiful ladies, perhaps?

Cathrynn made her way toward her husband, desperately trying to maintain control over her emotions. When she reached the happy crowd, she put her hand possessively on Duncan's arm. He drew her to him and smiled. "Ladies, have you met my lovely wife?"

The girls smiled prettily at Cathrynn, their eyes

narrowing enviously. “Lady Willoughby,” they murmured, curtsying. Politely following suit, she then turned to Duncan and requested they leave.

In the carriage she turned on him. “How dare you?! I know you brought me to England as a kind of peace offering to your fellow landowners, and that’s fine. But if you think you can do whatever you want as if you were still a bachelor then you are sadly mistaken. I will not be made to look like a fool!”

Duncan blinked twice and asked in his usual quiet manner, “What are you talking about?”

“I know about Lord Ambrosia’s ship, “ she whispered. “You were out all night gallivanting around the sea as the Black Knight while I was at home, never suspecting a thing. I have to ask myself, what else do you do while I’m asleep?”

Duncan’s midnight blue eyes narrowed dangerously. “I don’t think I like what you’re implying.”

“I’m not implying anything. I’m outright asking if you’re having an affair with any of those girls.”

Leaning across the carriage, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to face him. “I told you once before I would be faithful, and I have. But I’m warning you, Cathrynn, don’t push me.”

They pulled up in front of the mansion and Duncan stepped out, slamming the door and disappearing into the house. The driver helped Cathrynn down and smiled reassuringly. The smile she returned was weak as she trailed miserably behind her husband.

CHAPTER SIX

Pulling hairbrush through her hair angrily, Cathrynn railed at herself for being such an idiot. She knew he wasn’t having an affair. Now she’d only made matters worse by accusing him of doing something she knew he wouldn’t do. No matter what else he was, Duncan was a man who kept his word, of that she was certain.

Clutching her nightdress rightly about her, she left her room and hurried downstairs to the study. Hesitating, she

knocked quietly and walked in, closing the door behind her.

Duncan sat at his desk, his shirt unbuttoned to the waist, booted feet resting nonchalantly on top of the desk. The brandy he held in his hand was poised halfway to his lips, his dark eyes clashing with hers over the rim of the glass. The low lamplight lent a soft glow to the room and Duncan felt his anger slipping away as she stepped closer to him, her silky hair flowing behind her.

“Come to tell me what you’re really mad about, sweetheart?”

Oh, he knew her so well. “Why didn’t you tell me you still planned to be the Black Knight? When I heard the men talking this evening, I was so afraid for you, and shocked that I hadn’t even known you’d gone. I’d expected you to put that dangerous part of your life aside and concentrate on the business you have here. I know I wrongly accused you of being with another women. I’m sorry.” She bent her head, tears of frustration leaping to her eyes.

Duncan returned the glass to the desk and sat up, wiping a hand over his dark hair tiredly. “Come here, Cathrynn, he said softly. His gaze was penetrating,

smoldering. He took her hand and urged her nearer still.

“You understand I have to do this. Many people suspect me already, I cannot afford to let the Black Knight retire every year when I return to England. I have enough protection to keep me safe. Some of my crew remain here with me to ensure that rumors and speculation aren’t taken too far. The others ride with the ship. Even as we speak, Ian is sailing the *Highlander* in my place. You needn’t worry about me so, my love.”

Cathrynn’s breath shuddered as she leaned into him, savoring the slight taste of brandy that still clung to his lips. He pulled her onto his lap, cradling her head against his chest. He stroked her lovely tresses lightly, staring past her into the leaping flames of the fireplace. How had she won such a place in his heart? He, who had sworn off love, who had *vowed* never to fall prey to any coquettish, clinging woman! He knew the power of love too well, knew of the pain and suffering it eventually entailed. Hadn’t his mother proven that to him? Hadn’t she given up on life, on him, no longer able to cope with his father’s death? His grandfather had missed no opportunity to tell him that his mother suffered a broken heart.

At first, Duncan had defended her, insisting that his mother was stronger than that, desperately needing to believe that his own love could hold her, could somehow make her well again. But as the weeks wore on, his arguments were less and less adamant until, one day, he offered no argument at all. His grandfather had been right. Duncan didn't want to fall into such a trap, to be so dependant on another person that he couldn't function without her. He would not allow himself to fall in love, he told himself vehemently.

Cathrynn stirred slightly in his arms, even in sleep her small hand finding his cheek to bestow a loving caress. As his gaze returned to his wife, a warmth spread through him, bringing a smile to his lips. It was then that realization hit him with such force he felt as though he'd been kicked in the gut. Maybe it was already too late.

Duncan stood up, carrying Cathrynn effortlessly with him as he ascended the stairs and strode down the hall to her room. He deposited her ever so gently on the bed, bringing the covers up and tucking them securely around her. Bending, he kissed her cheek, his breath whispering through her hair. His smile was bittersweet as he left her room and returned to the

study and the only thing that could offer him some amount of comfort tonight--brandy.

Cathrynn was in the kitchen sharing coffee with Dale's wife, Marian, by the time Duncan came in for breakfast late the next morning. Cathrynn's eyes twinkled when she smiled at him. "Good morning, Duncan. Glad you could join us."

Despite his late night and promises to himself to avoid his wife as much as possible, Duncan found his mood improving and a smile jumping to his lips. He bowed gallantly, taking each hand in turn and bringing it to his lips. He sat down beside his wife as Marian hurried to bring him some breakfast. "Just coffee, Marian. I'm hoping to share an early lunch with my wife today. I know you've been wanting me to go into town with you to look at samples for redecorating." He laid his warm hand over hers, his thumb lightly caressing her fingers. "I'm sorry I've been too busy for that, sweetheart. But I did tell Lady Merriweather that we were on holiday today, and we may as well spend it doing something productive. How about a cozy lunch for two

followed by a trip to Samuel's?"

Cathrynn's green eyes lit with pleasure, a smile erupting upon her face. "Let me run upstairs and freshen up a bit. I'll be right down."

Excited at the prospect of having her husband all to herself for an entire day, Cathrynn practically skipped upstairs, checked her appearance, and dashed back down to the kitchen. When Duncan wasn't waiting for her at the table, she turned to go outside, assuming he was readying the carriage.

"Wait a second, lassie," Marian called to her. "Your Lord Willoughby isn't out there. He said to tell ye it'll have to wait, Cooper's called him into the study to conduct some urgent business."

Cathrynn's countenance turned from crestfallen to angry when she heard that the impertinent butler had again managed to bury her husband in work, leaving him no time to spend with her. Marian gathered her in her ample arms and sat her down at the cheery yellow clothed table, setting a steaming cup of tea in front of her. Having known and cared for Duncan since his arrival in England at the tender age of fifteen, Marian felt more like family than a servant. She'd been the

one to help the poor boy through the hard times of losing his mother and then his grandmother, her Scottish accent comforting him when nothing else could. She'd loved him as if he were her own, and felt the same for his pretty kind-hearted wife. Sitting across the table from the younger woman, Marian grasped her hands tightly. "Dinna worry yourself none about it, Cathrynn. Men have business that sometimes requires their immediate attention. 'Tis the lot of a wife to bear it, and try to understand."

"Oh, I know he has to tend to business, Marian, 'tis not Duncan that I'm angry with, but that sod Cooper. It's as if he traipses about the house all day in search of something with which to occupy Duncan. Everything that man does annoys me."

Marian nodded in agreement. "Cooper is a dour fella, ta be sure."

"I think you're being a bit too kind, my dear friend. Cooper is the stubbornest, most disagreeable man it has ever been my misfortune to meet."

The sudden change on the older woman's face caused Cathrynn to turn around, her gaze clashing with the butler's,

who stood just inside the doorway. She felt no remorse for what she'd said, knowing it to be the honest truth, and they glared at each other for a long moment before the old man clicked his heels and waked briskly from the room.

Turning back to her friend, Cathrynn burst out into a fit of giggles, clasping her hands to her mouth trying unsuccessfully to quiet them.

Duncan sat back in his chair with a sigh, rubbing the tense muscles of his neck. He'd not wanted to disappoint Cathrynn, but it couldn't be helped. Cooper had made him an appointment with the bookkeeper tomorrow, and everything must be in order so he could find any discrepancies between his books and Mr. Jordan's. He hadn't been able to concentrate on the numbers, instead seeing the excitement on his wife's face that he'd had to erase for the sake of business.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he trained his eyes on the book before him. The columns of numbers were a puzzle to him, one he had never quite been able to solve, and that knowledge made him feel stupid and inferior. Cooper never missed a chance to point out that the former Lord Willoughby

had always kept his books in excellent order, right down to the last shilling. And wasn't it a shame that his successor could make hide nor hair of a few simple columns of numerals. Duncan's bookkeeper, of course, was too polite to actually *say* anything to him about it, but the surprised looks on his face were enough. He'd endured too many of those uncomfortable meetings to count, and he refused to do it any longer. Let Cooper handle it!

Closing the book with a snap, he put it firmly back into the drawer and shut it. As lord of the manor, he could take time off whenever the hell he wanted, and he wanted to right now, damn it! He set out to find Cathrynn, determined to take her to a nice dinner in town. In the hallway, he passed Cooper.

"Finished with the books so soon, my lord?" he asked stiffly.

"No," Duncan answered, attempting to walk past him.

The butler boldly stepped in front of him, barring his way. "Lord Willoughby, it is a matter that must be attended to immediately. The books will not correct themselves. Your grandfather--"

Duncan stepped up to the tall man until he was looking directly into his eyes. "I am not my grandfather, and you would do well t remember that," he said firmly, pushing past the servant who stood wide-eyed and shocked, for the young nobleman had never stood up to him before.

Duncan knocked on his lady's bedchamber door and walked in, surprised to see she was not there. As he turned to leave, a note on the vanity caught his attention. 'My darling,' it read, 'meet me in the orchard when your business is done.'

He smiled and headed toward the orchard, not stopping to wonder about the light bounce to his step. As he entered the large apple orchard, the sun was setting low on the sky, the smell of the crisp fall afternoon surrounding him. He reached up and plucked a ripe red apple from a tree, realizing he hadn't eaten all day long. Turning a bend, he saw Cathrynn curled up on a blanket beneath a large tree, her attention on a book she held in her hands. Next to her on the blanket sat a large picnic basket. His smile started on his handsome lips and made its way to his midnight blue eyes which crinkled slightly at the corners. "What's all this?" he asked lightly.

Cathrynn looked up from the book, startled by his sudden presence. “Duncan! I didn’t expect you so soon.”

He sat down beside her. “I’ve had such a busy week, I grew tired of working. I’m sorry I had to postpone our trip yet again, sweetheart. We’ll go tomorrow, you have my word.”

“I understand you have important work, and I won’t count on going until we are in the carriage and well on our way.”

He rested the palm of his hand on her cheek, his thumb caressing her high cheekbone. “Nothing could stop me from spending my time with you tomorrow, my lady,” he said softly. “Of that you can feel most assured.”

Unable to speak for the tears that sprung to her eyes, Cathrynn busied herself preparing the lunch Marian had packed for them. “I thought you might be hungry, since you missed both breakfast and lunch. I do think Marian went a bit overboard, though, with the chicken, potatoes, corn, and a whole apple pie!” she babbled.

Duncan easily proved that Marian had not gone overboard, indeed. After he ate the remaining food, he helped

Cathrynn pack the dishes and leaned against the tree, a sigh of contentment escaping from his lips. Spreading his legs, he pulled Cathrynn between them, resting his hands on her stomach.

“Duncan! Don’t make such a display. Someone will surely see us!”

“We’re merely sitting on the ground together, watching the sunset. Besides, all the orchard hands finish their chores well before dark and will be home having their own dinner by now. Just relax with me.”

Cathrynn relented, leaning against him and relishing the feel of his strong body against hers. The heat emanating from him kept her warm as the evening chilled a bit, and she did relax and watch the sun dip lower into the horizon. A soft wind blew, showering them with a gift of multicolored leaves, one landing in Cathrynn’s golden hair. Duncan drew his hands up to pluck it, but found he liked it there. “Turn around and let me see you in your natural splendor,” he said huskily. She turned in his arms, and he couldn’t help but capture her soft lips with his own, gently tasting her lower lip with his tongue. Desire spread white-hot through him as she returned his kiss

with wild abandon. Her long, silky strands of hair caressed his cheek as his lips moved to her throat, delighting in the fresh smell of her. His hands were everywhere, he couldn't touch her enough. They moved from her cheek, down her slender arm, to her soft, ample bosom. He was like a man possessed.

He had to have her.

Right now.

Cathrynn offered no complaint as he feverishly rid her of her clothes, but matched his enthusiasm. Her hands roamed over his hard, muscular body, reveling in his strength. She wanted him so very much, *loved* him so very much, and gave everything of herself to him. Did he understand what she was trying to tell him with her body? Did he know of the great gift she bestowed upon him, her undying love? Cathrynn cried out softly as they became one, her eyes locked with Duncan's unable to read the emotion held there but certain that this time, he felt something more. His grip tightened about her as he stared into her eyes, eyes which brimmed with tears of joy and love. She cried out his name as their passion played itself out, holding him as if she would never let him go. And she never would, she vowed. Someway, somehow, she would make him

love her. And as she gazed again into his eyes before he fell into a contented sleep, she felt that maybe she didn't have quite as far to go as she had once thought.

As Cathrynn drifted in a state between sleep and consciousness, the sound of approaching footsteps brought her around, a surprised cry escaping her lips as a shadow fell across their naked bodies. Duncan started, immediately assessing the situation and drawing the blanket over his wife, tucking her protectively into the crook of his arm.

A full moon was reigning now, casting the intruder's face in both light and darkness, but there was no mistaking who he was.

"Cooper," Duncan growled. "What is the meaning of this?"

He shrugged his stiff shoulders nonchalantly, but the gleam in his eyes was impudent. "I was merely having a quiet walk when I heard strange noises coming from the orchard and chose to investigate. Imagine my surprise to find my lord and my lady in such a compromising position."

Duncan's eyes narrowed dangerously. "We are legally wed, and upon our own property. To my estimation,

you are the only one in a compromising position, Cooper.

Now leave us,” he demanded.

“Of course. My apologies, my lord, my lady,” he said as he turned away, but his contrite tone of voice was belied by a sarcastic smile.

Cathrynn could hardly contain her excitement as they rode into town early the next day. Duncan had kept his promise, postponing his appointments so he could spend a rare day with his wife. Since the weather was so beautiful, he instructed the driver to deposit them just inside town, and they walked arm in arm along the streets flowing with happy people. The tavern they stopped at for lunch was cozy and warm, a fireplace blazing brightly next to their table. Just as the serving wench brought their drinks, a loud, boisterous voice came through the doorway. “My dear Lady Willoughby!”

Cathrynn turned in confusion, laughing gleefully when she saw who had called to her. Lady Ambrosia ambled toward their table, her husband at her side. Her choice of attire this day caused Duncan’s eyebrows to elevate, and he hid a smile as he sipped from a tankard of ale. She wore a

crimson dress with yellow satin roses sewn in random intervals on the skirt, her petticoats a matching canary yellow. Lace in that same color spilled abundantly from her deep décolletage and elbow length sleeves. Upon her head, she wore a small yellow hat with red roses around the rim.

Cathrynn curtsied. “Lord Ambrosia, Lady Ambrosia, I’m so happy to see you! Won’t you join us?”

Lord Ambrosia held up a hand. “We wouldn’t want to interrupt your lunch.”

“Nonsense,” Duncan replied. “We’ve only just ordered and we’d love to have your company. In fact, there is something I’ve been needing to speak to you about, Ambrosia.”

The older couple relented, and before Lady Ambrosia’s plentiful fanny rested in her chair, her tongue was wagging with gossip. “Did you hear what happened to Lady Erica Merriweather?”

Cathrynn smiled indulgently, knowing her friend was wont to gossip. “No, I hadn’t heard.”

“Oh, my goodness! You missed a spectacle yesterday, my dear! We went to the Merriweather’s for tea, as

did about three other couples. Let me see, there were the Johnsons, or was that the last time we visited? Hmmm. With all the excitement, I suppose I forgot who the other guests were. Anyway,” she waved her hand, as if clearing unnecessary thoughts from her mind. “Anyway, everyone was gathered in the parlor indulging in polite conversation while waiting for the refreshments. It seemed an inordinately long amount of time, but of course none of us wanted to be so crude as to point this out. Lady Erica seemed a bit flustered as she left the room in search of the servants, and when she returned, she fainted dead away right there on the parlor floor!”

“Oh, my!” Cathrynn gasped. “Whatever was the matter with her?”

“When I tried to find a servant to send for the doctor, there were none to be found.”

“No servants in the whole house!” she laughed, amazed, for Lady Erica was known for having a ridiculous amount of help.

“When I couldn’t find any, I went in search of them. Do you know where I found them?” Cathrynn shook her head. “In the kitchen, eating the refreshments that were meant for the

guests, the whole lot of them! They informed me they were rebelling against Erica's unfair treatment of them. His Lordship and I had to leave right then, before my mirth spilled out in front of everyone!"

"How is Lady Erica now?"

"I'm not certain. She was just reviving when I left, but I'm going to pay her a visit this afternoon. I would love to see the high and mighty Lady Erica lower herself to answer her own door!" This set her into such a contagious fit of laughter that Cathrynn had to bite her lip to keep from following.

Lord Ambrosia smiled cautiously at his wife. "I see the humor in the situation as well as you do, my dear, but we must be tactful. My business dealings with her husband are delicate enough lately without any added burden."

"And my Aunt Mabel's a big brown cow! Don't expect me to believe that Lord Merriweather, or any one of you other men, would allow the petty problems of your women to interfere in your business. I love you dearly, milord, but let me have my fun. If anyone deserves to be a laughingstock, it's Lady Erica."

Duncan had been about to comment on this when a

noise at the door caught his attention. Immediately his body tensed and his midnight eyes turned to black. His hand that had been resting lightly on the table clenched into a fist so tight his knuckles turned white. Cathrynn turned toward the sound and saw a man about Duncan's age standing insolently just inside the room. He nodded his head at Duncan and strutted slowly over to their table until he stood directly between the couple. Cathrynn had to admit he was handsome, with sandy blonde hair and blue eyes that were so light they were almost clear. A dimple appeared in his cheek as he smiled suggestively at her. She immediately disliked him with a vehemence she'd never known before. Just one glance at her husband told her he felt the same way. A light gust of wind blew her napkin to the floor before she could grab it.

“Allow me, my lady,” the stranger drawled. He swiped the napkin from the floor and placed it intimately upon her lap with a wink. In a loud whisper, he said, “I’d be happy to help you with anything else you husband can’t handle for you. I can show you what it’s like to know a real man.”

Purple with rage, Duncan lunged to his feet, drawing his fist back as his chair crashed to the floor. The owner of the

pub held Duncan's arm in check. "I don't want any trouble in here, Lord Willoughby. I know you to be an honorable man, and I pray you, take this outside."

Taking a deep breath, Duncan motioned the sandy-haired fellow ahead of him. "Wait," Cathrynn called, laying a hand on the stranger's arm. "Before you go out there, I have something to say." She was aware of the silence all around her, knew that every ear in the room was waiting for her to plead for her husband.

"Cathrynn," Duncan growled in warning.

"About your proposition, sir," she turned her head slightly to gaze into Duncan's eyes as she spoke. "My husband is the kindest, strongest, most honorable man I've ever known, I couldn't possibly consider being with anyone but him. Ever. And as for the likes of you, I'd just as soon you slither back from whence you came." She smiled sweetly to her husband. "Forgive me for taking up your time, milord. I'll leave you to your business."

Turning her attention back to her companions, she took a deep breath, hoping her nervousness didn't show. The

two men met outside, and she could hear the grunts and thuds as their fists connected to flesh, and flesh to the hard ground. She closed her eyes to keep the tears from falling, and slowly realized that every head, indeed, had been watching her.

Duncan slammed his fist into his opponent's jaw, feeling the strength of ten men. Cathrynn's words had filled him with so much pride and confidence he felt as if he would burst with joy. He didn't even feel the pain in his bloodied lip as he smiled viciously. "Drag yourself up off the ground and fight like a man, Jameson. You've always thought yourself so much better than me, now is your chance to prove it."

The man called Jameson stumbled to his feet, his fists held protectively before him. "It's been a long time since last we met, Willoughby. You've mastered the English accent quite well, after all those years of trying to hide who you really are. You don't think any of us have really forgotten that you're just a lowly born Scotsman? Your grandfather was desperate for an heir, or he never would have claimed you."

Duncan scowled, remembering all the jibes Jameson had thrown at him when they were young. Pooling all his

strength, he let his fist fly, catching his rival square on the chin and sending him backwards toward the pub. The blonde man stumbled up the stop and slammed into the building, smacking his head and sliding heavily to the floor of the porch. Opening one swollen eye as far as he could, he watched Duncan step up beside him. His eyes were as black as the night, power emanating from his body, his voice holding the edge of steel when he said, “Don’t ever try to bait me again, Jameson. You’ll find it’s a battle better left alone.” He pivoted on his heel and strode crisply back through the doors.

Taking a deep breath, Cathrynn tried to calm her frazzled nerves. It was all she could do not to run after Duncan like a mother hen and beg him not to fight. Instead, she pictured him as he’d been on the *Highlander*, wielding his sword with power and confidence. When the pub had resumed a steady buzz of conversation, she asked of her friends, “Who is that man?”

Lady Ambrosia rolled her eyes dramatically. “Lord Nicholas Jameson is your husband’s greatest enemy.” She smiled fondly, her eyes looking beyond Cathrynn to a time long past. “Duncan was a good boy, so polite and kind. He

used to stay at our home as often as he could, since he and our son got on so well. Anyway, the elder Lord Jameson and Duncan's grandfather were the closest of friends, at least as close as two monsters could be, and somewhere along the line they decided to pit the young boys against each other. For a while, the boys were close, learning fencing and whatnot together. I'm afraid what started as a game turned very serious, and Duncan was constantly reminded of his shortcomings as compared to Nick. No matter how hard that poor boy worked and improved, it was never enough for Willoughby. Then came the fateful day Duncan learned that his grandfather had bet against him in an important fencing tournament. He laid into Nick with the ferociousness of a lion, but there again, Nick came out on top. I'll never forget that day," she said softly, tears blurring her vision, "it was the last we saw of Duncan until the title was passed on to him."

Cathrynn had no chance to respond, for Duncan strode in and resumed his place at the table. She noted with relief that a small cut on his lip was all the damage that seemed to have been done to him. He smiled at her and squeezed her hand reassuringly. A lighthearted conversation ensued, thanks

to Lady Ambrosia, but Cathrynn was preoccupied with thoughts of her husband as a young boy. She was relieved when her friend smiled and waved, promising, “I’ll let you know how it fares at Lady Erica’s,” and laughed exuberantly as her husband pulled her out the door.

Duncan paid the tab and helped her to her feet, his face lit in a rare smile. “I believe I promised you a trip to Samuel’s.”

As they walked along the sidewalk toward the decorator’s, Cathrynn noticed a confidence exuding from her husband that she had not felt since they’d landed in England. Maybe the run-in with his old enemy had been good for Duncan, after all. Quelling her curiosity, she smiled and pulled him into the store, concentrating on transforming Willoughby Manor from an atrocity into a masterpiece.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Duncan and Cathrynn stepped regally through the doors of the Ambrosia’s grand ballroom, aware of the many

heads that turned to watch the handsome couple. Their faces lit into smiles as they met the host and hostess for the evening, each thinking that Lady Ambrosia had outdone herself this night. Her gown was of the loveliest cream silk, but the print on the fabric was that of various shaped, multi-colored seashells. As if that weren't enough, her hat was a perfect replica of a large seashell, a short veil floating below it in her favorite color, purple. Nonetheless, Duncan took her hand and touched his lips to it and, without even cracking a smile, said, "You look most lovely this evening, Lady Ambrosia. I look forward to seeing you again tonight."

As always, Duncan's compliments caused her smile to widen and her cheeks to flush slightly. She grasped them both in a hug and said, "Go on, children, and enjoy the party. I'll see you a little later."

Before they had a chance to join the others on the dance floor, a man stepped up before Cathrynn and bowed deeply over her hand, touching it lightly to his lips. When he straightened and she was able to see his face, she had to stifle a gasp. Her smile widened and she took a step back to quell the urge to throw herself into his arms, for she wasn't supposed to

have met him yet. “Ian,” she whispered delightedly, “I’ve missed you so!”

Duncan smiled and clasped his hand. “How goes your business, old friend?”

Ian winked. “Never better. I’ve been successful in every venture and my good fortune is overflowing.”

Duncan nodded slightly, relieved to know everything had gone according to plan. “I appreciate the amount of time you’ve spent out this year, my friend,” he murmured. “I’m only too glad to accept my share of the responsibility now. I trust everything is set up for our meeting the beginning of this week.”

Ian glanced furtively about them, noticing a couple strolling toward them. With a quick gesture he silenced Duncan’s doubts and bowed deeply before Cathrynn. “May I have this dance, my lady?”

Blowing a kiss to her husband, Cathrynn allowed her friend to lead her onto the dance floor. She smiled up at him much as she would to one of her brothers. “How have you been faring, Ian? I admit I never expected to see you here in England.”

“I’ve been well, but I’m always happy to come home. I don’t usually stay abroad for so long, but Duncan had more pressing business to tend to this year,” he winked at her, his blue eyes twinkling wickedly.

Blushing slightly, she decided to ignore his barb. Lowering her voice, she asked, “So, your ‘business’ abroad will be put on the shelf for a while, then?”

Ian’s small frown sent a pang of fear through her heart. “No, of course not. Duncan should have told you, Cathrynn, that he’ll be taking over for some time. I’m sorry, but I cannot neglect my holdings here any longer, for my father is getting on in age and he wants me to handle the bulk of the estate.”

“No, no, I understand. I just didn’t realize...Can we stop, please? I think I need to speak with my husband.”

As Cathrynn reached her husband’s and noticed the group of men gathered around him, she heard him say, “I’ll be in London day after tomorrow, and we can meet then to discuss the ships.”

Taking a deep breath, she tried to still the throbbing in her head and put on the best smile she could muster.

Duncan tucked her hand possessively through his arm and said, "Gentlemen, you know my wife."

They bowed as one, each taking her hand in turn. One man, hair graying at the temples, shook Ian's hand. "It's good to see you again, son. I see you've met the lovely Lady Willoughby,"

Another, younger gentleman said in a teasing voice, "Maybe she can introduce you to a nice young girl, Ian. Your father thinks it's high time you married and produced an heir to claim all this finery." He turned his arm in a huge arc.

Chuckling, the older man replied, "You're still young, take your time finding the perfect lady to become the new Lady Ambrosia. It's not a decision you can change your mind about once it's all said and done."

Shocked, Cathrynn felt close to a swoon. She clutched Duncan's arm with one hand, and put the other to her head. When he realized how she was feeling, Duncan supported her with one strong arm and sent a hooded look to Ian. Making their apologies, he helped her through the crowded dance floor and out the door to the main hallway.

"Where are we going?" she asked faintly.

“Upstairs. I have my own suite of rooms here that are always kept available for me.”

As they trudged up the stairs and down the hall, Cathrynn felt her strength return along with her anger. How much more could he keep from her? How many more secrets could he possibly have that would jump out at her when she least expected it? She was shocked and hurt that he felt he couldn't trust her with the knowledge that Ian was Lady Ambrosia's son. And when, she wondered, had he planned on telling her that he was leaving for business in two days? By the time they reached his room, her temper was close to boiling.

Duncan opened the door and ushered her inside. She walked to a window, keeping her back to him, to try to collect her thoughts. It was dark outside, with the occasional bolt of lightning to illuminate the sky. Liveried servants scurried here and there, getting as many chores done before the storm came. Hearing the door click softly, she turned around. A fire burned merrily in the fireplace, signifying that they were expected to stay the night. Another thing he hadn't told her.

“Cathrynn...”

“Don’t,” she interrupted harshly. “There’s nothing you can say right now. Why don’t you trust me, Duncan? Why do you continue to keep secrets from me? I’m your wife! I thought we had finally come to the point where we could count on each other and trust each other. At least, I trusted you. And now I find out you couldn’t even tell me that Ian is the Ambrosias’ son? What did you think I would do with that information, Duncan? Did you think I’d use it against you? After everything we’ve shared together?” She shook her head sadly, feeling the anger drain away. “I can see I still have much to learn about you.”

Duncan sat her down and knelt before her, taking her hands in his. “You must believe that I never meant to hurt you, my love. It was necessary, for your safety, that you believe you didn’t know the Ambrosia’s son until everyone had witnessed your meeting. It had nothing to do with trust, I promise you. You know this business we’re in is risky, and that I’ve told you everything I possibly can. But it can never be everything, Cathrynn. I thought you understood that.”

She smiled slightly and nodded. “Yes, I did. But was it also a secret that you’re leaving for business in two days? I

don't see any reason you couldn't tell me that when I heard you tell a room full of people."

His midnight blue eyes twinkled a bit and he nodded.

"I admit, that was purely selfish. We've been having such a nice time together, I didn't want to ruin it with thoughts of leaving. I'm sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

Cathrynn tried to summon her anger, wanted to feel the anger, but she couldn't. The look in his eyes melted the ice around her heart, and she allowed him to pull her into his arms. She didn't protest when he kissed her, or when he gently peeled away her clothing, or even when he laid her down in front of the fireplace and made achingly sweet love to her. And when it was all over, she couldn't remember why she'd been upset in the first place. They got dressed, smoothed their clothes, and made their way happily back down to the ballroom.

Dancing in his arms, Cathrynn felt as if she were part of him. She knew with every ounce of her being that she belonged to him, and always would. Their relationship was finally taking on a new level of feeling that she had only hoped for before. His caring and thoughtfulness must be signs of a

deeper affection for her, even if he might not call it love.

Having her in his arms was sweet agony. Even though they'd just made love upstairs, he found that he was not near satisfied enough. The feel of her against him, moving to and fro, the warm smell of her, was almost more than he could stand. If he didn't get some distance between them soon, he'd have no choice but to lift her in his arms and cart her away to his room, where he could savor her the way he wanted to. Duncan sighed, letting his hand slide up and down along her back, the satin of her gown feeling cool and smooth to the touch. But he knew what was hidden there, skin that could grow so hot it burned right through her clothing. His thoughts took a decidedly wicked turn, and he gazed down into her eyes, positive that she was feeling the same as he. Wanting nothing more than to have her right here, he knew that it was much too early to retire for the night without enduring gossip for the next fortnight. Reluctantly, he set her from him and asked if she'd like a refreshment. Seeing her to a seat near some other ladies, he went in search of something cool to drink.

Finding some punch, he was on his way back to her

when a few men stopped him to talk business. He answered their questions as quickly as he could without seeming rude, annoyed that his eyes kept searching out his wife. Finally freeing himself from the stuffy older men, he strode off toward her when he stopped dead in his tracks. She was smiling at a man he'd never seen before, and there was something familiar about the way she spoke to him. His muscles tensed, and he was surprised at the force of jealousy that burned in his stomach. Taking a deep breath, he willed himself to calm down. She was just being polite to the newcomer. Cathrynn was in love with *him*, after all. Hadn't she just accused him of not trusting her? Well, here was his chance to show her he did trust her. And he honestly did.

He just didn't trust the stranger.

Cathrynn stood with her back to the crowd, waiting for Duncan to bring their drinks. Their rendezvous upstairs had left her thirsty, and she was still too warm from his lovemaking. She wondered if anyone could tell how satisfied she felt.

Suddenly, someone covered her eyes and said, "Do

you remember me?” A shiver of fear ran down her back. The voice sounded oddly familiar, but she couldn’t place it. The uncomfortable feeling escalated until she turned around and opened her eyes. She gasped, as if seeing a ghost, and stepped back. “Austin?” As the knowledge sunk in, her smile grew wider. “Austin! What brings you to England?”

Duncan stood near the chair his wife had vacated, frowning as he watched Cathrynn dance happily with another man. She knew him, he could tell by the way she was laughing and talking. They were on the second dance in a row, and Duncan didn’t care for the way he held her just a fraction closer than what was proper. He didn’t care for the way the stranger looked at her, either. Like he could ear her up at any moment.

When the dance ended and they headed toward him, Duncan tried to wipe the frown from his face and rage from his voice. He didn’t need Cathrynn to be angry with him again tonight. “Duncan,” she smiled, coming into his waiting arms. She motioned her friend toward him. “I’d like you to meet my husband, Duncan McKleighan, Lord Willoughby,” she said

proudly. “Darling, this is my friend from home I told you about, Austin Greenbush.”

Despite the feeling of all the air being forcefully pushed from his lungs, Duncan coolly stuck his hand out for a handshake. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Greenbush.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lord Willoughby. As I told your wife, I’m shocked and relieved to find her here in England, safe and sound. When we found her missing, we feared the worst. I’m afraid I found it too emotionally draining to remain so near the home where she grew up. Hence, I ended up in London. It’s a nice surprise, indeed.”

“We sent word to my wife’s parents before we left Virginia,” Duncan said gruffly. “You must not have waited around long before giving up on her and leaving.”

“Alas, the memories were too painful for me. I feared I’d lose my mind were I to remain much longer. And although I find she is lost to me forever, at least I know she is safe and well cared for.”

Duncan tightened his grip on Cathrynn. Something about this man didn’t sit right with him, and it wasn’t just the fact that he had been engaged to Cathrynn. “If you’ll excuse

us, I'd like to dance with my wife."

Cathrynn smiled at Duncan as they danced, her cheeks flushed. "What a coincidence that Austin showed up here in England, practically on our doorstep. He said when he left Virginia my mother was still so dejected over my disappearance that she had taken to her room and refused to come out. My father and brothers were still searching all the bordering towns trying to find some word of me. Oh, Duncan, they have suffered so much pain!"

Stroking her back, he said soothingly, "So have you, my darling. They have surely received many of your letters by now and know that you are well and happy." He brushed her cheek and softly said, "Don't worry about the past now, Cathrynn, for it is over and done with, and the future is uncertain. Live for the moment, my love, and be happy."

Her eyes glowing with love for her husband, she whispered, "I am happy, and shall always be, as long as I am with you."

Lowering his head so she wouldn't see the emotion in his eyes, he kissed her lightly on the lips and rested his forehead against hers. They swayed quietly together until the

music stopped and Duncan was dragged into a dance with Lady Ambrosia.

Feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the surprises she'd endured, Cathrynn headed toward the gardens, hoping for a cool breath of air and a few moments to herself. She found a deserted bench and sank upon it, breathing deeply of air that was turning colder with every hour, ending the unseasonably mild weather they had so enjoyed. So much had happened this night, and so quickly, she couldn't begin to know how she felt about the strange new turn of events. Ian, the young Lord Ambrosia? Austin crossing an ocean and finding her here, just by chance? It certainly seemed too much of a coincidence, but what reason would he possibly have to lie? Well, a coincidence it must be, for there was no other explanation.

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, she turned with a smile, expecting to see Duncan. Her disappointment was evident, however, when it was Austin she found herself gazing upon. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Cathrynn. You were expecting someone else?"

"No, no, of course not," she lied. "How are you enjoying the party?"

“I was having a very nice time until the belle of the ball left the room.” He sat close beside her and caressed her cheek softly with the tip of his finger.

Pulling away slightly, Cathrynn set his hand upon his own lap. “Don’t, Austin. I’m a married woman now.”

“You’re with the wrong man, Cathrynn. You were promised to me a long time ago. You are mine,” he declared heatedly.

“No, I belong to Duncan now. He is my husband, my heart belongs to only him.”

Austin shot off the bench and turned on her. “Don’t pretend with me, Cathrynn. I’ve heard all the rumors, I know you married Mr. High and Mighty Lord Willoughby because you had no other choice.” He pulled her to him, their lips just inches apart. “I’m here now, little Cathy,” he said softly. “I can take you away from all this.”

She tried to pull away. “Stop it! You’re talking nonsense.”

So intent were they on their private conversation that they didn’t hear Duncan step out into the gardens. When he saw her in what appeared to be a passionate embrace with her

ex-fiancee, all logical thought fled. Every muscle tensed, he listened to hear what they would say next.

“I love you, Cathrynn, I always have. We can leave here tonight, return to Virginia, and marry just as we planned. Can you deny you loved me?”

“I loved you, Austin, but that was a long time ago. What I feel for Duncan is so much more. I only know that whatever I do, wherever I am, I must be with him because to be without him would be a fate too agonizing to imagine.”

He gazed at her for a long moment before murmuring, “Let me refresh your memory.” He took her lips in a fierce kiss that so shocked her she was motionless.

Before she could raise her hand to slap him, Duncan flew from the shadows and grabbed him by the shirt, slamming him against the trunk of a large tree. “Let’s get one thing straight, Greenbush,” he growled. “Whatever ties you think you may have had to my wife are long since severed. She belongs to me, and I’ve no intentions of letting her go.”

Austin pushed Duncan’s hands away and taunted, “She’s naught to you but a pretty treasure used to pacify your noble peers. I’d bet this marriage of convenience hasn’t even

been consummated.”

Duncan’s powerful fist smashed into his rival’s nose, sending blood spurting everywhere and leaving Austin in a cowering heap on the ground. Kneeling beside him, Duncan snarled, “Cathrynn is my wife, and you will respect the union between us. And I give my word, Greenbush, if I catch you anywhere near her, you can kiss your sorry excuse for a life goodbye.”

With that he stood up and held his hand out to Cathrynn. She came willingly, sparing but a quick glance toward the man she had once cared for so much. Hand in hand, they walked through the milling crowd, heads held high. When they reached their carriage, he ushered her in and climbed in beside her, sitting ramrod straight. She could feel the tension emanating from him and could think of nothing appropriate to say.

At home, she followed him into the study. He went to the desk and poured a hefty amount of brandy into the tumbler, carrying it with him to stare out the window. He appeared not to notice she was even in the room. After long moments of watching him nurse his drink, she said, “Aren’t you going to

say anything, Duncan? It's all over with, you can relax now."

As he turned slowly from the window, she was surprised at the fierce look in his eyes as they burned into her. "What would you have me say, my dear?" His voice was low and menacing.

"I-I would have you say what's on your mind. Can you still be so angry with Austin?"

He stepped toward her until they were close enough to touch. His lips merely a breath from hers, he said, "The anger I feel for Greenbush is but a mere fraction of the *rage* I feel for you."

Cathrynn gasped and stumbled back. "Whatever do you mean, Duncan? I did nothing wrong."

"Come, my dear, you should know better than to lie to me. I saw you with my own eyes, and I heard you admit to loving him. But know this, I will never let you go. You are my wife, and you will stay by my side if I have to lock you in your rooms to keep you here! I'll not have you running off to the next ship that would sail you away from me!"

"Have you gone mad, Duncan?! I've never given you any reason to accuse me of such behavior. If you'd listened to

the whole conversation you would know that I refused to leave you. I admitted that in the past I loved him, but Duncan,” she said softly, “nothing could ever compare to the love I feel for you.”

If he heard what she’d said, he gave no indication. “I don’t want him coming here. Ever. And while I’m away on business you’ll be confined to the manor. Everything you need is here, there’s no reason for you to go elsewhere.”

“Duncan, you aren’t listening to a word I say! I don’t want to leave you, I love you, you stubborn oaf! For the love of God, Duncan, *look* at me! After everything we’ve shared, can you really believe I would just walk away?!”

“Fine, let’s think this out rationally, shall we? On the one hand, you have a handsome young man with whom you’ve shared your childhood, your love, and every aspect of your life up until now. A man you know and trust. A man your parents had so much confidence in they gave him your hand.” He paused slightly and narrowed his midnight blue eyes. “And then there’s me. I bought you off the street and forced you into marriage. I carried you away from your homeland across the ocean on a pirate ship. To top it all off, I deliver you to an

atrocities I call a house with servants that are civil, at best. No, no, you're right. I can see why you'd rather remain with me," he said sarcastically. "If you were smart, you'd not just walk away. You'd run screaming." This last sentence was uttered so softly the words were but a breath.

"Why is it so hard for you to believe I want you?!" she cried.

"'Twas *him* you were kissing, Cathrynn!" he roared.

"I was not! He was kissing me, *I* was struggling to break away. I don't know what you think you saw out there tonight, but it obviously isn't what really happened."

"I know what I saw and nothing you say will convince me otherwise."

She shook her head sadly. "I can't talk to you when you are like this, Duncan. I realize you need time to cool down, so we can talk more in the morning." She turned at the door and watched him fill the tumbler once more with brandy. Quietly, she said, "And Duncan, I don't think that will help you see anything more clearly."

As she walked out the door, he sat down heavily and took a deep drink, trying to block out the picture of his wife

locked in another man's arms.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cathrynn sighed as she gazed at her reflection in the mirror. After spending a sleepless night wondering how to approach Duncan this morning, she had risen at dawn and dressed herself in a soft yellow gown, hoping the color would brighten her mood somewhat. Opening her bedroom door, she headed toward the study where she suspected he had spent the night. Duncan loathed the bedchamber that had been his grandfather's, and she had come to realize that on the few nights he spent away from her he remained in his study. So nervous her hands were trembling, she nevertheless stepped determinedly down the stairs to the study. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, and it bathed the study door in light like a beacon. Drawing a deep breath to calm herself, she knocked on the door and called out to Duncan before entering. The room smelled faintly of stale brandy and was shrouded in darkness. Sighing, she picked her way

carefully to the windows and drew the heavy draperies allowing the sunshine to stream in. Turning around with her hands on her hips, she was surprised to find the room empty. Where in the world could he be? She'd never once known him to sleep in the master bedroom, so where could he be keeping himself? The thought occurred to her that he may be hiding to avoid the confrontation that was inevitable. Well, she'd search him out and leave him little choice in the matter!

"Marian," she called as she made her way to the cheerful kitchen. "Marian, have you seen Duncan yet this morning?"

The cook came out of the pantry wearing a bright smile. "Good mornin' to ye, Lady Cathrynn. Would ye be wantin' a cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you, I need to find Duncan. Have you seen him?"

Marian looked a bit taken aback. "Why, yes I have, lassie. But he's gone now."

"Gone? What are you talking about? Where did he go?"

"Ah, now surely he told ye he was leavin' for London

this mornin’?”

Cathrynn felt her knees go weak. “London?” she asked faintly. “He wasn’t supposed to leave for another day. When did he go?”

“‘Twasn’t too long ago. Now don’t look so stricken, my dear. He received a note and had to leave immediately on business.”

Her head was reeling and for a sickening moment the room spun around. Breathing deeply to steady herself, her gaze fell to the table and the half-full mug of coffee. Duncan’s mug. Steam was still rising steadily from the strong black liquid. Heedless of the fact that she was wearing no shoes, she grabbed up her skirts and ran from the house. The cold, wet mud oozed between her toes but she gave it little notice as she ran toward the stables. Maybe she could still catch him. Maybe she could make him see that last night was all a misunderstanding. Before he donned his Black Knight clothing, and all the danger that accompanied it, she had to make him see what had truly happened. She knew he was leaving today because he felt betrayed, and even though she had some nothing wrong, she was wracked with guilt.

By the time she reached the stables her bare feet and the hem of her dress were caked with mud, and many of her golden curls had escaped their hairpins. Gasping for breath, she reached for the door at the same time she heard the trotting of hooves. Turning with dread, she saw him riding down the lane past the house. She couldn't let him go like this! She called out to him. Once. Twice. As she collapsed in shivers against the wall, she whispered to herself, "Oh, Duncan, why couldn't you just believe in me?"

Duncan sat at his desk in the study, staring into the tumbler of brandy as if he could find answers hidden somewhere in the depths. What would he say to her when she came to him this morning? He didn't want to hear her side of the story. He didn't even want to hear her say that man's *name*. Usually one to have a tight rein on his emotions, he lost all control where Cathrynn was concerned. Even now, after having an entire night to cool down, his temper was just barely in check. Every time he closed his eyes he saw again his wife being held in someone else's arms. Abruptly he stood up and slammed his fist down upon the desk. "I have to get out of

here,” he mumbled to himself. “If I see that innocent look of hers again I’ll explode.”

The force of his fury shocked him. Never had he been so angry or so close to losing his iron control. In all honesty, he was afraid he might hurt her. Striding briskly from the room, he almost collided with Cooper in the hallway. “This came for you, my lord,” the servant said stiffly. “And in the future try to refrain from your nasty drinking habit. The stench emanating from that room is putrid.”

Ignoring the butler as he always did, Duncan opened the note and scanned the page. A postponed meeting. Good, he’d have more time on the *Highlander*. Much needed time to reflect upon the catastrophe that had become his life.

In the kitchen, Marian cheerfully fetched him a cup of steaming hot coffee and packed a lunch for him. As he sat at the table in the cozy room (he was loath to eat in his grandfather’s stuffy formal dining room) he wondered, as he always did before these trips, how he would make it through another round of London meetings. The businessmen, lawyers, accountants, et cetera, were all boring stuffed shirts and he longed for the few short weeks he would spend aboard

the *Highlander* when everyone thought he was seeing to his properties overseas. He sipped his coffee slowly, brooding over the best way to handle the people he had to meet.

The sun was barely up when he heard Cathrynn's voice down the hall. He jumped out of his chair and grabbed his lunch from the table. He took one last gulp of coffee, wincing as it burned a path down to his chest, and waved to Marian as he all but ran out the back door. Striding hurriedly to the side of the house where his horse was tethered, he packed the food in a saddlebag and checked to make sure he had all he would need for the long trip. As he jumped on the horse and galloped down the lane, he heard Cathrynn call to him. His heart clattered painfully against his ribs, but he didn't turn around. No, the wound was still too raw to let her rub salt in it. He didn't want to hear her lies, her excuses. He'd seen her betrayal with his own two eyes, and every time he looked at her he saw it yet again. His wife, clasped in a passionate embrace with her ex-fiancee. For all Duncan knew, she could have written and invited him here, asked him to be her lover. He told himself he didn't care, it didn't matter to him one way or another what she did.

But it was a lie.

Dale found Cathrynn some time later still on the ground by the stables, cold, wet, and utterly defeated. He lifted her gently and carried her to her rooms, ringing for Megan to help Her Ladyship change. Then he discreetly left the room to speak with his wife about cheering the poor, sad girl.

Megan was at a loss for words. The mistress who had always been cheerful and optimistic now lay in a bedraggled heap on the floor before the fireplace, staring sightlessly into the flames. Summoning all her courage, the young girl began talking brightly as she lay out dry clothes for her lady and called for a hot bath. When the bath was poured, she sprinkled some lavender oil in it and helped Cathrynn undress. She was talking about her silly baby brother as she helped her into the tub and began washing her long hair.

Thankfully, the water began to warm her and some life returned to her eyes. She looked at her maid and shook her head sadly. "Thank you for trying to cheer me up, Megan, but it isn't going to help right now. I'd just like to be left

alone.”

Megan helped her into a light blue gown and quietly left the room. Cathrynn sat in a chair before the hearth, staring into the lively flames. She’d never felt so wretched in her life. Everything she’d worked for in her relationship with Duncan was gone in one moment of misunderstanding. She’d never be able to regain the closeness and camaraderie they’d come to share, because now he didn’t trust her.

Drawing in a deep breath, she made her way down to the kitchen, her favorite room in the house. Marian rushed toward her and grasped her in a hug. “Oh, my poor dear,” was all she said as she poured a cup of tea and set it before Cathrynn. “Would ye like ta tell me all about it?”

Cathrynn smiled wanly as she sipped. Raising pained eyes to her friend, she whispered, “He left me, Marian. He walked right out that door without even a fare thee well, see you again someday.”

The older woman patted her hand. “He’ll be back, darlin’.”

“I’ve never seen him so angry, Marian. So unreasonable. Maybe I should just leave before he returns.”

“Oh, no, milady, don’t do anything so rash. Don’t even speak of such a thing! You bring a happiness to this old house that has been missing since Duncan’s poor mother was lost to us. Whatever happened to bring such thoughts to your head?”

Cathrynn filled Marian in on the details, trying to keep the tears at bay. Marian smiled slightly. “’Tis a funny thing about men, milady. They can look a murderer in the eye and fight fearlessly with one arm tied behind their back, but the merest glimpse of love has them runnin’ scared. He loves ye, darlin’, don’t doubt it. I know that boy better than anyone, and never have I seen his eyes light up like when he looks at you. He’s angry and frustrated right now, he needs time to confront his feelings. But you aren’t like him, darlin’, you don’t run from your feelings, and this time shouldn’t be any different. Ask yourself this: Would his behavior have been so extreme if he didna care for ye?”

Cathrynn brightened slightly. “I suppose you’re right. Oh, do you really believe that, Marian?” she asked hopefully.

Marian leaned forward and lifted Cathrynn’s chin up. “I’d stake my life upon it, darlin’. Come on now, we’ve spent

enough time lazin', let's put ourselves to some good use.

Seems to me you've had some good ideas on remodeling these horrid old rooms."

She rose from the table smiling, her optimism returned. "Right you are, Marian, I'll get right to it."

"What, pray tell, will you 'get right to'?" a voice asked stiffly from the doorway.

"Why, remodeling of course, Cooper. But that's none of your concern," she returned flippantly.

"Which room do you plan on changing?" His face was a mask of disapproval, his body, if possible, stood more rigid than usual.

Cathrynn giggled, feeling much better after her talk with Marian. "All of them!" she exclaimed and brushed past the impertinent butler.

"Your pardon, *my lady*," he sneered, "but what of His Lordship? Has he no say in the matter?"

Cathrynn studied him calmly, trying to force down her anger at his sarcastic tone. "My husband has given me free reign over this house, Cooper, and unlike him, I will not tolerate your rude behavior. You will treat me with the respect

I deserve.”

Turning on his heel, Cooper marched out of the room and down the hall. A triumphant smile on her face, Cathrynn followed, her mind already on her redecorating plans. She walked slowly through the rooms, engrossed in trying to decide where to begin. After a while, she realized you should always begin at the beginning, so she made her way into the grand entryway. Sighing and shaking her head, she gazed at the pea green rug on the floor. That would have to be the first to go, and everything else along with it. She didn't see anything worth saving. From the huge picture of a vulture flying over a dark, raging sea to the enormous brass vase that dominated one corner, she saw nothing that she wanted to keep. Calling to a few of the servants, she gave them orders to move everything to the attic, and sent the driver, Ted, to London to fetch one of the decorators from Samuel's.

Moving to the dining room, she again ordered servants to remove everything but the lovely cherry dining table and chairs. As she turned her gaze to the ugly tan draperies, she realized she had never seen them open, and therefore didn't know what the window looked like. Pushing

them aside, she gasped in awe at the beautiful bay window, complete with a window seat. Maybe this house can be made into something magnificent after all, she thought.

Cathrynn returned to the entryway to see how much progress had been made and was surprised to see Cooper instructing the servants to leave everything as it was. “Cooper,” she said coolly, “the servants have their orders, please see to your own duties.”

“My lady,” he said, his tone condescending, “you cannot mean to remove all these family heirlooms.”

“I can and I do. And from this moment on you would do well to remember that you, sir, are only a servant and will not question what I do. I am the lady of this estate and what I say goes, do you understand?” Her patience was slipping.

“I don’t think you understand the magnitude of what you are doing. These furnishings and pictures have adorned these rooms for centuries and should remain for many more. The former Lord Willoughby would never have stood for such sacrilege.”

“Whatever happened here before my arrival is none of my concern, but I am determined to make this house more

presentable for the current Lord Willoughby.” She motioned one of the movers to take away the brass vase.

“Return it,” Cooper ordered.

The poor servant, Gregory, looked from one to the other of them, unsure of what to do. Even though the butler was elderly, all the servants feared his wrath. Trying not to let her temper slip, she dismissed him and turned on Cooper. “If you do not stop trying to undermine my authority I will have no choice but to let you go.”

The butler threw his head back and laughed. “I’d like to see you try to run this household without me. You swish your pretty skirts around and issue orders as if you’ve a right to do so, when we all know that before you came here you were nothing but a two-bit whore!”

A shocked gasp emanated from the servants who had gathered to watch the heated exchange. Though they feared for their jobs if they crossed the evil butler, their love for the small lady was stronger. Several men, Gregory included, stepped forward in warning. Cathrynn’s face turned beet red and anger suffused her small body. “His Lordship will not let that remark go unpunished.”

“HA! *His Lordship* will allow me to do whatever I please, just as I always have. That boy doesn’t have an ounce of courage. And he certainly wouldn’t have inherited such a magnificent estate if the former Lord Willoughby had had any other choice. He doesn’t have the sense God gave a fly! Why, he can’t even do his own books, the very simplest of jobs for a man in his position.”

The last bit of civility left in Cathrynn unraveled at Cooper’s unfair attack on Duncan. Feigning a calm she did not feel, she took a deep breath and demanded, “Pack your personal belongings and leave, Cooper. Your services are no longer required here.”

He took a menacing step towards her, but nevertheless she stood her ground, surprised to note that his voice was still the same cool, aloof tone as always. “Perhaps you’d better rethink your position, my lady. No one knows more about the running of this estate than I do. Your precious Lord Willoughby doesn’t have the slightest notion of how to keep this business afloat. He’d rather--”

“You are dismissed, Cooper. Have your bags packed and be off this property by morning.” As she turned to leave,

he grasped her by the arm, spinning her around. Her deep green eyes flashed fire as she stumbled back and would have fallen had Gregory not been there to catch her. A bevy of male servants surrounded Cooper and escorted him to his room.

“Don’t worry, my lady,” Gregory assured her, “we’ll make sure he doesn’t harm you. Now, show me what goes to the attic and I’ll make sure it gets there.”

Smiling her thanks, Cathrynn threw herself into her work. Her hands shook slightly, and she couldn’t help but wonder how Duncan would feel about her decision. True, he had hated the dreadful butler, but might not look kindly upon her taking such a momentous decision upon herself. If he’d wanted Cooper fired he could have done it himself any number of times. Maybe he really was too valuable to let go.

Nonsense, she chastised herself. He was naught but a butler, and good ones, although rare, could be found. Anyone would be better than the surly Cooper, who single-handedly had kept Duncan under his grandfather’s shadow all this time. No, she’d done the right thing, she was sure of it, and tomorrow she would spread the word and find a butler who

would be an asset instead of a hindrance.

As she turned to leave a sound at the still open door made her pause. A short, round man stood awkwardly in the doorway, a smile lighting his face. “Lady Willoughby?” he asked pleasantly. At her nod, he bowed low and kissed her hand. “I am so pleased to finally meet you, Lady Willoughby. My name is Nathaniel, but please call me Nate. I am the decorator from Samuel’s. Why don’t you show me around and we can draw up some preliminary plans and have the workers here bright and early tomorrow morning.”

The man’s sunny disposition was contagious and Cathrynn found herself smiling as they walked from room to room, discussing fabrics and color assortments.

When the doorknocker sounded the next morning, Cathrynn hurried to open it herself, expecting Nate with supplies and workers. She was shocked, however, to see Austin standing on her doorstep, his nose very large and discolored. “Aren’t you going to ask me in?” he asked as she stood speechless before him.

“Austin, what are you doing here? Duncan warned you to stay away.”

“I just want to speak with you a moment before I leave for home, my dear Cathrynn. So I can assure your parents that you are well.”

She sighed. “Very well, you have five minutes and then you must go. Duncan will be furious if he finds out you have been here.”

She led him into the parlor and turned to say something, but he pulled her to him and crushed her lips beneath his. Cathrynn slapped his face and stepped away. “Whatever has gotten into you, Austin Greenbush? How many times must I tell you I am happily married?”

“I have it on authority you are not so happy. I don’t see the lucky bridegroom, my dear. Ah, yes, that’s right. He left you yesterday after the unfortunate incident at the Ambrosia estate. You don’t have to remain here, Cathrynn. If you come with me you could be home with your parents in mere weeks.”

“I have already told you I will not leave my husband. I love Duncan and here I will stay. Your time is up now, Austin. Go away and don’t ever come back. The fondness I felt for you is gone now that I see your true nature. Duncan

was beyond fury when he found you embracing me the other night, you won't get off so easily again the next time. You'd better go while you still have the chance."

"Not without taking something of you to remember."

He grabbed her arm and dragged her up against him, pinning her arms to her sides as he nibbled the tender flesh beneath her earlobe. As he trailed wet kisses up and down her neck, his breathing became heavy and ragged. Fear replaced the disgust she felt and she began fighting harder, trying to cry out even though her face was pressed to his shoulder. He tore the bodice of her gown and groped her breast, squeezing painfully. Just as she was about to lose hope, he let go of her, and she sagged gratefully to the floor. Looking up through dazed eyes, she saw that Dale and Gregory had pulled him from her and were now escorting him out the door. She heard a dull thud as he hit the ground outside and knew the two men were making him pay for harming her, but she could find no pity in her heart for him.

Still trembling, she got to her feet and headed for the door, but Cooper materialized in front of her, blocking the way. He shook his head and looked her up and down as she

clutched the torn bodice against her. “Your husband has barely been gone twenty four hours and you are already entertaining men. Well, I’d say you got what you deserved. And you haven’t heard the last from me,” he said ominously.

She glared at him, unable to speak in her own defense. He smiled maliciously, turned on his heel, and strode out the door. Cathrynn sank into the chair and let her head fall into her hands. She sincerely hoped she had seen the last of them both, but had a feeling they wouldn’t quit so easily.

Duncan sipped at the ale resting on the table in front of him and watched the tavern wench serve drinks across the room. Every so often she’d glance at him from the corner of her eye and wink suggestively. She was pretty enough, had all the right curves, but try as he might, he had no desire to bed her. His thoughts were still with Cathrynn. After two weeks in London, his anger had simmered down enough for him to look at the situation a little more calmly. His wife claimed to love him, and no matter what else he believed about her, he had to believe she did. He was also beginning to wonder if he had judged her too harshly that night. Maybe she hadn’t been at

fault. Truthfully, he didn't remember much of the conversation between Austin and his wife. And Austin had definitely been the aggressor. But Cathrynn had admitted she'd loved the man who had been her fiancée, and that's what kept Duncan up nights. He wondered if right now her soft, sweet body was pressed close to the American's. Did she sneak out to see him?

No, of course she didn't! Duncan reminded himself that he'd ordered the servants not to let her leave the house. Maybe he shouldn't have done that. He'd be sure to catch her wrath when he returned to Willoughby Manor. Unexpectedly, the thought of her anger brought a smile to his lips. Her green eyes flashed so brightly when she was mad, then later, when they made up....

He forced himself to break that train of thought. With every day that passed he felt himself softening toward her, wanting to have again the sweet friendship that had developed between them. And as much as he didn't want to admit it, he missed her. Missed her so much that he had considered running right back home just to be with her.

And, just maybe, he loved her.

Duncan jumped as if physically burned by the thought, tossed a few coins on the table, and quickly left the room. The cold November night washed over him as he stepped outside, but he gave it little notice as he strode down the street, pursued by his own emotions. How the hell had a thought like that entered his mind? For years he'd guarded against just such a catastrophe, and now here it was staring him in the face. But, for some reason he could not fathom, he held a soft place for Cathrynn in his heart, no matter how he tried to ignore it.

But love had nothing to do with it.

He was fond of her, to be sure. He liked being with her, and she certainly wasn't hard on the eyes--Dammit, he was tired of excusing the way he felt about her! Could it be he'd finally found the woman who wouldn't let him run away from himself?

He entered his townhouse and climbed the steps to his rooms wearily. Soon he'd be aboard the *Highlander*, and he'd be able to see everything more clearly. Not bothering to call his manservant to help him change, he dropped onto the bed fully clothed, falling into a troubled sleep.

Dressed in lilac gown, Cathrynn left her room and headed downstairs to check on the progress being made by the workmen. It had been one month since Duncan had left, and she had spent every minute working to finish as many rooms as she could before he returned. The grand entryway had been finished first, and looking at it now, she couldn't believe it had ever looked so horrid. The once green room was now a bright, graceful place. The wood floors had been polished to a shine and partially covered by a blue and white rug. The dull walls now proudly wore blue and white striped wallpaper and were tastefully decorated with scenic paintings. A new cherry table sported a vase of satin flowers of various shades of blue, with a few yellow blossoms added for extra color. Cathrynn smiled and proceeded to the dining room, which was just a day or so from completion. She had chosen to do this room in shades of rose. Light pink and white drapes adorned the lovely bay window and were pulled back to let the sunshine in, which bathed the matching wallpaper. A white lace tablecloth graced the long table, making it seem much less foreboding.

Cathrynn hurried into the kitchen for breakfast,

smiling brightly at Marian. “Is there any word from Duncan today?”

The cook placed a steaming plate before the lady and shook her head. “I’m afraid not, my dear, but ye know he’s very busy. I do have good news, though. Nate said they would finish the dining room today and begin in the parlor. Would ye be havin’ your meals in there from now on?”

“No, I’d rather be here with you, Marian. I don’t like eating alone. You think he’s alright, don’t you?”

“Oh, the lad’s fine, darlin’.”

Dale stepped through the door and settled his large frame at the table. “Good mornin’, little lady. Why the long face?”

“She’s worried about His Lordship, husband.”

“I just thought he would have sent word by now,” she said, trying to act nonchalant.

“Don’t worry about him, little lady. He can handle himself, that’s for sure.”

“Do you think he’s...well...gone overseas yet?”

“Ah, so that’s what’s got ye so upset. I’ll not lie to ye, darlin’, he’s aboard the ship.” He leaned across the table

and whispered, “He’s a brilliant swordsman, that one. He’ll come home to ye safely, of that ye can be sure.”

Cathrynn was worried about him, had hoped that he’d send word that he was doing well. Maybe he was still too angry to want any contact with her at all. The thought upset her, but she smiled through it, turning to Dale. “I think I’ll call on Lady Ambrosia today. When you return to the stable, would you ask Billy to ready the carriage?”

Dale’s face turned beet red and he looked to his wife. As he hurried away from the table, she heard him mutter something about ‘not being the one to carry out his ridiculous orders’. She glanced at Marian, amused. “What was that all about?”

“It appears that Lord Duncan ordered you not to leave the house, and any servant who allowed it would be permanently dismissed upon his return. His dander was up, alright, but I’m sure he’s calmed himself down by now.”

Cathrynn jaw dropped as this latest bit of news sank in. Of all the nerve! She stood up and smiled at Marian, a determined light shining in her eyes. “I’m going to visit Lady Ambrosia today if I have to drive the team myself!” she

exclaimed, hurrying upstairs to change into something more appropriate.

When she returned to the kitchen, Dale was waiting to drive her to her friend's house. They walked out in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Once inside the carriage and on the road, she turned her gaze out the window, trying not to let despondency overcome her. Duncan had been gone an entire month and, though she hated to admit it, she missed him terribly. She couldn't help but wonder if he was still angry with her over Austin. Even though she hadn't done anything wrong, the thought of Duncan's distrust tore her up inside. She couldn't believe he would actually attempt to hold her captive in her own home! As if she would go gallivanting about the countryside seducing young men! How little he must think of her to insinuate such a ridiculous notion. The thought saddened her, made her wonder what the future held in store for them. "Oh, Duncan," she whispered, "was I so wrong about you? Is there nothing I can do to make you love me?"

Lady Ambrosia threw her ample arms around Cathrynn and led her into the parlor. "What a wonderful

surprise, my dear! I had planned to call on you but thought better of it, knowing how busy you are with your renovations.”

Cathrynn nodded. “We have been working night and day in the hopes of finishing the house before Duncan comes home, but you know I’m never too busy for you, Lady Ambrosia.” She gratefully accepted a cup of steaming tea with a smile. “What a lovely dress!”

Lady Ambrosia turned a circle, enjoying the attention. “I just had it made, isn’t it just fabulous! It’s not quite as colorful as some of my other pieces, but I like it just the same.”

“It suits you well,” she said truthfully. The gown was a lovely emerald green velvet adorned with mother of pearl buttons and worn over a lighter green and white checked petticoat. It was really quite normal, and Cathrynn had to stifle a giggle.

“So, how *are* the renovations coming?”

“Very well, indeed. The decorator from Samuel’s is so magnificent I hardly recognize the rooms when he’s finished them. You must come over and see the changes, Lady Ambrosia. I’d like you to be the first.”

“Oh, my, what a flattering invitation. I remember well how depressing those old rooms were, how dark and stifling.” She sighed, a sad look passing over her features. “But I can’t wait to see what you’ve done, Cathrynn, I’m sure your brightness has replaced all the gloom.”

At that moment the butler introduced Lady Erica into their presence. Lady Ambrosia rolled her eyes dramatically at her friend before she greeted the intruder. “Welcome, Lady Erica. I trust all is well at your estate?”

The thin woman, clad in pink as always, sighed deeply. “As well as can be expected, I suppose. When my husband is away the house turns into pure chaos because the servants don’t listen to a word I say. They are all an embarrassment to their positions!”

“A servant is only as good as his employer, I always say,” Lady Ambrosia stated in her usual boisterous manner. Cathrynn’s green eyes twinkled merrily, but she opted to refrain from baiting the other woman.

Deciding to ignore this comment, the pink lady turned her malicious smile upon the golden beauty sitting opposite her. “I hear you are renovating your home, Lady Cathrynn.

Although I am sure *any* change would be for the better, I can't imagine that dreadful old house ever being anything pleasant to look at." Her eyebrows drew together delicately. "I seem to remember a rather disturbing repetition of green."

Cathrynn bristled at her tone, feeling a protectiveness over the house that surprised her. "You can see it for yourself, Lady Erica, for we plan to throw a Christmas ball next month." Cathrynn regretted the words the minute they left her lips, for although she had written Duncan requesting he be home in time for a ball, she hadn't received an answer yet. But the ball was in motion, and she had to roll with it.

Erica clapped her hands together, delighted to have stumbled across a fresh piece of gossip. "Wonderful! When shall it take place?"

"The plans aren't finalized yet, but we will send the invitations soon," she hedged.

Lady Ambrosia spoke up. "So what's the latest news? I could use a good bit of entertainment."

Lady Erica's cold eyes shone at the prospect of letting loose a shocking piece of gossip. "I hear that the Black Knight is still riding the seas as arrogantly as usual. Your husband is

at sea at this very moment, is he not, Lady Cathrynn?" she inquired with a honeyed tongue.

Cathrynn felt the blood drain from her face as she dizzily grasped the arms of the chair for support. Was Erica accusing Duncan of piracy, or merely implying that he could be set upon by villains at any moment? Whatever her meaning, the intent was vicious and cold hearted. Cathrynn wanted to slap the self-satisfied grin from her bony little face, but somehow managed to keep hold of her temper.

"I'm sure Duncan is in no danger, my dear," Lady Ambrosia once again came to her friend's rescue, patting her hand for comfort.

"On the contrary, my dear ladies, the good Lord Willoughby is in danger up to his handsome eyebrows. 'Twas his ship the pirate took, and if my information is correct, a bloodier battle has never been waged."

Cathrynn's gasp reverberated through her slight body. Her only coherent thought was that something was terribly wrong, for how could Duncan have attacked his own ship? As her confusion mounted, her shaking hands grew weak and slid from the safety of the chair as blessed darkness claimed her.

Lady Ambrosia leaped from her chair just in time to cushion the tiny lady's head as it hit the floor. She called for one of the male servants and saw Cathrynn safely from the room before she turned on Erica with a vengeance. "Who do you think you are coming into my home and terrorizing my dearest friend? You all but told dear Lady Cathrynn that her husband may be dead, and yet you sit there in your disgustingly *pink* finery as calm as you please, looking every bit the fine lady. My word upon it, Erica, *you are no lady*. Take yourself from my presence and do not return, for you will never be welcomed through these doors again."

Lady Ambrosia watched as the skinny woman stood, holding a shaking hand toward her. "Lady Ambrosia--"

"Begone," she almost growled, "for I am no longer amused by your malicious need for gossip. You have harmed someone very close to my heart, and that kind of behavior cannot be tolerated. Away with you now, before I have you physically removed."

The pale lady turned a shade whiter, realizing that this time she may have gone too far. Much too arrogant to admit this, however, she turned her nose up and brushed

regally past her hostess.

Returning from the darkness that claimed her, Cathrynn was surprised to find herself in her own suite of rooms, the sun shining high in the sky. Megan dozed quietly in a chair next to the bed. Tears pricked Cathrynn's eyes as the horrible conversation about Duncan came back to her. Whatever could have happened to him? Were they set upon by another pirate ship? Was he injured, or worse? She closed her eyes to the sharp pain that seized her heart at the thought of losing Duncan. Then again, perhaps Lady Erica had mistaken the facts and given her the wrong information. Of course, that could be the only explanation, for how could Duncan attack his own ship? 'Twas impossible. Throwing the covers from her body determinedly, she padded over to the wardrobe and began rummaging through her gowns.

Megan awoke with a start, falling onto the floor with a loud thump. Cathrynn smiled kindly at the sweet but clumsy girl. "Help me dress please, Megan. I must hurry downstairs and see to some business."

"Yes, milady," she curtsied and hurried to her

mistress, quickly helping her into her corset and petticoats before sliding a gown of mint green silk over her head and lacing it up expertly. “Are you well, Lady Cathrynn?” she asked, a concerned frown marring her pretty young features.

Cathrynn nodded, not trusting herself to speak for although she put on a brave front, her heart was beating in fear for Duncan. “There is someone downstairs waiting to speak with you, milady. Shall I tell him to return some other time?”

Declining her maid’s offer, Cathrynn swept down the staircase and into the parlor, expecting one of the workmen, and so was surprised to see Ian standing at the window with his back to her. “Ian,” she called softly, her heart thumping wildly within her breast. Had he come to tell her of Duncan’s demise? Had he finally been outrun and captured? Or injured? Or something much, much worse?

Ian tried to smile a greeting while bringing her trembling hand to his lips. A frown was etched on his face, and his lips were drawn tightly together. There would be none of his usual teasing today. “Cathrynn. Please, sit down.” She complied, sinking into a chair as her knees gave way beneath her. Ian took a deep breath, pacing back and forth as if

weighing his words.

“Tell me, Ian. I cannot stand my own thoughts any longer, I must know what has truly happened. How is Duncan?” The last was torn hoarsely from her throat.

Ian fell to his knees before her, grasping both of her hands. “I cannot stand to see such pain in your eyes, dear Cathrynn. I wish with every fiber of my being that it had not been necessary to hurt you so. We’ve been fools from the very beginning to drag you into our charade as we have. It pains me to tell you--”

Cathrynn grabbed the collar of his frock coat in her hands and pulled him closer. “*What are you trying to tell me, Ian? What has happened to my husband?!*”

“To set your mind at ease, Duncan is well, as is all the crew.”

She was losing touch with reality, she was sure. How could such an allegedly bloody battle have ended in no casualties? “You’ll have to help me here, my lord, for I fear I’ve taken leave of my senses. I hear Duncan’s ship has been captured and a bloody battle waged, but yet you tell me everyone is fine. I don’t understand.” It took all her energy to

keep from screaming and beating an explanation from him word by word.

Standing, he turned his back to her, unable to face the play of emotions that would surely cross her features at his next words. “’Twas a mock battle.”

“What?”

“’Twas a mock battle, it never really happened. We needed a cover story, you see? There has been some hated accusations pointed at Duncan for quite some time.” He turned to face her, his eyes pleading for understanding. “Although there is no evidence to link him to the Black Knight, we sometimes start rumors to discourage the talk. Therefore, ‘tis impossible for Duncan to be the Black Knight if the pirate attacks his ship while he’s aboard, right?”

“Why wasn’t I told?”

“There wasn’t time. We worked it up and leaked it out quickly. By the time any of us thought how the story would affect you, it was already too late. I’m sorry for the pain we’ve caused you, but your reaction totally validated our story.”

She leaned her aching head back against the chair and

let relief wash over her. Duncan was alive. Thank goodness, he was fine! Pushing back the anger, she thanked Ian for the message and turned to leave the room, feeling drained. A hand on her arms stopped her. “Cathrynn, please. I’m sorry our scheming ways have hurt you, but you have my word that this will never happen again.”

Her eyes were sad as she brought them up to meet his. “It’s not *your* words I need to hear, Ian.”

He nodded in understanding as he handed her an envelope. “I received this for you yesterday. Would you like to read it or shall I have it burned?” His blue eyes twinkled slightly.

Taking it from him with a smile, she kissed his cheek in gratitude and hurried up to her room to fling herself on the bed and rip open the envelope. ‘My dearest Cathrynn,’ it read, ‘I hope this letter finds you well. I have been out to sea three weeks and all my business has gone according t plan. In regards to your note, I think a Christmas be’ll would be fine, and although I’ve no idea when I shall return, I promise to make it in before the holiday. I’ve had much time to myself since I last saw you, and I now realize that the scene with

Greenbush was not your fault. I apologize for being such a jealous fool.'

Cathrynn's mouth gaped at this, and she had to read it three times before the words made any sense. It continued, 'Every day without you is like a day without the sun, and I look forward to returning to your sweet smiling face. Until we meet again--Duncan.'

Sitting down at her dressing table, she moved to slip the note into her keepsake box, but a draft caught it and it blew between the table and the wall. Sighing in frustration, she reached down to retrieve it, but she encountered a hard object instead of the soft paper. Intrigued, she clasped her fingers around it and pulled hard, sneezing as a cloud of dust assailed the room. It was a book, she noted in surprise, and from the looks of it it had been down there a long time. Wiping it clean, she opened it and read the first page: 'This journal property of Elizabeth McKleighan.'

CHAPTER NINE

Duncan leaned over the side of the ship, his elbows resting on the rail. One more day on the *Highlander*. One more day before he had to return to that horrid old mansion that held memories of his grandfather like a drunk held on to a bottle. Amazingly, he didn't harbor the usual dread that accompanied the thought of Willoughby. Instead, he found himself almost anxious to return so he could again see Cathrynn. He wondered if she'd received his letter and whether or not she'd accept his apology.

Having had a lot of time to think these past weeks, it was not surprising that his thoughts always turned to his wife. The usual jubilation he felt while on board his beloved ship was almost nonexistent, instead it was replaced by an annoying impatience to return to Cathrynn. He'd been a pompous ass all those weeks ago, literally running away from her when she would have explained. Duncan finally realized now that he had not been running so much from Cathrynn as he had from himself, and the memory of his mother. The fear of loving and being loved so completely scared the wits out of him. What if he gave in and something happened to her? How would he

handle it? He didn't want to end up a broken shell of a man nor did he want that for Cathrynn if something were to happen to him. And what of any children they might have? He knew firsthand how it felt to watch a parent whither away from despair.

A vision of her lovely face teased him in the shimmering depths of the water. She loved him. No matter what he did or how he felt, he knew in his heart that Cathrynn loved him. He had to make up his mind one way or another before he returned home, and he was as far away from a decision as he had ever been.

The eagerness to see her was building with every day that brought them closer to shore. So, too, was the frustration. He didn't *want* to spend his every waking moment longing for her.

He didn't want to love her.

Smashing his hand against the railing, he turned angrily and strode off to his cabin, and a large bottle of brandy.

A few of the elder seamen witnessed Duncan's agitation and chuckled to themselves. "That boy's got it bad."

"Yeah, but who's gonna tell him that?"

“What, and risk his wrath?” Every man, some larger even than Duncan, shuddered at the thought and dropped the subject quickly.

Cathrynn stared at the small book in awe. She was holding the diary of Duncan’s mother. She ran her finger over the neatly scribed words and felt hot tears spring to her eyes. Duncan had loved his mother very much, for her pain had been his pain, and he had carried it with him for so many years it had become a part of him. She was staring at the one thing that could help her fully understand Duncan--his past.

Lovingly wiping the dust from the faded blue cover, she pushed away a twinge of guilt and opened the book. An envelope was secured to the first page, and she carefully detached it and opened it. Two small portraits fell to the vanity. Retrieving them with shaking fingers, her eyes lit upon a small family portrait. A man who looked very much like Duncan held himself proudly, smiling down on his wife and small son. The woman had lovely pale blonde curls and laughing blue eyes. A boy of about three, Duncan, sat contentedly on her lap. They were a striking family, beautiful

beyond comparison.

Cathrynn wiped away tears as she gazed on this happy family and the little boy who would grow to become her husband. The next picture was of Duncan, about twelve years old, already so tall and handsome. His midnight blue eyes twinkled and a dimple appeared in his cheek. So happy, so carefree in his childhood.

Setting the pictures aside, she drew a letter from inside the envelope. The newfound information would help her help Duncan, she reasoned, pushing away the last shred of guilt.

My darling Duncan,

It is with a sad heart that I write this letter, for my time here is fast coming to an end. You are but fifteen, and though it breaks my heart to leave you in the evil clutches of your grandfather, please know that it is beyond my control. Never doubt my love for you, and I shall be with you always, my love. My only hope is that someday, when my mother feels you are ready to know everything, that you will understand and not judge me too harshly for my weakness. I pray that you will not suffer under your grandfather's rule, and I am

entrusting you, my most precious possession, to my mother. She loves you as dearly as I do, my darling, and she will protect you with her love. I've enclosed the two pictures I hold most dear, cherish them as I have and always remember the good times. Until I may see you again.....

Your loving Mother

Cathrynn sighed softly. All these years, Duncan had though his mother had sacrificed him to his grandfather. All these years, the proof of her love had lain hidden behind this vanity. Now his healing could begin. Hopefully, these pages held the answers to all the questions that had been plaguing him for so many years. Moving to the bed, Cathrynn settled herself comfortably between the covers and excitedly opened to the first entry.

August 29.....We've just arrived at Willoughby Manor. It is late and I tucked Duncan into bed like I did when he was a child. He's growing into such a strong, responsible young man, each day becoming more and more like his father. I can hardly believe I'm now sitting in the room I occupied as

a girl. I never imagined the impact this old house would still have on me. The moment I saw it a knot formed in my stomach, and I know it will never abate until we leave here. I dread facing my father tomorrow, knowing what I know about him. How can I look him in the eye without betraying my hatred for him? It will be difficult, but I must. My family is depending on me.

Cathrynn laid the book in her lap, a confused frown marring her lovely features. If Elizabeth had despised her father then why had she returned to England? The answer must lie somewhere in these pages, and Cathrynn vowed she'd not stop reading until she knew everything that had happened ten years ago.

August 30.....Duncan and I had lunch together in the orchard today, reminiscing about all the happy times we shared in Scotland with his father. I treasure these moments with my son because, for a while, I can concentrate on my love for him and not worry about our situation here. He is such a wonderful boy, so loving and sensitive, always quick to

smile. He's the only one now who has the power to make me laugh. What a funny boy!

I shall have to face my father now. What shall I say to him? Oddly, I feel no fear, only loathing for what he has done to us.

September 1.....I missed my calling. I should have been an actress, for he bought my fearful daughter act. I know that I can go on with this charade for as long as it takes to find out what he's done with my darling Michael. I shall find him, if I have to search 'til the end of my days.

September 15.....I was able to spend some time with Duncan today. We walked through the orchard and waded through the pond. Afterwards we, along with Marian and Dale, happily finished off one of Marian's delicious apple pies. It is nice to have friends who hail from Scotland, so soothing to hear that sing-song accent that I so miss.

Father has kept me so busy doing his books that I've not had much time for my son. I tell myself that it will be but a short time before I find my husband and return to our home

when I'll be able to see Duncan again whenever I want to, but neglecting him hurts me. I spend every spare moment searching for some tidbit of information about Michael. It must be here somewhere, but I'm running out of places to look. Father is clever, but I am determined to search every nook and cranny. I will never give up!

September 16.....Lady Ambrosia visited today. What a strange and funny woman! She wore a lime green gown with large blueberry clusters embroidered all over it. But never have I met a kinder woman. She's taken a liking to Duncan and has promised to send her son over to get acquainted with him. I'm so happy he'll have someone his own age to spend time with. I have noticed his smile doesn't appear quite as readily now, and know that 'tis my own fault for bringing him to this horrible place. How I wish I had left him with the McCleods in Scotland, but I was weak. I could not imagine spending that much time away from him. Maybe it will all be over with soon.

September 30.....Lady Ambrosia, true to her word,

sends her son over every day. He and Duncan became instant friends. He's such a polite boy, forever laughing and teasing just as Duncan does. It does my heart good to see them together. I love visiting with Angelica. Her husband is so influential even my father wouldn't cross him, and she knows it. So every day at tea time she visits, rescuing me from my work for a short time and providing me with much needed time with my son.

I finally found a secret stash of my father's papers. I didn't have time to look through them, but I'm sure I will find out something about my darling Michael. Every time I think about the way he was taken from us I die a little more. I will never forget that day. Duncan was visiting the McCleods when it happened, thank God! Michael was working the fields on a hot day and I took some cold water to him. Just before I reached him a group emerged from the forest and attacked him, dragging him away. I screamed for help, but of course no one was around to hear me. Angus formed a search party, but he was never found. We assumed he was dead, but what a relief it was to receive a letter from him a few weeks later. He had found a sympathetic man to carry the letter for him. I was

so shocked when he revealed to me that my father was behind his abduction! I haven't told Duncan that his father may yet be alive. 'Twould be too cruel to get his hopes up for nothing. But I believe he is alive and I have to find him. My father is ruthless. I know he will kill him if the mood so strikes. Be brave, my Michael. I'm trying to find you!

October 1.....The days grow shorter and the weather is colder. I can see Duncan and Ian running through the orchard. Those two are so alike they could be brothers! There is Mother bringing them snacks. Thank goodness Mother is here, she loves him almost as much as I do.

I'm getting closer to Michael! I could hardly believe it when I actually saw his name on paper this afternoon! I had to put it away hurriedly, for I heard father coming down the hall. At last, the end is in sight. Once I find out where he is, all I have to do is get him out. I long for the warmth of our home in Scotland, where our family can be together again.

October 2.....I've found him! Oh, to think he's been right under my nose all this time. That stash of papers I found

yesterday revealed everything. Now that I know where he is all I have to do is figure out how to get him out. I must believe he is still alive, for my own sanity if for nothing else.

October 5....I wouldn't have believed it could be so difficult to get to the basement. Father has foiled my every attempt, but I still don't think he knows I know. Michael is being held in this very house and yet I cannot get to him. I know I must stay calm so Father does not suspect me, but I readily admit this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

Duncan knows something is wrong, even though I deny it he doesn't believe me. He is trying to help, but I cannot risk him by confiding my secrets. When he walked into my room this morning I thought he was Michael. That's when I saw what I know has been coming for along time--my boy is a man now.

I feel very strange--I must get some rest.

October 7....I made it! Father was out today and I finally got into the basement to see my beloved. He is being held in a cell smaller than my bed! He was sitting on the

floor, his head slumped to the side and I feared the worst. But when I walked up he opened his beautiful blue eyes and smiled at me. I was so relieved and fell to my knees beside the bars. His face, even covered with a thick beard, was so handsome! But his muscular body had thinned so drastically! Thankfully, I'd been able to smuggle some food and water to him. I toy with the idea of telling Duncan about his father. Michael says I should, nay, I must. I want to protect him, but Michael says he is a man now and I must treat him as such. And I will, but I must take a nap now, for I don't feel well.

October 9.....I can't find the cursed keys! I have been to see Michael every day but I cannot find the keys to unlock the door! I feel so frustrated and helpless, and I've been so weak all the time lately. What's the matter with me?

I've decided to tell Duncan everything when he returns from the Ambrosia's in a few days, for I need his help. I have the feeling that Father has been allowing me to see Michael, because it has been too easy lately. I've never been so afraid in my life, for I not only risk my own life, but those of my family. I must lie down, I feel so weak just holding this pen

makes my hand shake, and my stomach feels ill.

I believe I'm being poisoned.

October 10....It's now or never. I found the keys. I sent word to Lady Ambrosia for Duncan to meet us at her house. Three messages by three different messengers, just in case. I'm leaving this journal and letter for Duncan just in case something happens to us. I want him to know the truth.

I've eaten nothing today but apples from the orchard and water from the well, and I gave Michael the same. Although I'm not feeling much better, I am not any worse, which gives me hope.

It's almost midnight. I have to go free my husband and find my son. Hopefully, none of us will ever see this journal again and will return safely to our warm home in Scotland. I pray this will be so.

Cathrynn laid the book down, brushing tears from her cheeks. Poor Duncan had been living a lie for ten years. His mother described him as being happy, always smiling. How wonderful it must have been to see that very handsome, very

rare smile of his on a regular basis. She sighed, wondering what had happened to them. Had they escaped? And if so why hadn't they come back for their son? Cathrynn was determined to find out if they were still alive. Even more so, she wanted to bring a ready smile back to his lips, if it were possible. Now she could understand exactly what he had been through. Evidently the messengers never reached the Ambrosia estate and when Duncan returned home was told his mother had died. But had she really? Cathrynn had a feeling that she hadn't.

Smiling softly to herself and planning her search for the McKleighans, Cathrynn drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Two weeks after finding the journal Cathrynn was just beginning to settle down. After snooping through Duncan's papers and finding the address for the McCleods, she wrote them a letter. Knowing Lady Ambrosia had befriended poor Elizabeth McKleighan made Cathrynn happy,

and she invited her friend to tea the day after reading the journal. Unfortunately the older couple had been out of town, but now had returned and accepted the invitation. She was due any minute and Cathrynn could hardly contain her excitement. When she long awaited knock sounded on the door, she all but ran to the hallway to greet her friend.

Lady Ambrosia, clad in her usual assortment of colors, clasped the smaller lady in a bear hug. “How I’ve missed you, my dear! Oh my, what a lovely job you have done here! I should love to see the rest of the house.”

Cathrynn impatiently gave her a quick tour of the rooms and returned to the front parlor for tea. “Lady Ambrosia, I admit I’ve asked you here for a reason.”

“Anything for you, my dear.”

“What happened to Duncan’s parents?”

Lady Ambrosia’s face drained of color and her eyes widened in shock. A nervous hand played with the large ruby brooch at her neckline. “Whatever do you mean?”

Laying a comforting hand on her arm, she said, “I found his mother’s journal, Lady Ambrosia. I don’t want anyone else to know about it, but I know you were her friend.

She wrote some wonderful things about you. It ended so abruptly, she said she was going to your house to get Duncan, but of course I realized she never made it. What happened to her?”

Heaving a great sigh of sadness, the robust woman closed her eyes, remembering. “Elizabeth was such a sweet little thing. So tiny, yet so strong in spirit. She loved her family so deeply, and she had to make some terrible sacrifices for them. The night she escaped with Michael I expected her to come for Duncan, for I received two messages that they would be leaving the country. I didn’t tell Duncan, thinking it best if he didn’t know until they arrived, not knowing how he would react to his father’s sudden resurrection. I waited and waited, but they never came. Shortly before daybreak I sent Lord Ambrosia and some men out to find them. Thank goodness I did.”

“Where were they?”

“He found them in an alley, beaten and very weak.”

Cathrynn nodded. “Elizabeth suspected they were being poisoned.”

“Yes, so she said. Lord Ambrosia put them on one of

his ships and sailed them a safe distance away, promising to take care of Duncan until they were well enough to return and claim him. They did come back, Cathrynn, I swear they never would have abandoned him! It was six months before they could return and I invited Duncan to stay with us for a while. My husband's business was so important to the elder Lord Willoughby that he never would have refuse me anything. But it didn't turn out as we had planned.

“Michael and Elizabeth were already at my home when Duncan arrived, and I sent him up to my son's room to freshen up for dinner. I planned to break the news gently to him and then his parents were going to take him back to Scotland. Elizabeth was too excited, though, and she crept up to my son's door.” Tears blurred her vision and she gripped Cathrynn's hand tightly. Softly she continued, “She just wanted to hear his voice. Six months is a long time for a mother to be separated from her child, she only wanted to see if he was well. She listened at the door for a while, and Duncan happened to be talking about her. The poor boy was still hurting from what he believed was his parents' deaths. He was bitter and his grandfather told him lies upon lies about

Elizabeth until he believed them. He told Ian that his mother hadn't loved him, that she had given him to his grandfather in an attempt to make up for marrying his father. Elizabeth heard every word.

“The poor girl was heartbroken. The tears fell silently from her lovely eyes and nothing we could do would stop them. I told her Duncan didn't mean what he had said, he was still in pain from his loss. I wanted her to talk to him, to let him know that she was well and cared very much for him. I begged her to tell him, Cathrynn, but she refused. She said he'd been through enough and she couldn't put him through another such shock. I couldn't change her mind. Not even Michael could change her mind. Elizabeth said she'd give him sometime to come to terms with his feelings and then she would let him know everything.”

She shook her head sadly. “She came back later, but by then Duncan was gone. No one knew where he had gone, not even Ian. Or at least if he did he wouldn't tell us. She made me promise never to tell him what had happened. She said when the time was right she would come back. Duncan didn't return until his grandfather passed away. She figured

the new Lord Willoughby had everything he needed. She always thought after reading the journal he would ask about her, but he never has.”

“He didn’t know,” Cathrynn whispered. “I found the journal behind the vanity in my room where his grandmother must have hidden it. He’s never known anything about it. Where are they now?”

“In Scotland. She still writes to me, inquiring as to his health. I still beg her to come, but she won’t until she knows he wants to see her.”

“So many wasted years. What shall we do now, Lady Ambrosia?”

“Give him the journal. He needs to know the truth,” she stated firmly.

“I’ve already wrapped it. I planned to give it to him for Christmas.”

“Splendid idea, my dear. Maybe now they can find each other after all these years.”

Cathrynn silently hoped so, too.

It was now one week before Christmas, and Cathrynn

had been working everyone extra hard so that everything would be finished by the time Duncan returned--whenever that may be. She was pleased, though, for the renovations were just days from completion, even the surprise she had planned for Duncan, which she had designed herself. She had replaced the moody Cooper with a much more pleasant and efficient butler. Instead of using intimidation to control the servants as Cooper had, Daniels used kindness. He only had one thing against him--he was much younger than Cooper. Somewhere around thirty, Cathrynn guessed. Just one more thing for her to be nervous about when Duncan came home.

When *would* he be home, she wondered. The Christmas ball was just one week away, and she couldn't seem to help herself from glancing out every window she walked by searching for some sign of her husband. Right now she was standing at the dining room window, which faced the orchard, remembering the afternoon she and Duncan had spent there. Cathrynn longed to see him again, to be held in his strong arms.

Daniels interrupted her. "Excuse me, Lady Cathrynn," he said in the starched butler's voice. "I've been

going over the books as you've requested and you were correct.

There is a definite problem."

Cathrynn sighed wearily. "How bad is it?"

"I haven't finished, but it is quite substantial."

"His Lordship will be back within the week, Daniels.

You can discuss it with him then."

"Very good, my lady."

He turned to leave, but Cathrynn stopped him.

"Daniels, thank you for all your hard work. It *is* appreciated."

His smile lit up his blue eyes, and his blonde hair ruffled slightly as he nodded. "'Tis my pleasure, my lady."

Cathrynn strolled about the house, smiling at how bright and cheerful it looked. What once had been a dreadful abomination was now an elegant home. Every curtain was open to let in the winter sunshine, chasing away the shadows that had lurked before. She was especially pleased with the front parlor. Since this was where she received company, she had had it decorated tastefully in cream with gold accents. It looked very elegant, indeed. She had done each of the bedrooms upstairs in a different color, choosing powder blue and pink for her own room. The wallpaper and quilt were

done in a matching floral pattern, a white rug graced the floor and white eyelet curtains set the room off. It held a soft, dainty quality now. Tiring of her wanderings, she headed to the kitchen, which she had decided against redecorating, for a cup of tea.

Christmas Eve. One day before the ball and still Duncan had not returned or sent word about when he would arrive. He had *promised* to be here before the holiday. She refused to worry about his safety, instead trying to rouse anger at his actions, but sadness was really all she could feel. She wanted him to be here for Christmas. She wanted to dance in his arms tomorrow night. She wanted just to be near him. It had been so long since she'd seen him!

She touched her hand to the cold glass of the windowpane where she stood in the parlor, staring at the drive and willing him to come home. She hadn't much hope left. It was already early afternoon and darkness came on quite early these days. She sighed resignedly and left her post, hurrying to help Marian bake pies for the festivities. As she passed yet another window she noticed the softly falling snow. A bit

more in the Christmas spirit, she smiled and began humming a carol.

Duncan spurred the horse into a faster gait, trying to ignore the freezing wind that whipped past him. He was almost home. Seeing his wife again was all he'd been able to think about the past few days. He didn't even mind returning to that horrid old house. With a start he realized that the painful stomachaches he'd always felt when nearing Willoughby Manor were gone now, replaced by an urgent need to hold Cathrynn again.

Just a few more miles. If he hurried he could have a hot bath and shave before dinner. Duncan hoped he could avoid Cathrynn until after he'd cleaned up, for he looked bad and smelled worse. He'd had a haircut in town but had opted to leave the thick beard for added warmth on his ride home. Of course, he could have ridden in the warmth of his carriage, but it was much slower than riding horseback and he hadn't wanted to wait a moment more than he had to.

As he turned on to this own property and came in view of the house, a soft snow began falling. He smiled at the

welcoming lights coming from within. He hurried down the long drive, giving his horse to a stable boy with instructions to put his saddlebags in the study. Running to the front of the house, he bounded up the steps and lunged through the door, only to stop dead in his tracks. Where was the ugly green rug and huge old vase? This entryway actually looked cheerful and inviting. And where were the servants? He supposed they must be busy with preparations for the ball. Glancing around again, he couldn't believe this was the same house he'd left a few short months ago. Stepping backwards out the door, he looked up at the huge structure, verifying that it was indeed his own.

He wandered around the house, admiring the work his wife had done and her exquisite taste. He noticed how the open drapes changed the feel of the rooms. After a while he made his way to the study, finding it untouched in his absence. He looked for his bags but they were nowhere to be seen. "Damnation," he muttered. Now he'd have to search out his belongings, running the risk of seeing Cathrynn before he'd had a chance to clean up. He tried ringing the bell and calling for Cooper, but to no avail. Finally, he opened the door and

stormed into the hall.

Cathrynn was in the kitchen helping Marian. “Could you get some more flour from the pantry, dear,” Marian called to her husband.

Hearing him grumbling about being too busy for such a chore, Cathrynn called to him, “Throw it to me, Dale, and I’ll take care of it.”

The older man smiled gratefully and tossed a small bag to her. She caught it deftly but, as he arms closed around it, the seams burst and the white powder exploded into the air, falling straight down upon the surprised lady. She stood speechless for a moment, as did everyone around her, then she burst into merry laughter. When she regained control of herself, she turned to Dale, who still stood in the door of the pantry, a stunned look on his face. “That’s it!” she couldn’t resist teasing. “I refuse to ever again set foot in a room already occupied by you and a bag of flour!”

Dale chuckled as he remembered the similar incident aboard the *Highlander*. “Right you are, little lady. I’ll just be about my way and leave you girls to your baking.”

At that moment the stable boy came through the door, loaded down with Duncan's bags. "His Lordship tol' me ta put these in the study, milady."

Cathrynn's green eyes grew round as saucers as this news sank in. "Duncan has returned?" she asked in disbelief. "Benjamin, Lord Willoughby is here right now, at this moment?"

"Yes, milady," the boy said. "He wants his stuff took to the study."

"Thank you, Benjamin. Just leave them here and I'll have them sent to his room."

Puzzled, the boy dropped the bags and murmured, "Very good, milady," before scrambling out the door.

Cathrynn looked down at herself in despair. "Marian, look at me! I can't let him see me like this!"

"Hurry and run along, little darlin'," the older woman soothed. "I'll have a bath sent up to ye forthwith."

Grabbing up her soiled skirts, she ran out into the hallway--smack dab into Duncan.

The force of the blow knocked them to the ground, Cathrynn on top of her husband, their noses almost touching.

Duncan's grin was a welcome sight as his arms closed around her, preventing her from getting up. "Welcome home," she whispered just before his mouth closed over hers. His lips were warm and soft, caressing her with a tenderness she had only dreamed of. She ran her fingers through his thick black waves, still wet from the snow. He felt so good, so strong and warm. He smelled of leather and crisp winter air. She let her hands roam over him at will, totally oblivious to the fact that they were lying on the hallway floor in plain sight of anyone who might happen by.

At the sound of footsteps, they reluctantly broke their kiss and looked up. Daniels stood beside their prone forms, a smile tugging at his lips. "Lord Willoughby, I presume?"

Duncan helped Cathrynn to her feet and stood beside her, an arm held protectively about her waist. He stuck his other hand out toward the stranger, giving his wife a puzzled look.

Giggling nervously, Cathrynn introduced them. "Daniels, this is Duncan McKleighan, Lord Willoughby. Duncan, meet Daniels, our new butler."

Duncan's only reaction was a slightly raised eyebrow.

“Pleased to meet you, Daniels. Come, my dear, we’ve a few things to talk about.”

Cathrynn followed him up the stairs, her hand held lightly in his. Now that the moment was at hand, she had no idea what she should say to him in explanation of her actions while he’d been away. He stopped outside her bedchamber door and took in her appearance for the first time. A smile played about the corners of his lips, and his midnight eyes twinkled playfully. “Maybe we’d best call for a bath and talk later. Much later. I’m not in the mood for conversation right now.”

Cathrynn simply nodded breathlessly, but as he turned to go downstairs, she remembered the surprise she had for him. “Duncan, I had your things sent to your room.”

Turning around slowly, he questioned her with but a look. “I-I know you don’t like the room, but--I thought--” Holding her hand out to him, she walked to the door next to her own and opened it. “Merry Christmas,” she whispered uncertainly.

Duncan stepped through the door and felt his heart slam against his ribs. She’d redone the whole room for him, in

colors that she knew would suit him. She had done the one thing that he'd thought impossible--making him feel comfortable in his own house. This house that he had hated. A house that no longer had any power over him, because of her. She had taken her love for him and poured it into the whole house, as a gift for him. He turned away from her to hide the emotion that he couldn't quite keep from his eyes, and when he tried to speak, he found that his throat was too tight for words. He gazed at the burgundy and midnight blue room, trying to buy some time until he could regain some control over himself.

Cathrynn stood at the door, twisting her wedding ring nervously. "Duncan? I'm sorry, I should have asked your permission, but I thought, well, anything would have been an improvement, and--"

He crushed her to him, nuzzling her sweet smelling hair, unknowingly covering his beard with flour. He kissed the top of her head, the tip of her nose, the curve of her neck. Suddenly, he could wait no longer. The force of his feelings grew stronger with every touch, every whisper. He picked her up gently and carried her to his bed, lying her down and gazing

at her for a moment before joining her. "I've dreamed of this so many times while I was away," he whispered against her ear. "I've missed you so, my Cathrynn."

She clung tightly to him, reeling from the intensity of his lovemaking. He touched her more tenderly, every caress touching her heart as nothing ever had before. He rained soft kisses all over her soft body, pulling her atop him and making them one in an earth-shattering moment of unsurpassed beauty.

When they were both sated, Duncan slid onto this side and pulled her into his arms. He stroked her hair softly, watching the golden waves curl around his fingers. His midnight blue eyes smiled into her with something she'd never seen there before. "Thank you, my darling Cathrynn," he murmured.

"Whatever for?" she whispered against his chest.

"For everything ye've given me since the first moment I saw ye." His voice was still barely above a whisper, his Scottish accent fully evident. "I don't know what I've ever done to deserve you, but I thank the good Lord for my good fortune." He caressed her cheek with his thumb. "I love ye, Cathrynn."

Her intake of breath was so sharp it was painful, and tears sprang to her eyes. “You don’t have to say that,” she was barely able to get out.

Gripping her chin firmly, he made her meet his eyes. “I do love ye, sweetheart. I have for a long time, but I didn’t want to admit it. ’Twas bein’ without ye for so long that made me see the truth. You were with me every minute of every day, and I spent every night longing to hold you in my arms. I’ve never felt this way before, as if, when I’m not with ye, I’m no longer whole. You complete me, my darlin’. And I wanna spend every day for the rest of our lives makin’ up for the way I hurt you in the past.”

Cathrynn put a finger to his lips. “Shhh. There’s never been anything to forgive. The look in your eyes right now is all I need to show me that my dreams have finally come true.”

They lay together quietly, Duncan still stroking her silky hair, and drifted off into a happy slumber.

Christmas Day dawned bright and early at Willoughby Manor. Cathrynn awoke to the sounds of the

servants finishing the rooms for the guests who would stay over, and the smell of succulent foods baking. She reluctantly moved from where she had been warmly snuggled in her husband's arms. "Merry Christmas, Duncan," she whispered, causing him to stir, his dark eyes opening slightly.

"Come back to bed, Cathrynn. 'Tis barely mornin'."

She tugged on his hand. "No, there is much to be done today, and if I want any time alone with you it will have to be now. I promised Marian I'd help her with the baking."

Duncan chuckled and raised an eyebrow. "Do ye really think that's a good idea?"

She swatted his hand and dashed from the bed to the door and adjoined their rooms. "If you want your present then you'll come with me to my chambers."

A devilish grin it his face. "I thought I'd already received my present, but I'd be happy to receive it again in your room."

Heaving a disgusted sigh, Cathrynn stepped through the door and beckoned for him. Remembering his own gifts to give, he hunted through his bags for them and joined his wife. He couldn't believe the sight that met his eyes. A small

Christmas tree stood in the room, decorated with ribbons and bows, looking very much like it belonged there. Cathrynn stood before a merrily crackling fire, smiling so broadly he feared her lovely face might split in two. “Come sit down, Duncan, I can’t wait to give you your gift.”

He sat down beside her, feeling as if he were in a dream. What was this strange feeling, happiness? He’d gone without it for so long he’d almost forgotten how it felt. He accepted the box she gave him, opened the wrapping, and stared at the gold pocket watch. He turned it over in his hands, recognizing the exceptional quality with which it had been made. On the back was an inscription: *To my darling Duncan. Forever.* When he looked at her, his eyes were dark with emotions he no longer tried to hide. He grasped her neck and pulled her to him, whispering in her ear. “Thank ye, my love. I’ve not had a nicer gift.”

She put a hand to his face, unaccustomed to feeling the beard growing there. She remembered what Elizabeth had written about Michael in her journal, and had to agree that a beard did nothing to take away from his handsome face. If anything, it enhanced it. She stroked it lovingly, happy to

finally have him home. Straightening, he pulled a box from the bag he'd brought in. "Merry Christmas to you, sweetheart."

Excitedly, she took the box and tore into it. A lovely golden locket was nestled inside, and as she picked it up she noticed that it, too, bore an inscription. Her breath caught as she read it: *To my darling Cathrynn. Forever.*

"I have more, but they aren't from me." He turned the bag over and numerous brightly wrapped packages littered the floor. "While I was away I had cause to be near your hometown, so I stopped at your parents' house. They invited me to stay over a couple of days so I accepted. Ye have a very nice family, my love. They sent these presents for ye, and I have a whole passel of letters from everyone. Your brother and his wife just had their first child, and they sent photographs."

She smiled through the tears in her eyes. "You met my family, Duncan? You spent time with them? Even my father?"

"Yes, well, he saw fit to give me a lecture on why I shouldn't have stolen ye away as I did, but after that we got

along smashingly. We even went hunting together.”

Cathrynn’s jaw dropped in a most unladylike manner. “My father took you hunting?! That in itself is a miracle, Duncan. He only hunts with my brothers, no exceptions.”

Her husband smiled arrogantly. “I guess that would make me the exception.”

Laughing gleefully, she kissed him soundly. “I’ll not deny that. So what do you suppose all this is? Or do you know that, too?”

“Why not find out?”

An hour later the entire floor was strewn with wrapping and gifts of all kinds, but the one Cathrynn cherished the most was a photograph of her family, complete with Duncan holding her brother’s new baby girl.

After a leisurely day spent in her bedchamber with Duncan (Marian insisted she didn’t need any help!), Megan bathed Cathrynn and helped her into her emerald green velvet gown. A diamond teardrop necklace adorned her graceful neck and matching earrings set the gown off. Her hair

cascaded gently down her back in soft golden waves, a few strands gathered atop her head held securely with emerald combs. Her eyes, which held a sparkle of happiness, were made a deeper green by the ensemble. Finally, she was ready to go downstairs and greet her guests, who were already beginning to arrive.

She stepped out of her room, knowing Duncan was waiting for her in the hall, but was caught unaware by the force of her attraction to him. He was freshly shaven and looked very crisp in his black and white evening attire. The only splash of color was the emerald neck cloth tied to perfection. He held his hand out to her and, as their fingers touched, a warmth tingled up her arm and settled itself in her twinkling eyes.

“Shall we, my dear?” he asked in his deep, wonderful voice.

Smiling, she descended the stairs with him and they positioned themselves in the ballroom, greeting the guests who had already arrived. A huge Christmas tree towered at one end of the ballroom, aglow with hundreds of carefully placed candles. The orchestra was playing softly in the background.

As they talked to the people around them, Cathrynn was surprised to note that Duncan's accent, although slight, was not completely hidden. Was he finally coming to understand that his accent was very much a part of him, that he would still be the same person no matter how he talked? His shoulders, too, were slightly less rigid than they usually were here in England. *He's relaxing*, she thought happily. *Maybe the shadow of his grandfather is finally losing its hold over him.* Saying nothing, she just smiled a bit wider and squeezed his arm lovingly.

The Ambrosias were the last to arrive, the lady's dress, as usual, causing quite a stir. She was dressed this holy day in a red velvet gown trimmed in white fur, a matching hat nestled precariously on her head. Her husband and son, not sharing her wish to entertain, were dressed conservatively. Lady Ambrosia grabbed Cathrynn in a hug. "So lovely to see you again, dear. Welcome home, Lord Willoughby. Your lady missed you while you were gone."

The couple exchanged a warm look and smiled at their friend. "I missed her as well. Be sure to save a dance for me, my lady, or my Christmas won't be complete."

Lady Ambrosia laughed heartily, stepping gracefully aside as the Lord and his Lady led the guests into the first dance. Duncan's grip was firm as he held his wife close to him. He had been without her too long to care about keeping a proper distance, wanting to feel her body against his, wanting to sweep her off her feet and carry her upstairs for more lovemaking. It mattered not that they had whiled away the entire day doing just that, he could not get enough of her. It seemed to him that once he let his guard down and allowed feelings to penetrate the thick wall he'd built around his heart, it seemed to overflow. He was no longer afraid of wanted her and, yes, even needing her. These months they had spent apart had taught him that no matter how far or fast he ran, he could never be free of her, nor did he want to be.

He gazed down upon his lovely wife who seemed to actually be glowing with happiness, and knew that he would never again wander far from her side. He smiled at her, the depth of his feeling darkening his already midnight blue eyes. Not thinking of the crowd of people around them, indeed honestly forgetting they were there, he lowered his head and took her mouth in a tender kiss, his tongue softly caressing one

rose colored lip. She smiled and rested her head against his chest. They needed no words, he let his actions speak for him, but he felt a powerful urge to tell her again, to let her know beyond a shadow of a doubt that she need never doubt him again.

“I love ye, darlin’,” he whispered in her ear.

She looked up at him, her teal green eyes brimming with happiness. “I love you, Duncan.”

Although they were smack dab in the middle of a ballroom, they were in their own world, so it came as a surprise when they heard Ian’s voice boom, “If the Lord and Lady of the manor would be so kind as to vacate the dance floor, the orchestra and guests may continue with the merrymaking.”

Cathrynn blushed and Duncan cursed his friend good naturedly as he led her into the next dance. “I’m going to throttle that man within an inch of his life,” he growled, glaring at Ian across the room.

“Please do, and throw in a punch or tow for me while you’re at it.”

His smile turned down a bit, the arm about her waist

tightened even more. “I never told ye, Cathrynn, how sorry I am for actin’ the way I did with Greenbush and for running away when you wanted to talk to me.”

She shook her head. “But you didn’t--”

“I did. I heard you calling me and I ran like a frightened rabbit. I was so angry, I couldn’t trust myself around you, didn’t know what I’d do. But after the rage boiled down to a simmer, I could see that you were blameless. Have you had any trouble with him since?”

“No. He came to see me once the day after you left, but the servants escorted him from the property, and I’ve not heard from him since. I believe he’s left town, probably returned home.” A prickly feeling suddenly overwhelmed Cathrynn causing gooseflesh to break out on her skin. She shivered, having the uncanny feeling that someone was watching her.

“Ye should have to me you’re cold, sweetheart. Let’s sit down and I’ll fetch you some spiced cider.”

Cathrynn sat alone in a chair while Duncan searched out some refreshments, rubbing her arms until the feeling ebbed. How strange, she thought, to feel so alone and

vulnerable in a room teeming with people. She shook her head to clear it, and a wave of dizziness overwhelmed her.

Suddenly Duncan was beside her, and the uncomfortable feeling passed. She accepted a cup of hot cider and smiled her thanks.

A shadow fell over them and they looked up to see Lady Amanda Chutney beaming down at them. “How are you Lord Willoughby, Lady Cathrynn?”

Cathrynn smiled at the woman who was genuinely a kind lady. “We are well, Lady Chutney. And yourself?”

“Very well, thank you. I love what you’ve done with the house, Cathrynn, it’s magnificent. You’ve very good taste.”

“Thank you,” she said proudly, “but I can’t take all the credit. The decorator from Samuel’s was a godsend. How is your baby?”

“He’s doing wonderfully. I couldn’t stand to leave him on Christmas, so I brought him with me and sent him upstairs with his nurse. Would you like to see him?”

Cathrynn agreed eagerly and hurried from the room with her friend. Duncan watched them go with a smile,

wondering when they would have a child of their own. With as much activity as they had enjoyed today, there might be a child growing within her at this very moment. That thought sent a surprising rush of warmth through Duncan. A baby of their own. He could just imagine!

Ian brought him out of the daydream with a clap on the back. “Welcome back, my friend. I’m happy your homecoming finds you well.”

Duncan laughed and lowered his voice. “I did have a close call, but we can discuss that at another time. All is well and as it should be.”

“Excellent! So we’re agreed to let it rest a while?”

“For a while. I’d say we both need a break. I have other more interesting matters to occupy my time right now,” he chuckled. “Any luck yet with your girl?”

Ian sighed. “No, and I’m right sick about it. She won’t give in, you know? She’s as stubborn as--”

“As Cathrynn?”

“Did I hear my name on your lips, darling?” she asked as she stepped up beside him, giving him a knowing look.

The men shared a look and burst out laughing, to which Cathrynn sighed and turned her back on them, going in search of Lady Ambrosia. She found the woman alone in a corner, watching the merrymaking and eating a piece of cake. Rolling her eyes as she approached, Cathrynn said, “Your son and my husband are incorrigible when they are together, my lady.”

Lady Ambrosia laughed in her usual exuberant form. “Really, my dear, I do wish you would call me Angelica.” Cathrynn conceded with a smile. “Now, what did those two boys do this time?”

Cathrynn laughed lightly. “They were talking about how stubborn their women are. I wasn’t under the impression that Ian had a lady friend.”

Lady Ambrosia heaved a sad sigh. “Yes, well, it is not widely known, though they have been together for many years. Melissa is my cook’s daughter. She has been working in my kitchen since she was a child, first by helping her mother, then, when she grew older, as the assistant cook. She’s a very sweet girl, and I know she loves my Ian with all her heart.”

“So he’s in love with a servant. That must be very hard on him, but I can’t believe it would make much difference to a man like Ian.”

“Of course not, he cares not an ounce what others say. Although he has asked time and time again, Melissa will not marry him. She doesn’t feel worthy of a man who is not only a lord, but whom will inherit such a large and respected estate. He has pleaded with her, I have talked to her, but all to no avail. She is his mistress, and she will not allow it to progress from there.”

“But Ian will be expected to marry and carry on the line, will he not?”

“He will be expected to, but he will not. I know my son, and if he cannot have his love, he will have no one.”

“How sad for them. There must be a way, Angelica. We have to help them.”

Lady Ambrosia patted her friend on the back. “You are such a lovely person, my lady. If there is a way for them to be together, we will find it.”

Duncan and Ian strode over to them at that moment, cutting short their conversation. Ian whirled his mother onto

the dance floor, but Cathrynn declined, the thought of dancing making her feel dizzy. Persuading her husband to mingle with the guests, Cathrynn slipped into the garden, the pristine white snow chilling her feet. She sank wearily down onto a cold stone bench, which had been swept clean of snow. A deep breath of the brisk winter air helped clear her head, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. Through the many large windows of the ballroom she could see Duncan dancing with Lady Ambrosia, so she knew it couldn't be her husband whose eyes were following her. The feeling was dark and scary, and she shivered, though not from the cold.

‘Really, Cathrynn,’ she chided herself, ‘you’re just feeling the effects of too much wine and dancing. The excitement has overwhelmed you.’

Refusing to let her imagination run away with her, she laid her head back and closed her eyes, savoring the crisp smell of snow in the air. There were no stars in the sky tonight, the promise of more snow lingering in the breeze. A knot formed in her stomach as the frightening feeling intensified, threatening to consume her.

She suddenly heard a sound behind her, very faint, like clothing rubbing together as someone moved. Another deep breath helped to calm her nerves. She told herself she was being silly, no one else wanted to brave the cold, and anyway, she would have nothing to fear from her guests or her servants either, for that matter. Too much wine, she laughed, vowing to slow down for the rest of the night.

Was that another sound? Was it closer this time?

Her heart began to race, her thoughts coming in a jumble. Maybe she should return to the party, Duncan was probably looking for her. Oh dear, no one knew where she had gone. What if something happened to her?

No, no, everything would be fine. She should be perfectly safe at her own home. No one here wanted to harm her. She had made no enemies. Well, except one. He was angry, but would he actually return for revenge against her?

Of course he wouldn't. But even if he did there were any number of servants who would protect her. The grounds were literally crawling with hired help.

But not tonight. Tonight they were all having their own party upstairs, and those who were not were serving at the

ball. Oh dear, she really was all alone out here, wasn't she?

Cathrynn stood to go back inside just as she heard the snap of a twig. Heart pounding, breath coming in short, frightened gasps, she turned sharply. She saw nothing out of the ordinary until she looked down. There in the snow just behind the bench was a pair of very large footprints in the snow. As if stuck in slow motion, she pivoted to run, noticing a shadowy figure near the bushes to her left. Quick as lightning, someone grabbed her arm and pulled her headlong into the shrubbery. A hand clamped fiercely over her mouth, stifling the scream that ached to break from her lungs. She struggled to fight him but, thrown off balance as she was, it didn't do much good. Finally, in desperation, she simultaneously bit the tender flesh of his palm and threw her head back, connecting with his face. The moment she felt his grip weaken she bolted, not daring to look back.

The snow was slippery, making her progress slow. The only light in the moonless night was that which spilled from the ballroom windows, but she couldn't see anyway through the tears blurring her vision. Closer and closer she came to the house, slowly but surely, picking her steps

carefully through sometimes large drifts of snow. Hearing a noise behind her, she panicked and tried to speed up, but instead went sliding down the walk. She tipped over, falling face first into the snow. The drift was so tall at the side of the walk near the bushes that her arms were completely buried. She struggled to regain her footing, but only succeeded in burying herself more deeply.

A pair of strong hands grasped her arms and dragged her upwards as she let loose an ear splitting scream. The man shook her, slapping her lightly across the face until she quieted. When she opened her eyes, Duncan was standing there, a look of confusion on his face. Sometime during her adventure a soft snow had begun to fall, and Cathrynn watched as it swirled down, mingling with Duncan's black hair.

"Duncan," she whispered, relieved to find herself in her husband's arms. She slumped against him, her entire body shaking uncontrollably.

Taking her gently into his arms, he stepped carefully through the snow, around the house to the outside entrance of the kitchen. He knew she would not want to make a spectacle of herself before their guests, and also that she would tell him

nothing about what had happened until they were alone.

Striding briskly into the bright, warm kitchen, he ordered Marian to fetch a cup of tea while he placed her in a chair at the table. Her head was down, he could tell she was struggling to hold back a flood of tears. Tucking her hair behind her ear, he asked her what had happened.

Cathrynn looked up at her husband, his green eyes alight with unshed tears. Marian placed the tea in her hands and went busily about the room, keeping the others busy so the lord and his lady could speak without interruption. "I went outside for some fresh air," she began quietly. "I was attacked by someone hiding in the garden. I didn't see who it was, and he didn't say anything. I feel so foolish."

Duncan, his face a dark mask of anger, pushed away from the table and strode purposefully out of the room. Moments later, she heard a commotion outside as he and a posse of servants searched for her attacker. She sipped her tea calmly, knowing it would do no good to try and stop him. When the tea had calmed her enough for the trembling to abate, she checked her appearance and returned to the party.

Everything was as it had been when she'd gone to the

garden. No one seemed to know anything about her adventure, and she was happy to keep it that way. She no longer felt the sinister eyes upon her, so whoever had been here must have gone away. Duncan stepped up beside her, wrapping his arms around her waist protectively. “Did you find anything?”

“No,” he growled. “We saw where you had struggled and followed the tracks to the edge of the house. I sent the servants after him, the bastard! How are you?”

She smiled up at him. “I’m fine. It’s all over with now, I just want to put it behind us. None of the guests seem to have noticed anything, I’m relieved to say. Let’s join in the party, my lord.”

He led her onto the dance floor, marveling at her ability to shrug off such a harrowing experience. Most ladies would swoon and weep for days on end, but not his wife. She may be built like a delicate porcelain teapot but inside she was as sturdy as an iron kettle. His admiration grew by leaps and bounds for this amazing lady. He pulled her closer, thanking the powers that be for keeping her from harm.

Finally the ball came to a close, Duncan seeing to the guests that were departing, Cathrynn settling the ones who

were staying overnight. At last, all the guests accounted for, Duncan headed tiredly up the stairs to his room, loosening his neck cloth and unbuttoning his shirt as he went. He was surprised to find Cathrynn in his room, sitting beside the blazing fire with a cup of tea. She was wearing a warm flowing nightgown, her golden hair curling softly about her face. She smiled when she saw him, her eyes lighting up with pleasure.

“I ordered some tea for us. Won’t you join me?”

Duncan tossed his shirt in the corner and sat on the floor by her chair, taking her cup she offered and laying his head upon her leg. Cathrynn stroked his hair lovingly, brushing it away from his forehead. Setting the cups aside, he scooped her into his arms and tucked her into bed, climbing in beside her. He snuggled her against him, content just to lay here with her. He stroked her cheek. “Go to sleep, darlin’. I love ye,” he whispered against her hair, knowing she was already asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next afternoon found Duncan and Cathrynn relaxing in the kitchen with a cup of tea after a hectic morning of feeding their leftover guests and sending them on their way. Daniels entered and asked Cathrynn if she needed anything from town, since today was his scheduled day off and he had errands to run there. She replied with a shake of her head and a smile, and he, too, left the house. A cozy feeling descended upon the warm room as the lovers sat together in comfortable silence.

Duncan grinned at his wife. “So, you never did tell me what happened to Cooper. I thought that old coot would live forever.”

Cathrynn glanced up at him, her green eyes mirroring her uneasiness. “Cooper didn’t pass away, Duncan,” she said quietly. “I dismissed him.”

His eyes widened with surprise and the chair he had been balancing on two legs crashed ungracefully to the floor. He stared up at her, shock and disbelief evident on his face. Feeling the need to defend herself she stood, planted her hands on her hips, and said, “That man was intolerable, Duncan. He didn’t treat either of us with even a shred of respect and I

disliked him intensely. He challenged my authority before a room full of servants, laughing at me when I threatened to dismiss him. I had no choice but to follow through.”

Picking himself up from the floor with a grimace, Duncan took her rigid body in his arms. “Ye’ve no need to explain yourself, darlin’. I don’t blame ye for getting rid of him, it should have been done long ago.”

“I asked Daniels to look over the books from the time you inherited the estate until now, because I always wondered why you had such a hard time with them. Cooper had been embezzling funds since the day your grandfather died and purposefully changed the figures so that you would never know.”

“How did Daniels find out? I’m not such an idiot that I cannot add numbers and find discrepancies. Those books were so messed up it would have taken a genius to decipher them.”

“Daniels found a hidden book containing the correct figures. Te ones you were working on were just a jumble of random numbers.”

Duncan’s smiled lit up his handsome face. “Ye’re

making a habit of solving all my problems, Mrs. McKleighan.

A man could get used to this kind of treatment.”

Taking a deep breath and telling herself there would be no better opportunity, she smiled at her husband and said, “Speaking of hidden books and solving problems, I have something in my room I need to show you.” Butterflies erupted in her stomach as she took his hand and led him up the stairs.

“What is it, sweetheart?” he asked with a worried frown as she sat him down in a chair by her fireplace. She leaned against the bedpost, pressing a hand to her nervous stomach. Duncan fell to his knees before her, covering her hand and looking up at her with wonder. “Cathrynn,” he whispered. “My lovely Cathrynn, are we going to have a baby? Is that what ye’re trying to tell me?”

Cathrynn’s green eyes registered the shock she felt reverberate through her body. How could he know? How could he have known when she wasn’t even sure herself? She managed a small smile. “I-I-I’ve suspected for quite some time, since about a month after you left but, but I haven’t seen a doctor.” Her smile widened as his face lit up with sheer

pleasure. “I-I wasn’t sure what you would think.”

Duncan laid his dark head gently on her tummy, his hand lightly massaging the small of her back. This woman, his lovely wife, was carrying his child. Duncan’s body was consumed with a heat such as he had never felt before. He kissed her stomach tenderly, passing his large hand over the tiny mound he hadn’t noticed until now. He unbuttoned her blouse with painstaking slowness, peeling the fabric away from her shoulders and tossing it across the room, followed by her skirt. The satin of her chemise was cool against her heated skin, but he quickly relieved her of her underclothing until she stood before him in all her splendor. Still kneeling before her, he pressed his lips to her bare skin, playfully licking her belly button. His hand roamed her waist lightly, coming to rest on her buttocks, pulling her closer to him. He stood, pushing her hair aside to nuzzle her sweet neck. Cathrynn moaned and leaned into him, her knees giving way just as he scooped her up and laid her on the soft rug before the hearth. Duncan lay beside her propped on an elbow, one finger trailing sensuously along her breasts, forming a figure eight between the two before giving each his undivided attention. Cathrynn’s breath

was coming in short gasps, her breasts heaving up and down, teasing Duncan. When his mouth finally closed on one pink nipple, she cried out in anguished delight.

He continued the torture, lavishing attention on one nipple until she thought she might scream from frustration, then turned to its twin, breathing lightly upon her fevered skin before taking it slowly into his wet mouth. Cathrynn whimpered, twining her fingers in his thick hair and pulling him ever closer. Feeling an urgency that left her gasping, she grasped his arm and pulled him atop her, kissing him until she was lost in the delightful abyss of passion.

Duncan held her tenderly, gazing into her deep green eyes as he prepared to enter her slowly. Unable, to wait, Cathrynn quickly pulled him down and rose to meet him, joining them in one swift movement that left them both gasping for breath. Already close to the breaking point, Duncan tried to still himself, but Cathrynn would have none of it. She set a fast, desperate rhythm, clinging to him as if she could climb right inside and become part of him. She cried out his name, and they exploded together in an ecstasy so profound she couldn't contain it. Tears poured from her eyes

as she kissed her husband's sweaty temple. "I love you, Duncan," she whispered to him.

Rolling them over onto their sides, he sighed contentedly into her hair and replied, "I love ye, too, my Cathrynn."

The next day Cathrynn stood by her bedroom window, watching Duncan exercise his horse, looking the perfect male specimen that he was. She smiled, laying a hand against her midsection. All these weeks, she had tried not to think about the possibility of a child, afraid she would be too disappointed if it didn't pan out. Now that she had actually counted how many times she had missed her monthly, she knew that there was no other explanation, and sheer exhilaration filled her. Cathrynn imagined a little boy with jet black hair and midnight blue eyes, the image of his father.

She watched Duncan stable his horse and stride toward the house, his powerful body moving gracefully through the thick snow at his feet. Spotting her at the window, he grinned and waved just before he entered the mansion. Cathrynn had sent Megan to him with a message to meet her in

her bedchamber when he finished working his horse. She had meant to tell him about his mother's journal yesterday, but the news about the baby had wiped everything from their minds, and they had finished out the day lying in splendor before the fireplace. She didn't know exactly what she would say to him, only that it must be done soon.

He strode through the door, snatching her into his arms and pressing his cold lips to her warm, fragrant skin. He grinned down at her. "What's wrong, sweetheart? Didn't you get enough of me last night?" he teased.

She stepped away from him, nervously wringing her hands. "Sit down, Duncan. I have something extremely important to tell you."

His eyes narrowed, the teasing light disappearing. Crossing his arms and leaning against the door, he eyed her warily. His quiet anger reminded her of the first day on the *Highlander*, when she had found out he was the Black Knight. He waited patiently for her to say something, his body tensing more and more for every second she didn't speak. It was obvious he thought she somehow found him lacking, but she could think of nothing to say to reassure him.

Cathrynn laid her hand on his arm, feeling the bunched muscles beneath his shirt. “Duncan, this has nothing to do with you and I. It’s about your mother.”

His dark brow furrowed, confusion clouding his eyes. “What could you possibly have to say about my mother, Cathrynn? I don’t wish to talk about her.”

“I know, but I do. I found something, Duncan, while you were away on the ship.” She took the diary from a drawer and held it out to him, explaining, “I found it behind the vanity, where your grandmother must have hidden it. Take it, Duncan. It will answer all the questions you’ve been struggling with all these years.”

Taking the book from her, he opened the cover, the blood draining from his face as realization sank in. “No.” The one word came out raw and scratchy.

“I read it,” she said quietly. “Your grandfather lied to you, Duncan. You must read it so you can put all the bitterness behind you. Don’t you want to know what really happened? You were right all along, your mother was strong and good, and she loved you.”

The miniature portraits fell from the book and

Duncan bent to retrieve them, a look of tremendous pain crossing his features at seeing the likeness of his mother. He grabbed the pictures and spun toward the door. Cathrynn held out a hand to stop him, but he slammed from the room. She heard him stomp down the stairs and, after a moment, a door banged shut. He was in the study, she knew, where his brandy would be in easy reach when he needed it. Her heart went out to him, but she knew there was nothing she could do to help him until he read the journal. "Dear God," she prayed, "please help him understand."

With a sigh, Cathrynn headed downstairs to oversee the cleaning of the chandeliers. As she passed the hall table, a letter in the pile of mail caught her attention. Her breath caught as she picked it up, noticing the return address. The chandeliers forgotten, she hurried into the parlor where she could read her letter privately. With trembling hands, she opened the letter from Duncan's mother and read:

My dearest Cathrynn,

I am so happy to hear from you! I had all but given up hope that I would ever see my beloved son again. I am glad to know that he is well. I would love to see Duncan

again, even for a short time. But I believe he no longer has warm feelings for me. It is my own fault, you know. I should have left him with the McCleods all those years ago, but I didn't want to leave him. Because of my selfishness, I lost him for good, ruining his life in the process.

Angelica tells me you make him happy. I cannot thank you enough for coming into his life and seeing past all the bitterness and hate that I allowed to be rained down upon him. Angelica says he smiles again. How I would love to see that special smile that always succeeded in warming my heart.

I know now that he never received my journal, that he's believed we've been dead for all these years. We're at a crossroads now, too many decisions to make and no guarantee that any of them will be the right one. What should I do, Cathrynn? You know him better than any of us now. What can I do to make him understand?

I've enclosed a letter for him, but you must decide if he should have it or not. All our hopes rely on you, Cathrynn. We're counting on you to help us like you promised in your letter. All our hopes and prayers are with you, my dear, and our deepest thanks. Take care of yourself and Duncan. We're

looking forward to hearing from you soon.

All our love,

Michael and Elizabeth McKleighan

Tucking the letter carefully in her pocket, Cathrynn again went to oversee the chandeliers that were being cleaned, her mind on Duncan and his parents. By the time she reached the entryway, however, the last chandelier had just been cleaned. Sighing, she dismissed the cleaning party and decided to explore the attic, for she could find nothing else to do to keep her mind from her husband, and she didn't want to disturb him. She knew he'd need time to decide whether or not to read the journal and, if he did read it, to digest the information therein.

When she reached the top of the narrow stairs that led to the attic, she looked around in awe. Years and years of unwanted furniture and clothing lined the walls, old paintings, books, shoes. Crossing to the window, she flung the curtains wide to let in more light, coughing at the cloud of dust that arose.

Clapping her hand together, she headed to the row of paintings stacked against the wall, excitement overcoming her. The first picture was of the orchard in springtime bloom, followed by a selection of lords and ladies that she had no interest in. About halfway through the stack she came across a portrait of a man with very dark, evil eyes. His skin was very pale, his mouth drawn tightly closed, eyes narrowed. His light yellow hair coupled with his skin gave him a colorless, ghostly look. Cathrynn knew without seeing the name that this was Duncan's grandfather. She shivered turning the portrait to face the wall. Behind it was a likeness of a very frail looking woman. She was very pretty, with dark golden hair and skin like porcelain, but her brown eyes held a hint of fear. Duncan's grandmother. Setting it aside, Cathrynn smiled at the last picture. Duncan's mother, Elizabeth, as she must have been before she was banned from her own home. Blinking back tears, she stood, wiping dust from her skirts and noticing that the room had become much darker.

Cathrynn hurried to her bedroom, changed into a fresh lavender gown, and made her way to the kitchen. Marian greeted her with a warm smile. "There you are, my dear. Ye

missed lunch, ye did, and I bet you're near to starving!"

Cathrynn smiled sheepishly as her stomach growled.

"Did Duncan come out of the study yet?"

"No, poor dear. We left a tray outside his door but, like you, he never touched it."

Opening the study door without knocking, Cathrynn stepped through and closed it softly behind her. She shivered, noticing there was no fire in the fireplace. How long had he been stewing in the cold darkness? Duncan was standing at the window, a glass of brandy in his hand. The journal sat on the desk, seemingly untouched. The setting sun cast shadows throughout the room, so she busied herself lighting lamps and called a servant to start a fire. Once the room was warm and cheery, she stepped up beside him, taking the glass from him and setting it on the desk. She slipped her arms around his waist, laying a kiss on his back. "Duncan, did you read the journal?" she asked softly.

It was a long time before he answered. She kept her arms about him, waiting until he was ready to talk. "I read it," he rasped hoarsely.

Taken by surprise, she gasped and moved up beside

him. “What do you think?”

Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair and sank wearily to the leather chair. “I think my life has become one enormous lie. Everything I’ve known to be true in the last ten years has been nothing but lies. And even though I realize what I found in the journal is potentially good news, it brings up so many questions.” He turned eyes to her that had gone black with pain. “Are they actually alive, Cathrynn? And if so.....Where have they been the last ten years?”

Cathrynn felt his anguish so deeply her knees buckled, seating her in his lap. She pulled Duncan’s head to her shoulder, smoothing her hair from his forehead as if he were a child. She realized with horror that he was crying, his broad shoulders shaking, and she wrapped both arms around him to offer whatever comfort she could. A decade of bottled up emotions tumbled forth, and Cathrynn felt hot, scalding tears burn tracks down her own cheeks, wishing she could take his pain and make it her own. She would do anything rather than see him suffer like this.

“Everything will be all right, my love. Don’t worry, everything will turn out for the best,” she crooned. “I pulled

the truth from Lady Ambrosia, and I can explain everything that happened to your parents. They are alive. They want to see you, Duncan. They love you.” She pulled the letter from her pocket, pressing it into his hands. “This letter came today. It’s from your mother. See what she has to say,” she pleaded, “put all the hurt in the past and start fresh.”

“I’ve been blaming her all along.”

“That’s not your fault. Your grandfather fed you lie upon lie until you believed what he said. You were just a boy, Duncan. Give your parents a chance, give *yourself* a chance, and reclaim what you’ve lost. Take the leap of faith, darling, and believe in them again.”

Duncan was quiet for a long moment, his gaze reflective. Cathrynn knelt between his knees, her teal green eyes beseeching him. The warm glow of the firelight cast a halo about her, turning her hair to liquid gold. He touched a strand tenderly, letting the softness caress his fingers.

“Duncan, I want to go there,” she said softly.

His eyes widened in surprise. “To Scotland?”

“Yes! I know this is all a shock to you, but wouldn’t you like to go? To see your parents again? To receive all the

answers you've been looking for?"

From deep within a sigh arose and escaped past Duncan's lips. He stared into the fire, simultaneously fighting and welcoming the memories that flowed freely through his mind. Memories that he had held at bay for so long. Almost against his will he felt the pain that had been with him these last ten years begin to fade, replaced by a hope that he was afraid to feel. Gazing down at his wife, her angelic features full of hope, he knew he could not deny her such a small request. Could not deny himself. "I suppose we could visit while we're out on the ship this year."

Cathrynn shook her head. "I don't want to visit, Duncan. I want to live there."

He came to his feet so forcefully she almost fell backwards. She stood up to face him, praying she was doing the right thing. She could see the conflicting emotions in his eyes, knew that he wanted to return to Scotland more than anything else. "I can't do it, Cathrynn. I can't leave everything here and move to Scotland. You are asking too much."

She was asking him to reclaim his life, the one he

wanted. “Why? We have nothing here in England. I *hate* this place, Duncan. Ever since the first day I set foot through these doors I’ve hated it. I have worked my fingers to the bone trying to change everything--the house, the servants, even myself. But no matter what I do it still feels the same. I never met your grandfather, Duncan, but I can *feel* him here. His bitterness, his hatred. I have opened every window in this house to chase away the shadows, but they still remain.” She took a shuddering breath, all the emotions she’d tried to hide now coming to the surface and bursting forth. She sighed quietly, laying a hand on her husband’s arm. “I don’t want to raise our baby here, Duncan. I don’t want our child to grow up under darkness and fear. I don’t want to watch you work yourself into an early grave slaving over a job that you hate. We deserve more out of life, and we can have it. If you’ll only take that step.

“A leap of faith,” she whispered.

“I have a duty, Cathrynn. I am honor bound to carry on the line and keep the estate running. And it that’s not exactly what I wanted from life, well, I wasn’t left much choice.”

“This burden was never yours to carry. The duty to continue the family was your grandfather’s, and he failed. Why should you remain here looking after the business of a man who hated you, who caused all the pain in your life? If you leave here, you will still be a man of honor, Duncan.”

Back rigid, Duncan gazed into her eyes for along time, fighting his feelings. After what seemed like an eternity, his shoulders relaxed and he gathered her into his arms. “Dear God in heaven, Cathrynn,” he whispered against her hair. “*I want to go home.*”

Fiercely, she held him to her, tears of relief coursing down her cheeks wetting his shirt. “I love you, Duncan, and I would follow you to the ends of the earth if that’s what you wanted.”

Gently, he stroked her cheek and replied in a thick voice, “I love ye too, my darlin’.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cathrynn hummed quietly to herself as she completed

the finishing touches to a nursery she would never use. The curtains rustled at the open windows, allowing the fresh June morning air to flow into the room. She smiled at the view of the orchard in bloom as she stocked the drawers with tiny clothes. They were finally almost ready to leave England, but they didn't want anyone to know that they were never returning. Her smile grew as she felt the movement within her swollen belly. Just a few more days to go before she could hold her baby in her arms, touch his tiny cheeks, little hand, soft derriere. She pictured a baby boy with coal black hair and midnight blue eyes, sweet dimples appearing at every smile.

Lost in thought, she didn't hear Duncan approach until he pressed himself against her back, his arms stretching around her. She leaned her head on his chest, closing her eyes and welcoming his warmth. He nibbled her ear, whispering naughty words in a husky voice.

Cathrynn turned in his arms, laughing. "Did you talk to Ian yet?"

"I just came from his estate. He's spent days trying to convince Melissa to join us, but she's still resisting."

"But why?" she cried, genuinely upset. "If she goes

to Scotland wit us, they can get married there and no one here will ever know she was a servant.”

Duncan caressed one of her golden ringlets absently.

“Not everyone looks to the positive like you do, my darlin’.

She’s afraid the truth would someday surface and Ian would be scandalized. She doesn’t wanna hurt him.”

She threw her hands into the air impatiently. “That girl is stubborn as a mule! I suppose I’ll have to speak with her on his behalf. I wonder how many lives have been ruined by misplaced honor.”

“I’m afraid I have more bad new, sweetheart.”

Her teal green eyes rose slowly to his, apprehension apparent. Every day that brought them closer to leaving England for good also brought the fear that something may keep them from leaving. Duncan smiled, revealing the well-loved dimples that appeared more and more often now.

“Don’t worry so much, Cathrynn, nothing will keep us from going to Scotland. Ye have my word on it.” He spoke softly, soothing her fears. “I have some last minute business to take care of in London, so I’ll be gone for a few days. Ye do understand, darlin’, I have to leave the estate in the best

possible condition. I'll be back in two, three days at the most."

"I want to go with you."

"No, ye need to stay here where you'll be well taken care of."

"But Duncan--"

"No. I'll not discuss it further."

She knew from the tone of his voice that he would brook no argument. He gathered her into his arms. "I'll miss ye every moment I'm gone, my love."

Cathrynn gave him a watery smile. "I suppose you're going right now?"

"The sooner I take care of this the sooner I'll be home."

"Hurry home," she said, giving him a long goodbye kiss. As he walked out the door, she sighed and sank down into a chair, fingering a small yellow blanket. Feeling suddenly tired, she made her way wearily to her room for a much-needed nap.

She awoke a few hours later feeling refreshed. The beautiful morning had turned dreary and cool, and she could

hear the soft patter of raindrops against the window.

Stretching, she propped the pillows and sat up, ringing for Megan. The girl responded quickly, as she always did, smiling cheerfully at her mistress. "Lady Cathrynn, this note came for you."

Eyes alight, she reached for the envelope, expecting a letter from Lady Ambrosia. She scanned it quickly, threw the bedclothes off and stood. "Get my dark green dress and cloak, Megan. I'm going to London!"

Horror filled the girl's eyes. "You can't do that, milady! None of the drivers are here today. They all received an invitation to a party of some sort at the saloon outside town."

"Dale will take me."

"Dale is helping out at the Ambrosia estate."

"I'll drive myself, then."

"My lady, have you forgotten your condition?!"

Cathrynn glanced down at her protruding stomach, smiling ruefully. "Of course not, don't be silly. Duncan's changed his mind, he wants me to meet him at the inn."

"May I come with you?"

“Thank you, Megan, but I need you to finish packing the baby’s clothes. Don’t worry about me.”

“Lady Cathrynn, please!” she pleaded desperately.

“You can’t just ride off to London without protection. And I find it very strange that Lord Willoughby would ask you to meet him without sending someone to fetch you.”

“I’m sure he expected someone to be here to accompany me.”

Megan grasped the edge of Cathrynn’s cloak as she swept from the room. “Please, I beg you, take someone with you!”

Cathrynn merely patted her hand and continued through the door. In the stable she asked Benjamin to saddle her horse, and started out toward London, her heart singing. She only knew the way vaguely, but she wasn’t worried, for the horses knew where to go, and once she was in town she’d have no trouble finding the Silver Spoon Inn. Smiling secretively to herself, she concentrated all her attention on reaching her husband, never suspecting that she was being followed.

Hours later, when Megan had finished packing the baby clothes and all but a few of Cathrynn's gowns, she abandoned the rest of her chores in favor of pacing the room nervously. She wrung her hands, the uneasy feeling she'd experienced when her ladyship left increasing with every passing minute. She shouldn't have let her go alone, but what could she do? As friendly as her relationship with Lady Cathrynn was, she was still just a servant, having no authority over anyone but herself, and even then very little. She knew as surely as she knew her own name that Lord Willoughby had not sent that letter. Cathrynn was in danger, and she was powerless to help her. She put her head in her hands, tears threatening her chocolate brown eyes. Finally weariness overcame her, and she sank onto the floor in a fitful sleep.

Duncan strode into the cheerful entryway, tired but happy that he'd been able to get home earlier than planned. He handed Daniels his cloak, asking where his wife might be. "I don't know, sir. I haven't seen her since this morning just before you left."

Scowling, Duncan brushed past him and made his

way to the kitchen, calling for Cathrynn. Marian turned from where she was cleaning the dishes, smiling broadly. “Lord Duncan, I didna know ye’d be home so soon. What a pleasant surprise. Have a seat and I’ll make you a late night snack.”

He shook his head abruptly. “Where’s Cathrynn?”

Her brow furrowed. “Why, I don’t know. She went to her room to nap shortly after you left this mornin’. I haven’t seen her since. Megan took her a lunch tray but she didn’t touch a bite.”

“Is she sick?” he asked, concern marring his face.

“No, I don’t think so. Megan takes good care of her, she’d let me know if somethin’ was amiss.” Her gaze turned thoughtful. “Come to think of it, though, I haven’t seen Megan since this mornin’, either.”

Duncan quit the room, his face becoming darker and darker as suspicion crowded his mind. He took the steps two at a time, his boots echoing hollowly off the walls. Throwing open her bedroom door, he strode in, one glance at the bed confirming his suspicion. She was gone. Just as a precaution he checked her wardrobe. It was empty except for a handful of gowns. His eyes closed momentarily and he leaned against the

cool wood, letting reality sink in. She was really gone. The only woman who had ever made him care. The only woman who, he'd thought, had ever cared about him. Leaving the room, he made his way down to the study in a daze.

Pouring himself a healthy dose of brandy, he stared out the window into the black nothingness of the night, mirroring the darkness of facing the rest of his life without Cathrynn. He put his forehead to the cool pane of glass. What a fool he'd been! What a cuckold! He'd believed her, believed she'd loved him. Had believed, in fact, everything that she had ever said to him. Hell, she'd probably been seeing that Austin Greenbush all along! The child she carried could have come from the loins of that bastard!

A few sweet words, some well-placed kindness, and he'd been lost in her. Lost in her deep green eyes that sparkled playfully, in her beautiful smile that he'd thought was meant only for him. Lost in what he now realized had been a web of deceit that had lifted him higher than he'd ever imagined possible only to crush him beneath the cruel truth.

He ignored the voice of reason that berated him for his unfair thoughts. A tiny voice inside his head that conjured

up every selfless thing Cathrynn had ever done for him.

With a growl he put those soft thoughts aside and tossed back the brandy, waiting for the warmth to fill him. It never came. He felt a coldness reaching into the depths of his soul, snatching away every hope, every dream that he'd dared to rekindle since Cathrynn had come into his life. She'd taken everything that was good in him with her, leaving nothing behind but an aching void.

A timid knock at the door barely caught his attention. He growled admittance and was shocked to see who closed the door softly behind her. Megan curtsied politely. "Welcome home, milord."

"What the hell are ye doin' here?!" he roared, his Scottish accent fully evident. "I thought ye'd gone with *her*."

"What? No sir, I tried, but she wouldn't take me with her."

"So she's left all of us then," he muttered.

"Excuse me, sir?" She waited for a reply but none was forthcoming. "All the servants are very worried about her ladyship's disappearance. I just wanted to let you know that I know where she is. At least, I know where she was heading."

“Look Megan, I don’t care where she is or what she’s doing. She’s made a fool of me and run off with her lover. For all I know, the child I thought was mine is actually *his*. So if ye don’t mind, lassie, I’ll hear nothin’ more of her now or ever again. I’ll leave this blasted place as scheduled with nary a look back and good riddance to a wife who was a cheat and a liar.”

Megan was shocked that he, who had been so loving and tender to his wife, would talk of her this way. Her shock quickly turned to anger. She, who had never had much of a temper. That he would speak so disrespectfully of a woman who was everything that was generous appalled her. Taking a deep breath, she looked him square in the eye and said, “Lord Willoughby, I cannot stand by and let you disrespect her ladyship in such a manner. While you sit here drinking spirits and feeling sorry for yourself, she is in serious danger. I knew before she even left that she would be in trouble, but she wouldn’t listen to me. All the drivers and Dale were gone and she insisted on going alone. I tried to stop her, sir, I swear I did, but she was too intent on meeting you in London she wouldn’t even listen to me!”

Crossing the room, Duncan grasped her shoulders and shook roughly. “Dammit lass, quit ye’re babblin’ and tell me what ye’re talking about.”

“A letter was delivered for Lady Cathrynn while she was napping, so I waited to give it to her when she awoke. With the baby coming so soon, I figured she needed her rest. It was a letter from you asking her to meet you in London.”

“I sent no letter!”

“I know that! I tried to tell her you wouldn’t, but she wanted to be with you so desperately she wouldn’t listen to reason.”

“’Twas just a hoax so she could have an excuse to slip out of the house.”

“She is the lady of the manor, she doesn’t need a reason to leave nor does she have to explain herself to her servants. You should know that better than anyone, milord.” Her tone was impertinent, but for once she didn’t care. Her friend was in danger and she would stop at nothing to help save her.

Duncan turned from her, but she grabbed his arm, catching him off guard and spinning him around. “You listen

to me, *sir*. Lady Cathrynn is in danger and I'm not going to stand around and wait for her to be harmed just because you *imagine* she did something against you. I'll resign my post right now and, I'm sure, so will the entire rest of the household and we will go find her ourselves." She opened the door, heartened to find all the servants there, nodding in agreement. She turned to him with sad brown eyes. "And what a pity, milord, that her servants have more faith and love for her than her own husband." With that, she quietly closed the door.

Duncan swore softly and reached for his brandy, but the picture of Cathrynn he'd hung above the fireplace stopped him in mid-air. And suddenly he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what Megan had said was true. Cathrynn had done nothing wrong. She was faithful to him, loved him, and was right now in serious trouble. So, who *had* sent the letter? And what would he have to gain from kidnapping Cathrynn?

Throwing the door open, he strode into the throng of servants in the entryway and began assigning orders. He formed search parties, sent Megan to find the note that had been delivered, and asked the kitchen help to keep hot food on around the clock. When they found her--and he swore they

would--he wanted a hot meal ready for her. Just as he was about to lead out the first posse, the kitchen door swung open and the stable boy, Benjamin, stumbled in gasping for breath. The women clucked over the poor boy and tried to sit him down at the table, but he brushed them away.

“Lord Willoughby, I have news o’ Lady Cathrynn.”

Duncan clenched his hands into fists to keep from shaking the words from the boy. He forced himself to wait patiently while Benjamin caught his breath. “This afternoon I was saddlin’ a horse to be exercised when I head someone come into the stable. ‘Twas milady, and she asked me to saddle her a horse and then took off down the road. I was worried, ya know, her bein’ a lady alone, so I followed her. She rode toward London, but just before we reached the city a man rode out o’ the woods. They talked for a while, then when she tried to ride away he grabbed the reins and held a gun to her.” Duncan could tell the boy was scared, for his words were tumbling over one another in rapid succession. “I wanted to come for help right then, but I didn’t know where he was takin’ milady, so I followed until they stopped at that old shop what burned last year. He took her in there, milord.”

The panicked child tugged on Duncan's sleeve. "C'mon, we have to go save her! She's scared somethin' awful, even though she yelled and kicked at the man. We have to save her!"

Duncan patted his shoulder comfortingly. "Ye've done a good job, Benjamin, but now ye need to stay here and rest. Marian has a hot meal ready and--"

"But milord, I have ta show you--"

"Ye're a good and thorough man, Ben. Without your help we'd yet be searching the streets for Lady Cathrynn. I'm proud of you, but I think you can better serve us here. You see, we are all going after my lady, and we need you to look after the women here."

Without another word he motioned to his men and they left the house, mounted their horses and rode hell-bent for London. As they came upon the Ambrosia estate, they encountered Ian riding towards them. He waved his arm. "Duncan! We received word that Cathrynn has been abducted. I thought you could use some reinforcements!"

Without pausing Duncan waved his thanks as men poured from within the walls of the estate and Ian fell in beside

his friend.

Cathrynn sat on a chair in the cold, abandoned store, her hands tied behind her, her ankles bound to the legs of the chair. The only source of heat was a small pot-bellied stove that smoked incessantly, giving the room a gloomy feel. She watched her captor as he moved about the room lighting candles and wondered what ever could have possessed him to do such a horrible thing to her. And what would Duncan think when he found her gone? His trust had been so hard won and still was so fragile. Would he believe she had left him or would he realize she had had no choice?

With a bravado she didn't feel, Cathrynn addressed her tormentor. "You know you've signed your own death warrant by abducting me, don't you? Duncan isn't a fool, he will know you're the one behind this."

The man turned cold, hard eyes to her and snickered. "By the time your husband makes it back from his business trip and finds you gone we'll both be far away from here. I'm no fool, either, I know how to cover my tracks. That's how I got away when I tried to snatch you from your party."

Cathrynn gasped involuntarily, even though she had put two and two together long ago and realized he had been her attacker. “They didn’t bother looking up in the tree, did they? What a bunch of bumbling idiots! They had no idea how I escaped without leaving my tracks, and all the time I was just above their heads laughing at them. It’s been that way all my life. Because of the image I portray I can do anything I want and no one suspects me. Your precious husband is no different.”

“I would think you would know better by now than to underestimate Duncan. He won’t let me go so easily. When he finds out what you’ve done it doesn’t matter where you are, he’ll find you. And when he does, you’ll wish you’d never crossed him.”

He laughed maniacally. “But that’s what is so lovely about my plan, my dear. He never will find out. He thinks you have left him.”

“He’ll never believe that!” she spat out with a vehemence she didn’t feel.

“Of course he will. I sent a note to his hotel telling him you’ve run off with your ex-fiancee. It is almost midnight,

I'm sure he's read it by now. Oh, he is probably drowning his problems in a glass of brandy right about now."

Tears burned Cathrynn's eyes, the picture he drew too vivid in her mind. What if he actually got away with this crazy scheme? Would Duncan always believe that she had left him for Austin? And what of their child? He was due to be born so very soon now, would he grow up without ever knowing his father? And Duncan, she couldn't bear to think of how he would react to yet another horrendous disappointment from someone he loved and trusted. He would most assuredly never trust again.

Straightening her shoulders and squaring her chin, she vowed that she would not let that happen. Somehow, someway, she would have to save her family. They had just so recently found happiness, she could not allow it to be taken away. Duncan's life had always been controlled by the people surrounding him and his own misguided sense of honor. Now it was time for someone to fight *for* him for a change. That someone would have to be her. Now if she could only stall for enough time to form a plan.

"So when are we leaving?"

He turned from the stove, coughing as a blast of smoke engulfed him. “Pipe down, I’m busy.”

“I have a right to know when and where you are taking me.”

“You don’t have a right to anything unless I say you do. At the moment, you have the *right* to speak. Misuse it and I will put a gag in your mouth.”

Cathrynn sighed in frustration. “I cannot believe you are treating me this way! What kind of a barbarian are you?!”

He advanced toward her slowly, coming to stand directly in front of her. He reached out a hand and, instead of striking her as she expected, laid it upon her belly. The baby moved restlessly beneath his touch, as if feeling the tension flow through his fingertips. He looked up at her, a brief look of wonder touching his eyes before the hardness returned. He stood like that for what seemed like hours, but was only a few moments. Their gazes locked, they seemed to speak to each other telepathically.

In a sudden movement he turned away and strode across the room, putting distance between them. He paced the length of the room for a while, glancing at her from time to

time, his expression changing from bewildered to angry and back again with alarming speed. She didn't know what to say, she was rooted to the spot, her eyes never leaving his face. Instead of slowing down, he became more and more agitated with each step he took.

He scowled suddenly, stopping in mid-step. "You don't seem very surprised that I am capable of this kind of behavior, *Cathrynn*."

She shrugged. "I've always sensed something about you that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I guess mental instability is something I haven't had enough experience with to foresee in someone," she replied coolly.

He smiled at her, seemingly amused at her statement, until his eyes again returned to her swollen stomach. "How much longer?" he demanded.

Trying to steer his thoughts away from the baby, she changed the subject. "Why won't you tell me where you're taking me? Have you not decided yet?"

He stood stock still, his eyes boring into her, for so long she started to squirm nervously. "How much longer?" he asked slowly, enunciating every word.

Cathrynn swallowed nervously as fear gripped her.

“I’m not sure. A week, maybe more.”

“I suppose you are hoping for a little boy who’ll look just like *him*.”

Wisely, she chose to remain silent. He resumed his pacing, the emotions crossing his features turning more and more to anger. He began mumbling to himself as he walked, sending a chill down Cathrynn’s spine. She knew she had to think fast if she wanted any chance for escape, but her mind was a blank. She had no idea how she could get herself untied, let alone get outside without his seeing her.

So she watched him, her eyes following him back and forth, silently hoping and praying for a miracle to save her and her unborn child. Because, although she knew nothing about mental illness or this very violent side of him, she did know that he could do serious harm to her, given the chance.

All at once he stopped, pinning her with his icy gaze.

“Do you love him, Cathrynn?”

She didn’t know how to respond without making the situation worse.

“*Do you?!*” he thundered.

Cathrynn jumped, becoming painfully aware of the growing numbness in her hands and feet. “Yes!” she hissed. Wasn’t it said that the ‘truth shall set you free’?

He spun around, shoving all the pots and pans from a shelf behind him then grasping a small table in the corner and throwing it through the window. Immediately a cool air swept into the room bringing rain with it. She felt a fine mist shower her face. It was like a taste of freedom.

“What do you want me to say, Austin?!” she cried. “Do you want me to say that you are the only man I’ve ever loved? That I could love no one more than I loved you? It’s not true! I’m sorry, but it’s not true! I never loved you in that way, never felt passion or longing or anything other than affection for you. I loved you in my own way, but it was never like what I feel for Duncan. You were more like a brother to me than anything else.” Tears streamed down her face as sobs wracked her body.

Defeated, Austin sank down to the floor. “I know,” he whispered. His eyes sought and held hers. “I loved you so much, Cathrynn, I couldn’t wait until our wedding night. I wanted you so bad I could taste you, every night you were in

my dreams. Then, the week before our wedding I heard you say it, that you only felt a sisterly affection for me. It was then I knew that I could never marry you knowing what I did.” He was speaking calmly now, in a conversational tone.

“So I hired the thugs to kidnap you and sell you into slavery.” Cathrynn was too stunned to respond, she just slumped further into the hard chair. “It was very easy, actually. I wore a disguise when I hired them, just as a precaution, but I paid them so handsomely they never would have pointed the finger at me. And of course no one would have thought to suspect me, since I was so grief stricken. After a while I got tired of your brothers begging me to help find you. You would never believe how boring it is to search for someone you *know* you’ll never find. So I left letting everyone think that my grief for you drove me away. I decided to visit a friend in London, and imagine my surprise when I found you here living better than you had in the States! Married to a bloody nobleman, no less!”

He sighed in exasperation. “You’ve made my life such a mess, little Cathrynn. Once I knew where you were again I couldn’t get you out of my mind. I knew I had to have

you this time, even just once, or I'd never get any peace. Your precious husband keeps such a good watch on you that it's taken me all these months to finally catch you. A mighty brilliant idea, if I do say so myself, to send those notes to you and your lord. He'll never come looking for you, Cathrynn. You know that, don't you?"

She knew. Dear God, Duncan wasn't even supposed to return from his trip for another day or so. Even then, he wouldn't search for her. He would board the ship, head for Scotland, and try to forget that he had ever met her. Even now, he was probably knee-deep in a glass of brandy, berating himself for ever having trusted her.

Who would save her? No one knew where she was, the servants wouldn't question her whereabouts, thinking her to be with Duncan. She couldn't save herself, for she'd lost all feeling in her hands and feet, and the rest of her was numb with astonishment. She was floored, defeated by the fact that someone she had cared so much about could do something so horrendous to her.

Austin stood up and advanced toward her. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and cried silently, "*Where are*

you , Duncan? I need you!”

Duncan raced toward London, the huge posse thundering behind him. He ran his horse to the limit, but it still wasn't fast enough to satisfy him. He prayed that she would be safe when he reached her, prayed it wasn't too late for the small life growing inside her. With every beat of the hooves he willed her to be strong, for he was on his way to save her. Funny, he would have expected to feel the urge to pound Austin Greenbush into a bloody pulp, but he didn't. Instead all he could think about was gathering his wife into his arms and assuring her that she was safe and forever would be safe with him. He was desperate to feel her against him, unharmed.

As they rode into the city, Duncan stopped the men and instructed them to break up and quietly surround the abandoned store. He then rode to the front of the building and dismounted, his face set in determination.

Austin stroked Cathrynn's silky hair with one hand, her cheek with the other. "You are so pretty," he breathed.

“I’ve dreamed of touching you like this, little Cathrynn. Now you will finally be mine.” He touched his lips to hers and she groaned, feeling a pain deep inside her stomach.

Austin smiled, murmuring as he trailed wet kisses down her neck. “I knew it wouldn’t take you long to realize that you’ve been wrong about me all these years. Regretfully, we’ll only have tonight before we must once again part. Maybe those bumbling idiots won’t botch the job this time and sell you to someone who wants a wife. Once you are rid of the burden you’re carrying and you have your figure back, I’m sure you’ll fetch a good price. The kid of yours will probably bring an even better price, times being how they are. But there’s plenty of time to worry about that later, right now you belong to me. Only me.”

Cathrynn’s eyes rolled back and she groaned again, the pain coming sharper this time. Her mind blank, she was desperately close to losing consciousness when he shook her shoulders. “Wake up, dammit. I want you to feel it when I take you. I want you to know who’s dominating you.”

Cathrynn opened her eyes a slit but closed them quickly when she saw him towering above her. She tried to

take a steadying breath, but pain again seized her.

Her tormentor was unaware of her condition as he continued his attention on her neck, unbuttoning her blouse to grope her full breasts. “Say my name, little Cathrynn. Call out for me, tell me you’re mine.”

She was silent, so deep in her own world of pain and anguish that his words barely registered. Again he shook her, his voice becoming rougher. “Say it. Tell me you belong to me.”

The door flew open, banging against the wall, Duncan standing in the opening, his fury a visible force around him. “The hell she will! Get away from my wife, Greenbush!” he growled, his quiet anger so strong it seemed to ricochet around the room.

Cathrynn’s head came up. “Duncan,” she whispered in relief.

“I’m here, sweetheart. You are safe now.” He spoke to her soothingly even as he tracked the retreating Austin around the room. “Ye’ll not get away from me, Greenbush,” he said quietly as he grabbed him by the collar and threw him against the wall.

Austin picked himself up and ran through a door
Duncan assumed lead outside. Leaving him to the rest of the
men, he turned to his wife and gently untied her. "Cathrynn,
I'm so sorry," he whispered to her. "I should have been here
for you."

"Duncan? Is it really you?" She tried to throw her
arms about him, but they wouldn't move. Her body felt so
heavy.

Duncan gathered her to his chest, pressing kisses to
her hair. "It's me, darlin'. Ye didn't think you could get rid of
me that easily, did ye?" She felt so small, sounded so fragile,
her voice but the barest whisper.

"I didn't think you'd come. He sent you a note. I
didn't think you would believe in me enough....."

He closed his eyes against the wave of guilt that
engulfed him at her words. He rested his forehead on hers. "I
believe in you," he whispered.

As he picked her up and strode toward the front door,
a loud blast sounded from behind them, then suddenly the
room was swarming wit men. The gun was easily wrested
from Austin's grip and he was tied up and slung upon a horse.

There was so much confusion that it took a few minutes for anyone to realize that Duncan, his face white, had sunk to his knees on the floor, his wife still clutched tightly in his arms. Blood leaked from a large gash on the side of his head. Ian was the first to reach him, taking Cathrynn from his arms and helping him to his feet. "Can you walk?" He merely nodded, stumbling drunkenly behind his friend, his eyes fastened protectively on his wife.

Cathrynn drifted in and out of consciousness during the ride home, the pain in her middle growing in intensity. She was aware of the gentle sway of the horse beneath her and could feel herself resting against Duncan's chest, although she was unsure if he were holding her up or if it was the other way around. She knew he'd been hurt, but her mind was so foggy she couldn't remember exactly what had happened.

The journey home seemed to take forever, but the cool night air and light drizzle served to clear her head some, and she was awake when they finally rode up to the house. The lawn was covered with what was surely every servant in their employ, and Marian ran up to her the minute the horse stopped. Duncan dismounted slowly and reached up to help

her down. When her feet hit the ground, she doubled over in pain.

Marian gasped. “Milady, what is it? Did he hurt her?” she asked of Duncan.

He shook his head, scooping her into his arms. “I don’t know. She’s fainted several times, but I’m not sure what the problem is.”

“The baby,” Cathrynn whispered. “The baby is coming.”

“Oh, dear Lord, what timing,” Marian exclaimed. “‘Tis a good thing we sent for the doctor already, just in case.”

Ian hurried toward them, a worried frown marring his handsome face. He tried to take Cathrynn into his arms but Duncan pushed him away and strode quickly toward the house. “Don’t be a fool, Duncan, let me help you. Your head is leaking like a damn sieve!”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of my own wife,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

Cathrynn’s pain filled eyes glanced up at him, noting for the first time the wound at his temple. She reached trembling fingers up to soothe him, blood staining her skin.

“Dear heaven, Duncan, you’ve been shot!” she murmured weakly, tears for him filling her eyes.

He smiled down at her, his midnight blue eyes shining. “’Tis nothing, my love, but a small scratch. I hardly even feel it.”

Ian followed him to the bottom of the grand staircase, watching to be sure they made it to the top, then threw his riding gloves onto the floor in frustrated anger at his friend’s stubbornness.

Laying Cathrynn gently upon her bed, Duncan replaced her tattered clothing with a soft cotton gown and wiped the dirt from her face. Megan stood hesitantly at the foot of the bed, wanting to help but unsure of what she should do. Duncan glanced up at her, understanding and gratitude showing in his eyes. “Why don’t ye see if Marian needs help in the kitchen, I want to take care of Cathrynn myself.” He watched her make her way dejectedly across the room and as she opened the door, he said, “Megan, thank you for shaking some sense into me. I may be the one who brought her home, but you are most assuredly the one who saved her.”

Blinking away tears, she smiled slightly and left the

room. Turning his attention back to his wife, he was embarrassed to see her eyes open and resting on him. She touched his hand. "You'll never know how much your words meant to her, Duncan. She worships you like a god." A smile began on her lips but ended in a grimace.

"Cathrynn?" he gripped her hand, wishing he could take her pain away.

She took a deep breath as the contraction passed, smiling reassuringly at him. "Don't worry about me, I'm only have a baby. He didn't hurt me, I think I just fainted from fear for the baby. But I wonder.....how did you ever manage to find me? Austin's plan seemed foolproof."

He stroked her hair as he spoke, trying to soothe some of the anguish she bravely tried to hide from him. "As I rode into London this morning I realized that it doesn't really matter how I leave the estate, only that I leave. So I finished the most pressing business--I had to make sure the servants that stay have a place to work--and then I came home. But you weren't here, and no one knew where you were." His eyes were dark with guilt when they met hers. "I thought ye left me, Cathrynn. Your clothes were gone from the wardrobe,

there was no sign of ye. If it hadn't been for Megan, I may still be in the study with only my brandy for company. She made me admit to myself how wrong I was. I'm not worthy to ask your forgiveness, sweetheart, but I swear if ye'll let me I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to ye."

She touched his cheek lightly. "There's nothing to forgive. I can't say I wouldn't have thought the same thing if I'd been in your place. But what I really need to know is how you *found* me. That old store was so hidden that he lived in it for all these months and no one ever knew he was there. How did you know?"

Duncan's smile lit up his face, the beloved dimple appearing in his cheek. "Well, milady, ye basically save yourself. 'Tis because of the love ye bestow on our servants that I was able to find you. Young Benjamin saw ye leave alone and followed behind to see ye safely to your destination. When Greenbush kidnapped you, he rode along until he knew where ye'd be kept."

The pain deepened yet again, and Cathrynn could no longer hide some of her contractions. She squeezed her husband's hand, her eyes tightly closed. Where was the

doctor?! It was becoming unbearable. Not only were the contractions stronger, but her back and head hurt, and she hadn't felt the baby move in quite some time. A tear slid onto her cheek, and as if from far away, she felt Duncan catch it on his fingertip. How much longer could she stand the torment?

Duncan strode into the kitchen, the bright light hurting his eyes after being accustomed to the soft glow in the bedroom. He was surprised to find Dale and Marian standing in a corner, quietly arguing. He pierced them with his gaze, his tone brusque. "Ye sent for me?"

Dale was the first to address him. "How is the little lady?"

Running a hand through his hair, he said impatiently, "Not well. Where in the hell is that damned doctor?"

"I sent for him hours ago," Marian said. "Sit down for a moment so I can tend to your head. Megan is with her and she will be fine without ye for a while." He obeyed reluctantly. As she began to wipe the dried blood from his wound, she was relieved to find that it was, indeed, just a flesh wound. When she had cleaned and wrapped his head, Dale

gave him a letter that had just been delivered. After scanning it hurriedly, he jumped to his feet and began pacing the room agitatedly.

“The doctor won’t be coming.”

“What!” they exclaimed in unison.

“It seems that the good Dr. Johnson drunk himself into a stupor and passed out at the saloon in town some time ago. His assistant is out on calls and is not expected in until much later.” He threw his hands out. “What are we going to do?!”

Dale gave his wife a meaningful look. “I guess that settles it, then. Ye have to help her.”

Marian turned panic-stricken eyes to her husband and sank down into a chair. She shook her head and whispered, “No. I can’t do it, Dale, don’t ask it of me.”

He bent down on one knee in front of her, taking her chin in his hand. “’Twasn’t yer fault, darlin’, what happened all those years ago. Ye have to put it in the past now, the little lady needs ye.”

Duncan scowled down at them both. “What the hell are ye talking about?”

Dale stood, facing him. "Marian is a midwife."

Duncan's eyes lit up and he picked the woman up, twirling her around the room, only to set her down again when he noticed the dejected look on her face. "I'm sorry, Duncan, but I cannot help her. It's been years since I was a midwife, and even then--"

"She's lost her confidence. A long time ago, she delivered a baby that tried to make an appearance months too soon. The baby didn't make it. I've tried to tell her 'twas through no fault of her own, but she hasn't birthed a baby since."

Turning to his long-time friend, he took her hand and hugged her to him. "You are the only one who can help her now. I have faith in you, Marian."

Taking a deep breath and squaring her shoulders, she gathered some supplies and followed Duncan.

Cathrynn opened her eyes when she heard Duncan's voice and held her hand out to him. She rested her head on his arm, trying to draw strength from him. "It hurts," she whispered in his ear. "I can't stand it anymore, it just gets worse and worse and--"

Suddenly she stopped speaking and even seemed to stop breathing, her face turning an alarming shade of purple.

Duncan didn't know what to do. "Marian! Come quickly, I don't know--" his voice broke with emotion.

Hurrying over, she took one look at Cathrynn and began to roll up the sleeves on her blouse. Gone was the fear and uncertainty that had plagued her only moments before. She was ready for whatever happened, ready to bring a new life into the world and put an end to her friend's suffering. She touched Cathrynn's cheek, speaking softly. "Cathrynn dear, can you hear me?"

She moved restlessly in the bed, but nodded. "I'm going to help you, I'm a midwife and know all about birthing babies. I think it's just about time now. Can ye do what I ask of ye?"

Cathrynn nodded, her face again changing to purple. Duncan threw a stricken look to Marian. "Why don't ye wait in the kitchen, son, 'tis almost over."

He refused, the look on his face daring her to argue. She shrugged and began to instruct Cathrynn to spread her legs. She draped sheets over her knees and called Megan to

her side. Duncan's patience snapped. "How can ye be so damned calm when she's suffocating?!"

Marian smiled serenely. "She's fine, darlin', she's merely pushing the baby out. Ah, yes, I can feel the wee head already. Give it another good push, sweetness...good. I know it hurts, but it'll be over very soon now. Duncan, support her head for her. There ye go. Here he comes, not much longer....One more good one, darlin'."

Duncan held Cathrynn up while she worked to deliver the baby, marveling at her strength and courage. After every push she fell back against him, her face lined with exhaustion. Her body seemed to know just when it was time to try again, for she would tense up, squeeze her eyes shut, and hold her breath.

How long they spent that way, he didn't know. Nor was he aware that it was over until he heard a slap and a healthy wail. He gazed down at his wife, only to see her teal eyes shining up at him. Tears streaked her face, her hair covered the pillow, his arm, and half of her upper body, and she was more beautiful in that moment than ever before. He let his head fall onto the breast, his own eyes far from dry,

drinking in her scent and giving thanks for all that he'd been given. He'd almost lost them both, but the horror of the last night faded away in the bright light of their future as a family.

A ray of early morning sunshine fell across the bed and they blinked, each returning from their own thoughts. Marian instructed Megan how to clean the baby, ordered Duncan from the room, and set about cleaning Cathrynn and the bed.

When everything in the room was fresh, Duncan was allowed back in and the servants left the couple alone with their new baby. Reclining on the bed beside his wife, he watched her nurse the baby for the first time, his chest puffed out with pride. The child was perfect. He stroked the ten little fingers, fine black hair, tiny little chin. He kissed the tip of the little nose and asked, "So, what are we going to call--" he paused. "Sweetheart, exactly what is this child?"

She giggled. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I'm sorry to say I can't tell by the face if I've a new son or daughter."

"Daughter," she supplied. "A perfect baby girl. You're not disappointed? That she's not a boy?"

His look was tender upon them. “With all the love you’ve brought me, having a baby girl just means I’m doubly blessed. What do you plan to call her?”

Cathrynn examined her new daughter lovingly. “I’m partial to Kaitrynn, and I’d like to name her for your mother.”

“Kaitrynn Elizabeth McKleighan. I must admit, it has a nice ring to it.” As he caressed her fingers she wound her fist around his thumb. He kissed her little hand. “To Cathrynn and Kaitrynn, the most beautiful women I’ve ever known.” He wrapped his arms securely about them, and the three of them fell into an exhausted slumber.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cathrynn sat in her room on what used to be the *Highlander* nursing Kaitrynn, who had just turned one month old. Her midnight blue eyes and coal black hair attested to her paternity, but the rest of her features were her mother’s. As the baby fed, Cathrynn relaxed and let her mind wander. They had been out to sea for what seemed an eternity, but the

happiness she felt grew with every passing day. As the ship had pulled away from London that first day, she had danced and twirled upon the deck with Duncan, the feeling of freedom almost tangent around them. So many of their friends had chosen to accompany them to Scotland. Of course, Marian and Dale were thrilled to return to their homeland and, although they wouldn't be living in the same household anymore, they promised to settle close by. Megan hadn't had a dry eye for the entire week before they left, so they'd invited her to come along. And, biggest surprise of all, Ian had finally persuaded his mistress Melissa to forget about her background as a servant and marry him in Scotland. Cathrynn had been teaching her the ways of the aristocracy and reassuring her that she'd made the right decision. Although every time Melissa looked at Ian, Cathrynn could tell she'd never have actually denied him anything.

Then there were Duncan and little Kaitrynn. Fatherhood brought out the best in him. Gone were the tense shoulders, the lines on his face, and his forced English accent. He was at peace with himself and his past, eager to begin his future. They had decided it would be best to tie up all ends in

England permanently so they would never be bothered with Willoughby Manor again, and Duncan had also promised to do away with his alter ego, the Black Knight.

Cathrynn brought the baby up to her shoulder for a burp as Duncan strode through the door, whistling. “There are my two favorite girls,” he said jovially, taking a seat across from his wife and pulling out a newspaper. “I got this from a passing ship, listen to this article:

***“Black Knight Fights Last Fight,
Takes Ship Down With Him’***

“The Black Knight, feared pirate of the seas, has fought and lost his last battle. Sadly, the fight ended in the complete and total destruction of both ships involved.

The Black Knight’s ship, Highlander, which for so long had struck terror into the heart of many a merchant, was blown into tiny pieces scattering the ocean with its debris. There were no survivors. The other vessel was owned and occupied by Lord Duncan Willoughby, his wife Lady Cathrynn, and infant daughter. Their ship sank only moments after the explosion of the Highlander, taking all occupants down with it.’”

Duncan grinned at Cathrynn. "It couldn't have been better if we'd planned it ourselves."

Cathrynn giggled. "I might remind you that we did plan it ourselves. You left Daniels with very detailed instructions on how to leak just the right amount of information to the press. And you did a mighty fine job of it, too."

"Do you feel it, Duncan? The whisper of freedom from a life of suppression and distrust? Was it only a year ago that we first arrived at Willoughby together? It seems like an eternity and yet, now that it's over, just a small slice of time out of the pie of life."

"My, my, aren't we philosophical all of a sudden."

Cathrynn laid the baby in her cradle and curled onto Duncan's lap. "I can't help it, I'm just so happy to be chasing our dreams instead of stuck in a life of misery. There's always another choice, and I'm so glad we took ours."

He hugged her to him, kissing the fragrant skin on the inside of her neck. "I love ye, Mrs. McKleighan," he whispered. "I've another surprise for ye. We've just docked."

Cathrynn's eyes lit up. "We're finally in Scotland!"

Oh, I'm so excited I can hardly sit still. When can we leave the ship?"

"Soon," he laughed. "The men are unloading our necessities, the rest will be sent later to my father's house. 'Tis but a short carriage ride away, my love."

"Are you nervous?"

"As a cat in a doghouse!" He kissed her soft hand. "But with you by my side I can face anything. Ye are my strength, my love."

Ian knocked on the door, calling out that all was ready for departure. Cathrynn stood, smoothing her skirt with a trembling hand. She was wearing a deep blue dress with a small pink floral print and, although she liked it very much, she was unused to wearing such a common dress. Gone were all the large satin and lace gowns, replaced instead by pretty yet serviceable dresses, for here they were not nobility, not special in any way. Duncan would be a farmer like his father, just as he'd always intended to be, and never again would they be waited on by a house full of servants. And never again would they be forced into a life of misery because of their name, and the title bestowed upon it. Taking a deep breath,

Cathrynn smiled at her husband. Finally, they were just normal people, setting out to find a life of happiness and contentment.

Duncan gathered the baby gently into his arms and took Cathrynn's hand, leading her from the cabin. On deck, all their friends were gathered and ready to go ashore. As one, the group walked down the gangplank and onto solid ground. The men whooped and the women giggled. Duncan led them to a small stable where his father had promised to leave some horses and two wagons. A large sign on the building read 'Welcome home, McKleighans and Friends', and a feeling of warmth enveloped Cathrynn.

After much debate, it was decided that they would stop for lunch before continuing on for the day. They found a pretty white hotel/restaurant and filed in, scooting two large tables together to accommodate them. The waitress took their orders, and they sipped coffee contentedly while they awaited their meal. Being a Saturday afternoon, the small place was crowded and noisy, and they were all aware of the hooded looks thrown their way. The friends tried to make conversation amid the turmoil, but were failing miserably

when an older gentleman walked by their table, stopping in his tracks when he caught sight of Duncan. He blinked and looked again as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Suddenly, he let out a peal of laughter and clapped Duncan on the back. "Well, I'll be! You're Michael McKleighan's boy, aren't ye now? Why, I haven't seen ye since ye was knee high to a grasshopper, I haven't! Mighty nice to see ye've come home, son, mighty nice. Your folks now ye've returned?"

Duncan smiled while making introductions. "No, sir, we've just docked, but we'll be on our way to see them shortly."

"Thank your momma for the sweet potato pie she sent over last week. My Gert was a bit under the weather, but that perked her right up. Let her know Gert wants her to visit right soon, and that goes for all of ye. My little lady loves to have visitors, and she'd take it as a personal affront if ye didna bring this darlin' baby for her to see. She's got a soft heart for wee ones, she does."

Duncan laughed. "If I remember correctly, she's not the only one."

The gentleman, Mr. Cameron, flushed slightly and

beamed. “Well, I’ll leave ye to your meal. Don’t forget to come by soon.” With a wave, he was gone. His booming voice had alerted everyone in the room to the newcomers’ identities, and the strange looks were replaced by welcoming smiles, allowing them to finish their lunch in peace. Afterwards, Duncan and Cathrynn took their leave of the others, who had opted to stay behind and tour the city for a day or so before joining them at the McKleighan spread.

At the wagon, Duncan bowed low before his wife, kissing her hand and said dramatically, “Milady, your chariot awaits.” He handed her and Kaitrynn up then jumped up beside them and took the reins, clucking to the horses. As they jerked into motion, he grinned down at her, his face alight with pleasure such as she’d never seen before. She giggled happily. Hugging her to him, he asked, “How does it feel to be just another face in the crowd, sweetheart? Just a normal family heading home.”

Home. It sounded so warm and inviting. She squeezed his hand tightly. “I can honestly say I have never spent a happier moment in my life. I can hardly wait to see the farm and meet your parents! It’s funny, but I feel as if I know

them already.”

They grew quiet as they traveled across the lovely countryside. They climbed many abundantly green hills with pretty trees and flowers growing wildly wherever they pleased. They saw fields of thistle, small animals romping playfully, and the most beautiful sunset imaginable. It was while Cathrynn was watching the lovely colors play across the sky as the sun sank lower and lower onto the horizon that Duncan stopped the wagon on the top of a large hill. “Here it is,” he said proudly, his voice husky.

Cathrynn turned her gaze from the sky down the hill, expecting a small farm with a few patches of livestock. She was surprised to see a large two-story white clapboard house with deep green shutters and a large front porch and wrapped around one side, a welcoming light shining through the windows. A short distance away stood not one, but three big red barns, each with a different kind of animal grazing within a fenced area. There were quite a few smaller outbuildings and a quaint little cabin stood about a mile from the larger house. She turned wide eyes to her husband. “Oh my, Duncan, it’s exquisite! How much of this land is your father’s?”

Duncan's eyes shone as he again laid eyes on his homeland, at long last. For more than ten years he had longed to reach his glen again, never actually believing that his dream might come true. And yet, through a string of miracles, he not only had his land back, but his entire family, plus two.

"All of it," he answered quietly. "This land is ours, darlin', for as far as they eye can see. Every blade of grass, every leaf on every tree. 'Tis all ours." He pulled her into his arms, overcome with emotion. "Thank you, sweetheart. Thank you for bringing me home."

Cathrynn swallowed against a tight throat, clutching him with all her might. She couldn't have loved him any more than she did at that moment. All the troubles they'd been through, all the frightening and lonely hours spent doubting themselves and each other, all that disappeared in the bright glow of their love and newfound faith. And it had all been worth it, every moment, to be able to stand here now, two hearts joined as one.

Pulling reluctantly away as the shadows became deeper, they started slowly down the hill. As they neared the bottom, two figures came through the front door, the woman

wiping her hands on a towel. The few seconds it took to cross the yard seemed to last forever. Then the older couple recognized their wagon and, with it, their son, they waved and ran to meet them.

Duncan jerked the horses to a halt and jumped down, helping his girls down tenderly. They turned around just as his parents came up beside them and, awkwardly, everyone froze. Tears streamed quietly down Elizabeth's cheeks as she searched her son's eyes for any remnants of the resentment he had carried for her for so many years. Finding none, she stepped hesitantly closer and touched his cheek lightly. Her breath shuddered and she clasped her hands to her breast, a radiant smile touching her lips. "Welcome home, Duncan," she said softly.

As if magic, her words broke the spell of silence, and everyone seemed to move at once. Duncan took his mother in his arms, clasping her gently to him. He and his father shook hands, clapped each other on the back, then hugged quickly. Elizabeth caught Cathrynn's eye, and the two of them burst out laughing. "Come inside and have something to eat, you are just in time for dinner. Coincidentally, I've made beef stew,

Duncan's favorite."

Michael guffawed. "That's no coincidence. She's made beef stew every night for a week!"

She slapped his arm playfully and sent him a reproachful look. "Come, Cathrynn, we'll let the men fetch your bags while we set the table. It's so dark I can't get a good look at my granddaughter."

Stepping into the cheerfully lit kitchen, the mouth-watering smell of stew in the air, Cathrynn felt a sense of belonging sweep over her. Elizabeth took the baby from her arms and held her up for inspection. Disturbed from a sound sleep, Kaitrynn opened her eyes and regarded her grandmother calmly. "Oh what a beauty our little Kaitrynn is! Look at those wonderful eyes of yours, love, just like your daddy's." She hugged the baby to her gently, holding a hand out to Cathrynn. "How can I ever thank you for bringing my family together again? I had despaired to hope, I didn't know what else to do, and then you came along like an angel of mercy and made all our dreams come true. You will always have a very cherished place in this family and in our hearts, Cathrynn."

Wiping her tears away, she laid the baby in a cradle

in a corner of the room and smiled. Cathrynn helped her set the table and serve the food, feeling so much more accomplishment in this one small task than she had in her entire reign as Lady Willoughby. Just as the last dish was set out, the men came through the door, laughing boisterously. They held up their freshly washed hands and took their places at the table. Michael said grace and the meal began. As they ate, Michael filled Duncan in on everything that had happened since he'd left.

"I only noticed one thing different after all these years. The little cabin down the drive?"

His parents exchanged a beaming look. "'Tis for you," his father said. "Angus McCleod helped me build it. It isn't a mansion, mind ye, but it will do until we've time to build your wife the home of her dreams," he winked at Cathrynn.

Duncan grinned down at his wife and kissed her. "I've an idea that little cabin *is* the house of her dreams."

Cathrynn smiled shyly and concentrated on the remainder of her food. Duncan pushed away his empty bowl. "I do believe ye've improved upon a perfect recipe, Momma,

if that's possible."

Elizabeth flushed prettily and shooed them from the room. On his way out, Michael grabbed her around the waist, planting a sound kiss on her neck. She giggled and said to Cathrynn, "He *is* affectionate." As she began cleaning, she confided, "Michael has been waiting for so many years to share his special brandy with Duncan. He has such a weakness for the drink."

Cathrynn laughed as she dried the dishes and put them away. "Duncan inherited more than the color of his eyes from his father, then!"

When the kitchen was tidy again, the women settled in at the table with a cup of coffee while Kaitrynn nursed. Afterwards, Elizabeth insisted on bathing the baby. When she was clean and dressed in warm clothes they joined the men in the library. Cathrynn smiled to herself when she saw that it was decorated in burgundy and dark green, just like Duncan's study had been. The two men sat on a sofa together, laughing loudly.

"All right, you two, I think we've had enough excitement for one day. If you keep drinking like that there

won't be enough left for tomorrow night.”

This caused more laughter, for anyone who knew Michael McKleighan knew that he had an unlimited supply of brandy. She took her husband's arm and led him away, mentioning on her way that their bags were in Duncan's room.

Suddenly alone, Duncan and Cathrynn gazed at each other. A mischievous glint in his eyes, Duncan swept Cathrynn into his arms, carrying her and the baby up the oak staircase to the bedroom of his childhood. He placed her on her feet, and she tucked the baby into a cradle by the bed. Turning to her husband, she waked slowly over to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She kissed him softly, cherishing the relaxed feel of his shoulders, the hint of brandy on his lips. He rubbed a circular pattern on her back, working his way down to cup her rear. He nuzzled her warm neck, murmuring, “Have I ever told ye how much I love ye?”

“Mmmmm. Not yet today.”

“I love ye, Cathrynn, keeper of my heart. I've loved ye since the moment I laid eyes on ye. All my yesterdays, all my tomorrows, belong to you, my darlin'.”

She rested her forehead on his hard chest, fighting the

tears that threatened. “I love you, Duncan, so much more than I ever dreamed.”

Later that night, he lay in bed, stroking her hair as she slept beside him. He glanced around the room he’d occupied as a child, overwhelmed that he had actually come full circle. After so many years of bitterness, he was now full of hope and excitement for the future. He kissed Cathrynn’s sweet cheek, finally drifting off to sleep with her nestled snugly in his arms.

EPILOGUE

Christmas Eve. Duncan leaned against the fireplace in his father’s library, a glass of brandy in his hand, contentedly watching the scene before him. Everyone had traveled to Scotland to share in Kaitrynn’s first Christmas. Cathrynn’s parents were there, the McCleods, Ian and Melissa who had, indeed, gotten married and were expecting their first child in the summer. Lord and Lady Ambrosia were there, the lady looking exquisite in a green dress printed with sprigs of holly and an actual miniature evergreen adorning her hat! And

Dale and Marian were there, as well.

Snow fell softly outside, the fire crackled cheerfully, and Duncan couldn't remember a better feeling than he had tonight. Kaitrynn was seated on her grandfather's lap, happily playing with his newly grown beard while everyone else sang Christmas carols around the piano as his mother played.

Cathrynn came up beside him, slipping her arm around his waist and placing a kiss on his lightly stubbled cheek. "Merry Christmas, Duncan."

He touched her cheek lightly. "Merry Christmas, darlin'."