



Harlequin Romance

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Master of Ben Ross

LUCY GILLEN



Master of Ben Ross

by LUCY GILLEN

Melodie tried not to think about what John had implied: that Neil McDowell was too wrapped up in Ben Ross, the large Scottish estate, to care about a woman.

She was prepared to admit that Neil had become the most important factor in her life—but she still shied away from recognizing that what she felt for him was love.

If John was right, then the best solution was for her to leave. But somehow she knew her future was there at Ben Ross.

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CHAPTER ONE

GLEN Ross station was more or less as Melodie expected it to be, and she smiled to herself as she stepped down from the train and stood looking around her for a moment or two. The simple concrete platform ran one side only and scarcely merited the title of station, but there was also a little stone but built at one end of it and an elderly man was just emerging from the door to speak to another, younger man. If her information was correct Jamie McClure, the stationmaster-cum-ticket-seller, was much more helpful and kindly than his somewhat austere appearance suggested, and she approached him fairly confidently.

It had been suggested that someone would meet her when she arrived, but being fairly familiar with the vagaries of British Rail she had decided to take a taxi instead in case she missed the connection. The idea of keeping a stranger waiting around for her did not appeal at all and since there was a taxi on call she might as well make use of it.

The stationmaster was at present busy in conversation, but both men turned when she approached carrying her suitcase, and it was easy to guess that new arrivals were few and far between at Glen Ross. The younger man watched with a certain air of anticipation as she walked along the tiny platform, and made no secret of the fact that he liked what he saw, while the older one viewed her arrival with more plain curiosity.

Melodie was not very tall, but she had enough good

dress sense to make the most of a softly rounded figure and slim legs, and with long black hair and wide blue eyes she was pretty enough to be used to admiration without being self-conscious about it. Consequently when she put down her suitcase and hovered discreetly, it was with the confidence that she would get someone's almost immediate attention.

Although the older man was not impressed in the same way as his younger companion, he was nevertheless curious enough to look across at her inquiringly. The young one was quite attractive, although he was not, strictly speaking, good-looking. His features below a thick thatch of brown hair were open and friendly, and he had brown eyes that smiled when he did, and looked warm and encouraging, as if he might prove helpful should the stationmaster not be as co-operative as promised.

'Oh, please, don't let me interrupt,' Melodie begged when their conversation ceased, but the younger man was shaking his head.

'Oh no, that's O.K., you're not interrupting anything. I'm about through now—please go ahead.'

His accent had a definite transatlantic twang and was not even vaguely Scottish, which surprised her, for she had already decided that he was a local, 'largely because of his features, she had to admit. He had what she had always thought of as a Scottish face—rugged but friendly, and rather attractive.

'I understand it's possible for me to get a taxi from here.' She addressed herself to the older man, and he nodded.

'Aye, that's right. He disna stand in the yard, but if you're needing him I can ring for him tae come. Would you be wantin' me tae call him?'

'Well, I have to get to Ben Ross,' Melodie explained, 'and it's quite a distance, I believe.' She gave him one of her best smiles, shamelessly seeking to get on the right side of him. 'You must be Mr McClure?' she guessed.

For a moment she had the awful feeling that her efforts were going to be met with a firm snub, but then she realised that there was a faint smile barely noticeable on the dour face, and he was nodding. 'I am that,' he admitted, plainly puzzled by her knowledge. 'You say you're wantin' to get to Ben Ross?'

'That's right.' She was so thankful to have broken the ice that she gave him another smile. 'I think you knew someone who lived there for a while, some years ago now. Catriona Holland—do you remember her?'

The old man's smile broadened and he nodded more firmly now. 'Oh aye, I remember the lassie well I Miss Ross, she was then, o' course. She inherited the old house when her uncle died, then married and went off to Australia—I mind her well.' His shrewd old eyes scanned her face once more curiously. 'You'll be a relation, nae doubt?'

'Not a relation,' Melodic denied, 'only a friend. I'm to stay at the lodge cottage for the next couple of months, and I'm really looking forward to it.'

'Ooh aye?' It was plain that the information surprised him, although it was difficult to imagine why, unless there was something about the place that she had not been told.

'You seem—surprised, Mr McClure.' She looked at him both anxiously and curiously. 'Is there any reason why I shouldn't stay at the cottage?'

'Och, no, no.' He was shaking his head again. 'Yon's a fine quiet and peaceful place for a holiday, though

it's mebbe a wee bit isolated for a young lassie like yourself.'

'Oh, I don't mind that!' Melodie laughed, dismissing the problem of isolation. 'I'm not exactly on holiday, you see, I'll be working—at least I hope I will. My name's Melodie Came, I'm an artist.'

Once more the old man looked vaguely surprised, but it was evident he thought it none of his business to show anything more than a polite interest. 'Well, it's a grand place for scenery too, and if you're to be busy you'll not be minding the isolation so much.'

'It will make sure I work, at least,' Melodie agreed. 'Now if you would be so kind, Mr McClure——'

'Oh aye, your taxi. If you'll just wait a wee while, Miss Came, I'll get him to come and fetch you.'

'Hold it!' She had almost forgotten the young man busily stowing boxes in the boot of his car, but he was evidently still within earshot and interested in what was being said, for he put the last box in the car, then came to join them. His brown eyes were smiling at Melodie warmly and it was to her that he spoke. 'I'm going out that way in just a minute, if I can be of any help,' he said.

It would be an easy solution and it was one that appealed to her, Melodie had to admit. 'That's very kind of you—but are you sure it isn't taking you out of your way?'

'Not in the least—I'm actually going to Ben Ross.'

'Oh!'

She glanced at the boxes he had been putting into his car. Somehow he did not strike her as a delivery man, and he was not Neil McDowell. Her friends had described the Ben Ross estate manager as being almost blond, and this man had dark brown hair, apart from

the fact that he wasn't old enough—Neil McDowell should be in his mid-thirties, and this man was not much older than herself.

'You may as well save the cab fare,' the man beside her suggested, and she laughed, ready enough to fall in with the mildly joking reference to Scottish thrift.

'In that case, I will—thank you.'

'My pleasure!' He offered a hand and with a smile she put hers in to it. 'I'm John Stirling—my uncle works on the Ben Ross estate.'

'Oh, I see.' His identity was clear at last, although judging by the size and opulence of the car he was driving, either it belonged to the estate or else Neil McDowell paid his men very well.

'O.K.?'

He waited for her nod of consent before lifting her case into the boot of the car with the boxes he had

been stowing, and Melodie turned back to the little stationmaster and smiled. 'It seems I won't be wanting a taxi after all, Mr McClure, thank you.' Impulsively she offered him her hand. 'Goodbye, it's been nice meeting you.'

John Stirling saw her into his car and the old man was still watching curiously when they drove out on to a crunchy stone road that led steeply uphill. Looking back through the car window Melodie could see the hill continue on its way, this time sloping steeply downwards into what could be the village of Glen Ross—a collection of small cottages about a mile distant from the station.

The road continued to rise just as steeply and she felt her heart beating faster all the time as excitement and anticipation mounted the nearer they got to Ben Ross. She looked forward to the next two months with

growing confidence now that she was here, and it was obvious that she wasn't going to be disappointed in Scotland. It was going to be all it was said to be if her first experience of it was a true indication.

The scenery was breathtaking and she tried to take in everything as she was driven up the hill. She caught fleeting glimpses of distant horizons sometimes, between the trees; vistas of mountains with their heads in the mist, and broad sweeps of blue sky as a background. There were trees either side of the road, young rowans for the most part and not yet fully grown, and immediately behind and between them mass of wild roses was hung with small pink faces that peered from a tangle of green briars and leaves.

Beyond them the ground sloped steeply in another direction, down to what looked like a rocky glen of some kind, where a river or a stream flowed around the foot of the hill and glinted and gleamed in the sunlight. The hillside itself was dotted with stunted elder and with goat-willow, and the water could be seen only as tantalising glimpses between them. What she could see looked so enchanting that she promised herself a much closer look before too long.

'Did I hear you tell the stationmaster that you're an artist?'

John Stirling's pleasant voice snatched her back to the present, and Melodie nodded. 'I'm hoping to be one day,' she told him. 'I'm supposed to be—well, quite good, but I'm still only a beginner, and lately I haven't been getting on very well. I'm hoping Scotland will inspire me.'

'If it doesn't, nothing will ! ' he assured her.

Melodie looked out of the car window again, and could only agree with him. 'It's so beautiful, I can't

quite believe it's true,' she said. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

'It's very like parts of Canada.' He spoke with such confidence that she felt she could safely confirm that transatlantic accent, but before she could ask, he forestalled her by asking her about her own origins. 'Where are you from, Miss Came?'

'From Surrey originally, but we moved as a family to Australia a couple of years ago.'

'And now you're back in the U.K.?'

'Only me.' She laughed and pulled a face, wondering why she felt she had to offer an excuse for her returning. 'The others settled down quite happily.'

He did not take his eyes off the road, and she thought he was not asking the question out of mere curiosity—he was interested. 'But you *weren't* happy?' he suggested, and she laughed and shook her head.

'I wasn't exactly unhappy, just—restless. It's a wonderful country, but I simply couldn't settle down over there. I happened to mention at a party one evening that I'd like to go back—come back, and some friends of mine suggested I had a couple of months up here in Scotland to see if I could get back to working the way I used to.'

John Stirling smiled at her over his shoulder, a warm encouraging smile. 'I warn you, this place works spells,' he said. 'You might find when your couple of months is up you won't want to leave.'

Melodie looked out at the hills in the distance, and the clouds scattered like flakes of snow in the summer blue sky and smiled. 'I might at that,' she agreed.

It was something of a surprise when he sounded more serious suddenly. 'Do you know Neil McDowell?' he asked, and she shook her head.

'No, I don't know him, only about him.' He hesitated, or so it seemed to her, as if he was in two minds about something he had to say, and she looked at him curiously. 'Why do you ask, Mr Stirling?'

'Oh—no reason!'

His shrug and the tone of his voice were enough to put ideas into her head; discomfiting ideas that disturbed her present rather complacent satisfaction, and she continued to look at him while she sought for reasons. If there was something about Neil McDowell that she should know, she would rather learn it now, before she arrived, than have whatever it was sprung on her after she got there.

'Tell me about him,' she said, and put on her most persuasive look when he turned his head for a moment. 'I'd like to know what I'm up against, Mr Stirling, and at the moment I have a strange feeling that I might not be as welcome as I'd hoped.'

John Stirling made no reply for a moment or two, then he shrugged. 'It's nothing much,' he confessed. 'It's just that I'm rather surprised that he's having someone stay there, that's all, though of course if his boss said you were coming there wouldn't be much he could do about it, I guess.' He laughed and shook his head as he glanced briefly at her, and Melodie looked at him curiously.

'You mean—he doesn't like anyone staying there?' It was a possibility that had not occurred to her, and she viewed it with dismay.

'I can't honestly say that, because I've never heard his opinion on visitors,' John Stirling admitted. 'But he guards Ben Ross as jealously as if he really was the laird.'

'That's the Scottish equivalent of a—a lord of the manor, isn't it?'

He nodded. 'The locals refer to him as the laird of Ben Ross, though I've always taken it as rather a joke, but—I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong and they really look upon him as the laird; I guess he is to all intents and purposes, for he's looked after the estate since the days when old man Ross was still alive, and he must feel a kind of possessive love for the place.'

More than that, Melodie thought, from the sureness of inside knowledge. She had a letter in her handbag, and papers that would put Ben Ross completely into the hands of Neil McDowell once all the legal formalities had been completed. His former employer and benefactor had left him a wealthy man and he had at last achieved his ambition to own the old house he was so fond of by persuading the old man's niece to sell it to him. All this she knew because Catriona Holland had entrusted her with the precious papers—but she knew nothing of the man himself, or almost nothing, and perhaps John Stirling could enlighten her. —

'You know him quite well?'

He shrugged. 'I know him,' he said. 'I doubt if anyone knows him really well, he isn't a man it's easy to get close to, but he's not as dour as some folks think he is either.' He laughed and looked at her briefly. 'Dour is a Scottish word,' he informed her. 'It means kind of—forbidding, stern, if you like.'

'Oh dear!'

It was obvious he regretted the impression he had given, and he was shaking his head. 'I'm sorry, Miss Carrie, I guess maybe I've put you against the man before you've even met him, and I didn't want to do

that.' He turned the car into a gateway as he spoke, then put on the brake and turned in his seat to look at her. 'This is the lodge cottage,' he told her. 'Do I drop you off here, or shall I take you up to the house?'

To one side of the drive, hidden by tall shrubs for some half of its height, was a small stone cottage. It looked quite homely for all it was obviously empty, and Melodie felt vaguely out of her depth for a moment or two, until she remembered that she had no way of getting into her new home, even if she wanted to.

'I have to get the key from the house,' she said, 'so if you could——'

'Nothing simpler!' He was smiling and somehow that was very reassuring, then he started up the car again and drove between high borders of shrubs which gave glimpses of steep hillsides on either side and a loch far down in a valley, shining like a blue silk patch amid the soft drabness of heather. 'Please don't take me wrong about McDowell,' John Stirling begged. 'He isn't as dour as he's reputed to be, and anyway——' he turned and smiled at her, 'one look at you and he'll be charmed to welcome you.'

'I hope so.'

Melodie was recalling another opinion of Neil McDowell—a woman's opinion, and probably one that was mellowed by time and pleasant memories. She always suspected that there might have been something between Catriona Holland and her estate manager at one time, although nothing had ever been said to encourage such a suspicion. It was just something in the way she spoke of him, and in the way Nick Holland looked at his wife sometimes when she spoke of him. Maybe Neil McDowell nursed an unrequited love, in

which case he was unlikely to be charmed by another woman even after eight years.

She looked at John Stirling again from the corner of her eye, and hoped she would see something of him while she was here. He seemed pleasant and uncomplicated, and he might prove a welcome means of support if Neil McDowell should prove as dour as he suggested.

'You don't come from around here either, do you, Mr Stirling?' she asked, dismissing her prospective host from her mind for the moment, and John Stirling shook his head.

'I was born not far from here, but my folks, like yours, emigrated, only in their case it was to Canada. We went just after my fifth birthday, so I guess you could say I'm practically one hundred per cent Canadian after twenty years. My folks still have a Scottish burr in their speech, but not me, I'm afraid! '

'So you're just visiting, like me.'

'Not quite like you,' he denied with a laugh. 'I've no intention of doing anything remotely like work while I'm here.'

'Are you here for long?'

He shrugged carelessly, then cast her a smile over his shoulder. 'I arrived last week and I figure to stay at least another couple of months.'

'Oh, I see.' She didn't like to ask outright, but it was difficult to imagine him wealthy enough to take such a long holiday if his uncle was an estate worker. 'You don't have to worry about how long you stay away, then?'

'I can't quite say that.' He pulled a face, as if he found what he was about to say a little embarrassing. 'Don't be misled by Uncle Jamie working for the Ross estate, Miss Came—I guess you could say we're kind

of—rich relations. Isn't that the term they used to apply to the wild colonial boys who made good?'

'Something like that,' Melodie agreed, frankly interested.

'My pa made good in a big way out there and he built up a business that by now runs like clockwork, but he still puts in ten or more hours a day, would you believe?' He laughed and shook his head, evidently finding his father's passion for business beyond his comprehension. 'I've been put through the processes from A to Z and I guess I know it pretty well by now, but——' He shrugged and once more turned a smile on her. 'I like to unwind a little now and then and when I do I take off and come and stay with Uncle Jamie.'

'It sounds marvellous!'

He laughed and shook his head. 'It is, believe me! I ride sometimes, McDowell makes his stables available to me, and I fish and generally laze around.' The brown eyes smiled their warmth at her once more. 'Maybe I could persuade you to join me instead of working, huh?'

'Maybe you can—sometimes!'

He braked the car in front of a big brick house with tall windows and huge wooden doors, and Melodie sat for a second taking it in. 'Well, here you are, Miss Carne—Ben Ross.'

Five wide and impressive stone steps led up to the front doors and Melodie had the strangest sensation of having been delivered rather than merely being given a lift. It was a moment or two before she took advantage of the car door being opened for her, and she thought John Stirling was watching her curiously as he waited.

'Thank you.' She accepted his help and stood on the

gravel drive looking up at the old house. 'I—I suppose there's someone home?'

'Sure to be,' John Stirling assured her confidently, then slid a hand beneath her arm and bent his head slightly as he lowered his voice. 'Would you like me to come with you, at least as far as the door?'

She accepted the offer gratefully. 'I'm an awful coward,' she confessed with a faint smile. 'But I keep thinking of Neil McDowell as stern and forbidding ever since you described him.'

'Oh, gee, I'm sorry!' He looked dismayed at the idea of being the cause of her nervousness. 'I wasn't trying to scare you off, and he really isn't too bad when you know him, honest!'

He kept hold of her arm while they walked up the stone steps together, carefully avoiding the dangerously worn parts in the centre. An ancient iron bell-pull clanged somewhere inside the house, and they waited in silence while Melodie looked around at the garden behind them.

'Miss Carne's here to see Mr McDowell, Mrs McKay.' John Stirling's voice recalled her, and she spun round quickly when she realised the doors had been opened.

She had heard of Jessie McKay too, and her reputation was less guaranteed to inspire confidence, a reputation seemingly confirmed by a pair of shrewd and distinctly unfriendly brown eyes. She was plump and her round face wore a slight frown, as if she did not welcome strangers on her doorstep. A plait of grey hair encircled her head like a coronet and made her appear yet more severe as she took stock of Melodie before she spoke.

'Come away in, Miss Came, and I'll tell Mr McDowell you're here.' She acknowledged John Stirling with a

slight nod of her head, and made it plain that he was not included in the invitation. 'You'll not be wanting to see Mr McDowell as well, Mr Stirling?'

If she expected him to take the question as a dismissal she must have been disappointed, for he was not as easily put off as she obviously expected him to be. 'I have Miss Carne's luggage in my car,' he explained, unabashed by his chilly welcome. 'I brought her up from the station, so I guess I'll hang around until she's ready to go back to the cottage.'

'You'll wait in your car?'

It was clear what she expected the answer to be, and Melodie saw a hint of a smile appear on his mouth. 'Sure, I'll wait outside!' He smiled at Melodie reassuringly and partly closed one eye in a suggestion of a wink. 'See you later, Miss Came!'

'You're sure you don't *mind* waiting?'

It seemed rather an imposition after the way he had been treated by the housekeeper, but he was apparently untroubled by it and grinned cheerfully. 'Not in the least,' he assured her. 'still be here when you come out again.'

'Thank you.'

When Melodie stepped in through the doors it was like entering another world, different from any she had known before. The hall she found herself in was enough to make her stare about her in frank amazement, for it was so exactly what every stately home is reputed to be like that she could scarcely believe it was real.

Above her head it soared upwards almost out of sight in the shadows, dark-panelled for the first few feet, then painted starkly white the rest of the way up to the vaulted ceiling. A staircase occupied the whole of one wall and a huge portrait hung about half way—a huge

portrait of a man whose dark visage seemed to dominate the hall and whose sharp dark eyes appeared to watch her with discomfitingly lifelike sternness.

Yet strangely enough there was an air of homeliness about the place, despite its grandeur, an atmosphere of quiet that she found encouraging. She thought the housekeeper was regarding her curiously and she hastened to explain her interest.

'I've heard so much about Ben Ross,' she said, 'I've been dying to see it.' She indicated the portrait on the stair, pressing on impulsively as she was prone to do. 'That's Mr Duncan Ross, isn't it?' she asked. 'It's a wonderful painting.'

'It's a guid likeness,' Jessie McKay allowed, and spoke with the authority of familiarity.

'Mrs Holland told me about the painting,' Melodie explained. 'I have an interest, you see, being an artist.'

'Oh aye, you would.'

It was scarcely an encouraging response, but Melodie hoped her manner was not an indication of what she could expect from her employer. She led the way across the hall to one of the doors that gave on to it, and indicated that Melodie should follow. 'Mr McDowell's in here.'

'Here' proved to be a library as grand as the hall. It was huge and furnished with rich leather furniture, and leather-bound books lined the walls on three sides. A massive fireplace, screened for the summer with a huge wrought iron screen, seemed to span half one long wall. Tall, arch-topped windows admitted the sun, but the room was cool, and she barely had time to notice very much before her attention was drawn to the man who stood in front of the fireplace.

It was a curious sensation to see someone she had had

described to her and to find nothing at all recognisable about him. For one thing Neil McDowell was taller than she expected, and less handsome than she had been led to believe. He might have been very good-looking at one time, Melodie thought, but at thirty-three or four he was lean and rugged and looked every bit as dour as she feared.

At the same time there was a curious magnetism about him, a suggestion of power and self-confidence that sat well on the broad shoulders. His hair was fair; thick and glossy and falling over part of a broad brow, and he had grey eyes that were steady and confident, but not especially friendly as he looked across at her while she followed his housekeeper over to where he stood.

He wore breeches and boots and a shirt that was open at the neck to show a brown throat, and he looked so completely at home standing there with his feet just slightly apart in front of that huge fireplace that it was difficult to believe he was not already the owner of Ben Ross.

'Thank you, Jessie.' A brief nod dismissed the formidable Mrs McKay and she went out again, leaving Melodie alone with her supposedly unwilling host.

'Miss Carne—I'm Neil McDowell.' He extended a hand and she took it a little cautiously, wincing slightly when the strong brown fingers curled over hers for a second only. 'Please sit down.' She did as she was bid, perching herself right on the edge of one of the big wing armchairs. 'Did you have a good journey?'

His voice was pleasantly low and the softness of the Highland accent made it more attractive, but he asked as if she had come only from somewhere just south of

the border, instead of several thousand miles from Australia.

'Yes, thank you, Mr McDowell. It's a long way, of course, and I'm rather tired what with the jet-lag and——'

'You need the key to the cottage, of course.'

She nodded and opened her handbag, pulling out the bulky envelope she had been charged with delivering. 'I also have a letter and some papers for you from Mrs Holland.'

'Ah yes.' A large hand took the packet from her and he nodded his satisfaction. 'Thank you, Miss Came.' He looked down at the envelope in his hand for a moment, as if he was impatient to open it and study its contents, and she had the feeling he was waiting for her to go as soon as possible. 'I'll get the key for you ! '

He strode across to a big bureau and pulled down the front of it, returning a second later with a key which he handed to her. 'Thank you.'

The grey eyes spared her a moment and she was surprised to see a quite unexpected glimmer of speculation in them. 'Do you ride, Miss Came?' She nodded and he smiled. 'Ah yes, of course, you're Australian, aren't you—brought up to ride horses!'

'I'm' not Australian, Mr McDowell, I'm English, though I've spent the last two years in Australia.' She was afraid she might have sounded rather sharp when she contradicted him, so she smiled to take any suggestion of criticism out of the words. 'That's not long enough to make an Aussie,' she told him. 'But I do ride, as it happens, though not very well, I'm afraid.'

From the way he was dressed it was obvious he rode, and probably very well, and she half expected an invi-

tation to join him, despite the reputation for dourness. Instead he nodded, tapping the packet he held against the thumb of one hand in a way that hinted at impatience.

'Please feel free to use any of the horses in the stables while you're here, except Black Knight, he's not a woman's horse and he can be hard to handle.'

'I'll remember.' She smiled at him again, wondering whatever had possessed John Stirling to suppose that one smile was enough to charm him. 'And thank you.' She got up from the edge of her chair and indicated the package he held. 'I'll go and unpack, and leave you to read your letter.'

'Aye, thank you.' He held her gaze for a moment and she found the grey eyes unexpectedly warm when he smiled. 'Enjoy your stay, Miss Came.' Something seemed to occur to him suddenly and he frowned. 'I should have thought,' he said, 'have you left your luggage at the cottage, or have you now to carry it down there? If you have I'll have the car out in a moment and run you down there.'

'Oh no ' She felt curiously uneasy suddenly when she came to tell him about John Stirling, though heaven knew why. 'I—I had a lift from the station, and Mr Stirling's waiting for me with my suitcase in his car, the rest of my stuff will be coming some time soon.'

'Jamie Stirling?'

There was something about the way he asked the question that told her he knew who she referred to quite well. 'No,' she said, 'John Stirling. I believe his uncle works on the estate.'

He neither confirmed nor denied that fact, but merely nodded his head as if the matter was of no further interest to him. 'You'll not be needing my help, then,'

he said, and Melodie took that for her dismissal.

She looked at the key in her hand, and turned to go, still with a strangely dissatisfied feeling that made her unwilling to go yet. 'remember about the horse,' she said. 'I mean, not to take the black one.'

For a moment the grey eyes held hers again, and she thought the wide mouth was touched by a hint of smile for a second. 'You'll likely have no need to remember,' he told her, 'unless you're a very early riser. I'll have Black Knight saddled and away before you come on the scene, I daresay.'

'You—you ride every day?'

He showed no surprise at her interest beyond a brief elevation of one fair brow. 'I ride round most of the estate every day,' he said. 'It's part of my job, Miss Came.'

'Oh yes—yes, of course.' She hastily recalled John Stirling sitting outside in his car and waiting for her, and she gave a short and slightly uneasy laugh as she turned away. 'I'd better go before my voluntary chauffeur decides to go without me V

Neil McDowell was shaking his head, and she stopped in the act of turning to look at him over her shoulder. 'Oh, he'll not do that! he assured her, soft-voiced, and she found it hard to explain the sudden flush of colour that warmed her cheeks as she -turned swiftly and headed for the door.

'Goodbye, Mr McDowell!'

CHAPTER TWO

IT was a pleasant surprise for Melodie to find that the cottage she was to occupy was not merely habitable, but brightened with one or two unexpected touches that suggested a welcome. A vase of flowers, obviously fresh picked from the gardens, stood on the table in the one small sitting-room and dining-room combined, and another on the windowsill of the bedroom.

On exploring her new domain she found that even more practical matters had been thought of. There was a supply of groceries in the kitchen cupboard which would be enough to last her for a day or two, at least until she had time to do some shopping. The unexpectedly thoughtful gesture both surprised and delighted her, and she felt lighthearted enough the following morning to sing to herself while she prepared her breakfast.

She would go for a walk, she decided while she was washing up her breakfast things, and earmark a few likely places where she could work. The whole area around Ben Ross as well as the estate itself seemed to be one big scenic canvas and, as John Stirling had said, if this scenery did not inspire her to produce some good work, then nothing would.

Even the view from the tiny kitchen window was enchanting for all its limited scope, and she felt rather as if she was at the very edge of the world. If she looked to the left, she could just see the way in to Ben Ross. The gates had long since disappeared, but the two

broken stone gateposts still remained, although almost completely covered by a cloak of shiny-leafed ivy and buried in the overgrown shrubs that lined the drive to the house. Immediately in front, more low-growing shrubs allowed a view across seemingly endless landscapes of hills and valleys, still misty in the morning sunshine and alternately shadowed and brightened as billowing white cumulus drifted across a pale sky.

It was an unmistakable sound of horses' hooves on the crunchy gravel of the drive that brought her out of her daydream, and she put down the drying up cloth she was using, when she recognised it, and went into the little sitting-room. John Stirling had mentioned that he sometimes rode, and he might have taken it into his head to call on her to see how she was getting on.

It was possible from the sitting-room window to see some distance along the drive and the rider was closer than she realised when she looked out. Unsure just what her reaction was at first, she recognised him not as John Stirling but Neil McDowell. Had it been John Stirling she could have been sure that he was coming to see her; in the case of Neil McDowell she thought it less likely, for recalling his reception of her yesterday she thought it unlikely he would be troubled with whether she was settled in or not.

Whatever his reason for riding along the drive towards the cottage, she found the sight of man and horse fascinating enough to spend a moment or two watching them. He had mentioned that he rode over the estate every day as part of his job, but it was more than a diligent application to his job, she thought, that gave him that air of possession, and reminded herself that he *would* soon possess the estate he had loved and worked for for so long.

He sat well in the saddle, with an ease that suggested long practice, and mounted on a shiny black stallion, who she assumed was the notorious Black Knight she had been warned against, he looked every inch the lord of the manor that John Stirling had dubbed him. The horse was a magnificent animal and it was obvious from the way he arched his neck and occasionally tried to shake his great head that he was impatient to indulge in something more exciting than the quiet trot that was all he was being allowed at the moment. Only the man's firm hand on the rein kept him in check, and Neil McDowell held him confidently and with deceptive ease.

He was a man who suggested strength, perhaps even a certain ruthlessness, which was not at all as he had been described to her before she left Australia, and she wondered how much he had changed in the eight years since her friends had seen him last.

He was dressed very much as he had been yesterday, in breeches and boots, but today a blue shirt seemed to lend emphasis to the contrast between fair hair and a skin tanned to a deep golden brown by years spent outdoors in all- weathers. He was not at all as she had visualised him, but she found him rather intriguing all the same, And enigmatic enough to arouse her interest.

So convinced was she that he intended to ride straight past with possibly a polite acknowledgement of her as she stood at the window that when it became obvious that he meant to call at the cottage, she was caught un-awares. She heard the violent and indignant snort of the stallion when he was brought to a halt, and hastily brought herself back to reality, brushing a hand over her hair as she hurried across the little room to open the door.

Neil McDowell was tethering his mount to one of the trees that half-buried the cottage on the side furthest from the drive, and he turned when he heard the click of the latch, his grey eyes regarding her with the same disconcerting steadiness she had noticed yesterday.

'Good morning, Mr McDowell!'

Three long steps brought him to the door, but he made no attempt to accept the invitation she conveyed by stepping back and smiling in a vaguely uncertain way. He put one hand on the jamb of the door and leaned on it, while a hint of smile touched his mouth for a moment. 'Good morning, Miss Carne—are you settling in? Is everything all right for you?'

'Oh yes, thank you. It was very kind of whoever was responsible for the flowers and the supply of groceries. I should have thought of bringing something to somewhere as isolated as Ben Ross, but I'm afraid it just didn't occur to me until it was too late.'

'You'll not be too uncomfortable, then?'

For a moment she wondered if he hoped she was uncomfortable enough to decide not to stay, and she hastened to disillusion him. 'On the contrary, I'm very comfortable I '

His manner suggested not so much terseness, as a desire to be away as quickly as possible, and she did not profess to understand him. 'If you need anything more, I'm sure Mrs McKay will be able to find it for you.'

'Oh no, I'm fine, thank you.' She wished he would come inside instead of standing on her doorstep, as if he was merely making time to call because he felt he should. 'Won't you come in for a moment?'

He was shaking his head almost before she had finished asking, and he looked decided enough not to change his mind. 'I'll not trouble you, Miss Came. Now

that I know you're settled and not needing anything, I'll be away.'

He had already unhitched the black and was preparing to remount before she found her tongue again.

'Oh, Mr McDowell—thank you for coming to ask after me.'

He turned and looked at her over his shoulder and for a second the grey eyes held hers steadily. Then she caught another glimpse of that faint smile on his mouth as he shook his head. 'You're a guest of the estate, Miss Came; Ben Ross is not lacking in hospitality, I hope.'

'No, of course not.' She tried not to feel as if she had been put in her place, and made another effort to let him know that she appreciated what had been done for her. 'Were—were you responsible for the flowers and the groceries?'

He seemed to take a minute to consider whether or not to admit responsibility. 'I guessed a young girl who was—arty by nature would not have the practical good sense to think to fill the store cupboard,' he told her with unabashed frankness, and hastened to remind her how right he was. 'And you said yourself you'd not thought of it until it was too late, did you not? The flowers must have been Mrs Stirling's touch; I have to confess I'd not thought of that.'

'Mrs Stirling?' Surprise at the name overshadowed any objection she might have had to his opinion of her, and her reaction evidently amused him, for it showed in the grey eyes for a moment.

'John Stirling's aunt,' he said.

'Oh! Oh, yes, of course.' She recovered herself hastily. 'He told me he was staying with his uncle on the estate, I hadn't thought of an aunt too. Maybe I'll see her some time and be able to thank her for the flowers.'

He said nothing for the moment, but swung himself up into the saddle and held the restless black with the same apparent ease that had impressed her so much when she watched him ride down the drive. He turned the animal and held it in check a moment longer while he looked down at her.

'I dare say John Stirling will be glad to pass on your thanks,' he told her. 'I've no doubt you'll be seeing him before long!'

He put his heels to the black stallion's glossy flanks, and Melodie followed their progress for as long as she could see them along the drive towards the house, her feelings strangely mixed. There was a consummate skill in the way he rode that was exciting to watch; the satiny black horse, streamlined for power and hard to handle, and the tall, fair man who controlled him so skilfully. It was an exciting and curiously disturbing combination, and her expression was thoughtful as she turned back into the cottage.

Just as Neil McDowell had suggested, it was not very long before she received a visit from John Stirling, not riding on horseback, as she half expected, but driving the same car he had brought her from the station in. He arrived a little after eleven and asked her out to lunch with him.

It was an invitation she would have liked to accept, but she had not gone for her walk after all the previous day. Various small jobs around the house had demanded her attention and she had still not made that necessary tour of reconnaissance, and she had to remind herself, as well as John Stirling, that she was there primarily to work.

'I'd love to go with you, Mr Stirling,' she told him,

hoping he would not put her resistance to the test by insisting, 'but I really do have to try and get down to some real work. Yesterday I promised myself I'd take a walk and get the lie of the land, but I didn't go and I simply can't allow myself to be—sidetracked again to-day, much as I'm tempted.'

He looked so genuinely disappointed that Melodie felt vaguely guilty about refusing to go with him. He was a nice, friendly young man and he felt towards her, much as she did towards him, she guessed. They had taken a mutual liking to one another from the beginning and so far there had been no suggestion of anything other than liking, though almost inevitably something more would develop before too long, she was not naïve enough to suppose it wouldn't.

He had perched himself on the edge of the sitting-room table and he regarded her for a moment or two with bright speculative brown eyes, then he smiled. 'Do you think you could call me John?' he asked, and Melodie stared at him for a moment, then laughed and shook her head.

'I don't see why not,' she agreed. 'Could you manage to cope with Melodie? It's rather more of a mouthful, I'm afraid.'

'It's beautiful, and I guess I could cope very nicely, thanks!'

She smiled at him, feeling she had in some way compensated for refusing to lunch with him, and walked into the tiny kitchen at the back of the cottage. Taking a coffee pot from the cupboard on the wall, she looked over her shoulder.

'Can I persuade you to have coffee with me?'

He had followed her into the kitchen, and it was plain that he was as tempted to accept as she had been,

but he pulled a rueful face as he leaned against the door jamb with his arms folded one over the other. 'I wish I could,' he said, 'but I promised Uncle Jamie I'd fetch some stuff for him from Corrie by early this afternoon. In fact I was hoping to kill two birds with one stone when I asked you to have lunch with me.'

'I'm sorry, John.'

'You insist on working?'

She probably imagined a hint of impatience in his voice, but it was possible he was not often refused, and disliked the experience. Dislike or not, she must be adamant if she was going to achieve as much as she hoped in the next couple of months.

'I must, John. I'm here to work and so far I haven't done a thing about it. I know it's only one day,' she added hastily when it appeared he was going to remind her, 'but with someone like you around it could be all too easy to slip into the habit of going out and about when I should be painting, so I mustn't let myself be persuaded.'

The smile she gave him suggested flattery, as much as the words did, and she used both, shamelessly, for her own ends. Apparently with some success too, for he stood and watched her for a moment or two while she put coffee into the pot, then shrugged and sighed. Heaving himself away from the doorway, he came and stood beside her while she busied herself at the kitchen dresser.

'O.K.—I guess I've got the idea, but you surely don't intend working all the hours God made, do you, Melodie?'

'Not quite!' She smiled up at him. 'If you still want to take me out somewhere, ask me at a week-end. I'd really *like* to go with you, you know, it's just that I

really must try and do something now that I'm here—start off on the right foot, so to speak.'

'Yeah, sure!'

She paused in the act of taking a cup and saucer from the cupboard, and looked at him over her shoulder for a second before she spoke. 'You are *going* to ask me again, aren't you?'

An arm slid around her waist, drawing her against him, and the move was so unexpected that she caught her breath, then he bent his head and his voice murmured close to her ear. 'You bet your sweet life, I am! '

Melodie eased herself away, using the near boiling kettle as an excuse to make the break. She wished he had not made such a move so soon, especially when she had not been expecting it, but she still treated the matter lightly. 'I'll hold you to that! ' she threatened.

While she made the coffee he watched in silence, then he shrugged resignedly. 'You won't change your mind, I guess?'

'Not at the moment, John.'

She put all the things on a tray and he carried it into the next room for her. 'O.K.' He shrugged again, obviously not happy about being refused, but resigned to it for the moment. 'I'll see you, Melodic 1 '

'I hope so! '

The brown eyes regarded her for a second, seemingly in some doubt. 'So do I,' he said.

Walking had never seemed so enjoyable before, and Melodie found every aspect of the vast Ben Ross estate, and its surrounding countryside, well worth recording on canvas. The whole place was completely irresistible, and she found so many views and impressions that just

begged to be painted, that she was almost confused with a surfeit of good things.

A rather hair-raising drop from the side of the drive seemed to be her only means of access to a lush and fertile glen, and while she debated the wisdom of making such a hazardous descent she stood looking at the country around from her vantage point.

Rolling hills, their craggy outlines softened by a seemingly permanent mist caused by the summer warmth, and sweeps of dusty mauve heather and soft green turf—all soft muted colours that delighted the eye of an artist and made her positively anxious to start working. Not a breath of wind stirred, and the surface of a small loch below in the glen reflected the sky like mirror glass.

A river ran like liquid silver across in the distance, skirting the nearer hills, and great grey granite boulders thrust up through its racing waters, overwhelming the wind-dwarfed scrub that lined its banks. There were salmon, she knew, and she dwelt on the thrill of seeing them thrust their silver-grey bodies against the wild river.

It was an irresistible challenge to climb down to the glen below where she stood, and she managed with less effort than she expected, although it took every trick she had learned with two rock-climbing brothers to get her safely to the bottom without mishap. It was well worth the effort when she stood at last by the smooth stillness of the little loch, and it was so quiet that the silence was almost tangible.

The waters of the loch were green and clear, backed by more hills, softly rounded and draped in green and purple. She had never felt more at peace in her life, she thought, and closed her eyes for a second as she took in

a long, slow breath. Just imagining spending the next two months here was enough to convince her that she would be able to work as never before, and it gave her a sense of excitement just to think about it.

'Miss Came—good morning!'

Startled by the sound of a voice behind her, Melodie spun round quickly, her eyes wide open now, and blank with surprise, then blinking rapidly back to reality when she met the disconcerting steadiness of Neil McDowell's gaze. He was mounted on the black stallion, and before she could return his greeting, he swung himself down from the saddle and draped the rein over his arm as he came to join her at the edge of the loch.

'Did I startle you?'

Her immediate instinct was to deny it, and she shook her head, at the same time hastily avoiding that steady gaze that she found so disconcerting. 'No, not at all,' she said. 'I just wasn't expecting anyone else, that's all—it's peaceful here and I didn't see anyone coming.'

'You'd be too busy contemplating the loch; and I came down the hill from the house.'

She glanced up at the steep hillside automatically. It was strewn with outcrops of rock that looked dangerously hazardous for both horse and rider, and he must be a quite remarkable horseman to have achieved it without mishap. He had apparently noticed the direction of her glance and from the faintly amused smile that touched his mouth for a moment, she gathered he followed her train of thought quite easily.

'It's not as dangerous as it looks when you're used to it,' he said, and Melodie felt somehow that she had been gently chided for being over-anxious.

In truth she had been snatched from a reflective mood of pleasant tranquillity, and plunged into conversation

with a man who she freely admitted made her curiously uneasy. There was no good reason for her uneasiness, but nor was there much she could do about it. Whenever she came into contact with Neil McDowell she felt the same reaction to him, and it irritated her without her being sure why.

'You ride very well,' she said, attempting an off-hand compliment. 'I wouldn't like to tackle that slope even on the best horse there is.'

'I would hope not!'

Something in his voice brought a reaction from her, though she could not have said why. 'You feel a woman isn't capable of it?' she asked, and the grey eyes swept slowly over her face before he answered.

'Some women might be,' he said in his quiet voice. 'Not you, I think, Miss Came, you're too much a—a womanly woman.'

It was a compliment, Melodie recognised a little dazedly, though it was doubtful if even he fully appreciated the fact. 'I'm not a very good horsewoman either,' she said, 'I have to admit it.'

He looked around at the gentle beauty of the glen, and then looked at her with a raised brow. 'Were you finding subjects for your paintings?' he asked, and Melodie nodded. 'You'll find plenty to please you here.'

'I'm—overwhelmed by it!' She too looked around her and smiled, touched again for a moment by that sense of peace and satisfaction she had felt earlier. 'I could live here for ever, and never run out of subjects. It's all so unbelievably lovely, and the most marvellous thing, I think, would be the way it must change with every season—show a different face all the time. I'd love to see it in winter, in the snow!'

'You'd not be standing here in winter!' He was smiling, and the difference it made to his normally serious features was stunning. It gave a glimpse of the man he might be, and warmed the grey eyes to a more gentle expression. The water literally floods down from the hill when the snows melt,' he went on, 'and this glen, often as not, becomes a loch, for a while at least.'

'But it must be exciting, even then,' Melodie insisted. 'It's part of the character of the place, isn't it?'

He was watching her with a more thoughtful look in his eyes, as if he found her views surprising in some way. 'You've a feel for the country, Miss Carrie, you should do it justice.'

'I shall try!'

His approval was somehow both unexpected and oddly gratifying, and it occurred to her for the first time to wonder whether his breakneck ride down that stony steep slope had been specifically so that he could join her, or if he would have undertaken it anyway. He must surely know the estate as well as anyone, and she speculated on just how willing he would be to help with names and locations, if she asked him.

'Were you thinking of painting Loch Lairdross?' he asked, and she nodded, looking at him curiously.

'Is that its name?' She glanced up at the lean and sternly attractive face through the thickness of her lashes for a moment. 'I don't know the names of anything,' she ventured. 'That fall, for instance.' She looked across to where a stream ran like a swift silver ribbon between ragged rocks, fed from above by a glittering waterfall that seemed to spring suddenly from nowhere, way up in the hillside. 'That waterfall's beautiful with the stream at the bottom—has it a name?'

'The Ghyll burn.' He provided the information willingly enough, and it gave her encouragement to ask more questions.

'Ghyll's a local name?'

'It's from an old Nordic word meaning a ravine or narrow valley with a stream running through it—there are many such names about here.' His matter-of-fact presentation of the information surprised her rather, and she looked at him curiously.

'That's interesting,' she said. 'Are you an expert on such matters, Mr McDowell?'

'Not an expert, no.' The grey eyes watched the glinting fall of water down the hillside rather than her, and once more she felt a desire to know more about him, to break through that enigmatic barrier and find the man behind it. 'I know a little about Ben Ross because it interests me.'

'You love it.'

She had not meant it to sound anything other than a statement of an obvious fact, and yet she saw a swift flick of surprise show on his face for a moment before he spoke. 'Aye,' he said in a voice that was low and soft, 'I love it, and I've no doubt you'll be fully aware of the fact that it's going to be mine before long.'

Melodie nodded, more touched by his confession to loving the place than she would have believed possible. 'I know,' she agreed, 'and I'm sure it couldn't be in better hands.'

The grey eyes held hers for a second and she felt compelled to look away, disturbed by something she could not quite understand. 'I agree, Miss Came,' he said, 'but then, of course, I'm biased !'

It occurred to her suddenly to wonder how soon he was to become the legal owner of Ben Ross, and if his

taking over was likely to affect her own position. 'How soon will it be?' she asked, and added hastily, 'before you take over, I mean.'

'Does it matter?'

It was a polite way of telling her to mind her own business, she realised, and felt the colour that warmed her cheeks suddenly. 'I—I suppose not,' she allowed. 'Unless you're likely to evict me from the cottage the moment you take possession.'

He regarded her again with that hint of smile on his mouth, but said nothing. Climbing once more into the saddle, he held the restless stallion with a firm hand while he looked down at her from his superior position. 'I'll not do that,' he said, and Melodie heaved a sigh of relief, more pleased than she would have believed to know that he was not anxious to be rid of her. 'You're a guest, Miss Came, I cannot turn around and send you packing the very minute I take possession—even if I'd a mind to.'

He gave her no time to reply to the somewhat discomfiting assurance, but put his heels to the black stallion and sent him galloping off across the springy turf with Melodie watching him, trying to decide whether or not she had been snubbed. It was going to take a great deal of patience and perseverance to understand and know a man like Neil McDowell, but it never for a moment entered her mind to wonder whether it would be worthwhile.

Melodie would not have dreamed of intruding into the privacy of Ben Ross itself, but by walking in the gardens that were furthest from the house, she felt, she could not be accused of intruding, and the view from the front of the house was breathtaking. There were hedges of

tall sturdy evergreens that shielded the terraced walks on the upper level from the searing winds of winter, and steps between the two levels.

It was on the intermediate steps that she stood at the moment, her eyes on the vast expanse of the landscape visible to her from that vantage point. The gravel drive beside which her own cottage stood, was to her left, sloping steeply down towards the narrow stony road. It wound like a ribbon across the foreground of her vision, leading in turn to the tiny station of Glen Ross, and beyond that to the village itself.

Mountains, road, river and streams, and acres of rolling open country seemed dominated by the towering situation of Ben Ross, and as she looked out from her lofty viewpoint she found herself well able to appreciate Neil McDowell's arrogant pride in the place.

Even on such a warm sunny day there was a breeze to temper the warmth of the sun. A light, soft wind that was just strong enough to stir the strands of black hair around her face, and mould the thin dress she wore to the soft contours of her shape. The sun was bright enough for her to need a shading hand over her eyes, and she was unaware of anyone else near until someone spoke from the lower level of the terraced lawns.

'Beautiful ! ' John Stirling's pleasant voice declared softly. 'Just beautiful

Melodie looked down at him, momentarily blinded by the sun in her eyes, and smiled. 'That's why I'm admiring it,' she told him, deliberately misunderstanding. 'Good morning, John '

He shook his head, taking the brick-edged steps in a couple of strides to stand beside her. 'You know I wasn't talking about the view,' he chided, and his brown eyes glowed earnestly in his nice friendly face. 'You're easily

the loveliest girl I know,' he assured her, 'and I'm not just saying that, Melodie.'

She found his unexpected earnestness a little disconcerting, and sought to hide her reaction to it, by looking at the view once more. 'Did you come to find me especially to say nice things?' she asked, treating it with studied lightness. 'You're very good for my ego, John.'

'I was hoping you'd do something for my ego by promising to come with me into Corrie,' he confessed. A firm but tentative hand was placed on her shoulder, and persuaded rather than obliged her to turn and face him. 'I know you said not to ask you until the week-end, but can't you change your mind and come anyway?'

He was much harder to resist than he probably realised, but Melodie had in mind to try and paint the whole exciting scene laid out down there before her, and at the moment it filled her head to the exclusion of almost everything else. She pointed to her easel and the rest of her equipment leaned against the hedge that sheltered the upper terrace.

'I came up here to work, John, I'm sorry.'

The hand on her shoulder remained, though its pressure was more caressing than firm now, and infinitely persuasive. 'Ah, come on, Melodie, who's going to complain if you take a few days before you start working, hmm? Nobody's pressuring you, are they?'

'No, of course no one's pressuring me, but I can't *wait* to start!' She laughed and half turned to indicate the scene behind her. 'You said yourself that if Scotland didn't inspire me, nothing could, and I have to agree with you.'

'Oh, Melodie!'

He put his other hand on her right shoulder and held

her for a second facing him, his fingers tightly pressed into her flesh under the thin dress she wore. His face was closer suddenly, and his mouth only a warm breath away, and she would probably have allowed herself to be kissed without protest. Except that when he was about to kiss her some sound behind them on the gravelled walk brought both their heads round swiftly, and John muttered something under his breath, his hands dropping quickly to his side.

'Good morning, Miss Came.'

'Mr McDowell.'

She sounded breathless, but she could do nothing about it, she was startled, perhaps even more so than John, and it probably showed on her face. Neil McDowell had been riding, or was about to go, for he was dressed the only way Melodie had seen him dressed so far—in breeches and boots, with a cream shirt in stunning contrast to the golden tanned colour of his skin.

It must have been evident what he had interrupted, but he showed no sign of reaction beyond the faintest tightening of his mouth just before he spoke, although Melodie felt more embarrassed than she would have believed possible. She had been brought up in a fairly free and easy atmosphere and she had gone with a number of boy-friends during her twenty-two years, so there should be no reason why she felt the way she did.

The teasing affection of two older brothers had also done a lot to overcome any tendency towards shyness, so that she was for the most part quite at ease in men's company. It was only when she came into contact with the curiously stern detachment of Neil McDowell that she experienced these qualms of uneasiness, and because

the sensation was new to her, she not only found it discomfiting, but she resented it too.

'I'm sor—' She stopped herself hastily from apologising, but it seemed as if her attempt went unnoticed anyway, for he was addressing himself to John.

'Good morning, John, aren't you riding this morning?'

The informality of the christian name surprised her, but then she recalled that John had sounded as if he not only knew him fairly well, but liked him too. His brown eyes showed the same suggestion of uneasiness she was experiencing herself, and he ran a hand through his thick hair as he answered.

'Not this morning—although I guess I might as well have done since I had a fruitless walk up here.'

Neil McDowell said nothing, but neither did he make any move to leave them. He was quite within his rights, of course, Melodie was forced to recognise, for after all, he was on the verge of becoming the new owner of Ben Ross, and both she and John were standing in his grounds.

He looked at her in that steady and very disconcerting way he had, and a slight tilt to his mouth suggested a smile. 'You'll be ready to start painting, Miss Came?'

'Yes—at least, I'm hoping to.'

'You'll need peace and solitude for that, I'm thinking?'

His meaning was obvious, and John Stirling's brown eyes looked at her reproachfully when she replied, 'Ideally, yes.'

She felt sure he was waiting for Neil McDowell to leave, and when it began to look as if he did not mean to, he shrugged his shoulders and thrust his hands into the pockets of his slacks. 'I guess I may as well take that

ride after all,' he said. 'I'll see you, Melodie, huh?'

'Yes, of course.'

Neil McDowell registered a barely perceptible flicker of surprise at the use of her name, but he made no move to follow suit when John turned and walked back across the lawn to the drive. He was still standing there beside her when John turned, hopefully she guessed, to wave *a* hand to her.

'I hope it's all right for me to sit here and paint,' Melodie ventured after a second or two. 'It's such a wonderful view, I can't resist it.'

'Of course.' The softly accented voice gave no indication of his personal feelings in the matter. 'You're to have the free run of the estate, Miss Came, those are my instructions.'

The irritation she felt at his having stressed the fact that he was merely following instructions in allowing her to sit there, was perhaps unreasonable, but she could do nothing about it. She did frown, however, and tilted her chin slightly when she replied.

'Good—then I'll set up here at the top of the steps.'

He seemed not to have noticed her reply, but was looking across the lawn at the now distant figure of John Stirling as he walked away along the gravel drive rather quickly, his shoulders hunched in a way that suggested he was still smarting from her refusal to be persuaded.

'You *do* prefer to be alone while you're working, do you not?' he asked, and Melodie shrugged.

'On the whole,' she agreed, 'but I hardly think you encouraged John to stay, Mr McDowell.'

He said nothing more for several seconds, and Melodie wished she felt less small and at a loss. He really was the most disconcerting man. 'I'm sorry, I'd no

idea you were so—close.' The quiet voice with its gentle accent was not even slightly raised, and yet she felt sure he was at least annoyed by her remark. 'I thought you were virtually strangers, until a few days ago.'

We are—virtually strangers, as you say, but we're friendly.'

She looked at the stern, uncompromising features and wondered if he had any idea of the kind of relationship she had with John Stirling. A kind of easy, natural friendship that could, or need not, turn into something more serious in time.

Neil McDowell, she felt sure, was a man of more deep and enduring feelings, capable of a depth of emotion she was neither used to nor could yet understand, and for that reason he disturbed her, if for no other. To reach her painting gear she had to get past him, and she did not have the immediate nerve to do so, so she stood beside him for the moment, on the top step, with that breathtaking vista all around, and tried to keep her firm hold on her patience.

'I interrupted—something, did I not?' He gave her no time to either confirm or deny it, but went on in the same quiet, matter-of-fact voice. 'I'm sorry if I appeared at an inconvenient moment, but I wasn't to know what the situation was, of course.'

Melodie looked up at him swiftly, her eyes bright with some reaction she was not quite sure of, bright as jewels, and faintly challenging. 'There *is* no—situation, as you call it, Mr McDowell!'

The grey eyes scanned slowly over her flushed face, and came to rest on the softness of her mouth, reminding her of how close John had been to kissing her when he appeared; then he shook his head. 'But you're angry,' he dedared with certainty.

'Angry?' She laughed, a short unsteady sound that betrayed her uneasiness. 'Why on earth should I be angry ?'

Once more he took his *time answering*, and *as before* his eyes made a slow searching survey of her face, noting how her thick lashes hid her gaze from him. 'Maybe because you were about to be kissed,' he suggested, soft-voiced, 'and you're disappointed.' For a heart-stopping moment she was sure he meant to soothe her disappointment by kissing her himself and she held her breath. Instead he simply stood for a moment with that steady gaze fixed on her mouth, then he shook his head and half-turned away. 'I'll leave you to your painting,' he said. 'If you've a need of anything, Miss Came, don't be afraid to ask—we're not lacking in hospitality, I hope.'

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER two weeks of near-perfect weather, the sky was overcast and threatened a storm. Heavy black banks of cloud loomed in over the hills and there was a warm smell of rain in the air. From her kitchen window in the little cottage Melodie watched the storm gathering and debated whether or not to yield to the threat and stay at home, or whether to take a chance and walk down to the river as she had promised herself she would.

It was a very long walk and there was virtually no shelter if the storm should break while she was out on the open moor, and yet the temptation to go was almost irresistible. The idea of borrowing a horse from the Ben

Ross stables, as Neil McDowell had invited her to, had crossed her mind more than once, but so far she had never taken up the invitation, yet that would seem to be the solution at the moment.

She would still get very wet if the storm broke, but at least she would have a faster means of gaining shelter than if she was on foot. Another few minutes spent hovering uncertainly by the window, and she finally made up her mind—she would ride.

A pair of fawn trousers and a white blouse served, for it was all she had in the way of riding clothes, and she set off along the drive to the house with a curious little flutter of excitement in her breast. It was some time since she rode last, and she hoped there would be a mount available to her who was less temperamental than the glossy black stallion that Neil McDowell always rode.

When she neared the old house it occurred to her how it always seemed so still and silent, as if it was completely deserted; it had seemed so when she arrived and it still did, so that she sometimes wondered just how lonely its solitary occupant must be with no other company than the housekeeper, Jessie McKay.

The company of an elderly servant, no matter how devoted she might be, was surely no substitute for a wife and family, and yet so far as she knew Neil McDowell had lived that way for the past eight years. Ever since the Hollands left him in charge of Ben Ross and went to live in Australia.

He was an attractive man for all his dourness, and when he smiled it made such a difference that the pity was he did not do it more often. John liked him, though with reservations, she thought, and she wondered if it was that apparently impenetrable barrier of reserve that

kept Neil alone in the vastness of Ben Ross.

As always there was no sign of life when she walked past the front of the house on her way to the stables at the back, except that she thought she detected a brief flutter of movement at one of the ground-floor windows as she passed. Once at the rear of the house she stood for a moment, undecided, for she was on completely strange ground and very unsure of herself.

It was all very well to receive an invitation to ride—any time she felt like it, but it had not occurred to her until now that the invitation might possibly have been made simply out of politeness and with no thought of its being taken up. There was no sense in turning back now, she supposed, for the invitation had been issued, whether or not it had been intended to be taken seriously, so she took a swift glance round then walked on boldly, a hint of defiance in the angle of her chin.

A wide cobbled yard spanned the distance between the back of Ben Ross and a small stone cottage with green shutters, and stable buildings took up two whole sides of the yard. They were spacious, she noted with some surprise, and were probably capable of stabling ten or twelve horses, though it was doubtful if Ben Ross supported that number at the present time.

The first two stalls were unoccupied and suggested from the state of them that they always were, but in the third one along she found a stocky, rough-coated chestnut gelding who looked up inquiringly at her, which was all the encouragement she needed. From the stall next door the restless sound of hooves on the straw-covered floor and an impatient snorting suggested that it housed a more lively animal, and to be on the safe side she decided on the seemingly quiet and docile gelding.

There was bound to be a tack-room somewhere, but she found a saddle and everything else she needed either hanging on hooks on the wall or slung over the wooden screen between the stalls. Hesitating before she took it down, she puzzled over her right to use it, but then decided that, since it was in the chestnut's stall, it would seem to imply that it was what the animal usually wore.

Lack of practice made her clumsy, but the chestnut co-operated well and although it took a lot of effort and concentration, she eventually had him ready and she stood for a moment getting her breath back, stroking the gelding's nose and brushing back a wisp of hair from her own forehead.

She quickly dropped both hands when she heard footsteps on the cobbled yard outside and seconds later a tall shadow fell across the opening. The shadow became suddenly and curiously still when she was seen and, feeling quite ridiculously guilty, Melodie looked at the newcomer with wide, uncertain eyes.

'Miss Came.'

'Good morning, Mr McDowell—I hope it's all right my being here. You did say ____

'Yes, of course it's all right.'

He was taken as much by surprise as she had been herself, she thought, and she was aware that his eyes were registering every inch of her slim rounded figure in slacks and a short-sleeved blouse. As always happened his scrutiny made her inexplicably nervous and she once more felt a flick of annoyance for her own reaction, though there seemed nothing she could do about it.

Turning back to the gelding, she rubbed the soft nose while she tried to keep her voice as light and matter-of-fact as possible. 'I found the saddle and the rest of

the gear in the stall—I hope it's all right for me to use it.' He nodded without speaking, and she hurried on. 'And is it O.K. if I take the chestnut?'

'Yes, of course. The only one I wouldn't let you take is Black Knight, he's too dangerous for a woman to handle.'

'Yes—I remember you told me.' Once more she gave her attention to the chestnut rather than look at him. 'This fellow seems rather sweet and docile.'

His name's Rusty.'

She patted the rough chestnut coat and smiled. 'It suits him. I'm so badly out of practice that I don't want anything too lively, and he'll suit me fine.'

'You'll find him quiet enough,' Neil McDowell agreed, and looked at her thoughtfully for a second before he added, 'but if you're very much out of practice maybe it would be better if you rode out with me for a wee while, until you get the feel of riding again—we'd not want you being thrown or falling off.'

Melodic was still staring at him over her shoulder. The invitation had taken her so by surprise that for a moment she made no response. When she came to find herself a mount she had not expected to see him at all. She had been quite certain that by now he would be out somewhere on the estate, making that tour of inspection he had mentioned, and that he would be gone for most of the morning. His sudden appearance threw her rather off balance, the more so because he had suggested they ride together with the apparent intention of seeing that she came to no harm. She was unsure at the moment just what her reaction was, and she looked up at him and smiled a little uncertainly.

'Are—are you sure I won't hinder you?' she asked,

and added hastily, 'You did say that you rode around the estate as part of your job, and I don't want to take up your time if you're busy.'

The disconcerting steadiness of the grey eyes was something she was beginning to expect, and his mouth twitched into a half smile as he walked past and turned into the neighbouring stall. 'You'll not hinder me, Miss Carrie. I'm not just setting out on my daily inspection, I did that some time ago! I merely returned to the house for a few minutes, that's all.'

'Oh, I see.'

When he emerged a few seconds later he was leading the black stallion, his glossy coat gleaming, already saddled and anxious to be off again. For a moment Neil stood stroking the animal's nose while he regarded her in that same steady way as she stood in the dimly lit stall. 'If it's simply that you'd rather not ride with me, you've only to say so,' he told her quietly.

'Oh, that's silly!' The flush in her cheeks annoyed her, because it was so seldom that she blushed, and yet Neil McDowell seemed to have the ability to get under her skin in a way she could not understand. 'I'd like to ride with you,' she went on, keeping her voice coolly matter-of-fact with a determined effort. 'I just don't want to hinder you, that's all.'

He said nothing, but turned to tighten the stallion's girth, then led both animals out into the yard; dropping the rein for a moment while he helped her to mount. She thanked him, more demurely than she would have believed possible, and he swung himself up with the same easy grace she had noticed before. Everything about him was firm and confident, and he was undoubtedly an excellent horseman, so that she feared her own prowess would fall far short; however, if he was

prepared to make allowances, then the ride could prove quite enjoyable.

'Did you have anywhere special in mind to go?' he asked as she clucked the chestnut gelding into motion, and Melodie shook her head.

'Not exactly,' she said. 'Though I had thought of riding over to take a closer look at the river I've seen from a distance. Would that be possible, do you think?'

'Of course!' They had left the yard and the anvil sound of the horses' shoes on the cobbled yard gave way to the softer, sound-deadening turf. Turning, Neil looked over his shoulder and once more that suggestion of a smile touched his mouth for a moment and warmed the sober grey eyes. 'We'll take the long way down, it's a better ride.'

'Whatever you say.'

There was no point in presuming to suggest a route, for he knew every inch of Ben Ross, better than any man alive, and she was in no special hurry, for all it looked very much as if there would be a storm before too long. As if he was thinking along the same lines Neil too looked up at the gathering clouds as they rode down a gentle slope towards open moorland.

'You'll not mind getting wet?' he suggested. Briefly his eyes scanned her fawn denim trousers and the thin cotton blouse that in the event of a storm would offer very little protection. 'You should mebbe have worn a jacket.'

The storm seemed to be hovering only a few feet above their heads, dark and heavy, and already the wind stirred restlessly beneath it. Melodie pulled a rueful face, shaking her head. 'I should have done,' she agreed, 'but it's too late to worry about it now, and I don't suppose a drop of rain will hurt me.'

'You'll see yourself as a tough woman, hmm?'

He did not mean it seriously, she felt sure, and she smiled in response to the suggestion. 'Not really,' she demurred, 'but I've been rained_ on before'

He said nothing, but gave his attention to keeping the black at the same speed as her own mount and made it look much easier than it was. He looked at ease and relaxed as they rode across the open moorland; a man in love with the country he belonged to. It was a country to inspire devotion too, Melodie thought, for it was breathtaking in its splendour, and beautiful rather than pretty—a rugged country, made for men like Neil McDowell.

Huge grey boulders thrust their way through springy turf and dark shaggy heather, adding to the air of rugged grandeur, and the sound of the river gabbled through the still air even before they could see it properly. The scowling clouds seemed to magnify every sound, cutting off the tops of the hills and turning the landscape into a mass of shifting shadows that flitted darkly among the rocks.

'It's magnificent!'

Neil turned his head when she breathed the words almost involuntarily, and she could feel the intensity of his feeling for the place—a kind of electric excitement charged by the nearness of the storm. 'Aye,' he said with deceptive quietness, 'it's magnificent.'

'And it's yours! '

She looked across at him, the gelding having for the moment drawn dead level with his faster companion, and she saw the unconscious lift of Neil's chin and the look that passed across his lean features suddenly. 'Not yet,' he said in the same quiet voice. 'Not quite yet, but soon.'

They approached the river more slowly, and Melodie could see how fast it flowed over its stony bed. Frothing and sparkling, it raced around the outcrops that pierced its surface and it seemed deep even quite near to the banks; louder now, too, and competing with the encroaching thunder. They rode almost to the very edge before she dismounted, aware that Neil had followed suit, and drawn to the brink by the hypnotic fascination of swiftly flowing water.

'Take care! '

A hand on her arm brought her round swiftly, her eyes still vague and bemused, and her pulse responded rapidly to the soft quietness of the warning voice. 'Yes. Yes, of course, it's very deep, isn't it?'

'And fast—you'd have no chance at all among those rocks if you fell in.'

With the idea of moving to a safer distance, Melodie gave a light pull on the rein to persuade the gelding to turn, but either he misunderstood her intention or the liveliness of the water made him frisky. Instead of turning so that she could lead him to a safer distance, he tossed his head and gave a whinny of protest, then nudged her nearer to the edge of the bank.

The stones at the very edge of the water were wedged only into sandy soil, and when her weight was put on them suddenly it was inevitable that they gave way under her. She was never quite sure exactly what happened, but one minute she seemed to be stepping back into empty space, and the next she was pulled hard against the reassuring solidity of a masculine body, with a hard left arm tight about her waist.

She made no sound, for surprise had followed surprise so rapidly that she had no time to cry out, and neither did she offer any kind of resistance to the arm

that held her so tightly. The thudding beat of her heart almost deafened her to even the noise of the water, and for a second or two she pressed her face to the softness of a cotton shirt and the warmth of the body beneath it, letting relief envelop her as well as other reactions she made no pretence of understanding.

'I warned you to take care, did I not?'

The quiet voice was muffled and it took her a moment to realise that it was because his face was buried in the softness of her hair. The black stallion, his rein trailing, tossed his head at the rumble of thunder and snorted impatiently, followed closely by a whinny of protest from the gelding when a vivid flash split the overhead blackness.

Two hands curled their strong brown fingers around her soft upper arms and held her away while still keeping a light tenuous contact between her own rounded shape and the firm hardness of Neil's body, and she raised her head at last. There were fine lines from the corners of the grey eyes, she noticed as she tipped back her head, and a suggestion of tension in the straight firm mouth so close to her own, an urgency in the lean brown features that brought a sudden and unexpected shiver.

She was trembling and she could do nothing to stop it, her emotions shattered by surprise and uncertainty, and in that moment it began to rain. Huge splashes hit the dry ground and made dark patches on the rocks, and the storm was right overhead suddenly—jagged flashes overtaken by rolling thunder.

The mouth that took hers was fierce and hard, almost savage in its demands, and she was so stunned by its savagery that she never even thought to offer resistance, but yielded her mouth and the soft curves of her body

to his steely hardness. His arms were inescapable and in a half-conscious, dazed way she was aware of not wanting to escape, although her heart was beating so urgently that her head was dizzy with it.

She did not even realise the storm had overtaken them until Neil released her at last and she saw how the rain had darkened his fair hair and gave his skin a golden glowing look, like burnished bronze. Her own hair clung wetly to her head and the thin blouse she wore was no protection from the downpour but moulded to her like a second skin as she slipped out of the arms that let her go more easily than she anticipated and left her exposed to the full force of the deluge.

The surface of the river frothed and spumed with even more fury as it was lashed by the downpour and the noise of the storm with that of the river made such a cacophony that it was impossible to speak above it. By signs Neil indicated that he would help her to mount and she hastily brought herself back to earth when she realised the moment was ended that had brought them close for those few seconds of excitement. She nodded silently, but her heart was still racing when she sat in the saddle again, and she flung back her wet hair in a gesture that was vaguely defiant.

'Let's go!'

He put his heels to the stallion and the animal took off like a streak of shiny black jet, thundering across the wet turf like the wind and leaving the slower gelding behind. Melodie used her heels, but to less effect; the beast was slower and less spirited and she knew he could never hope to catch the stallion, no matter how he tried.

Resigned to following, she rode with her head down,

her heart rebelling against being deserted so soon after those few moments of fierce passion, and she felt more wildly angry with Neil McDowell for leaving her than she would have believed possible. Resentment, confusion, anger—all played a part in the seething emotions that kept her taut and stiff in the saddle as she rode before the storm.

'Come on

The first indication she had that Neil had come back for her was his voice as he came up beside her, the sound of it almost drowned by the roar of the storm, and blown away on the wind. He took hold of the gelding's rein and brought the two animals close together, the black stallion running level, held back by the slower speed of his stablemate and resenting it.

'I can manage!'

His coming back should not have surprised her, but she was not thinking very rationally at the moment. She still resented his action no matter if it was an oversight and understandable in the circumstances. Neil let go the rein but kept the stallion to the same pace as the gelding, and both riders kept their faces forward, not once looking at one another until they rode into the yard.

Their hooves clattering on the wet cobbles, the horses galloped into the yard and, even before Neil had dismounted, the back door of the house opened and Jessie McKay's short, stern figure stood there. Taking the rein from Melodie's hands, Neil indicated the open door with a nod of his head.

'Get away in and take off those wet clothes,' he ordered brusquely. 'I'll see to the animals.'

'But you——'

Her protest was instinctive and he cut it short im-

patiently, his normally quiet voice a note or two higher than usual\ 'Go, woman, and make yourself dry before you catch your death! Jessie 'll find you something to change into—now, away in with you!'

Only once before had Melodie been inside Ben Ross, and Jessie McKay looked no more welcoming on this occasion than she had the first time. She held the door open wider and stood back, but her eyes were on Neil while he led the two horses into the stable, and it was clear that she at least considered the job of rubbing down and stabling should have been shared.

Melodie looked at the round austere face and wondered if it ever smiled, or if the shrewd brown eyes ever showed a glimmer of warmth. She looked a woman who judged the world a harsh place and an unjust one, though it was clear in the few times Melodie had seen her near Neil McDowell that she had not only a high regard for her employer but a quite deep and genuine affection too.

Melodie let the wetness drip on to the floor of the passage rather than shake it off as she followed the housekeeper through from the back of the house to the hall and the stairs. 'Mr McDowell said you'd be able to find me something to change into,' she ventured. 'I'm afraid I'm very wet.'

'I'll show you upstairs, there's a robe of Mr McDowell's you could borrow until your own things are dry.'

She made it clear that she complied only with reluctance and because she had more or less been instructed to provide temporary replacements. She would have liked it a lot better if Neil had not still been out there dealing with the horses while the stranger was already on her way to drying off.

The house was evidently much bigger than Melodie had thought and very grand in its manner too. Like that wonderful hall she had first seen, the upstairs suggested the traditional stately home and the landing was dark-panelled too, with any number of doors opening off, presumably into bedrooms.

The place was huge, far too big for one man and an old housekeeper, and Melodie once more speculated on the lonely existence of Neil McDowell. He would surely be much better off and far less grim if he married and had a family. It was the sudden recollection of that fierce hard kiss and the strength of his arms around her that made her pull herself up hastily and put such thoughts out of her head. It was purely speculation on her part—maybe he was neither as lonely nor as solitary as *she* supposed.

The bedroom she was shown into was exactly what she would have expected from what she had seen of the house so far. Half-panelled in dark oak, it had a high ceiling and tall windows against which the rain hissed and rattled in its fury. Thick carpet deadened her footsteps and there was a big four-poster bed on one wall with a yellow silk cover that gave an added touch of luxury.

It was a beautiful room, though it gave the uncomfortable feeling of not having been slept in for a very long time, and she shivered involuntarily as the rain continued to beat at the window, like someone tapping. Jessie McKay said nothing, but withdrew at once, presumably to find the robe she had promised to provide, and Melodie took the opportunity to look around her. It was the kind of room that suggested secret panels and family ghosts, but she had scarcely

time to indulge in a small shudder at her own fancies before the housekeeper returned.

The promised robe turned out to be a big red dressing-gown of thick towelling, the type that fastens with a sash at the waist, and she took it with the thought that it would probably smother her, but at least it would serve to preserve her modesty while she was wearing nothing else.

'If you bring your wet things down with you when you come, I'll see to drying them for you,' Mrs McKay told her, and Melodie smiled, hopefully trying to establish a less unfriendly atmosphere, though not with much optimism.

'I just hope I'm able to find my way back,' she said, with a rather unsteady little laugh. 'It seems like a very big house and there are so many doors.'

Her laughter inspired no more than a brief lift of one sparse grey brow, and Melodie suspected Mrs McKay was virtually without a sense of humour at all. 'You'll not go far wrong if you turn right when you leave this room and walk along to the top of the stairs,' she told her. 'From there it'll not be possible for you to lose yourself.'

Not even for you—Melodie added silently, but she nodded her thanks for the guidance all the same. 'Thank you, Mrs McKay.'

She stood watching the stocky and faintly disapproving figure of the housekeeper walk to the door, waiting to see it close, but she blinked hastily when Jessie McKay turned in the doorway and her shrewd brown eyes looked at her once more. 'You'll be chilled from the rain,' she stated in her flat voice. 'I'll have you something hot to drink that will take the chill from you.'

Dazedly Melodie nodded and smiled. 'Oh, that would be lovely, thank you ! '

This time the door closed behind her, and Melodie watched it with dazed eyes. Such an offer of hospitality was the last thing she expected from that dour and uncompromising woman, and she felt a momentary twinge of guilt at the thought of possibly misjudging her. When she unrolled the dressing-gown too, she found a large bath towel in the middle of the bundle, and she once again wondered at the unexpected thoughtfulness of Jessie McKay.

Her skin glowed after a vigorous rubbing with the towel, and Melodie felt much more comfortable as she shrugged herself into the thick towelling robe and tied the sash at her waist. As she expected, it covered her completely from head to foot, but at least it allowed no glimpse of her nakedness, and she rolled the sleeves back as she surveyed herself in a long cheval mirror.

The red colour suited her and added to the rather wild gypsy look that was suggested by her black hair roughly towelled dry and left to riot around her face because she had no means of combing it into any kind of order. There was laughter in her blue eyes that appreciated the sight, and she could not restrain a rather nervous giggle as she faced the prospect of appearing in such a state.

There was no one about on the landing when she looked out, and she padded out on her bare feet, then turned to carefully close the door behind her. It was as she straightened up that she found herself looking directly along at Neil McDowell, and for a moment she hesitated.

Evidently he had come from the stairs while she was dosing the door, and his hand was on the handle of a

door immediately at the top of the stairs, presumably his bedroom. For some reason she expected him to simply acknowledge her being there and then carry on into his room, and with that in mind, she waved a hand. But although he acknowledged the wave he made no other move and she was more or less obliged to walk along the landing towards him, feeling more self-conscious than she had ever done in her life.

Seeing him again she was reminded of the way he had held her in his arms, such a very short time ago, and the sight of his bare brown arms, still glowingly damp, brought a swift and disturbing reaction from her senses. Giving herself a mental shake, she smiled and walked over with as much confidence as her attire allowed.

Neil had kissed her, that was all, and it was hardly such an unusual event in her life that it should mean so much—she had been kissed before. Not with such intensity, it was true, but she had been kissed by men before, and it made no sense at all that Neil McDowell should have left a so much deeper impression on her emotions than anyone else ever had.

Grey eyes swept over her modestly covered length and registered the tumbled mass of her hair, then he smiled, and she was once again startled by the difference it could make to that rather stern face. 'I'd no idea I was so much bigger than you,' he said. 'That dressing-gown is mebbe a wee bit big for you!'

Melodie laughed because, despite her efforts at self-control, she felt curiously excited suddenly; the way she had down by the river, though she did her best to quell the feeling as she pulled the red robe about her more tightly. 'It drowns me!'

'That colour suits you.'

'A red rebel! That's what my brothers sometimes call me! '

'You've brothers?'

She nodded. 'Yes, two of them, for my sins!'

He nodded, but he was remembering those few moments beside the river; she knew it, even though he said nothing. She could sense it in his manner and she felt herself shiver at the possibility of the scene being repeated. She looked down at the thick red dressing-gown, anything rather than meet his eyes, then once more that small and slightly unsteady laugh betrayed her nervousness.

'Well, I'd better let Mrs McKay have____' She stopped, looking down at her empty hands for a second until the truth dawned, then she shook her head. 'Oh, what an idiot I am—I've forgotten my clothes!'

Turning quickly, she started to run back to the bedroom she had used, vaguely aware as she did so that Neil was calling something after her, then suddenly she went sprawling, tripped by a corner of the too-long dressing-gown that had caught under her foot.

Too breathless for a moment to get up, she lay full length until two large hands reached down for her and raised her from the floor. He said nothing, but held her for a moment while she recovered, and her cheeks were flushed, her eyes downcast because she felt she had made a fool of herself. Then the strong hands on her arms and the masculine scent of his warm, damp body seemed suddenly much too affecting, and she glanced up suddenly and shook her head, laughing unsteadily to cover the way she felt.

'It's just not my day, is it?'

'No harm done.' The hard fingers on her arms pressed into her soft skin for a second before he released

her. 'But Jessie will fetch your things—you'd best have two hands to cope with that long dressing-gown while you go downstairs.'

'Won't she mind?'

The question was instinctive, but she did not really know why she asked it, except that Jessie McKay's stony manner was still too easily recalled. But she saw Neil's brows rise as if it surprised him. 'I should hope not,' he said quietly, and glanced down at his own wet clothes. His shirt clung to his broad chest and showed the tanned skin through its thin texture, and his fair hair was still darker than normal, though already starting to dry. 'I've to change my own things first, then I'll be down too.'

Something else occurred to her suddenly, and she looked up at him. 'I haven't thanked you for taking care of both horses—I should have remembered.'

That too appeared to surprise him, for he was looking at her between thick fair lashes, and his head was angled in query. 'Would you not expect me to take care of them both?' he asked, and Melodie shrugged, vaguely uneasy without quite knowing why.

'Yes. Yes, I suppose so, but I'm still grateful.'

The grey eyes studied her for a second or two, and she found the scrutiny oddly disturbing; then he shook his head slowly. 'You'd best away downstairs,' he said, 'and mind and lift that robe when you go.'

The warning reminded her so much of the way her brothers sometimes spoke to her that she responded in much the same way she would have done to one of them, letting him know that she was not baby enough to need to be told.

'Yes, Mr McDowell I '

It was a pert answer, but meant only to tease him

for the way he was instructing her and she wondered if she had been too rash when she saw him raise a brow as he regarded her steadily for a moment. 'You don't have to be sassy,' he told her, and the slang expression spoken in that soft quiet voice brought a swift flush of colour to her cheeks.

'I'm not being sassy ! '

She looked up at him, her blue eyes unconsciously provocative between their thick black lashes, and she was at the same time tinglingly aware of her own body and of the man facing her. The air was electric, just as it had been down there beside the river, with the storm venting its fury all around them. A vivid flash barely preceded the snarling roar of thunder that shook the house, and she saw a glimpse for a moment of the same kind of fierceness in the eyes of the man beside her, before it was hidden from her.

'Jessie has some hot toddy ready that will take off the chill,' he said in that cool voice. 'I'll be down for my share as soon as I've changed my clothes.'

Her mind could not immediately cope with the matter-of-factness of what he was saying, and she shook her head slowly and vaguely. 'Mr McDowell—Neil——'

'Have you not heard that silence can be golden?' he inquired softly. 'I suggest that this is one of those occasions, Melodie.'

He turned and went striding back to his room and Melodie watched the tall figure in clinging wet clothes with dazed eyes. Pride and even arrogance showed in the way he walked, and she watched him go with a strange feeling of regret that she was not altogether sure she could explain.

CHAPTER FOUR

MELODIE had said nothing to John as yet about riding with Neil, or that they had been caught in a storm and she had been obliged to take shelter in Ben Ross. It struck her as odd that she was so diffident about mentioning it, and once or twice during the ensuing week she had questioned her own reasons.

John had become an even more frequent visitor to the cottage. He either came to see her in the mornings before she started work, or in the evening when she had finished for the day, and a couple of times he had taken her to visit his uncle and aunt in their cottage on the estate. The visits were not altogether a success, although it was pleasant enough chatting to his family, but the Stirlings had lived all their lives in the service of the family at Ben Ross and the idea of having a guest of their employer visiting as a friend of their nephew, made them uneasy, and did not fit in with their idea of how things should be.

She had seen Neil several times during the week, but had been given the opportunity to do no more than wave a hand as he passed, either from her cottage or from her chosen viewpoint at the top of the terrace steps. While he returned her greeting amiably enough he had not once stopped to say more than a couple of words to her, and deep down she resented the fact more than she cared to admit.

From his manner at present it might be supposed that he saw her simply as someone he could do no more

than be civilly polite to, but in view of the way he had acted when they stood beside the river in the midst of a raging storm, it was not an attitude that was easy to either accept or understand. Neil McDowell continued to be as much an enigma as ever, and sometimes she lost patience with herself for being so intrigued.

On Saturday morning, John was a fairly early caller at the cottage, and when Melodie opened the door to him it was plain from the way he was dressed that he had it in mind for them to go riding. He wore dark denims and a blue open-necked shirt, and he looked irresistibly cheerful, grinning all over his pleasantly attractive face when she opened the door.

'Hello, John, you're an early bird! '

He gave her mock salute and leaned a hand on the lintel of the door while he grinned at her hopefully. 'How do you feel about exercising one of McDowell's horses this morning?' His grin was perhaps just slightly less confident at the moment and she wondered if the surprise she felt showed on her face. 'Can't I tempt you, Melodie? I know you *can* ride because you've said so—so how about it?'

Her hesitation was purely and simply because she was remembering the events of the only other time she had borrowed a horse from the Ben Ross stables, but John did not know that and he was watching her with a curious anxiousness, as if he feared she might refuse. There was absolutely no reason why she should refuse to go with him, and she nodded after only a moment or two, glancing down at the summery dress she was wearing.

'You'll have to give me time to change,' she told him, and stood back from the door to let him in. 'Would you like to come in and wait for me—I shan't be very long?'

John's grin became broader than ever and, as he stepped inside the little cottage, he caught hold of her hand and gave her fingers a brief squeeze. 'Take all the time you need,' he said. 'I'm in no rush now I know you're not turning me down flat.'

Assigning him a chair with a careless hand, Melodie watched him curiously as he dropped into one of the cottage's rather battered armchairs. 'Did you expect me to turn you down flat?' she asked, and he shrugged, as if he hated to admit that he had ever doubted his own powers of persuasion.

'I don't know,' he confessed. 'I guess I figured that as it's such a long time since you were on a horse you might think twice about it when it came to the crunch.'

Of course, it was a long time as far as John knew, she thought, but rather than tell him that it was in fact little more than a week since she was last on a horse, she turned away towards her bedroom with a somewhat uneasy smile. 'I'll go and change,' she said.

When she reappeared a few minutes later she was wearing the same denim trousers and white blouse she had worn when she rode with Neil, and John got to his feet hastily. The way he looked at her, a swift searching scrutiny from head to foot, was reminiscent of Neil's reaction in similar circumstances, and the clarity with which she remembered the fact startled her for a moment.

Physically John was every bit as attractive as Neil McDowell, but there was something about the older man that left a deeper impression on her, although she could not have said why or what it was that made it so.

John's grin was in evidence once more as she came across the room to him and she responded to it instinctively. There was something about his almost

schoolboy enthusiasm that appealed to her present mood. 'Well,' he drawled, 'that must be something of a record for a quick change, and well worth the effort, believe me.'

His car was parked outside the cottage, but they walked along the steeply sloping drive towards the house, and once more Melodie was driven to speculate, as they approached the big red brick building, on how lonely it must be for Neil living alone there. She did not say as much to John, but simply remarked on the air of solitude about the old place, and he nodded agreement, unhesitatingly.

'I can't think why it hasn't been turned into a hotel or something by now,' he declared, and shuddered melodramatically. 'It'd give me the creeps, living alone in a mausoleum like that.'

'Oh, I wouldn't call it a mausoleum!' Her defence of the old house was quite instinctive, and she did not even notice John's vaguely surprised look when she made the denial. 'In fact it's really quite homely inside, and—' She stopped herself there, before she made a statement that could very well complicate things. Betraying an inside knowledge of the bedrooms in Ben Ross was bound to make John more curious than she was prepared for at the moment.

'I can't think why anybody would get so attached to it,' he observed, glancing at the rather severe face that Ben Ross presented as they passed along its frontage. 'Mind you, it must have something, I guess—the girl who inherited it from old man Ross hated leaving it, so Uncle Jamie says, though I'd have thought she would have been glad to see the back of it!' Only then did he remember at whose invitation she was there, and Melodie saw his suddenly rueful face. 'Oh, heck,'

he said dolefully, 'I forgot you're a friend of hers.'

'You don't have to worry,' Melodie insisted, intrigued anew about Neil's position at Ben Ross. 'Catriona and Nick were more neighbours than close friends. We got along well socially, but I never knew a lot about them, only that Catriona inherited Ben Ross about eight years ago, but gave it up to marry Nick and settle in Australia.' She looked up at the house again as they turned the corner and made for the stable yard. 'Just the same, I can see how she'd hate leaving Ben Ross.'

'And its manager, maybe?' John suggested softly, and Melodie turned to him swiftly, her curiosity fighting a certain loyalty she felt she owed to her ex-neighbour in Australia.

'Just what's that supposed to imply, John?'

He shrugged, obviously regretting having made that rash and somewhat malicious comment, but there was little else he could do, having gone so far, but go on. And Melodie wanted to know the rest with a compulsion that surprised her. 'It doesn't mean anything very much really,' he confessed uneasily. 'It was just something that my uncle said once, about Neil McDowell having been keen on the girl who inherited this place.'

'You mean he was in love with her?'

It fitted in so well with the kind of situation she had visualised for Neil, and her blue eyes had a distant, hazy look for a second or two as she pictured him in love with the owner of Ben Ross, then losing her to Nick Holland. She had known somehow that he had been a loser in a love-affair, and her heart beat faster suddenly when she thought of him living alone in that great house with memories that were possibly more painful than anyone realised.

John took a more prosaic view, and he shrugged

lightly. 'Who knows?' he said. 'Uncle Jamie said he was keen on her, he didn't enlarge on it.'

'I had a feeling there was something like that.' She shook her head slowly. 'He has that look about him somehow.'

'Ah, come *on* now!' John laughed off her romantic notions with a determined practicality, and taking her hand he smiled down at her, his brown eyes glistening. 'He's just a dour Scot, it has nothing to do with unrequited love I Don't get carried away with sentimental notions about him, Melodie—Neil McDowell isn't the type to take kindly to anyone feeling sorry for him.'

'I wasn't *feeling* sorry for him!' She denied it hastily and firmly, and yet she knew it wasn't quite true, and the flush in her cheeks made John raise a brow.

'O.K., O.K.,' he soothed, and squeezed her fingers persuasively. 'So let's drop the subject of McDowell and get ourselves a couple of horses, shall we?'

Melodie said nothing for the moment, but walked with him across the cobbled yard and into the stable, instinctively pausing beside the stall that housed the chestnut gelding she had ridden the last time she went out. Black Knight's stall next to it was empty, and she breathed an inward sigh of relief that Neil was unlikely to catch her unawares this time.

'I'll take Tarquin, the one I usually ride,' John told her from further along, 'and there's a nice little grey here you'll like. I'll saddle him for you since you're out of practice.'

'Oh no, I'll take Rusty ! '

Her response was unthinking and it was not until John walked back to her and she saw his curiously furrowed brows, that she realised what she had said. He came and stood by the chestnut's stall, resting one hand

on the dividing screen and looking at her in silence for a moment before he spoke.

'Anything you say,' he told her, but made no other move. 'He's quiet enough at least.'

'Yes.'

He still made no move, but stood watching her, and she felt there was a certain tautness in his manner. 'I get the feeling I've missed out somewhere,' he remarked. 'Or maybe it's none of my business.'

It would have been so much easier if she had explained in the first place, Melodie thought; as it was he was bound to suspect her motive for keeping quiet about her ride with Neil. To cover her discomfiture she turned and took the saddle herself and started to put it on the gelding's broad back, but she had barely started when John took over, his usually sunny face showing the first hint of anger she had ever seen there, then he looked at her and his eyes were narrowed.

'I guess it's none of my damned business at that !' he declared forcefully.

It was difficult to explain, and she wished it wasn't, for there was no reason why she should find it so hard to tell him that she had been for a ride with Neil. Except that she thought of the ride simply as a prelude to what had followed, and that was what made her reticent.

'There's really no mystery,' she said, taking the rein from him and soothing the gelding's soft nose while she talked. 'I came up here about a week ago because I suddenly decided I'd like to ride, and—Neil was here, so we went together.'

It sounded so simple and so uneventful, outlined like that, and that was how it should have been. Only the advent of a storm and that fiercely passionate reaction

of Neil's to her near ducking in the river had turned it into anything other than a perfectly ordinary ride, but it was the unexpected that made it so hard for her to forget the incident.

John's brown eyes scanned her face for a moment, then he reached out and took the hand that stroked Rusty's nose, drawing it into his hold for a moment while he spoke. 'You don't expect me to say I don't mind, do you, Melodie?' he asked, his voice quiet but not quite steady. 'I do mind, and I mind more that you felt you had to keep quiet about going with him, but as I said, it's none of my damned business 1 '

'John ' She looked at him with wide uncertain eyes, finding his reaction difficult to cope with. 'I didn't keep quiet about it—not intentionally. I mean, I'd have told you if the opportunity had arisen, but there didn't seem any point in suddenly announcing the fact that I'd been riding with Neil.'

'Not even back there at the cottage—when I spoke about how long it had been since you rode last?'

The suggestion that he was accusing her of something was not easy to accept, but she knew that was what he was doing, and she did her best not to resent it. 'It didn't seem that important,' she insisted, and he pursed his lips.

'Seems to me it was a whole lot more important than it should be from the way you're reacting.'

'John, it's not——'

'O.K., O.K.!'

He gave her one long look before turning his back to her and walking back along the stable to saddle his own mount, and she watched him with vaguely uneasy eyes while she stroked the gelding's soft nose absently. It hadn't been important, she was sure Neil would agree

with that, but it crossed her mind to wonder just how much more resentful John would have been if he had known the full story.

'Shall we go?'

His sudden question brought her swiftly out of her reverie, and she nodded hasty agreement, leading Rusty out into the yard. Just as Neil had done, he left his own mount to come and help her into the saddle, but before he did so he stood with one hand on an animal's neck, very close to her and looking down at her steadily with serious brown eyes.

'I guess I'll have to watch my step,' he told her ruefully. 'I could quite easily fall in love with you, Melodie Came, and I have a feeling I'd be wasting my time.'

'John——

He put a finger over her lips to silence her, then bent to help her up into the saddle. 'Let's go,' he said, 'before I start saying something I'll be sorry for.'

She watched him swing himself on to the broad brown back of his horse, and tried not to compare his style with Neil's, shaking her head firmly to dismiss the comparison. They were two very different men, both in character and appearance, although both had the same kind of rugged attraction. The difference was that John was open and extrovert, while Neil McDowell presented an enigma that she found an increasing need to understand.

Out on the moors again, Melodie felt the same sense of being overwhelmed by her surroundings as always, and she wondered if it would ever be possible to grow tired of such an environment. Riding with John she realised that he was less a part of the countryside than Neil was, but that was only to be expected. Canada

was his country and he probably had the same affinity with that vast continent that Neil did with this ruggedly grand country.

They had ridden so far at a steady walk, but John as well as his mount began to grow restless eventually at the slowness of their pace, and he turned to Melodie with the familiar grin and a hint of challenge in his eyes that she found hard to resist.

'How about seeing what these critters are made of?' he asked. 'Do you feel up to taking a gallop?'

Melodie had no great enthusiasm for the idea, but neither was she completely averse to it, and it was certain that Rusty would be less soundly outclassed by John's mount than he had been by the flying black stallion. 'Why not?' she said, and he studied her for a moment with a sudden concern.

'Don't say so if you'd rather go on at a steady pace,' he told her. 'I'd hate anything to happen, Melodie. If you got hurt I'd never forgive myself.'

'I won't get hurt.' She stroked the gelding's rough coat without looking at John as she spoke. 'I'm quite capable of taking care of myself, John.'

He leaned across and put his hand over hers for a moment, his expression serious. 'I hope so, honey—I'd hate it if you got hurt just to prove something.'

'I won't.'

'O.K.' He gave her one last look, then put his heels to his horse's flanks and set him off at a gallop, heading for a huge boulder that soared skywards from the turf and heather, some half a mile away. 'Let's go!'

To Melodie it seemed the ground was more uneven than she remembered it from that wild gallop through the storm a week ago, but the gelding never once faltered, and- she began to thrill to the speed of their

gallop as her long black hair fluttered out behind her and the wind whipped a bright colour into her cheeks..

John was in the lead by about four yards as they raced the last few yards to the boulder and she had little hope of catching him, although her mount seemed quite willing to try, until a sudden high-pitched whinny of fear startled him into swerving from his course. It took all her skill and strength to pull him up and she saw what happened only from the corner of her eye when the horse ahead stumbled suddenly and fell, rolling over before it lay on its side, its belly heaving with recent exertion, while its rider rolled clear.

'John '

She turned the gelding hastily and slipped from the saddle almost before he stopped moving, kneeling on the turf beside John. He was already raising his head when she knelt down, with a hand to his brow and looking as much annoyed as hurt. He hauled himself, up on to an elbow and pulled a face at her.

'Of all the lousy luck I ' he declared, and for some reason she could not explain, Melodie felt a sudden surge of anger.

'It's worse luck for your horse!' she told him, and got up from his side to go and look at his horse.

She soothed the glossy brown coat with a gentle hand and wished she knew enough to recognise an injury when she saw one, for the animal had made no attempt yet to get to its feet again, so she felt sure it must be more seriously hurt than its rider. Then she heard two new sounds at almost the same instant, and felt her heart thud suddenly-hard in her breast.

John swore softly to himself, and the thud of horses' hooves reached her quite clearly via dip springy turf she knelt on. In the circumstances it had to be Neil, and

the stallion that enabled him to cover the distance between them so rapidly that she had barely time to muse on his timely arrival before he was there beside her.

Nor did it come as any surprise that he gave his immediate attention to the animal rather than its rider, or that he said nothing until he had assured himself that the horse was not too badly hurt. He knelt beside her, almost sweeping her aside, and ran his big gentle hands over the animal's legs and the glossy flanks with a surety of touch that suggested he knew exactly what he was doing.

His voice murmured quietly all the time he was carrying out his inspection, soothing and reassuring the animal. Melodie got to her feet after a second or two, but still stood beside him, fascinated by his gentleness and unaware that John was watching with a frown.

Only when he was apparently satisfied did Neil get to his feet and looked across to where John sat with his knees hunched before getting stiffly to his feet. He could not be too badly hurt, Melodie felt sure, for he had rolled clear and the heather made a soft fall, but he evidently meant to make the most of his moment.

'Are you hurt, John?'

The belated inquiry from Neil brought a grimace, and John was running his hands through his hair, a frown suggesting that Neil McDowell was the last person he wanted to see at the moment. 'I thought you'd never ask!' he retorted acidly. He came across to them, rubbing a hand over his back and grimacing as he walked. 'I'm O.K., just bruised a bit—how's Tarquin?'

Neil gave his attention to the fallen horse once more before he answered, holding the rein lightly in one hand and coaxing the animal to its feet with soft words

and a soothing hand until it stood up. 'He's not much more than winded, as near as I can tell at the moment,' he said, 'but I'll need to look at him more thoroughly in the stable.' He bent once more and ran his hand over the vulnerable fetlocks, then nodded as if satisfied. 'At least he has nothing broken.'

'Well, thank God for that at least!' John's voice was heavy with sarcasm, and Melodie looked at him in some surprise. 'I don't have anything broken either, but I feel like I've been thrown out of a window!'

'John, you're *not* hurt are you?' She felt vaguely guilty suddenly, for both she and Neil, she realised, had given more attention to the well-being of John's mount than to him. 'You didn't say

'You didn't ask!' John interrupted ruefully, and she realised that was true.

She had gone to him, prepared to sympathise, but his statement that his fall was lousy luck had incensed her for some reason she could still not quite explain, and she had left him almost at once to go and look at Tarquin. Neil, she thought, was probably more angry than he appeared at first sight. It showed in the darkness of his grey eyes and the tight look about his mouth.

'You're both a lot luckier than you've any right to be!' he said.

John's usually friendly face was flushed, and he was much less troubled about letting his anger show. He glared at Neil in a way Melodie would not have believed him capable of only days ago. 'I get the impression that I'm taking the can back for this fall,' he said, his voice harsh. 'Dammit, how was I to know the fool horse would tread in a hole?'

Neil still would not allow himself the luxury of losing his temper, Melodie realised as she watched that

stern and uncompromising face from the shadow of her lashes, but his eyes had a steely greyness that brought an involuntary shiver to her. So far he had said nothing to her directly, and she hastened to speak up before a more serious situation developed between the two of them.

'We—we thought we'd give them their heads for a change,' she ventured, and Neil turned and looked at her at last.

'We?' He asked the single word question so quietly that it was doubtful if John even heard it, and Melodie flushed.

'I—agreed,' she told him. 'It's the same thing.'

He seemed unprepared to argue the point, but after a brief steady survey of her flushed face he walked across and picked up the rein of his own mount again while both she and John watched him uneasily. It wasn't in John's interests to quarrel with him, no matter how much he felt inclined to and she thought, with sudden insight, that John was not the kind of man to do anything that would jeopardise his own comfort or convenience.

'Well, what happens now?' he asked, and Neil shook his head. His hand was on the stallion's saddle and he prepared to remount, but he still had possession of Tarquin's rein, and that worried John. He watched him with a curious mixture of suspicion and dislike, but said nothing more.

Safe mounted once more, Neil looked down at the two of them for a moment before he replied. 'Give me your hand, Melodie ! '

'Hey now, wait a minute!'

John found his voice again, but by then Melodie had obeyed the instruction more by instinct than conscious

reaction, and Neil's strong fingers were closed around her wrist. 'Now come away up ! '

The grey eyes looked down at her steadily, challengingly, she might almost have said, and she did as he said, letting him use their clasped hands to help her on to the stallion's broad back pillion-fashion—behind him. She slid her arms around him and felt the hard rapid beat of her heart as *she* pressed against the warm vigour of his body.

He gave her one brief glance over his shoulder, then looked down at John still standing, helplessly angry, on the ground. 'Take Rusty, John,' Neil told him, and countered any protest on John's part by posing a question. 'I think Black is better able to carry two than poor old Rusty, do you not agree?' he asked with deceptive mildness. 'And Tarquin had best be walked until I've had the chance to take a better look at him.'

'If you say so ! '

John complied with very bad grace, and he pulled the patient gelding round quite roughly until he caught Neil's eye on him, then he frowned and swung himself up into the saddle, a picture of angry resentment. Neil handed him the rein of his erstwhile mount and he took it without a word.

'I need both hands for this fellow,' Neil explained, 'especially with a lady aboard.'

They made a curious little procession as they rode back across the moor, with Neil slightly in front on Black Knight, as was to be expected, and John obliged to slow his pace to a walk because of the riderless horse's hurt. It was as they neared the house and the cobbled yard that Melodie ventured to speak to Neil about the incident.

Her voice was as low as she could make it and still

be sure he heard what she said, for she did not want John to hear and resent her appealing on his behalf. 'Please don't blame John for what happened.' She put her face close to his, stretching to reach over his shoulder and conscious as she did so of the hard muscles that kept the stallion under control.

Neil half turned his head, his cheek brushing hers and showing her a brief glimpse of his mouth, just touched by a hint of a smile, as if her appeal amused him. 'I don't blame John,' he told her. 'Whatever gave you the idea I did?'

It was not the answer she expected, and for a moment she was at a loss. 'I—I don't know,' she confessed. 'Except that you seemed angry.'

Once more he half turned his head. 'I'm always angry when one of my horses is hurt,' he informed her, as if she should have known his reason without being told. 'I care for my animals, Melodie.'

'More than you do for people!'

The retort was impulsive, and unforgivable, she realised when she felt the hard body she clung to stiffen in her arms, but his self-control was remarkable. His body was no less taut, but it was quite at variance with the cool and matter-of-fact voice, and she was *once* more forced to ponder on the complicated character of the man.

'I find them a lot more reliable than most people.' He turned the stallion into the stable yard and his hooves dattered on over the cobbles in a way that aroused memories of the last time they had come back from a ride, so that Melodic half expected to see Jessie McKay in the doorway as she had been then. He reached round for her hand to help her down before he dismounted himself, and for a moment she met the steady, un-

wavering look of the grey eyes head on and at no more than a few inches distance. 'You find that cynical?' he asked, and Melodie did not reply at once.

She slid down on to the cobbles and glanced at John just appearing on the far side of the yard. She recalled the story John had told her only that morning, confirming her early suspicions that Neil McDowell had been the victim of an unhappy love affair, and she shook her head.

'No,' she denied. 'I don't find it cynical.'

She felt very small suddenly now that he stood beside her, looking down in that steady and infinitely disturbing way he had. He was close enough for the fine lines at the corners of his grey eyes to be clearly seen, and she could sense the vigorous tautness of his body, like a tensed spring. Raising her eyes, she looked at him as steadily as she was able, trying to convey to him that she understood his reasons for being the way he was, and the act of meeting his eyes brought a tingling awareness to every nerve in her.

'I—I understand,' she said. 'I understand your reasons perfectly.'

Clearly he found her pronouncement puzzling, for he was frowning. He would quite probably have questioned her meaning, but by then John had joined them and he looked no less resentful and disgruntled—a definite discouragement to further conversation.

'I will ask you to explain that at some other time,' Neil murmured, and Melodie wished she had not glanced over her shoulder the way she did, as if she feared John might have heard what he said.

Pouring out second cups of coffee, Melodie looked across at John and felt a twinge of impatience for his

continued ill temper. It was a new side to his character that she had not come into contact with before, and not one she liked very much. It seemed incredible that after such short acquaintance he could be acting the way he was because he was jealous, and yet there seemed no other explanation. If that was the reason she must do something about it as soon as she possibly could, for as far as she was concerned their relationship had not yet reached the stage where he had either cause or right to be jealous of anyone.

'I can't imagine why you're making such a big thing about this,' she told him as she stirred her own coffee. Elbows resting on the table, she looked across at him, her own blue eyes showing the impatience she could not hide for much longer. 'I've told you that Neil doesn't hold you to blame for whatever happened to Tarquin.'

'That's big of him! ' He took a gulping mouthful of hot coffee and held the cup between both hands, much more tightly than he needed to. 'I don't know why you felt the need to put in a plea for me in any case, Melodie—damn it, the horse fell, he'd know that as well as anyone! '

'I just tried to help, that's all.'

'And then to go riding off with you like—like he was the lord of the manor with every right to carry you off, I could have kicked him—more, I could have taken a poke at him and I darned near did! '

'Well, I'm glad you didn't, it would have been pointless and rather childish, and it wouldn't have served any useful purpose at all in the circumstances.'

'It would have made *me* feel better! '

'And what about me?' The impatience she felt was evident in her voice at last, and she thought he took

warning from it, for he leaned across the table and curled his fingers over her hand.

'Melodie, I'm sorry!' His brown eyes were anxious and questioning and it was very hard not to be affected by them. He shrugged uneasily and shook his head, pulling a wry face at her. 'I guess that guy gets me into such a lather I can't think straight!'

It was something that he was backing down and showed signs of recovering his usual affability, but she was troubled by his sudden and open dislike of Neil. Looking down at their entwined hands on the table, she pressed her fingers to his, her voice quiet but undisguisedly curious.

'I thought you liked Neil, John. You gave me that impression when you spoke to me about him on the day I arrived.'

John's smile was rueful, making it clear that he was about to confirm her suspicions. 'But that was before I got so worked up about you, honey. Now I can't help seeing him as the other man in a triangle situation—and from that angle he doesn't seem so easy to like.'

It was difficult, much more difficult than she had anticipated, and she did not look at him, but continued to study their clasped hands instead. 'I wish you wouldn't see him in that light, John, there's really no cause for it.'

Her heart was hammering hard suddenly and she could not imagine how this episode was going to end. Neil McDowell had done nothing to encourage her to think of him in any other way than as her rather unwilling host, except for one unexpected kiss—and she had been kissed before.

'No cause?'

John was watching her closely and she shook her

head as firmly as possible to convince him. 'I can't imagine why you think there's anything—like that.'

He watched her for a moment longer, then shook his head slowly, a small tight smile on his mouth. 'Maybe something about the way he looked at you out there this morning.' He turned his hand to enfold hers even more tightly, and his brown eyes were narrowed when he looked across at her, lacking their usual warmth and laughter. 'And maybe because you took so long telling me about that last ride you took—with him.'

'John, I told you——'

'Yeah, yeah, you told me!'

He held her hand tightly, then raised it to his lips suddenly and pressed his mouth to her palm, watching all the time as if he sought her reaction. She did nothing, but simply tried to still the urgent beating of her heart. She didn't, want to get serious about anyone at the moment, and especially a man she had known only a few weeks, but it was gratifying to have him apparently so deeply attached to 'her, and she could not help feeling a certain satisfaction.

Looking across at him, she scanned his ruggedly attractive face for a second or two. 'I don't know what you think has—happened, John, but——'

'No, don't!' He raised himself from his chair and leaned across the table to kiss her mouth, then laughed shortly and rather unsteadily. 'Don't give me any explanations, honey. I don't want to hear them and I don't have the *right* to explanations. Most of all I don't want to quarrel with you, not about McDowell or anybody else. I guess you could say I'm prepared to sign an armistice on any terms, just so you don't throw me out on my ear !'

'Oh, John, I wouldn't do that!'

She was shaking her head, won over without ever being quite sure what the quarrel had been about, or even if they *had* quarrelled, and John held both her hands in his. His smile looked less tense and the familiar warmth was back in his eyes again as he looked across at her.

'Promise?' he asked, and she nodded.

'Promise.'

CHAPTER FIVE

IT was hard to believe that a month had passed since Melodie first came to Ben Ross; since John Stirling had driven her in his car to meet the man who he said had *a* reputation for being dour, and who soon hoped to be owner of Ben Ross instead of just its manager.

She looked at the one completed canvas she had done since her arrival and studied it critically. The work was good, and yet somehow she felt she had failed to catch the essential character of the landscape, and it displeased her. Those elusive soft greens and blues, and the mellowness of the countryside, made it exclusive, she felt, and quite unlike anywhere else she had seen, and she had hoped so much to capture it, but not quite succeeded.

For some reason she had more than once felt the temptation to show the completed picture to Neil and seek his opinion of it. He would, she felt, be better able to judge whether or not she had captured the character of the country as well as she had hoped, but an unfamiliar shyness had held her back so far.

With the picture in her hands she studied it with her head on one side and a small frown drawing her brows together. She was never a very good judge of her own work, but the distant view of Glen Ross village from the terrace steps was fair enough, she thought, and the little houses, squat and palely honey-coloured, looked as they did in the reality of the summer sun. The road straggled upwards in the near foreground, hidden for the most part by rowan trees that in autumn, when she was gone, would add the bright red of their berries to the softer hues of the hills and glens.

'Melodie?'

She looked up hastily and put down the canvas she had been studying as she brought herself hastily back to earth. She had heard no sign of anyone approaching—neither the unmistakable crunch of hooves on the gravel drive nor the light knock on the open cottage door, and she stared at the newcomer for a moment with the dazed look of absence still in her eyes.

A pale blue cotton top hung loose above a pair of well worn jeans, and her black hair showed that she had run her hands through it over and over while she tried to form a judgment of her work, and Neil took it all in in one searching survey as he stood in the doorway watching her.

'I'm sorry.' Melodie shook her head to dismiss the last remnants of preoccupation and looked across at him curiously. 'Please come in, Neil, if you don't mind it being rather untidy.'

He smiled, and it was the same almost miraculous transformation of that rugged face that it always was. 'Is that not the privilege of the artistic temperament?' he asked, and Melodie pulled a face.

'I don't know about that,' she demurred, 'but it's a

fact in my case, I'm afraid, I'm not as domesticated as I could be. Though I can *cook* rather well,' she added with a hint of mock defiance.

'Can you now?' His eyes were warm with laughter. 'Then I'll mebbe call on you when Jessie is away visiting her sister! '

'Any time! ' It was odd how shy she felt suddenly, and the realisation brought a flush of colour to her cheeks and made her hastily avoid his eyes. 'Was it to ask me to help out that you came to see me?'

Neil shook his head, serious once more. 'I brought a letter for you that the postman left at the house by mistake, but I was coming this way, so I'd not to make a special journey.'

As if he feared she might think he had put himself out for her, Melodie thought ruefully, and took the envelope from him, noting absently that it carried an Australian stamp and had been addressed by one of her brothers. 'Thank you—it's yet another letter from the family.'

'You'll hear from them quite often, I imagine?'

'Often enough '

It was so difficult to think clearly when he was with her, and even the most commonplace remarks seemed significant when he said them. It was quite easy to see how he might have acquired a reputation for being dour, for he was mostly so serious, and there was an air of reserve about him that did not encourage confidences, yet only seconds before the grey eyes had been warm with laughter, and even now it was obvious that his interest was genuine.

'They worry about you, no doubt?' he suggested, and she hesitated to deny it.

'I don't think they exactly worry about me,' she ex-

plained, 'it's more that they don't trust me to eat as much as they think I should, or remember to buy things in—as I did when I arrived. You know what families are.'

He nodded solemnly, as if he knew exactly what she meant; although as far as she had heard he had no family 'Catriona mentioned in the letter you brought with you that you'd not been away from home before and that your family were a little concerned about how you would fare on your own.'

The information was such a surprise to her that Melodie stared at him for several seconds, scarcely able to believe him. 'You mean—you mean they told——'

'They apparently suggested to Catriona that if someone this end could see to it that you settled in all right and looked after yourself while you were on your own, they would be grateful.'

The implication was unmistakable and his matter-of-fact acceptance of it even more surprising. She felt incredibly small suddenly, and rather humiliated, though that was a rather too dramatic reaction, she realised. Just the same she felt angry to think that someone like Neil McDowell had been more or less assigned to see to her well-being. A quiet, reserved man who would find the request much more difficult to comply with than someone with a more extrovert nature would have done.

'I'm—I'm sorry, Neil.'

It was clear that her apology puzzled him, for he was frowning. 'For what?'

She shrugged, feeling helpless and slightly silly, when she thought of what his reaction must have been in the first instance. 'It's rather a nerve to ask a complete stranger to—to act as nursemaid to a grown woman,' she

said, 'and I wish Catriona hadn't passed on the request. It was a quite unnecessary chore to land you with, and I'm sorry.'

A glimmer of that earlier warmth showed for a moment in his eyes, and he was shaking his head slowly at her. 'I've not found it such a chore,' he denied. 'You've proved well capable of looking after your own interests so far.'

'Well, of course I am!'

Once more he scanned her flushed face with a slow searching gaze that she found infinitely disturbing. 'You don't like to think of me keeping an eye on you, mebbe?' he suggested.

'I don't like to think of anyone keeping an eye on me!'

His wide mouth hinted at a smile once more, and he shook his head as if to admonish her. 'Nevertheless, I think I'll not relinquish my role yet awhile—if you don't mind.' The rejoinder suggested a sarcasm that she would not have expected of him, and she frowned.

'I really don't need looking after, Neil, and I'm sure it isn't a job you relish!'

There was something in the way he looked at her that brought an unexpected flutter of response from her pulse, and she hastily looked away, even before he spoke. 'I've not found it a particularly arduous chore so far,' he assured her in his quiet and softly accented voice.

'Just the same I wouldn't have thought it was a job you would take to very willingly.' Her voice was unsteady and a little breathless, and she avoided his eyes at all costs, though it wasn't easy. 'You're not the type to—I mean,' she hastily corrected herself, 'you don't seem to me to be the sort of man who would take on

such a chore with very much enthusiasm.'

Once more she was made aware of a short, significant pause, as if he was watching her, waiting for her to look at him. 'I think perhaps you've been labouring under a delusion concerning me, Melodic,' he told her. 'Maybe more than one.'

'I—I don't think so.'

'You claim to know an awful lot about me, it seems I '

'Oh, but I didn't mean—I mean I don't claim to know you at all well, it's just that ' She shrugged uneasily, her hands spread in a curiously touching gesture of helplessness.

There was a curious air of tension in the little room that she could not account for at all, and she wondered vaguely if Neil was as aware of it as she was herself. She wished, not so much that he would leave her, but rather that the subject might be changed for one that was a little less personal to her. At the same time she could believe that if Neil had set his mind on following something up, her own feelings in the matter were unlikely to be taken into account.

Black Knight, tethered outside the cottage, could hear their voices and shifted restlessly, reminding them of his presence, and to Melodic the reminder brought other occasions to mind. Like the time when she had returned home riding pillion behind Neil, while John trailed them reluctantly on Rusty, leading his injured horse. And later, John's undisguised jealousy--his suspicion that there was something more between her and Neil than she was prepared to admit.

Neil had perched himself on the edge of the table with one booted foot swinging, and he seemed perfectly at ease, though she was far from being so herself. 'I seem to remember that at one time you suggested I

cared more for horses than for people, did you not?'

'And you agreed!' Her response was defensive, almost defiantly so, and she tried, a little dazedly, to remember how they had become involved in such a discomfiting exchange.

'I believe I told you that I found them more reliable than most people,' he corrected her with confidence, and she nodded.

'It—it Was something like that.'

The grey eyes assessed her response and her seeming nervousness for a moment in silence. 'You assured me then that you understood my reasons perfectly,' he reminded her. 'Isn't that so, Melodie?'

She was rather taken aback to realise that he had quoted her word for word as far as she could recall, and at the time he had implied the necessity to explain her words at some future time. This, she felt, was going to be the moment, and she spread her hands in a curiously helpless gesture of appeal.

'I might have done,' she agreed.

How on earth could she tell him what she had learned from John? That she knew about his love for the woman he worked for and had lost to another man. It wasn't something she could put into words, and she looked at him with an appeal in her blue eyes that besought him not to pursue the subject.

'You've mebbe been—hearing things?' The soft voice persisted, but she simply nodded and looked down at her feet. Then a long finger slid beneath her chin suddenly and lifted her face, the touch of his hand bringing a tingling flick of excitement to her senses. 'What tales have you been listening to, Melodie? Something John Stirling told you?'

'Not John!'

'Quick in his defence V He spoke as quietly as ever, but she detected an unmistakable touch of hardness in his voice. 'That tells me what I need to know, Melodic! What have you been hearing?'

'Nothing, I____

'I'd rather you didn't lie to me V The finger on her chin gave a short flick upwards and she caught her breath.

She could sense it again—that strangely taut atmosphere that filled the little room like a charge of electricity, and for several seconds Neil sat holding her with her chin supported on his finger while he looked down into her flushed face, dwelling longest on the soft, vulnerable tremor of her mouth.

'What have you heard about me, Melodie?'

It was incredibly hard not to tell him what John had told her, but she held her impulsive instincts firmly in check. There were enough uneasy meetings between him and John lately, without her making more cause for dissent, so she shook her head as well as she was able.

'Nothing I didn't know or—or guess before,' she insisted, and raised her eyes briefly to see if she was believed.

'I see.'

He quite possibly did see, all too clearly, Melodie thought, and wished she need not have been the cause of raising such uneasy memories. To Neil the intrusion of strangers into his private affairs would be a more deeply affecting thing than it would to someone less reserved, and she hated to think of herself as an intruder.

He stood up suddenly and for a moment looked down at her in silence, so that she felt herself trembling

like a leaf because of his nearness—the light touch of his arm that barely brushed hers when he moved. 'Since you already know so much about me,' he told her in a tight, clipped voice, 'you'll maybe already know what it was I came down here to tell you, so I needn't bother myself!'

'Oh, Neil, please!' She cared more that he was angry for the moment than about whatever it was he had to tell her, and she looked at him appealingly with a hand on his arm, its fingers pressed tightly into the firm brown flesh in her anxiety to convince him. Almost without being conscious of doing so, she used her wide blue eyes to persuade him. 'I promise I haven't been discussing your private affairs with anyone, please believe me, Neil.'

It took a moment or two, but then she felt him begin to relax and the taut muscles in the arm she held eased their tightness. He looked down at her for a moment, then shook his head slowly. 'I can't quite believe that I became so involved with you that I forgot—momentarily at least—the news I have.'

Melodie's heart was beating anxiously hard in her breast as she searched his face for some hint, then she found it in the bright, glowing darkness of the grey eyes suddenly, and felt an overwhelming surge of pleasure. A pleasure that banished the last shreds of their brief disagreement.

"Oh, Neil! Her voice was husky with emotion and

her eyes had the bright shining look of jewels as she searched his face. 'You've got Ben Ross—it's yours, isn't it?' His expression was confirmation enough and she flung her arms impulsively around his neck and kissed him beside his mouth. 'Oh, I'm so glad!'

His pride was such that she felt a momentary flick

of jealousy for the vast acres of Ben Ross, because he loved them so much and so completely. 'So am I,' he said softly. 'It's been quite a while.'

Her curiosity was aroused, but Melodie did not propose to question him, only prod gently to satisfy some inner longing she felt to know all there was to know about him. 'Have you always wanted to own Ben Ross?' she asked, and he did not immediately answer.

'For quite a long time,' he admitted at last, then shook his head and half smiled. 'It's a long story, but maybe I'll tell it to you one day.'

Through her thick lashes, she looked up at his lean brown face and felt the sudden rapid urgency of her heart. 'Not now?' she coaxed, and he shook his head.

'Not now—perhaps when you tell me how it is you understand my reasons for saying what I did about horses and people, hmm?'

She would have found some reply, though heaven knew what there was to say in response to such a provocative suggestion, but before she could even draw breath he had spanned his broad hard palm under her chin, and his fingers were stroking the softness of her cheek.

She half expected the gentle kiss he pressed on to her mouth to be merely a prelude to the same passionate and fierce caress that had stunned her on that earlier occasion, but instead he released her after that brief, light touch and she tried hard to stifle the sense of disappointment she felt.

The flush in her cheeks was even more pronounced, and she felt horribly vulnerable suddenly as she fought hard to remain matter-of-fact. 'Whatever the story behind your wanting it, I'm glad you've got what you wanted, Neil.'

That glow of warmth was in his eyes again, and he smiled. 'Aye,' he said, 'I believe you are.'

'What happens now?'

It was not her own situation that she had in mind when she asked the question, though obviously that was what Neil thought, and he raised a brow, a half smile teasing her gently for her anxiety. 'Oh don't worry,' he told her, 'I'll not evict you from the cottage, Melodie. I promised, did I not?'

'I wasn't thinking about myself, I meant—' She shrugged uneasily, wondering suddenly if he would see her interest as an intrusion into his privacy. 'I just wondered if it would make any difference to you, that's all.'

'Very little.'

'Except that you'll really be the laird of Ben Ross now.'

His eyes narrowed slightly and he looked at her for a moment in silence. 'Is that what he calls me?' he asked, and she did not have to question whom he referred to.

'Not only John, apparently—most people around here refer to you in that way.' She looked up at him, seeking to put matters straight. 'Not in a derogatory sense, Neil—after all, it's been true, hasn't it—even before today?'

Neil seemed to take a moment to decide, then he nodded, and she wondered if he saw himself in the part as well. 'I suppose it has,' he agreed. 'For five years before Duncan Ross died he did little on the estate, but left it to me, and for the past eight years I've not even had anyone to oversee what I do. I've run the place for the past thirteen years—my way.'

And how he had hated to see it go to a woman when old Duncan Ross died, Melodie thought. After five

years of caring for the place as if it was his own, he had probably felt that he owned it already, although his fierce pride in Ben Ross was still puzzling to her in one way. How could a man give his life to a place when he had little or no hope of ever making it his own? Perhaps this day had been his goal all along—the possibility that one day he *would* own it.

'You deserve to have it,' she told him, and Neil said nothing for the moment, but simply shook his head, as if he found it still too much to believe.

'We'll see,' he said, and seemed to deliberately seek out another subject for discussion.

Picking up her painting where it still lay on the table, he held it at arm's length for a moment or two and studied it, while Melodie watched him from the concealment of her lashes, trying to decide what his opinion was. His expression gave no indication whether or not his opinion was favourable, and she waited for it with a certain amount of anxiety.

'I've been trying to decide about that,' she told him with a slightly unsteady laugh, and when he spoke it was without turning round.

'Do you sell your work, Melodie? Are you a professional artist?'

It was not quite the answer she had expected, and she watched his face for a moment from the concealment of her lashes. 'Why—yes. I've sold them at various times—whenever someone wants to buy them.'

'I'd like to buy this one.'

Melodie was too startled for a moment to quite realise what he was saying, and she stared at him with wide eyes. 'You—you really like it?'

'I like it very much.'

'You don't think it's——'

'It's fine—I like it.'

She could not rid herself of the suspicion that for some inexplicable reason he was simply trying to please her, and yet there was no earthly reason why he should go to such lengths to please her, and she shook her head slowly. Nevertheless she had to be sure, and she touched his arm lightly with her finger-tips to make him look at her.

'Neil—you *really* want it?'

After a moment he smiled, and it was one of those smiles that glowed in the grey eyes, and brought a hundred tiny lines to the lean contours of his face. 'You're not a very good salesgirl, Melodie,' he teased. 'Yes, I really want it—the first thing I've got for Ben Ross since it became mine.'

His reason touched her more than she cared to admit, and she reacted impulsively, as she so often did. Putting her own hands over his as they held the painting, she squeezed his fingers persuasively. 'But won't you please let me give you the painting for a house-warming present, Neil?'

He hesitated, and she watched him almost anxiously, then after a second or two he smiled again. It was not as wholehearted as the last, but none the less warm for all that, and it expressed his appreciation of the gesture. 'Maybe it'll sound a wee bit strange to you, Melodie, even ungracious since you've offered to make it a gift, but—I'd like to buy the picture for myself—for Ben Ross. Will you let me do that?'

She thought she understood, though she would gladly have given it as a present, so she nodded. 'Yes, of course,' she said in a small soft voice. 'I understand.'

It was a second or two before she realised that she had used those exact words once before, and when she

glanced up at Neil, it was clear that he remembered too. The grey eyes held hers for a moment with that disturbing steadiness that shivered a thrill of sensation along her spine, and briefly, for a second or two, that glowing warmth was in their depths again.

'Aye, I think maybe you do,' Neil said softly.

It had been a long and quite tiring day one way and another and, having seen John out, Melodie yawned lazily and thought about going to bed. She had been a town dweller all her life, including the time she spent in Australia, and the hours she now spent in the rich Highlands air made her pleasantly sleepy so that she was always a little heavy-eyed by late evening, and had slept like a baby ever since she came to Ben Ross.

John was still a regular visitor and came most days, so that she wondered if he as well as Neil had taken it upon himself to keep a caring eye on her well-being. John, in fact, had made it increasingly plain recently that he would like their relationship to develop into something much more intimate, although so far Melodie had done nothing to encourage him.

She thought it was doubtful if he knew about the official change of ownership of Ben Ross, or he would almost certainly have said something to her about it, but she had no intention of being the one to inform him. If Neil wanted it made public knowledge he would let John's uncle know—he probably would in time, along with the rest of the estate employees, although it would make virtually no difference to their positions at all.

Smothering yet another yawn, she went through into the tiny kitchen and on impulse opened the door of a cupboard tucked away in one corner. Normally it

housed only brooms and dusters and the paraphernalia of house cleaning, but its prime purpose as far as Melodie was concerned was as a store for her painting equipment, and from the top of the pile she picked up the painting that Neil had asked to buy.

Frowning over it for a moment or two while she decided whether or not it was dry enough to varnish, she came to the conclusion that it was perhaps better than she had first thought. Maybe Neil was a better judge than she was herself—it really wasn't too bad at all.

There was still quite a lot of daylight outside, but inside the little cottage the small windows admitted only a limited amount of light, and she switched on the overhead light for a moment while she studied the painting further. The light flickered unsteadily for a second or two and she frowned up at it. It had been happening quite often lately and she supposed it was a technical fault—something to do with those huge skeletal giants of pylons that strode across the hills and spoiled so much of the landscape.

When it happened again she switched off and put the painting back in the cupboard, glaring impatiently at the light. 'Stupid things!' she declared, condemning the pylons for being ineffective as well as ugly.

Tomorrow she would varnish the painting and then, after another day or two, Neil could have it and hang it in his newly acquired domain. She must ask him, she thought as she undressed for bed, just where he had in mind to hang it—it would please her to think he wanted it somewhere where he could see it often, but she was not going to fool herself to the extent of thinking that he really cared that much one way or the other.

Outside the last of the daylight glowed in the evening sky, and through her open bedroom window the sound of a light wind in the shrubs and trees that surrounded the cottage rustled and whispered in a comfortingly familiar voice, lulling her off to sleep almost at once. It was the last sound she heard as her eyes closed, until a sudden loud and urgent voice yelled quite close to her ear what seemed like only seconds later, and snatched her from her sleep.

Her brain was dull, deadened by sleep, and her eyelids refused to open beyond a narrow, hazy slit that unbelievably showed Neil McDowell's stern face bending over her, while his hands gripped her shoulders with bruising force as he tried to shake her awake.

'Wake up, Melodie, for God's sake—wake up and get out of here!'

'What—I don't____' She shook her hazy brain into as much wakefulness as it was capable of at the moment, and glared at him indignantly. 'Don't *do* that! Stop it, Neil—leave me alone!'

'Oh, God in heaven, you're still half asleep!'

His voice seemed even closer suddenly and more urgent, and she cried out instinctively when the bedclothes were pulled back roughly and arms grabbed her up from the bed in one frantic movement, while she still fought to make him stop.

'Stop it, for heaven's sake, you little idiot! Stop fighting me!'

There was a curious and unfamiliar smell in the room, but she was incapable of recognising it for what it was at the moment, she could cope only with more immediate things. Like the strong, unyielding arms that she struggled against, blindly and instinctively, right up to the moment when they pushed her un-

ceremoniously through the bedroom window and into the cool night air, and she cried out in indignant protest when she landed among the shrubs outside the cottage.

The shrubbery probably made a softer landing ground than the hard ground would have done, but its leaves and branches were prickly, and she had no better protection than her nightdress, so that the impact was sharply uncomfortable. Her skin was scratched and grazed as she struggled to her feet and she stared at the cottage, the last remnants of sleep driven from her brain by the realisation of what it was all about. Smoke and flame seemed to be pouring from every window in the cottage and even the bedroom where she had been sleeping was filled with smoke.

'Neil!'

The cry was as instinctive as her struggles had been earlier, and she gazed at the window through which he had pushed her to safety, with a cold sense of panic in her breast, for there was no sign of him. No matter if the stony ground hurt her feet, she went to the window and raised her voice above the angry crackle of flames consuming tinder dry furniture and rafters, the heat scorching her cheeks as if an oven door had been opened.

'Neil I '

Her voice cracked in panic and she felt a tightness in her throat when *she* spotted him at last, over near the door as if he had been trying to get through into the rest of the cottage and had been driven back by the fire. He managed to close the door while she watched and she saw him hesitate for a second before striding across to the old-fashioned wardrobe that took up nearly half of one wall of the bedroom. He turned the

handle and nothing happened—the wretched thing always stuck when she tried to open it herself.

'Neil, please—get out of there!'

She gave a sudden sharp scream of terror when the door of the bedroom burst inwards before a long licking tongue of flame that came within inches of where Neil still struggled to open the wardrobe door and she shook her head in despair. A great billow of smoke followed and more flames, spreading rapidly through the dry timbers of the old cottage, and Melodie cried out to him again.

'Neill Neil, please!'

She saw him start towards the window, then dart suddenly across to where her robe lay across the foot of the bed, snatching it up as he came. He was across the room in a matter of seconds after that with the fire at his heels, and Melodie stepped back quickly from the window for fear of hindering his escape.

Smoke billowed out behind him as he climbed over the sill, and he shook his head as if to clear it, brushing a smoke-blackened hand across his brow, while in the other he held her robe, carelessly bundled into a mere handful. It looked such a little thing to have risked his life for, even though it was probably all she owned in the world at the moment.

He held it out to her and she was trembling like a leaf while he helped her into it, for it afforded little more protection than her nightdress did, and she stood like a small pale ghost in the vivid red firelight for a moment. Dazed and suddenly chill, she turned to him instinctively when he reached out, and hid her face for a second against his shoulder, while his arms held her close.

'That damned robe was all I could get for you,' he

said, as if he needed to explain, and Melodie was shaking her head urgently.

'You shouldn't have taken such a risk—it wasn't worth it to get my clothes.'

Limp and unresisting, she would have stayed where she was, in a curiously satisfying limbo of inaction, but Neil was taking off his jacket and wrapping it around her, his big hands strong and reassuring, and the grey eyes scanned her face in a swift searching scrutiny, as if he found it hard to believe she was unharmed.

'Are you all right?'

It seemed such a commonplace question in the circumstances, and she felt vaguely lightheaded, so that she almost smiled. Instead she nodded assurance and her eyes in turn searched his dark, smoke-grimed features for a sign of hurt.

'Are you?'

His nod was brief but reassuring, then he cast a swift downward glance at her flimsily clad shape, only partly covered by his jacket. 'You'll be getting chill if you stand around in this night air,' he declared with almost his usual matter-of-factness. 'I'd best get you up to the house as soon as possible and let Jessie take care of you.'

'The house?'

It had not yet occurred to her what was likely to happen now that she was virtually homeless, but taking refuge in Ben Ross was the last thing she could have foreseen, though the only possible one in the present situation, she realised. Neil was looking at her with raised brows and a hint of impatience. she feared.

'Of course,' he said. 'Did you think I'd leave you to spend the remainder of the night under the hedge?'

'Oh no, but——'

She got no further with her explanation, for she was

lifted once more into his arms and carried round the end of the burning cottage to where his car stood on the drive. Neil put her into the passenger seat, then came round quickly and got in beside her, turning his head briefly to look over his shoulder at the blaze.

In the flickering red light his face had a curiously tired look suddenly, and his grey eyes appeared more black than grey, so that she tried to imagine what he was feeling. Then he turned back, a tight stern look about his mouth as he started up the engine.

'I'm sorry, Neil.' From the way he glanced at her it was clear that her apology puzzled him, and she hastened to explain. 'It's your property,' „she reminded him, 'and it seems such a shame that your ownership should start off so badly.'

They drove along the drive to the house, taking only minutes to cover the distance it took her quite a long time to walk, and between the shadowy darkness of the shrubs and trees she caught glimpses of the bulk of Ben Ross against the skyline ahead and of the shimmer of water where Loch Lairdross caught the pale moonlight in the glen below and to their right.

'I'll call the fire brigade,' Neil said, turning the car around the last bend in the drive, 'but there'll not be much they can do by the time they arrive. I'm sorry about your things.'

'Oh, I can hardly blame you! You took too many risks as it was.'

In fact Melodie did not altogether understand her own present reaction to the drama. She should have felt something for the loss of her clothes and the rest of her possessions, and yet her main reaction at present was one of incredible satisfaction because Neil had been there to rescue her. It did not make sense, and she

would probably feel quite differently about it in the morning, but at the moment the fact that Neil had snatched her to safety was the only thing that seemed to matter.

'I haven't told you how grateful I am for getting me out of there,' she told him. 'I dare not think what would have happened if you hadn't been on the spot.'

'Do you always sleep so heavily?' He offered no explanation for his fortuitous presence in the vicinity of the cottage, but looked briefly over his shoulder at her, as if he recalled the difficulty he had in waking her, and Melodie nodded.

'Ever since I came here, I've slept like the dead,' she confessed, then realised how true that could have been and shuddered. 'I really am grateful, Neil.' Something else occurred to her then and without thinking she mentioned it. 'I'm afraid you won't get your painting now, it'll be lost in that blaze.'

Neil swept the car round the last few yards in front of the house and braked to a halt, turning his head briefly as he switched off the engine. It was difficult to see anything of his face for the moon was new and pale and only the diffused lights from the glass panels either side of the doors in the house gave it any illumination.

'Better the painting than the artist,' he said.

CHAPTER SIX

IT took Melodie several minutes when she woke the following morning to realise just where she was. The bedroom window was open and the curtains drawn back, and the customary sounds of morning reached her, but the warm sunshine across her face that had woken her was something out of the ordinary and she lay there for a moment or two slowly remembering how she came to be sleeping in a big, oak-panelled bedroom, instead of the more familiar cottage room.

The huge bed she was in was soft and comfortable • and at some other time it might have tempted her to stay in it for much longer. As it was there was a great deal for her to think about since the events of last night, not least the uncertainty of her future position at Ben Ross, and she was far too restless to remain inactive.

Dressing was an immediate problem, for she had nothing but the nightdress and flimsy robe she had escaped in last night, and she could not go far in them. At the moment she was not even wearing her own nightdress, but a voluminous cotton garment given to her last night by Jessie McKay.

It draped her slim form in shapeless folds, but Jessie had insisted that her own flimsy affair was far too smoke-grimed for anyone to go to bed in and she had provided one of her own. It had been a kindly gesture, Melodie felt sure, but once the donor had gone she had been reduced to a fit of slightly hysterical giggles at the

sight of herself in yards of white cotton.

Backed by fat feather pillows, she sat hugging her knees and looking out of the window at a new aspect of the now familiar countryside. The dominant position of Ben Ross gave a much wider view and was all the more breathtaking than from her cottage windows, and before long she was drawn into daydreaming as she watched the day grow.

The hills and mountains were veiled in mist, as they always were at this time of the day, their shapes made indistinct and softer. Their blue-grey colour muted and patched with shades of dark, rusty green heather that varied its hues with the movement of the clouds billowing like rolls of cotton wool around their peaks.

The sun as yet was little more than a hazy suggestion of gold that dabbed little touches of light over the landscape and coloured the hovering mist with a promise of a hot day. It was not yet the hot, summer sun that would develop later in the day, but it was pleasantly warm when she turned her face towards it and closed her eyes for a second.

A short preliminary knock preceded the opening of the bedroom door, and Melodie blinked herself hastily back to earth to see Jessie McKay's short, stocky figure coming across the room, carrying a tray which she placed carefully across Melodie's knees before she spoke.

'Good morning, Miss Carne—had you a good night?'

The breakfast as well as the inquiry were unexpected, and Melodie nodded rather dazedly as she looked down at the tray. 'Yes, thank you, Mrs McKay.'

Shrewd brown eyes cast their gaze over her face and Melodie liked to think that they appeared a little less disapproving than usual, although it was probably no

more than her imagination playing her tricks. 'You've no after-effects from you blaze, then?'

'None at all, I'm glad to say, though I dread to think what might have happened if Mr McDowell hadn't been on hand—I'm such a heavy sleeper I probably wouldn't have woken until it was too late.'

'Aye, he'd a job to wake you, I understand.'

Evidently Neil and his housekeeper were on the sort of terms that allowed confidences, and it did not altogether surprise Melodie to realise it. 'He's probably told you that he had to throw me out of the window to wake me up,' she said, and Jessie nodded.

The tray contained, as well as a plate of bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade and a pot of tea, everything necessary for a complete and very large breakfast, and Jessie McKay stood back with her hands clasped across her stomach, watching her as if she awaited some reaction.

'You'll be hungry,' she guessed. 'There's more if you need it.'

Melodie lifted the cover from the bacon and eggs, shaking her head over the size of the meal and smilingly denying the need for more. 'Oh, I shan't need more of anything, Mrs McKay, thank you, not after I've eaten this lot! Are you sure you haven't given me Mr McDowell's breakfast by mistake?'

It had been meant as a joke, but she remembered too late that the dour little housekeeper was lacking a sense of humour. Not a vestige of a smile crossed her face, but she answered her as solemnly as if the question had been a serious one.

'Mr McDowell had his breakfast long since,' she told her. 'He's away down to the McKenzie place to see

about some clothes for you. Their Kirstie would be about your size.'

Whoever Kirstie McKenzie was she was evidently not much in favour with Jessie McKay, judging by the tone of voice she used, though that was probably true of most people, except Neil. 'It's very good of him to bother himself,' Melodie told her, and wondered why Jessie had not undertaken the job herself.

The shrewd brown eyes were looking at her meaningfully. 'You're in no fit way to be walking about in public in nought but a night shift,' she reminded her. 'You've no other clothes left.'

It was the first time that the fact had been brought home to her quite so forcibly, and Melodie bit her lip as she looked at her anxiously. 'Everything went? The whole thing?'

'Every stick and stone,' Jessie stated flatly.

It was what Neil had expected, of course. The fire had had far too great a hold before it was noticed, and she supposed that to some extent, the fault was hers because she had not woken before. Neil had -spent some time trying to get her out safely and then it had been necessary to drive up to the house before the fire brigade could be called, and the nearest one was at Corrie.

Everything had contrived to delay the arrival of help, and it was only to be expected that the little cottage would be a total loss—she was only thankful that she was not a part of the total destruction, and she shuddered at the thought of how close that had been.

She gazed out of the window for a second at the bright, golden morning and felt suddenly sad, as if something was ending, then she shrugged, not care-

lessly but resignedly. 'Oh well,' she said to Jessie McKay, 'I suppose that's it.'

'You'll have lost everything,' Jessie said, and Melodie noted the sympathy in her voice with another flick of surprise. 'I'm sorry, Miss Came.'

Overwhelmed by a sudden sense of helplessness, Melodie looked up at her. 'I don't quite know what I should do,' she ventured, though with not much hope of being advised, and Jessie set her mouth firmly.

'First you've to eat your breakfast before it grows cold,' she directed. 'Then leave matters to Mr McDowell—as I've said, he's already seeing about some clothes for you.'

Unable to think of an alternative suggestion at the moment, Melodie picked up the knife and fork on her tray and prepared to tackle that big plateful of bacon and eggs. 'I'm not very practical when it comes to organising myself,' she confessed. 'It's very good of Neil—Mr McDowell—to take the trouble. And Miss McKenzie too, whoever she is.'

'McKenzie has the croft over near Glen Bar.' Jessie provided the information with apparent willingness. 'They've just the one daughter, and she's away to work in Corrie.'

'Oh, I see.'

It came unbidden into Melodie's mind to wonder if Kirstie McKenzie was pretty enough to catch a man's eye, and if maybe that was the reason Neil had gone over to see her himself instead of despatching one of his staff on the errand. It was a discomfiting idea, more discomfiting than she would like to admit, but she had to remember that for all his dourness, Neil McDowell was capable of a depth of passion that was surprising.

It was almost as if Jessie followed her thoughts when

Melodie looked at her again, for there was a slightly narrow look about the bright brown eyes and her mouth was pursed as if in dislike. 'I've no doubt you'll be found all the clothes you need from that place where she works,' she informed her. 'A boutique they call it, though 'tis nothing more than a shop to my mind.:

It wasn't the fact of Kirstie McKenzie that made Melodie stare at her, but the fact that Neil was arranging the purchase of new clothes for her when she was virtually penniless until she could obtain a new cheque book, and that was likely to take time.

'But, *Mrs McKay, I don't have the money for new clothes.* Not at the moment, at least; I—I shall have to ' She put down her knife and fork and gazed at the housekeeper with troubled blue eyes. 'I didn't realise what he was doing; I mean, I thought he was borrowing some things for me.'

'Oh, he'll borrow something for you first off,' Jessie allowed, 'but he'll know that a girl like Kirstie McKenzie will not have the kind of things you're used to, Miss Came. She's not a tasteful dresser,' she confided, and Melodie wondered what she could expect.

'Oh, but____

'Pay it no mind for the moment,' Jessie advised. 'Eat your breakfast and then wait here in your bed until Mr McDowell gets back with something for you. As soon as he comes I'll bring you what he has.'

'Thank you.' The round head with its encircling grey plait nodded silently, as she turned away. It was only when she had the door open that Melodie realised just how much comfort and reassurance she had been given, and she called out to her impulsively as she stood in the doorway. 'Oh, Mrs McKay!' When she turned and looked across inquiringly it was not quite as easy to say

anything, for it was never easy to express thanks to someone like Jessie McKay. 'You—you've been very kind and—and understanding. Thank you.'

It seemed barely possible that she was smiling, and yet there was a distinct upward curve to the straight firm mouth, and the brown eyes showed a glimmer of warmth for a moment. 'I think I hear someone,' she said. 'It's mebbe Mr McDowell with your things.'

She closed the door behind her and was gone. In fact she was gone for so long that Melodie began to wonder if Neil's trip could possibly have been fruitless after all, and alternatives were being sought. She had eaten her breakfast and returned to gazing out of the windows again when Jessie came back at last, and she turned swiftly when she heard her come in, smiling a welcome.

'I think you'll find all you need in here,' Jessie told her, placing a plastic dress-bag on the bed. 'I hope they're to your taste, Miss Came.'

Anything would have been welcome, Melodie thought, as long as it enabled her to get up and throw off the feeling of helplessness that being confined to her room gave her, and she laughed as she plunged her hands into the bag. 'Oh, I don't mind what it is, as long as I have something to wear,' she said. 'I was beginning to feel as if I'd have to spend the rest of my life in bed.'

It was an impulsive, half joking remark and it never for a moment occurred to her that it could give offence until she saw Jessie's expression change, as if she suspected she was being criticised, and it dawned on Melodie again that she must remember not to joke with her.

'Mr McDowell's only this minute returned,' she told

her, edgily defensive. 'I brought them straight to you, Miss Came.'

'Oh, please don't think I was complaining,' Melodie assured her hastily. 'It was just that you said you thought you heard Mr McDowell come in when you left me, and you were a long time—I thought he'd been unlucky with Kirstie McKenzie's wardrobe, that's all.'

If she had been taking an interest in the contents of the bag instead of looking across to apologise, she would probably not have been told anything more. As it was she noticed a rather vaguely uneasy look on Jessie's face suddenly, and looked at her curiously.

'That was not Mr McDowell,' Jessie said. 'It was—a caller.'

'Oh, I see.' There had to be more to it than that, Melodie felt sure, and she was still watching her curiously without quite knowing what she expected.

'It was Jamie Stirling's nephew,' Jessie went on in a tone that suggested she would rather not have imparted the information. 'He came to see if you'd been hurt in the fire. They'd no notion there was a fire—they'd not hear the siren from the other side of the hill.'

'John!' Melodie put her hands over her mouth and her eyes had a wide anxious look as she imagined John's reaction to finding her cottage completely gutted by fire. 'Oh, how could I have forgotten that he was very likely to go down there this morning, and to find the cottage burnt out—Is he still here, Mrs McKay?'

'He is not,' Jessie declared firmly. 'I told him you were not able to see him at the moment, but that he'd no need to worry since you'd not been hurt at all. I also told him,' she added with unmistakable relish, 'that Mr McDowell was taking care of everything for you—and he left.'

It was possible that John had been so stunned by the shock of finding the cottage burnt out that he had actually allowed Jessie McKay to send him away without leaving a message for Melodie, and she felt a twinge of conscience about him. She should have thought about the possibility of his paying a morning visit to the cottage, he often did, and anticipated his shock when he saw what remained of it.

'I'd like to have had a word with him,' she ventured, but Jessie was pursing her lips in evident disagreement.

'I couldn't admit a young man to see you when you'd not a stitch of clothing to wear,' she declared.

'I'm wearing your nightie and I could have borrowed that big red dressing-gown of Neil's again,' Melodie argued.

She said what she did more for the sake of making a point than for any other reason, but Jessie's frown condemned the very idea. She set her features sternly and her short dumpy figure expressed disapproval when she drew herself up, and regarded her gravely.

'It would not have been fitting with yourself in no more than a night shift and a dressing-gown,' she declared flatly. 'Mr McDowell would not have liked that at all.'

Melodie rolled, back the bedclothes and got out on to the carpeted floor, catching sight of herself in the voluminous borrowed nightdress as she did so, and she smiled at the very idea of its being considered even vaguely indecent.

'It's more than I was wearing when I sat drinking hot toddy with *him*,' she reminded Jessie, 'and I don't seem to remember him objecting then.'

Jessie was making her way to the door with her head

high and disapproval showing in every inch of her straight back. She turned when she got to the doorway and looked back for a moment, her eyes sharp and dark in her round face.

That was different,' she decreed, and closed the door firmly behind her, leaving Melodie wondering just why it should be considered so different—in Jessie's eyes, at least.

It was fortunate that Kirstie McKenzie's measurements were apparently identical with her own, except perhaps in the matter of height, for either the other girl wore her clothes quite long or she was some bit taller than Melodie. Otherwise the clothes Neil had borrowed for her fitted perfectly.

The tartan skirt that had been provided was longer than she would normally have worn, and it made her feel rather prim and proper as she made her way downstairs, but there was no fault to find with the blouse. The plain white shirt blouse suited her well and she left the two top buttons of it undone to make it look a little less severe, but with the neatly cut skirt it seemed to suggest that Jessie McKay's opinion that the girl lacked taste was more malicious than accurate.

Her *legs* were bare, but a pair of flat-heeled casuals were soft and comfortable, so that all in all she was well satisfied with her makeshift wardrobe. It was getting on for eleven o'clock when she went downstairs, and the house seemed curiously quiet and still, although before she reached the foot of the stairs she thought she could hear voices somewhere.

She was curiously reluctant to go down now that she was able to, and she looked up swiftly when she came under the scrutiny of that startlingly lifelike

portrait that hung part way down the staircase. It attracted her without her quite knowing why, and she stopped in front of it for a moment or two, studying it with professional interest as well as curiosity about the sitter.,

A plaque along the bottom of the gilt frame gave his name and the date it was painted, but the face itself attracted her. Duncan Ross, she felt, must have been a very strong-minded character, judging by his portrait, and yet there was a hint of laughter in the fierce dark eyes if one looked deeply enough.

Against the soft blues and greens of the background he looked an arrogant man, and yet he must have had a streak of sentimentality, for according to what she had been told he had loved and lost, but felt so sentimental about his lost love that he had bequeathed his house and a substantial part of his wealth to her daughter, Catriona.

It struck her too that there was something elusively familiar about the strong features, and yet she could not put a finger on exactly what it was. Hearing a sound of movement downstairs, she hastily shook herself out of her daydream and started down the stairs once more.

More than likely Neil was already out on his morning round of the estate, delayed by the need to provide her with something to wear from Kirstie McKenzie's wardrobe. He still followed the same routine even now that he was owner—Melodie could never imagine him delegating any of his usual tasks to others. He was much too concerned with the affairs of Ben Ross to leave the running of them to someone else, no matter how much work was involved.

As frequently happened when she became completely

lost in her thoughts, she was unaware of anything going on around her, and she started almost guiltily when a door opened across the hall and Jessie McKay came out of the room she remembered was the library. Melodie was subjected to a short critical scrutiny in the time it took the housekeeper to meet her half way across the hall, and a slight nod of her head seemed to suggest that the outfit met with her approval.

'Kirstie McKenzie must have better taste than you gave her credit for,' Melodic suggested, unable to resist commenting. 'These things are very nice.'

'Sunday clothes,' Jessie decreed, casting her critical gaze once more over the borrowed garments. 'I've seen the girl wear them in, the kirk.'

'Oh, I see.' Melodie smoothed her hands over the skirt, wondering if perhaps Neil had exerted his authority as laird to obtain the best for her, and hoping he hadn't. 'In that case I'd better take extra care with them.'

Jessie nodded, then glanced over her shoulder towards the room she had just left. 'Mr McDowell's in the library,' she told her. 'You'll be wanting to have a word with him?'

Melodic tried to do something about the sudden and rapid increase in her pulse rate as she followed the older woman back across the hall. She had expected him to be out on the estate somewhere; instead he was waiting for her in the library and she found the knowledge more disturbing than she cared to admit.

She kept remembering that lean anxious face in her bedroom last night, bending over her and trying to shake her into wakefulness while she fought him as if his intention was something quite different; and then the comfort of those few moments when she had been

held close in his arms. There were all too many occasions when Neil McDowell had played havoc with her usual bland self-confidence, and it troubled her sometimes that it should be so.

Jessie merely opened the door for her, she did not come into the room, but there was a look in the shrewd brown eyes as she passed her that brought a flush of colour to her cheeks, and she hastily quelled any wild guesses as to the meaning behind it.

Neil was standing in exactly the same position as he had been the first time she ever saw him—before the huge fireplace, his feet slightly apart and with that slightly autocratic air of ownership about him. Only now, of course, he *was* the owner of Ben Ross, and she wondered what difference the fact was going to make to her own position in the present circumstances.

In riding clothes, as he most usually was, he wore a blue shirt that emphasised his tan and showed off muscular brown arms that were pulled back behind him by clasped hands. He came forward when he saw her, and the grey eyes scanned her face swiftly at the same time as he reached out a hand, instinctively, she thought, almost as if he thought she needed support.

'Good morning.'

'Good morning, Neil.'

There was something curiously and disturbingly intimate about coming downstairs to greet a man in his own home, and once more she wondered at her increased sensitivity where he was concerned. The hard fingers closed about her arm for a second, but released her as soon as he realised she was in no need of support.

'How are you feeling, Melodie?'

'Oh, I'm fine, thank you.' She scanned the lean shadowed face for a moment but avoided direct con-

tact with the steady grey eyes, and she smiled. 'And you? You took far too many risks last night, trying to recover my clothes.'

A careless hand dismissed any suggestion of risk involved, and he cast his eyes over the rather school-girlish outfit he had borrowed for her. 'Your borrowed plumes fit you well enough, do they not?'

'Very well indeed,' Melodie agreed. 'But it was very good of Miss McKenzie to lend me her Sunday best—I must try and thank her for them myself.'

A glimmer of laughter touched his mouth for a moment and warmed the grey eyes. 'Your thanks should go to the minister of the kirk—Kirstie's usual tastes are rather flamboyant for churchgoing and the Reverend suggested something a little more demure might be more in keeping with the Sabbath. Kirstie complied, but she'd as soon see them go as anything else, even though she's only loaned them.'

'Oh, I see. Jessie did suggest that she was a bit——'

A light shrug conveyed her meaning, and Neil nodded agreement. 'She'll likely grow out of it when she's a wee bit older,' he suggested.

'I see—she's not very old, then? I thought perhaps

Remembering her own speculation on the subject of Neil's personal visit to ask the girl for a loan of some of her clothes, Melodie looked at him curiously. It was only when she saw his raised brow and the way he was regarding her so steadily with a hint of mockery in his eyes, that she realised at least something of what was going through her mind must have showed in that look, and she hastily glanced away.

'You thought she was older?' The soft-voiced inquiry

almost taunted her. 'Old enough to interest me, mebbe?'

'I'd no idea *how* old she was!'

She could not protest too forcibly, for he was too close to the truth for comfort and she feared he realised it. 'Kirstie is sixteen,' he informed her. 'She's time enough to change, though I doubt she will.' He indicated an armchair and Melodie sat down in it rather hastily. The trouble was that he could now look down at her from an even greater height, and she already felt dismayingly small. 'You've had breakfast, so Jessie tells me.'

'Yes.' She ventured a smile. 'I was thoroughly spoiled and had breakfast in bed.'

'Good—then as soon as I've changed out of these clothes we'll drive in to Corrie and see about doing some shopping for you. You'll be needing more than those bits and pieces of Kirstie's.' He took a hasty glance at his wristwatch and nodded. 'We're a wee bit late in starting, so we'll have lunch in Corrie. Will that suit you?' he asked, as if it had just occurred to him to consult her, and Melodie nodded vaguely.

He seemed to have everything so cut and dried that it struck her once more how out of character he was for the man she had been told about before she left Australia. Her friends had described him as rather shy and quiet and, while the latter might be true, she could find nothing shy about this rather forceful character.

'You're not a bit like Catriona described you !'

She had spoken impulsively and without stopping to think what she was saying, and she saw the slight stiffness that pulled back his shoulders suddenly, and the lowering of heavy-lashed eyelids so that the look in his eyes was hidden from her.

'What in the name of heaven has the way I look to do with what I was talking to you about?' he asked. His voice was as low and quiet as ever, but it hinted at coldness, and Melodie's lower lip was drawn anxiously between her teeth before she replied.

'I'm sorry, Neil, I just—spoke what was in my mind, that's all.'

'Were you not listening to what I was saying, then?'

'Yes, of course I was!' His steady questioning look suggested she had better explain, and she hurried on, wondering if it would do any good to try. 'I was just thinking that you were described to me as being quiet and ' She hesitated in case he should think shy was in some way a derogatory term, but with that steady grey gaze on her it was impossible to hesitate for very long. 'I was led to understand that you were rather shy,' she finished a little breathlessly.

In the brief glance she gave him she thought she saw his eyes narrow slightly. 'Were you now?'

'But I didn't mean that——'

'Shy?' He went on, as if she had not spoken, and there was a suggestion of mockery in his voice that made her uneasy. 'Is that what they told you?' A short and not altogether humourless laugh made her glance up again quickly. 'Were you expecting some kind of overgrown schoolboy, Melodie?'

It was a most discomfiting conversation and Melodie wished fervently that she had never made that impulsive remark about his character. 'No, of course I wasn't! Just someone—different, that's all.'

'No doubt!' The grey eyes held her unrelentingly and she found herself unable to resist looking up at him again. 'Well, maybe I was—shy, as you say, when Catriona saw me last, but I'm not the same man she

knew. A man can change a great deal in eight years, Melodic, and I'm no different from any other in that respect. I'm thirty-four years old now and a lot of things have happened to change me since Catriona's time here.' A hint of a smile just tipped one corner of his mouth and she found herself wanting to reach up and touch her fingertip to it. 'Maybe I grew up.'

'I know, Neil; I know what you mean.'

Her voice was soft, light and barely audible, but she thought she understood what he meant and she wanted to let him know she did. Neil, however, was shaking his head and that ghost of a smile was still on his mouth.

'You know?' From his voice and the way he looked it was obvious that he doubted it, and she felt a warm flush of colour in her cheeks. 'How old are you, Melodie?'

The question took her by surprise, but it seemed somehow to suggest that he saw her as little older than Kirstie McKenzie and she resented that more fiercely than she would have believed possible. Her blue eyes sparkling indignantly, she looked up at him. 'I don't see that my age has anything to do with anything!'

If only she did not always react so emotionally to him. Even the timbre of his voice affected her, as he stood with his hands still clasped behind him looking down at her, and that hint of mockery in his smile was infinitely disturbing no matter how hard she tried to ignore it.

'I just can't help wondering how it is that a wee bit of a thing like you can always be claiming to understand me so well,' he told her. 'You've made the same daim before, though you've never explained it, have you, Melodic?'

It was the same discomfiting situation she had found

herself in once before with him, and she shifted uneasily in the big armchair. 'It's just that—I feel *I do* understand, Neil, that's all.'

'Or you've been told something that you think explains the man I am?' Neil suggested quietly.

She got to her feet suddenly, because she no longer felt able to cope while she occupied that big chair and had Neil hovering over her, alarmingly like a bird of prey. Her hands were at her sides but rolled tightly so that she appeared taut and uneasy as she faced him.

'I wish you weren't always so suspicious of me,' she complained, her voice not quite steady. 'Please, Neill'

'Please, Neill!' He echoed her words, mockingly it seemed, but with something in his voice that made her shiver suddenly. Then he put a hand beneath her chin and looked down at her mouth for a moment or two before shaking his head slowly, as if something he sought an answer to was beyond him. 'Och, you've a very appealing way with you, Melodie Came, and I suspect you're better at getting your own way than most.'

'I—I wasn't trying to get my own way.'

'No?'

Her heart was thudding hard and she felt as if her legs were about to give way under her, they trembled so much. The touch of his strong fingers on her soft skin was like a caress and she would have given much to have his mouth once more on hers, kissing her the way he had when they stood on the river bank with the storm venting its fury around them.

In fact she felt the need for his kiss with such intensity that it startled her, and she did her best to quell the disturbing and unfamiliar sensations he aroused in her. But he didn't kiss her—instead he let her go,

slowly, his fingers sliding across her jaw almost reluctantly, and she felt strangely bereft when he stepped back a pace and stood looking down at her.

'I believe I was once in love with Catriona.' The quiet statement took her by surprise, and he must have seen the look in her eyes that questioned his apparent uncertainty, for he shook his head again slowly and there was a wry smile at the corners of his mouth. 'I cannot even be sure of it after this long, but whatever the truth was or is, Melodie, I'm not still nursing a broken heart, if that's what someone's suggested—you've no need to feel sorry for me.'

'Sorry for you?' It had not even occurred to her that she felt sorry for him, even though she supposed it was true to some extent. 'But, Neil, I didn't

Was it not pity that prompted those soulful-eyed looks and the assurances that you—understood me?' he asked, and it was impossible to tell from his voice how he took to the idea. 'Did John Stirling suggest that a broken romance was the reason I chose to live in what he considers a white elephant of a house and give my whole time and attention to Ben Ross?'

Melodie tried to shake her head and deny it, but it was more or less what John had said, and it was difficult to deny it with that steady gaze on her. 'Not—not really,' she said in a small husky voice.

Once more a hand slid beneath her chin and raised her face to him, the grey eyes studying her for a second or two before he spoke. 'You're not a very good liar, Melodie, are you?' Briefly his mouth brushed against hers; then he let her go once again and walked over to pick up a well worn briar pipe from an ashtray on the mantel, turning as he began to fill it with tobacco from

a jar. 'We'd best away and get that shopping done,' he said with stunning matter-of-factness. 'I've heard shopping for women's clothes can be a long job.'

'Neil, I can't V

Her voice was unsteady and she felt alarmingly light-headed, as if everything was happening too fast for her to cope, yet still some part of her brain was functioning with sufficient clarity to remind her that she had no cheque book and no means of obtaining another at least until Monday morning. But Neil was looking at her narrowly, as if he suspected delaying tactics.

'I haven't any money and I haven't a cheque book since last night,' she reminded him. 'I doubt if I'd be given credit in shops where they don't know me.'

'You think I haven't thought of that?' he asked, and there was a hint of exasperation in his voice that made her look down at her feet hastily.

'I didn't know,' she confessed.

'Keeping an eye on your well-being includes seeing that you're not destitute when your things are lost through no fault of your own,' he told her, 'as well as seeing that you've a roof over your head and food to eat.'

'Neil, you're not responsible for me to that extent!'

'Oh, indeed I am,' Neil declared firmly. 'I'll not have it said that I fell short in any way—not that I would whether I'd critics to say I did or not.' The grey eyes warmed with a smile as he rammed tobacco firmly into the pipe. 'I take my role seriously, you know.'

'Neil, will you please stop acting as if I'm five years old! I—I appreciate all you're doing for me and I'm very grateful, but I wish you wouldn't talk as if you're really responsible for my well-being.'

He said nothing for a second or two while he held a lighted match to the pipe and pulled it into hie, then he looked down at her, his eyes narrowed behind the screen of blue smoke, and she felt herself shiver with some inexplicable sense of excitement.

'Would you rather I let John Stirling take care of you?' he asked. 'He could take you to buy clothes and mebbe find room for you in the croft with his aunt and uncle—and himself, of course.'

'You know I didn't mean anything like that.' She felt incredibly small and rather helpless as she stood there in Kits tie McKenzie's Sunday best, and she was quite sure that if someone *had* to look after her she wanted it to be Neil. 'I'm—I'm grateful for you doing what you are for me, and if you could let me have something to buy clothes, just until Monday when the bank's open again.' Something else occurred to her then too. 'If I could have that little cottage across the yard for the rest of my stay, perhaps,' she ventured. 'I noticed it's empty.'

'Not for long,' Neil told her blandly. 'I've a new man starting next week and he and his wife will be moving into the groom's cottage in a day or two. We've plenty of room in the house here for you.'

'But

The grey eyes held hers steadily and there was a gleam of something in their depths that brought a flush of colour to her cheeks as he regarded her through the screen of smoke from the pipe. 'Jessie will chaperone you,' he said, 'if that's what troubles you.'

'It isn't!'

The retort was swift and instinctive, and Melodic felt her heart begin a hard and rapid pounding in her breast, when she thought of spending the next month under

the same roof with him. Almost as if he found the situation very much to his liking, his mouth curved in to one of those rare and transfiguring smiles that drew fine lines at the corners of his eyes and made them warm and glowing.

'Then for the love of heaven, woman, will you stop raising difficulties 1 Come away into Corrie with me and let's find you something more flattering than that skirt that's too long for you ! '

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEING a house guest at Ben Ross, Melodie realised, would make it difficult for John to visit her as often as he was in the habit of doing and he was probably wondering how best to contact her, since Jessie McKay's assurances that she was unhurt after the cottage fire. It was with the idea of letting him know exactly what had happened that she decided to try and see him the following morning.

He still rode the Ben Ross horses so the stable was the most likely place to see him, even on a Sunday morning, though not too early, she thought. It had simply not occurred to her to get up as early on Sunday morning as she did in the week, and when there was no sign of Neil at the breakfast table she assumed he was taking a well earned-rest.

A remark to that effect, however, brought a sharp response from Jessie McKay. Mr McDowell had already breakfasted and had now retired to the library to read a newspaper, she was informed. He was always early for

Sunday morning breakfast because he knew that Jessie only waited to serve him before getting herself ready to walk down to the kirk in Glen Ross.

It was very obliging of him, Melodie thought, although he might simply be one of those men who were completely helpless when it came to getting himself a meal and the arrangement suited him. But Melodie was by now quite accustomed to getting her own meals and said so.

'Oh, but you needn't have bothered about me,' she told Jessie when she brought her in a pot of fresh tea. 'I can always get my own breakfast if you're in a hurry, Mrs McKay.'

Jessie frowned indignantly, her brown eyes gleaming. 'Indeed you cannot, Miss Carne!' she said firmly. 'For one thing I'll not have strangers in my kitchen, and for another Mr McDowell would not tolerate the idea of his house guest cooking her own breakfast, and rightly so too!'

'Oh, but I'm not really a house guest,' Melodie denied, and wondered just what exactly she was. 'I'm a sort of refugee, I suppose you could say.'

Jessie, however, was not convinced and she looked as fiercely discouraging as ever with her hands folded at her ample waist. 'If Mr McDowell says you're to be a house guest, Miss Carrie, then that's how you'll be treated, and your meals will be cooked and served to you, as is fitting.' Despite her disapproval, it seemed to Melodie that she was prepared to make allowances, and the idea of Jessie's austere character allowing her to relent at all was surprising. 'You've mebbe not been told that we serve breakfast early on Sunday so that I've time to walk down to the kirk,' she said.

'No, I didn't know or I'd have made the effort.'

'Ah well, no matter.' She cast an expert and critical eye over the well provided breakfast table and nodded. 'You'll have all you need now, I think, Miss Came, so I'll away and get maself ready.'

'Yes, of course, Mrs McKay, thank you.'

The austere features relaxed a little more as she nodded, and Jessie turned in the doorway before she went out. 'Mr McDowell's in the library,' she reminded her, and Melodie nodded.

'Yes—thank you.'

'Aye, well.' Another brief nod and Jessie was gone, leaving a curiously pregnant silence behind her.

It seemed ridiculous to even suggest it, and yet somehow Melodie could not rid herself of the impression that in her own rather pedantic way Jessie McKay was trying her hand at matchmaking, and when she considered it it was something of a compliment if it should be true. Her employer was in his middle thirties and he must have had other opportunities to take a wife, but she wondered if perhaps Jessie McKay looked upon a comparatively young woman as less of a threat to her position of authority in the household.

Left on her own in the snug little breakfast-room Melodie mused on the prospect for some time while she ate her meal, then realised suddenly what she was doing. Shaking herself impatiently, she put the whole thing firmly out of her mind, for whatever Jessie McKay might have in mind, it was pretty certain that Neil, once her two months' stay was over, would take no further interest in her, and she preferred not to even think about her own feelings on the subject at the moment.

For all her reluctance to dwell on any suggestion of a relationship between her and Neil, she felt that yester-

day's shopping expedition had gone rather well. Neil had proved far more communicative than she expected, and she had spent rather more money than she intended because he was persuasive when she hesitated.

In fact the deep pink dress that she was wearing had been bought, she frankly admitted, because Neil had made some passing comment on it in a shop window, but it suited her very well, and she would probably have chosen it anyway. Its colour made a stunning background for her black hair and blue eyes, and flattered her light tan, and she knew she looked pretty in it, which was good for her ego.

On her way to look for John she made a turn towards the back door of the house when she left the breakfast-room, then hesitated as she came out into the hall and looked across at the library door. She changed direction almost without realising she was doing it, and felt a light fluttering beat to her heart as she crossed the quiet hall.

The library door was ajar and she pushed it a little further open before putting her head around the edge. Neil was not relaxed in an armchair, as she expected, but on his feet with his back to her, busy packing tobacco from the jar on the mantel into the same old briar pipe he had smoked yesterday, and she watched him for a moment with a curiously unfamiliar sense of intimacy.

She had half expected to see him in riding clothes, but apparently the daily round of the estate was waived on Sundays, for he was wearing light grey slacks and a navy shirt that showed up the fairness of his hair. He was tall and bronzed, and sometimes with his blond colouring he looked almost Scandinavian so that she had more than once been tempted to ask him about his

ancestry. Only the possibility of a curt response had deterred her, though it was still in her mind to do so one day.

'Good morning, Neil.'

The swiftness with which he turned seemed to suggest that he had not heard her approach, and for a moment his eyes registered such surprise that she wondered if he had forgotten her presence in the house. 'Good morning, Melodie.' The pink dress was noted and approved, and she felt another quick flutter in the region of her heart. 'I hope you didn't mind my not waiting breakfast for you.'

'Not at all.' She laughed, rather breathlessly, she was dismayed to notice, and walked over to join him, her mission to find John momentarily forgotten. 'If I'm too lazy to get up in the morning, I don't expect others to wait for me.'

The pipe was clamped firmly between strong teeth and he reached for matches from the mantel to light it with. 'I forgot to say that we usually have early breakfast on Sundays.' Briefly the grey eyes flicked to her face again before resuming interest in lighting the pipe. 'Did Jessie say?'

'Jessie *did* say,' she admitted, pulling a wry face. 'I was firmly reprimanded for sleeping through half the Sabbath!'

'Were you indeed?'

His voice and the way his head came up told her that she had misjudged his tolerance with regard to Jessie McKay, and she hastened to amend the impression she had given. 'Oh, I don't mean literally of course,' she denied, 'but I was very late and she was waiting to get ready for church. If I'd known I'd have come down earlier.'

'You may do as you please, you have my word on it!'

Gratified at being indulged, Melodie shook her head, smiling ruefully. 'You don't know me,' she told him, 'or you wouldn't make such a rash statement! All I hope is that you won't live to regret taking me in, once you've found out how hard I am to put up with.'

A screen of smoke half concealed his features, but the grey eyes watched her steadily, disconcerting as always. One arm lay along the high old-fashioned mantel, and a foot rested on the brass and iron fender. He looked completely at ease and the effect his relaxed appearance had on her own mood was too reassuring to be questioned at the moment.

'Just as long as you don't get setting fire to Ben Ross as well, I'll not regret anything,' he told her quietly, and the charge, however lightly made, startled her.

She looked at him wide-eyed for a moment. 'I hope you're joking, Neil,' she said, and her voice was huskily uncertain. 'You *are* joking, aren't you?'

It was a moment or two before he answered and the concealing haze of tobacco smoke that drifted up before his face made it impossible for her to see his eyes clearly, and guess whether or not he was in earnest. Then he took the pipe from his mouth and inspected its bowl rather than look at her while he answered.

'I'd not joke about the burning of a cottage,' he assured her, 'but it's not known what caused the fire yet—I expect to hear tomorrow.'

'Can they tell?'

Her rising indignation was overridden for the moment by curiosity, and Neil was nodding his head. 'Mostly they can these days.'

'Then I have nothing to worry about!'

For a second the grey eyes became clear behind the

smoke screen, and she noticed that they were serious, though not as much as she expected from his tone. 'You didn't leave the cooker burning or anything of that, then?' he asked, and she shook her head firmly.

'And neither do I smoke I ' she declared, giving the smoking pipe a meaningful look. 'Nor does John!'

'Then it was evidently an electrical fault or something of the sort,' he guessed, and looked at her curiously when she frowned. 'Does that strike a note, Melodie?'

'Yes, it does.' She remembered the flickering light that had annoyed her in the kitchen just before she went to bed. 'The light in the kitchen was flickering on and off, it had done it before and I thought it was something to do with the pylons—I'm not very technically minded,' she added when she saw him frown.

'Did you not think to say something to me about it?'

'No, I just thought

'You were very foolish not to mention it to *somebody*,' he told her, and sounded very much as if he was scolding, so that Melodie looked at him with a dark look of warning in her blue eyes.

'You're blaming me, aren't you?' she accused, but shook her head without giving him time to answer. 'Well, I'm sorry about the cottage, but I refuse to accept that it was my fault that it burned down! You must think I'm a complete idiot to take chances like that—it could have been me that was burnt to a crisp, as well you know!'

'Melodic.' His quiet voice belied the gleam in his eyes. 'I *know—remember?*'

She stared at him for a moment blank-eyed, her anger dying into the stunned realisation that she had forgotten for the moment he had been in as much or more

danger than she had herself, and she shook her head slowly, the tip of her tongue briefly moistening dry lips.

'I—I'm sorry, Neil, I didn't think. You know better than anyone how close it was for me. If it hadn't been for you I'd never have got out of there alive.'

There was a glimmer of warmth in his eyes again as he regarded her steadily, and for so long that she wished she could look away instead of gazing at him as if she was mesmerised. 'A kiss would never have woken the sleeping beauty I found,' he told her in his softly accented voice. 'I'd to shake you like a rag doll, and even that didn't wake you properly.'

She could so easily recall the strength of his arms as he swept her from her bed and thrust her forcibly through the bedroom window out into the night air and safety, that she shivered, a warm glow in her cheeks at the memory of how she had fought him. How she could have forgotten, however, briefly, was beyond her.

'I remember,' she said, barely above a whisper. 'You must have had my guardian angel at your elbow that night.'

'It's still hard to believe,' Neil said. 'I thank God I was out that night, for we'd never have seen the fire from the house until it was too late.'

It was a new aspect that Melodic had not thought of before, and she looked at him curiously for a second, her interest plain in her eyes. 'I—I didn't know how you came to be there,' she said. 'I didn't even think about how, only that you were there.'

'I saw the flames from the Glen Ross road as I came up from the village,' he told her, 'and I put my foot down hard. At first I thought it was Ben Ross, you see.'

'And you heaved a sigh of relief when you saw it wasn't!' Melodic suggested without stopping to think

Neil eyed her narrowly for a second, then shook his head slowly. 'If I thought you meant that seriously,' he told her, 'I'd make you sorry you said it—but I think I know you well enough by now, Melodic, to know you sometimes speak without stopping to think.'

'I'm sorry, Neil.'

'Aye,' Neil said softly, 'I know you are.'

He continued to regard her with the same disturbing steadiness and she dared not look at him again. There was a strangely exciting atmosphere in the big book-lined room that tingled along her spine and brought a flush of colour to her cheeks, and she had completely forgotten about John for the moment. Another swirl of blue smoke curled like a halo about Neil's fair head for a second or two, and when it cleared he seemed to snatch himself back from a moment of daydreaming.

Easing himself away from the tall mantel, he swept a slow and deliberate gaze over her slim shape in the rose pink dress. 'Were you going out?' he asked.

His tone suggested that he had hoped she was staying, and Melodie made no pretence of being other than ready to be persuaded. Her conscience urged her to remember John, but if Neil asked her to she would see John some other time.

'I was thinking about it,' she admitted, and he nodded.

'You'll be wanting to see John Stirling, of course,' he guessed, 'to tell him what happened. He'll be anxious if he hasn't seen you since the fire.' He smiled faintly. 'You'd best reassure him.'

He was doing no more than voice the self-same reasons that had made her decide to see John that morning, but somehow hearing him encourage the -idea

struck her as a bitter disappointment when she had anticipated his trying to persuade her to keep him company. And, illogical as it was, she resented her own reaction, so that she shook herself impatiently.

'That's what I had in mind,' she told him, and Neil inclined his head behind his screen of blue smoke.

'I think I heard him a few moments since—you'll mebbe find him still in the stable if you hurry.'

As if he could not wait to be left in peace again to read his paper and smoke a pipe, Melodie thought. There seemed nothing else to say, so she turned without another word and walked across the room aware that Neil's grey eyes were following her to the door, and she had her hand already on the handle when he called to her.

'Tomorrow,' he suggested, 'I could maybe drive you into Corrie to buy paints and whatever it is you need to start work again.'

Melodie half-turned, her hand on the door's edge, looking at him over her shoulder. 'You're in a hurry to put me back to work?' she asked, and the grey eyes held hers steadily, suggesting all sorts of reasons for keeping her busy. Like the fact that she saw less of John when she was working—but that she swiftly dismissed as unlikely.

'I'm thinking about my painting of Glen Ross,' he said. 'It was lost with the rest of your things, was it not?'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'The sooner you've more paint and canvas, the sooner you can begin another,' he told her, but some perverse imp in her make-up made Melodie stick out her chin as she looked across at him standing with relaxed confidence in front of the huge fireplace.

'But you'll be busy, Neil, and I couldn't take up your

time. John's on holiday and he won't mind in the least taking me in to Corrie for paints if I ask him.' She hastily avoided looking at him as she pulled the door to behind her. 'Thanks all the same, Neil.'

She hurried across the hall and hated herself for having been so childishly perverse. If only he had not been so ready to send her out to find John when she had thought he was going to ask for her company himself it *would not even* have occurred to her to react as she had. Shrugging in vague helplessness, she made her way to the rear of the house in search of John—nothing ever happened the way she meant it to with Neil.

John had willingly abandoned his plans to ride when Melodie found him in the stable as she expected, and instead he unsaddled his horse again and joined her for a walk. With his arm about her shoulders and hugging her close she was aware of something a little more intimate in his manner than she had noticed before, and yet she felt strangely helpless to do anything about it.

It was a lovely bright morning and they walked as far as the hillside that sloped steeply down to where tiny Loch Lairdross lay like a blue gem in the rusty green hollow of the glen, reflecting the morning sun like a mirror, clear blue and hazed with mist.

It was Melodie who suggested that they sat there for a while on the springy softness of turf and heather. The view was magnificent and she felt she would never grow tired of it—the panorama of mountains and glens enchanted her and she so easily became lost in the spell of it that she gave only half her attention to John when he spoke.

'What happens now?' he asked, and Melodie turned and looked at him rather vaguely for a moment. 'Where

are you staying since you were burnt out on Friday night—in the groom's cottage in the yard?'

She thought he knew very well she was not using the groom's cottage, for it was very obviously unfurnished, but he simply did not like the idea of the alternative. 'Neil has a new man coming into the cottage,' she told him, confident that he knew it already, 'it isn't available, John. Neil took me up to Ben Ross on Friday night and I've been there ever since.'

From the way his mouth tightened it was clear just how much he disliked the arrangement, and Melodie looked again down at the loch rather than at him. 'Damn it!' He swore softly and, although she was in part prepared for it, his vehemence startled her and she turned hastily, her eyes questioning.

'I'm very comfortable,' she said, 'and Mrs McKay is being very amiable on the whole.'

'I can imagine!'

His reaction irritated her without her being quite sure why. She had very little choice in the matter of staying where she was and his determined disapproval seemed to serve no useful purpose except to annoy her. 'They've been very good to me, John; I don't know what I'd have done without their help, and especially without Neil getting me out of the cottage as he did. I hadn't even a stitch of clothing except the nightdress I was wearing.'

John raised a brow and looked at the rose pink cotton dress she was wearing. 'Oh, hadn't you?'

'Not a thing!' She spoke sharply because he seemed bent on making things appear suspect as far as her rescue was concerned, and he had no cause to behave the way he was. 'I had to stay in bed on Saturday morning—yesterday, until Neil could borrow something for

me from a girl who lives on the estate.'

Swiftly and briefly John's eyes scanned up and down her shape and he laughed shortly. 'Kirstie McKenzie?' he guessed, and Melodie frowned at him curiously.

'How did you guess that?'

'Easy.' He shrugged carelessly. 'She's the only female on the estate who could provide you with something to fit.'

'You know her too, then?'

'Sure, though not as well as McDowell does!' His words and his voice were obviously meant to convey something that Melodie knew was not true, although similar ideas had passed through her own mind until she learned of Kirstie McKenzie's youth. 'He made a beeline for her place when you wanted something to wear, didn't he?'

Melodie frowned, following the implication all too easily, and disliking it. If John knew the girl as he claimed, then he must know how young she was, and the implication he was making concerning Neil was unworthy of him.

'For the reason you said,' Melodie insisted firmly. 'Jessie McKay told him that she was about my size and Neil went over to see her!' She tilted back her head and looked at him with a hint of defiance in her expression. 'And if you know Kirstie McKenzie as you claim to, John, you must know she's only sixteen. I'm quite sure Neil isn't the kind of man to have—that sort of relationship with a girl twenty years his junior. A—a schoolgirl!'

'You must be twelve or thirteen years his junior,' John retorted, stung by her criticism, 'and it doesn't stop him looking at you the way he does!'

Once before when he had made that same charge, she

had not even bothered to deny it, now she did so with less conviction than she hoped. 'He doesn't look at me in any special way—you're imagining things, John!'

John's frown did not lessen, but he took her hands in his and turned her round to face him as she sat curled up on the cool turf. His brown eyes were uncharacteristically hard and angry and so was his voice, so that she wondered what jumble of emotions disturbed him as he held her tightly.

'Melodic, can't you move out of there? Do you have to stay in that damned great barn of a place?'

It would never do to admit that she did not want to move out of Ben Ross; she did not yet dare admit it to herself, and she sought some way of answering him so that John would not guess how she really felt about it. Suddenly restless, she scrambled to her feet and John was beside her in a moment, walking beside her as she started down the slope towards the glen. Her hands were swinging, and he caught the one nearest to him and held it tightly in his.

'I don't see how I can move out,' she told him, choosing her words carefully, 'unless I go away altogether. There are no hotels nearer than Carrie.'

'I wasn't thinking about a hotel.'

His meaning was clear, of course, Neil had mentioned the idea when she spoke of alternative arrangements herself, but there simply was not room in his uncle's tiny cottage for another visitor. Nor had she the desire to live in such cramped quarters when the vastness of Ben Ross was available to her.

'There's nowhere else for me to go,' she told John. 'And it seems stupid not to take advantage of Neil's offer.'

'I'm more concerned with his taking advantage of

you!' John retorted sharply. 'Aunt Marie could find room for you, I'm sure.'

'I'm sure she couldn't,' Melodie declared firmly. 'The croft is far too small, John, and there's barely enough room for the three of you as it is.'

'Besides which you like the idea of living at Ben Ross,' John suggested with unmistakable meaning. 'O.K., Melodie, I get the point!'

'I don't think you do.' She eased her hand from his and walked faster, getting a short distance ahead of him until *he* realised and hastened to catch up. 'My choice is limited, John. Either I stay on at Ben Ross or I have to go right away, and I'm not ready to give up the rest of my stay simply because you have some bee in your bonnet about Neil McDowell!'

Melodie had seen that hint of sulkiness before, after Neil had brought her back from their ride on the back of his horse, and she saw it now in the set of his mouth and the dark, glowering look in his eyes. 'You're darned right I don't like you being there,' he agreed. Bending suddenly, he tugged a sprig of heather from its root and twirled it between restless fingers. 'I'm not sure I trust McDowell the way I used to, he's—different from what I thought he was at one time.'

'Different?' Her puzzlement was genuine and she looked at him curiously, but John was nodding as if he was quite convinced. 'How different, John?'

He glanced sideways at her without turning his head. 'I didn't have him figured for a Casanova, now I'm not so sure.'

Her own responses to Neil were still too fresh in her mind to allow her to deny the term as adamantly as she might once have done, but she shook her head for all that because she had only her own experience to

guide her opinion. 'I don't think you have any call to say Neil is a—a Casanova,' she denied, and John laughed shortly.

'Oh, I grant you he's quiet,' he allowed, 'but still waters run deep, and there's that affair that Uncle Jamie mentioned. Maybe that guy is deeper than I figured!'

It startled her to be reminded of Neil's self-admitted love for Catriona Holland, but she could not bring herself to say anything of it to John, so she said nothing. According to Neil he was not now even sure if he had loved his then employer, and Melodie preferred to think he had not—though she hesitated to admit as much even to herself.

'I wish you were anywhere but under his roof,' John declared, still far too angry. 'I don't trust him!'

'It doesn't really matter whether or not you trust him, does it, John?' It was a gentle reminder, but she knew it had had its effect when she saw his face darken and he brought them to a halt, turning her to face him.

His hands pressed hard into her shoulders and his eyes scanned her face for a moment before he spoke. 'Maybe not,' he admitted after a few seconds of silence, but the admission was made reluctantly. 'I kind of hoped I had the right to object to you moving in with him, but I guess I'm getting ahead of things. The fact is you're getting to mean a whole lot too much to me for me to simply sit back and accept the idea of McDowell taking you under his wing—I can't just say nothing, Melodie.'

It shouldn't have been so unexpected, she told herself, but lately Neil had occupied her thoughts to such an extent that she had given less thought to John than she probably should have done. It was incredibly hard

to know what to say to him, for she was not insensitive to the compliment he paid her, but she simply did not know what to do next.

'Melodic!' His hands gripped her shoulders firmly and she could not have turned away even had she had the inclination to. His head was bent and his voice pitched lower than it usually was, slightly unsteady too and oddly touching. 'You know I love you, don't you?'

Melodic did not move for the moment, but stood with her head bowed, looking at the open neck of his shirt and noting absently that he looked far more schoolboyish than she had noticed before. Her heart was beating with a faster beat than usual, aroused by the kind of excitement such a situation was bound to kindle, and she wished she had anticipated this moment before she came with him.

'I—I'm flattered, John, I really am.'

His brown eyes sought hard to make her look at him, but she kept her lashes lowered and preferred not to be influenced by them. 'I told you I was likely to fall in love with you, didn't I?' he reminded her. 'I'm quite serious about it, Melodie'

'Oh, John, I know you are!' She looked up at last, and found the brown eyes even harder to meet than she anticipated. 'I—I wish I could say—I mean, I can't say that I feel the same way, John. I wish I could! '

'I wish you could! '

He looked so earnest that it was impossible not to be touched, but she wished he hadn't spoken as he had, for it made it so much more difficult for her to decide to stay as she had planned. If John was as much in earnest as he said, then it was going to make matters worse that she was no longer able to see him as often as he was used to.

It was instinct that made her turn her head suddenly and look back the way they had come, and her heart thudded urgently at the sight of a tall familiar figure on the black horse, his fair head as unmistakable as the way he rode.

Sensing her distraction, John turned as well and she saw the swift frown that drew his brows when he recognised Neil. 'Arrogant devil he is!' he declared in a hard flat voice. 'I never realised it so much before.'

'You liked him before.' The words were out before she stopped to think, and John was looking at her almost as if he suspected criticism.

'I guess I did,' he admitted, once more watching Neil on the notorious Black Knight riding off down towards the river. Then he looked down at Melodie again and his eyes scanned her face in silence for a moment. 'Now I guess I'm jealous of him because he has you under his roof for the next month,' he told her. 'I can't pretend to like it, Melodie.' He took her hands in his and after a second or two raised them to his lips and kissed her fingers. 'I want to marry you,' he said, his voice barely above a whisper, 'and McDowell or no, I shall ask you a hundred times if necessary, as long as I think there's the faintest chance that you'll say you will.'

'John——

He silenced her with a light kiss on her mouth, and smiled down at her ruefully. 'At least give me the chance to live in hope,' he said. 'Will you do that for me, Melodie?'

If only she had not known that Neil was there somewhere on the hill that sloped down behind them, still within hailing distance if she should call to him, she could have given her whole mind to John, and she

looked at him with wide and slightly dazed eyes while he pleaded with her.

'Melodie?' He kissed her again and this time with more fervour so that she was momentarily swept along with his mood and responded without quite realising she was doing so. 'Well, at least you haven't sent me away,' he said with a curiously nervous little laugh. 'That gives me a little encouragement!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE warmth of the sun on her face when she woke made Melodie smile even before she opened her eyes, and she stretched her arms above her head lazily, reveling in the comfort of the big old-fashioned bed for a moment before she woke herself properly. It seemed hardly credible that it was little more than a week since the cottage had burned down and she had moved into Ben Ross.

The big bedroom already seemed comfortably familiar and it was certainly a great deal more luxurious than the one she had in the cottage. Its dark-panelled walls gleamed richly in the morning sunlight and the high windows allowed in lots more light than the tiny dormer windows of the cottage had. Jessie McKay had replaced the original heavy red curtains with fresh, lighter ones, though whether on her own initiative or at Neil's instigation Melodie couldn't be sure, but they gave the room a more cheerful look.

A glance at the bedside clock showed that it was quite early, and yet she felt the need to be up and

doing. Outside, in the ivy that covered most of the face, of the old house, sparrows were cheeping persistently, and from further away above the glen, she could hear the plaintive cries of curlews and lapwings on the morning flight for food.

Suddenly active, she got out of bed and walked over to the window, looking out across the countryside at the scene that never failed to enchant her, especially seen as now from the lofty dominance of Ben Ross. Perhaps she would ride this morning; the view from her window encouraged the idea, and maybe, if she was in time, she could go at least part way with Neil when he went on his daily round.

Having made up her mind, it was the thought of his possibly setting off before she was ready that sent her hurrying through the process of bathing and dressing, and she was so much earlier than her usual time that she caught Jessie McKay unprepared when she peeped round the kitchen door before going to join Neil in the breakfast-room.

'Och, you'll be in a rare hurry this morning,' the housekeeper declared with far less rancour than she would have shown little more than a week before, in the same situation. 'You bide with Mr McDowell in the breakfast-room, Miss Carrie, and I'll have your breakfast for you in just a wee while.'

Melodie glanced across the kitchen at the seldom used serving hatch and lowered her voice slightly. 'I'm hoping to go out when Mr McDowell does,' she confided, 'so don't make it too big a meal, will you, Mrs McKay?'

'He'd not like you going without your breakfast,' Jessie stated firmly. 'He'll wait if you tell him you're going with him.'

Still unsure whether or not he would, Melodie gave a light shrug and disappeared. Next door in the breakfast-room Neil showed much the same reaction to her early appearance. He looked pointedly at his wristwatch before he even answered her greeting, and his grey eyes showed laughter as he looked across the table at her.

'Could you not sleep?' he asked, and Melodie pursed her lips in reproach.

'I slept perfectly, as always,' she told him. 'I just felt like getting up early this morning—you don't mind if I join you, do you, Neil?'

'Not at all, as long as you don't mind me getting on with my own breakfast while you wait for yours.' He noted the blue jeans and a cotton shirt she wore and raised a brow. 'You look ready for action,' he suggested. 'Are you anxious to get started?'

He was finishing his meal already, she noted, and hoped that Jessie wasn't going to be too long with her breakfast or she couldn't reasonably expect him to wait for her. 'I felt like riding this morning, so I'm giving, the painting a miss, for an hour or two anyway.'

She had been hoping to hear him say she was welcome to join him and she was disappointed when he said nothing at all about it, but merely looked surprised at her reason for being early. 'You're usually very diligent about working during the week,' he observed. 'Is my painting giving you some trouble—is it maybe not going as well as you hoped?'

'Oh no, on the contrary, it isn't going badly at all, I've got on better than I expected. I just felt ' **She** shrugged vaguely, watching Jessie as she came in with her breakfast. 'I just felt like riding instead this morning, that's all.'

Jessie McKay set the meal in front of her and briefly the sharp brown eyes held her gaze, questioning her reticence and wondering at it probably. 'Since you're in a hurry to be away,' she told her, 'I did you only one piece of bacon with your egg, though a good meal in the morning is necessary, to my mind.'

'Yes, Mrs McKay, thank you.'

'Will you not have more?'

'No, thank you, there's plenty here.'

The shrewd brown eyes flicked briefly in the direction of her employer and Jessie folded her hands over her stomach in that now familiar gesture of disapproval. 'Aye, well,' she allowed, 'you'll know your own mind best, I dare say.'

Neil seemed to find the byplay mildly amusing and he looked at Melodie in obvious curiosity as he sipped his tea. 'Are you not eating properly, Melodie?'

He asked the question of her, but he looked at Jessie for the answer and Jessie was nothing loth to provide a reason for her lack of appetite. Melodie, however, preferred to make her own request and she frowned up at Jessie discouragingly.

'I'm having a breakfast and that's all that matters, isn't it? I just don't want—I mean, I happen to be in something of a hurry this morning, that's all, there's really nothing to make an issue about.'

He looked again at Jessie, but the housekeeper shrugged her plump shoulders and reached for his empty plate. 'I'll not make an issue, Miss Came,' she assured her, and Melodie found it hard to believe the glimpse of a smile that briefly softened the austere features. 'You'll be capable of doing things for yourself, I'll warrant !'

Neil watched the housekeeper leave the room, then

looked at Melodie and half smiled. 'I do believe Jessie approves of you,' he told her. Giving her no time to say anything, he put down his empty cup and looked at his watch. 'I hope you won't mind having your breakfast on your own after all—it's time I started out.' Getting up from the table, he stood for a moment with his hands resting on the back of his chair while he looked across at her. 'I'm glad you're going to give Rusty an outing, he can do with the exercise. You've not ridden much since you've been here, Melodie.'

'Not very much,' she admitted. 'I just don't seem to have got around to it very often, but I thought——'

'Aye well, if the spirit takes you this morning both you and the horse will benefit, I dare say.'

'Neil I ' He had started to move off, but he turned back when she called after him and fixed her with that steady and disconcerting gaze that she never seemed able to cope with very successfully. 'I wondered if I might come with you this morning.' She sounded vaguely breathless because her heart was thudding anxiously in case he said no. 'Just for part of the way,' she added hastily because he had not answered, and blue eyes between thick lashes had never looked so appealing. 'I wouldn't hinder you, would I?'

It was several seconds before he said anything, and he continued to look down at her from across the table. She had almost convinced herself that he was going to say he couldn't wait for her to finish her breakfast, when he nodded and smiled. It was one of those rare smiles that lit up his whole face and gleamed warmly in his eyes, and her senses responded to it instinctively.

'You probably will hinder me,' he said frankly, 'but please come just the same if you've a mind to.' She felt lighthearted suddenly and made as if to leave the table

and join him, but he waved her back to her neglected meal. 'Eat your breakfast first, there's no need to go without your food.'

'Are you sure you don't mind waiting for me?'

He was still smiling, his lean face crinkled with amusement at her anxiety. 'I'm sure—you finish your breakfast while I go and saddle the horses.'

It was less than ten minutes, in fact, before she went hurrying out through the back door of the house and across the cobbled yard to the stable. It was quite incredible how excited she could get simply at the prospect of riding with Neil again, and almost instinctively she glanced up at the sky.

It was clear and blue and there was no chance of them being caught in a storm as they had been the last time they rode out together. The sun was warm, but there was a light breeze that would probably become cooler as they got further out into more open country, but Melodic anticipated the ride with no less pleasure whatever the weather.

'Ah! There you are.' Neil came out of the stable leading the familiar chestnut gelding, and he helped her to mount before going back for his own horse. To Melodie's surprise it wasn't Black Knight he led out but the grey that John had once offered to saddle for her use, and Neil responded to her obvious curiosity with a faint smile. 'Black Knight's on the sick list this morning,' he said.

'He's been hurt?' She did not like to think of that magnificent creature being hurt, but Neil was shaking his head.

'He has 'flu.'

'Oh, but that can be dangerous for horses, can't it?'

'It can be.' He noted her quick anxious glance in the

direction of the stable as he swung himself up on to the grey, and she thought he appreciated her anxiety. 'McKenzie's a good man with horses and you've no need to concern yourself with him, Melodie. Everything that can be done for him is being done. He has medicine that the vet left for him and he's being kept warm, there's not much else we can do for him.'

'He's so beautiful!'

Neil's grey eyes were like bright steel in the tanned leanness of his face, but there was a hint of a smile on his mouth as he quizzed her. 'Would you grieve for him less if he wasn't so beautiful?' he asked, and she looked at him reproachfully.

'You know I didn't mean that, Neill'

He did not reply, but her eyes followed him as he led the way out of the stable yard and on to the soft springiness of turf, and she tried to decide whether or not he was as matter-of-fact about Black Knight's sickness as he seemed to be. Urging Rusty up alongside, she had the opportunity to study his face briefly before he turned to her and smiled, but she thought she saw the depth of his concern for his favourite horse in those few seconds.

'I really am sorry about Black Knight, Neil.'

The words were barely out of her mouth before he leaned across and pressed one big brown hand over her two smaller ones. 'Aye, I know you are,' he said. 'And so am I.'

He rode close beside her as they went down the hillside, a situation that was more easily achieved on the amenable grey than it would have been on his usual mount, and to Melodie there was a curious kind of satisfaction in their closeness. Neil was relaxed and his mood somehow communicated itself to her.

'You see that slope over there?' His voice brought her out of a pleasant state of dreaminess and she followed the direction of his pointing finger. 'Where it looks dark green there, do you see?'

Melodie nodded. 'It looks like little trees,' she guessed, and he nodded.

'It's a scheme I have for using land that until now has been unproductive,' he explained. 'They're young conifers—planted on the slopes they'll be profitable timber in years to come.'

Melodie gazed across what seemed to be an immense distance at the veritable forest of young trees that clung to the mountainside. The extent of Ben Ross must be even greater than she had realised, and she looked at him curiously.

'You own all that too?'

'I do—and I mean to make it work for me!'

'And those little houses I can see in the distance—are they on the estate too?'

'There are three crofts and all have good tenants—sheep and cattle and a wee bit of cereal, though it isn't very good land for growing much beside animals. The one you can see from here is where Donald Murdoch lives with his wife, the Stirling place you've visited and then over near Glen Bar are the McKenzies. All good tenants.'

'And John says there are salmon in the river.'

She made the observation when she caught sight of the river in the distance, flowing like molten silver over its rocky bed, reminding her of the last time she had ridden out with Neil. He half turned his head and nodded agreement, and she wondered if he too was remembering that eventful ride.

'That's right,' he said. 'The river is another good

source of income for the estate—we're very lucky it's so well endowed.'

'Salmon water is valuable, of course.'

'Very much so, and it's been built up over the years to a really profitable asset—the Ras is a wonderful stretch of water, and these days fishing rights are virtually priceless.'

'You're a very good businessman!'

The grey eyes looked at her for a moment as if he was unsure whether or not she meant the remark as a criticism. 'Is that a virtue or a vice in your opinion, Melodie?'

'Why—a virtue, I suppose.' She laughed a little uneasily. 'I'm notoriously incapable of even being able to handle a shopping expedition on my own without forgetting half the things I go for, so I can merely stand in awe of someone who is capable of handling an estate this size and making it pay.'

From the corner of her eye she could see the strong tanned arm and hand that held the rein nearest to her, and she was conscious suddenly of an aura of power about him, of pride in possession that made her tremble. He felt so strongly about Ben Ross that she wondered if he could ever feel deeply about a woman—she would surely have to be prepared to take second place, no matter who she was.

She almost cried aloud in surprise when once again a large strong hand engulfed her own two and squeezed them gently, and she looked up swiftly with wide eyes, to find herself once more the subject of that steady and disconcerting scrutiny.

'Do you stand in awe of me, then, Melodie? Surely not!'

'I'm—never quite sure.' She made the admission with

more frankness than she would normally have done because he had taken her by surprise. Briefly she scanned the lean tanned face, then looked down again at their hands, her own still enfolded in his, a small uncertain laugh shivering from her lips. 'I never quite know what to make of you, Neil.'

The hand was withdrawn, and she felt curiously bereft without its hard• warm pressure. 'I'm no great mystery,' he said, in that quiet voice she was beginning to find ever more attractive. 'Maybe one day you'll realise that, hmm?' Melodie said nothing, but glanced briefly up at him, meeting the warmth in his eyes with a sudden flutter in her heart beat. 'In the meantime,' Neil went on, 'shall we ride down as far as the Ras?'

She nodded, urging Rusty along to match the increased speed of the grey. 'The Ras?' she asked, coming up beside him again. 'That's a curious name—does it mean something special?'

A faintly sardonic smile touched the firm mouth, but she thought he was nothing loth to explain the curious name to her and the subject was a far less disturbing one than her opinion of him could have proved. 'It's another Nordic name,' he told her. 'There are any number of them around here. It means swift course, and you'll remember how appropriate that is in this case.'

She remembered the racing current and the deep grey of the water as it swirled around rocks and boulders in its path, and had to admit it was appropriate. But it was also beginning to dawn on her that there could be a connection between Neil's knowledge of Nordic meanings and her occasional musings on the possibility of his being of the same origin, and she studied him for a second between thick lashes.

His lean strong features could well have belonged to one of the marauding Vikings who for centuries had plagued the Scots, and left their physical impression on the people they invaded along with relics of their culture. His fair hair, thick and silky, fell across half his broad brow, and his grey eyes in the tanned face had the keen, narrowed look of conquest as he rode over his long-coveted land, tall in the saddle and with a hint of ruthlessness in his pride.

The need to know more about him was more imperative than it had ever been, and she felt sure that to know him she had first to know more about his precious land. 'Tell me about Ben Ross, Neil.'

Neil turned swiftly, his eyes narrowing slightly, as if he found her curiosity suspect. 'Are you really interested?' he asked, a slight twist of smile on his mouth. 'I warn you it's a subject on which I can wax eloquent, given the encouragement.'

'Well, I'm very interested. For instance, why Ben Ross; has it to do with the fact that the Rosses used to own it?'

'It has.'

She felt he was going to say more, but when he did not she pressed on. 'It's a huge place, isn't it—judging by what I've seen of it.'

'It's pretty big,' Neil allowed, but his smile left no doubt that it was an understatement. 'It stretches from the edge of Glen Ross village in the east, right over as far as Glen Bar to the south, where the plantation is I showed you, and out to the big loch and Ben Midden, west and north.'

'Ben Midden?'

She followed his pointing finger as he turned in the saddle. 'The mountain over there.'

Its distance away surprised her, even though she now knew that in this kind of country distances could be deceptive. 'But that looks miles away I '

'About three,' Neil agreed with a smile.

'But its name!' She thought she knew what the word meant, and Neil's smile suggested she was right, but it hardly seemed suitable to the stately peak that soared majestically, green and purple against the pale summer sky. 'I can't believe I heard you right.'

'It means dung heap, to be exact,' he told her. 'Our Nordic ancestors would appear to have had a taste more for frankness than beauty. The old Scandinavian word was *modding*, and it was probably called that originally.'

'Well, it doesn't seem very appropriate for a lovely view like that mountain. But tell me more, Neil—Ben, for instance. Is that Nordic too, or is it Scottish?'

'That's from the Gaelic for mountain peak.'

He seemed so close suddenly, as if she had got close to the man behind that dour exterior at last. She heard herself laugh, a light and rather breathless little sound, and she kept Rusty close up beside the ambling grey.

'And are you as much an expert on the Gaelic as you are on the old Nordic names, Neil?'

His eyes, moving slowly over her slightly flushed face, came to rest on her mouth and lingered there for several seconds. They seemed to have the gleam of steel in the tanned face, and Melodie felt a sudden more urgent beat to her heart. She had an almost irresistible desire to reach out and touch him, and she carefully avoided looking at him while he spoke.

'I don't claim to be an expert on either.'

'But you seem to know so much about both that you

must have taken the trouble to find out. It isn't the kind of thing you learn in school, is it?

He rode along beside her silently for a moment or two, and she glanced at the lean features in stern profile against the background of hills and blue sky. 'My mother gave me an interest in the Nordic names when I was quite small,' he said, and Melodie turned swiftly, unable to control the impulsive movement.

In all the time she had known him it was the first time he had made any mention at all of his family, and she could not help feeling that it was of more moment than she could realise at present. Her desire to know more about him was as fervent as ever, but she was afraid of asking too many questions and making him wary of her interest.

He was not looking at her but straight ahead to where the gleaming waters of the Ras tumbled over the rocks with a crescendo of sound like a gathering storm. There was a certain excitement in the sound, as if it could stir up emotions like that last time they had ridden down here, and she wondered what thoughts were going on in Neil's mind as he absently urged his horse on to a slightly faster pace.

'She was Swedish.' The, quiet, softly accented voice came to her slightly fainter because she had need to come up alongside again, and she put her heels to Rusty and brought him on. 'She died when I was ten,' Neil went on, almost as if he was unaware of anyone listening, 'but I remember how she used to teach me the old names and show me how they were derived.'

The urge to reach out and touch him was even stronger, but somehow she resisted it, and she looked up at him with shadowed blue eyes. 'You must have missed her terribly,' she said. 'You and your father.'

The way he glanced at her, so swiftly and suddenly, was not the reaction she expected and she held his gaze for a moment, not quite sure what she had said wrong. Then he nodded his head slowly, his face in profile again. 'She was beautiful,' he said, 'everyone missed her—even my father!' He put his heels to the grey suddenly and spoke over his shoulder as the animal surged forward. 'Shall we put on a bit of speed, Melodie? I've a lot of ground to cover before lunch time!'

Melodie glanced once more at the clock on the mantel and frowned. She had long since finished her own dinner, but she had eaten it alone, and there was still no sign of Neil coming in for his. Jessie would be fretting over it, as she always did when things got out of the comfortable routine she was used to—the wonder was that she now seemed to have accepted Melodie herself as part of the daily routine and the fact could still surprise her when she thought about it.

It was not necessary for him still to be out there in the stable with Black Knight for the animal was much better and recovering fast, but Neil had a soft spot for the mettlesome creature that was his favourite mount, and he had probably not realised how late it was. Melodie looked at the clock again, then across at the door when it opened, somewhat surprised to see Jessie McKay.

'Mr Neil's no in yet, then?'

Melodie shook her head. It was not necessary for Jessie to come and inquire, for she must know that Neil would let her know as soon as he came in for his dinner, so that Melodie suspected some other reason behind the inquiry. She thought she knew what it was

and she looked across at the housekeeper and smiled—she seemed so much more easy to read now that she was used to her.

'He's probably forgotten the time. I'd better go and tell him that his dinner's spoiling,' she suggested.

Jessie's nod of satisfaction suggested that the offer was exactly what she had had in mind. 'It'll come better from you, Miss Came—you'll not be charged with pestering him as I would if I chivvied him in for a meal.'

Getting up from her armchair, Melodie shook her head, pulling a face over the statement. 'I wouldn't bank on it—but I'll go and tell him just the same, Mrs McKay.'

'I'd be obliged.'

'He's sure to be still in the stable.'

'Sure to be,' Jessie complained. 'He dotes on you black devil, and the beast is well nigh recovered by now too.'

'He's very much better,' Melodie agreed, taking her jacket from a chair, 'but he's rather special, you know, and Neil's bound to worry about him when he's been so poorly.'

'Aye well, that's as maybe,' Jessie allowed, 'but somebody 'll need to worry about Mr Neil himself if he disnae eat when he should!'

They walked together across the hall to the rear of the house and it was instinctive for Melodie to glance across, as she so often did, at the huge portrait hanging on the stairs wall. It caught the light where it hung and for a moment the dark hair of the man in the picture was blotted out by a splash of yellow light that slashed across the brow just above the craggy face, and

Melodie stopped for a moment and stared, some fleeting familiarity catching her attention before it vanished just as quickly.

Jessie followed her gaze, drawn by her momentary pause. 'Yon picture fascinates you, does it not?' she asked, and Melodie shrugged, smiling a little uncertainly.

'For a moment I thought—' She shook her head, the fleeting impression no longer even remembered. 'The light can play curious tricks, can't it?'

Whether or not she knew what she meant, Melodie had no way of knowing, but Jessie McKay seemed ready enough to talk about the man, and she had never done that before. No one had mentioned the portrait except her friends in Australia—nearer home it seemed Duncan Ross was not a subject for discussion.

Jessie was glancing back over her shoulders at the painting as she spoke. 'He was a braw man for all they say about him,' she declared firmly, as if she expected someone to argue with her opinion. 'He'd his faults, but he was a fine, braw man.'

'You knew him?' She couldn't think why that should surprise her, but somehow it did, and Jessie was nodding her head firmly.

'Mebbe better than most,' she said.

From the kitchen doorway it was just possible to see the portrait, though at an angle, and Melodie looked across at it again curiously, unable to disguise or explain her interest in it. 'He fascinates me,' she confessed, and laughed, unsure of her reasons. 'I don't know why—I can't imagine why unless it's because of what I've heard about him. About how he was in love with someone once and she married someone else.'

'His cousin.' From her tone it might almost have

been a personal affront, Melodie thought. 'Then they went to live in England and he never did see her again—it broke his heart.'

'Poor man!' She glanced again at the portrait, trying to see that strong-featured man as a broken-hearted lover and finding it difficult. 'I know that it was Mrs Holland's mother that he loved,' she told Jessie. 'Catriona told me, that's why he left her Ben Ross when he died, as a kind of gesture, because he loved her mother!'

'And that was the one really wicked thing he did!' Jessie declared vehemently. 'She'd no right to the place!'

Still puzzled, Melodie shook her head. 'Then who had?' she asked.

It was as if she suddenly recalled herself, Melodie thought, for it was clear from her expression that she intended saying nothing more, that she probably considered she had already said too much. 'Ah well, it's all done with now,' she said as she turned into the kitchen, and Melodie knew she would not be hearing any more, not for the moment. 'I'll mebbe have to cook something else if this dinner is spoiled,' Jessie grumbled, and Melodie shrugged resignedly as she turned away.

She had been wise to put on a jacket, for the evening breeze could be very chill, and it was already growing dusk as she made her way across to the stables. The shadow of the house darkened the yard and even the groom's cottage seemed unoccupied for the moment with its new tenants obviously out for the evening, and a sharp east wind stole in off the moors, so that she shivered at a multiple of sensations as she made her way across the cobbles.

Inside it was quite dark except for the one stall where

an overhead light burned dimly, and she made her way past the other stalls, her footsteps swishing softly through the straw on the stone floor, to where she could hear Neil's voice, quiet and soothing, talking to Black Knight.

'Neil?'

He turned as she came into the stall where Black Knight stood with a blanket covering him, already feeling well enough to lift his handsome head and glance suspiciously at her from the corner of his fiery eye. Neil was stroking him, his big hands soothingly gentle on the glossy neck, and the animal was going to resent any intrusion into a situation that suited him perfectly, snorting disapproval at her presence.

'I came to warn you that Jessie is about to give notice if you don't come at once and have your dinner.' She accompanied the warning with a smile, and noted the wary eye of the stallion on her. 'Shall I stay with Black while you go?'

'No, you will not!' Neil declared forcibly. He stepped back from his charge and walked a few paces along towards her, resting one hand on the partition and looking at her with a gleam in his grey eyes. 'Neither will Jessie give notice,' he added with a crook of smile on his firm mouth. 'But I hadn't realised how hungry I was.' He glanced at his watch and whistled silently. 'Nor did I realise it was so late—no wonder Jessie's having a fit!'

'I had my dinner over an hour ago.'

'Then you can come and talk to me while I have mine.' He looked down at her steadily for a second, one brow raised curiously. 'Unless you've other plans,' he added, and Melodie felt the colour in her cheeks as she shook her head.

'Where would I be going at this hour of the night?'

Neil shrugged. His eyes were steel grey in the tanned and shadowed darkness of his face and his mouth had a slightly sardonic tilt at one corner. 'Who knows?' he said. 'It's not so late that you can't go out and see a—friend.'

'If you mean John, he's gone somewhere with his aunt and uncle this evening, and I know no one else here.'

'You know me.'

The deep quiet of his voice shivered through her, and she caught her breath at the rapid beat of her heart, her eyes carefully concealed by lowered lashes. 'That's true,' she agreed, husky-voiced, 'but you never ask me out, do you, Neil?'

She was thrillingly aware of his physical presence, but there was also an aura of excitement surrounding them that made her head spin with the sensation it created, and the desire to reach out and touch him was almost irresistible.

'John Stirling's in love with you.' His words snatched her back to reality and she blinked at him for a second in confusion, her head shaking slowly. 'You're not going to deny it, are you, Melodie?'

It was hard not to deny it out of hand, but she thought he would probably despise her if she did, and she would hate for that to happen. 'He says he is.'

'Then you'd better believe it, little one I ' His eyes held hers for a second, but she could not read anything beyond the faintly ironical smile in them. 'Now will you come and talk to me while I eat, or not?'

The temptation to talk to him while he had his belated meal was there, but instinctively she hesitated, patting Black Knight's sleek flanks and not looking at

Neil. 'Are you sure you don't want me to stay with Black?'

'Quite sure V He came closer, taking her arm and moving them out of the stall, back from the proximity of the stallion's restless hooves. 'He's perfectly all right on his own and I don't trust you two together—Black doesn't like females and you're too impulsive. You wouldn't resist getting too close and he'd probably kick you before I was half way across the yard.'

'I don't believe he would.' She stepped back and stroked the glossy coat once more, but felt the muscles in the animal's strong flanks twitch in dislike of a strange hand. 'I'd love to make friends with him, Neil.'

'Melodie I' He gripped her arm firmly and drew her away, coming to a halt in the stable doorway. The grey eyes looked down at her steadily and she felt her cheeks flush with colour as she hastily looked away. 'I want you to make me a promise.' He slid a hand beneath her chin, lifting her face to him, though she kept her eyes lowered. 'Will you?'

'It depends on what it is.'

Thick black lashes cast dark shadows on her cheeks, and her mouth had a curious trembling softness when he fixed his gaze on it. His fingers held her tightly, hard as steel on her soft flesh and she tried to do something about the rapid thudding beat of her heart as he looked down at her.

'Don't ever go near Black Knight unless I'm here—promise?' Melodie knew it made sense and she had no intention of doing other than as he said, but she did not answer for a second or two because she was still trying to think clearly and to speak other than in the husky whisper that she felt sure was all she could manage at the moment. The hand around her jaw

jerked her face up to him sharply and he leaned closer, his eyes narrowed. 'Melodie—are you ready to promise me?'

'Yes! Yes, of course I am ! '

He seemed unconvinced for he went on as if she had not spoken, his words warm on her mouth as he bent over her. 'It's only in romantic fiction that pretty girls can instinctively tame difficult animals—in real life Black would just as soon kick in your lovely head as look at you! '

'Then I won't give him the opportunity!'

She half expected him to make some bland remark about her being a good girl, and she steeled herself not to mind too much that he treated her as if he was an approving uncle. She was completely unprepared for the firm pressure of his mouth on hers, and her eyes flew wide open in surprise at the first touch of his lips, then were almost immediately hidden again by the long sweep of lashes.

The pounding of her heart was like a drum beat and she felt curiously lightheaded as she placed her hands instinctively to the broadness of his chest, her fingers fanned out over his heart's beat. But before she could respond to the kiss as every nerve in her body urged her to, Neil raised his head and was looking down at her with the gentle warmth of temptation in his eyes, smiling in a way that touched her senses like fire.

'I hope you know how to keep a promise,' he said.

She shook her head slowly, her eyes blank with the shock of disappointment and surprise. 'Neil——'

He was not giving her his full attention any longer, it seemed, for he walked back into the stall and patted the stallion's neck with a consoling hand. 'You're on trust too, ma lad.' He glanced back at Melodic and

his eyes were warm with laughter. 'Just in case this crazy wee creature takes it into her head to come and visit you, try and behave like a gentleman, will you?'

The black tried to turn and watch them go, but he could see no more than Neil's arm being placed around Melodie's shoulders as he led her from the stable and back to the house. The chill wind off the moor whispered across the cobbled yard and made her shiver, and Neil looked down at her and smiled, hugging her more closely as if to shield her from the blow.

Her eyes were like great blue jewels in her small face and made dark as night by the shadows of evening, but he could still make out the slight pout of reproach on her mouth as she glanced up at him, snuggling close in the curve of his arm.

'Don't you trust me?' she asked. 'I promised I wouldn't go near Black Knight except if you were there—isn't that good enough?'

The arm about her shoulder tightened still more, and Neil looked at her for a moment in silence, then once more the gleam of white teeth in his tanned face betrayed a smile, and he shook his head. 'You're a woman and they're an unreliable breed for the most part—but you're probably no worse than the majority.'

'Thank you!'

This time he laughed, a soft deep sound that fluttered across the top of her hair as he bent his head over her. 'But prettier than most,' he added, and Melodie smiled to herself in the dusk.

CHAPTER NINE

MELODIE was finding it hard to concentrate. The landscape she was working on was nearing completion, but at the back of her mind and impossible to ignore was the knowledge that there was less than two weeks of her scheduled stay left. All too soon she would have to see about finding herself a permanent home, and she had already made up her mind to settle in Scotland. John had warned her that she might find it hard to leave, and his prophecy was proving true. —

She paused in what she was doing and gazed across the glen to the soaring majesty of Ben Midden whose elusive magic she was trying to reproduce on her canvas. It was difficult to capture the awesome magnificence of the mountain and at the same time convey that soft, misty look that seemed to change with every minute, but she was quite pleased with what she had achieved so far.

It was warm in the sun and early August had a mellowness that late June had lacked. It added a golden look to everything, but it also gave a slightly more keen edge to the breeze that blew across the sheltered glen below her from the cooler heights of the hills and mountains. It was the first of the changes in character that she had anticipated when she first saw the place and it intrigued and fascinated her with its subtlety.

The sun warmed her face and the breeze wisped her black hair about her neck as she gave her attention

again to her work, too intent on her own thoughts to notice anyone approach. The first indication she had that she was no longer alone was when a pair of firm hands curled over her shoulders from behind, and John's voice spoke close to her ear as he bent over her. 'Hi, sweetheart!' His lips brushed across her neck in a shiver-inducing caress, and he hugged her for a second before squatting on his heels beside her. 'Hey, that's pretty good! '

Melodie turned and smiled, gratified but cautious as always of biased opinions like John's. 'It's coming on,' she allowed cautiously, 'but there's a lot to do to it yet, and I haven't too much time.'

'Before you leave here?'

She nodded. Although nothing had yet been said by anyone at Ben Ross about her coming departure she knew it must have occurred to both Neil and Jessie McKay that she would soon be leaving. For her own part, she preferred not to think about it, but it was something that had to be faced sooner or later.

'In less than a fortnight, my two months are up.'

'Then what?'

The intensity of his interest drew her gaze, and she looked at him for a second or two with her eyes narrowed curiously. 'Why, then I have to find somewhere of my own—somewhere permanent. In fact I ought to be looking already, it probably won't be all that easy to find somewhere.'

'Around here?'

She smiled ruefully, pulling a face as she admitted it. 'You were right about me not wanting to leave here when the time came; I'm hooked on the Highlands, and I'm going to try and find somewhere not too far from here.'

'I see.'

Something in his voice made her look round at him again. She sensed something in the hunch of his shoulders that made her vaguely uneasy, and John wasn't looking at her but down at the ground between his feet. Putting down her brush, she absently wiped her hands and looked at him curiously.

'John, is something wrong?'

He took several moments to answer but continued to look down at the ground. Then, as if he had suddenly made up his mind about something, he caught her eye and held it steadily for a second before he spoke. 'Melodie, I'm going back to Canada—I'm going home.'

'Oh!

She wasn't sure what she felt about it exactly. She liked John, she liked him very much and she would miss him, but she felt somehow that the fact of his going home wasn't the extent of what he had to say to her. She felt a curious sense of anticipation so intense that she got to her feet suddenly and stretched the cramped muscles in her hand and arm.

Almost at once John was beside her, standing close as she looked down at the glen and the deep, placid stillness of Loch Lairdross. 'I'm asking you to come with me, Melodie.'

It was not completely unexpected, if she was honest, for John had been asking her at fairly frequent intervals during the past couple of weeks to marry him, as he had said he would, yet somehow she knew that this time it was just a little bit different. It had not been easy to say no at other times, but this time she felt he was even more in earnest, it was like a last appeal, and was that much harder to refuse.

She hesitated, and by hesitating she probably gave him a wrong impression, for he put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him, his eyes searching her face anxiously for some sign that she had had second thoughts since the last time he asked her.

'Will you come back with me, Melodie, and marry me in Canada?'

'Oh, John—' She bit her lip and her eyes were wide and anxious when she looked up at him. If only it had not come to this when she was so unprepared for it. 'I—can't; I'm truly sorry, but I can't, John.'

The brown eyes already showed resignation even before she finished speaking, and he made a grimace with his mouth that was meant to be a smile. 'I guess I knew the answer already—I've known it all along. Ever since you were so reluctant to tell me about that ride you took with McDowell!'

'But, John, I——'

He placed a firm finger over her lips to silence her, and he was shaking his head again, that caricature of a smile still in place. 'Don't bother to deny 'It, honey, I know when I'm licked—but I had to try one last time.'

'Oh, John, I'm sorry!'

He laughed, but it was a harsh unsteady sound that was completely devoid of humour, and he pulled her close suddenly and kissed her mouth with a swift urgency that suggested it was as much a gesture of defiance, and she hated the change in him. More especially because she felt she had contributed to it, however unwittingly.

'Is it me you feel sorry about, or yourself for loving a lost cause, sweetheart?' The brown eyes scanned her small flushed face with a hint of desperation. 'It *is* a lost cause, you know, Melodie. Even if he wasn't still

nursing a fancy for his erstwhile boss, he's still far too wrapped up in Ben Ross to give priority to any woman, even one as delectable as you.'

It was something that until now Melodie had preferred not to think too much about. She was prepared to admit, though only to herself at the moment, that Neil McDowell had become the most important factor in her life during the past few weeks, but she still shied away from admitting that it was love she felt for him. She did not look directly at John, but hid her eyes with lowered lashes, her gaze fixed on the spot where his throat emerged from the collar of his shirt.

'The question of lost causes or not doesn't arise, John. I'll be leaving here in a couple of weeks or less, and it's unlikely I'll ever see Neil again.'

'And you'll find that quite easy to do, will you?' Melodie looked up quickly, her eyes wide and darkened by a sudden hurt and John was already contrite. 'I'm sorry, honey! I shouldn't have made a crack like that, knowing the way it feels to be—' His shoulders shrugged helplessly. 'I guess I just wanted to hit back.'

Her head was spinning, filled with a chaotic jumble of thoughts and emotions, none of which made much sense to her at the moment. John's remark, inspired by bitterness in his own disappointment, had gone home more deeply than she had been prepared for, but she might as well admit that it would be the hardest thing in the world for her not to see Neil again, if it had to be that way.

If, as John implied, Neil cared too deeply for Ben Ross to care very much about anything or anyone else, then the best solution was for her to go away and never see him again, but it hurt none the less for all that. She clenched her hands tightly at her sides and tried to

think lucidly about moving away. It ought to be possible to appear cool and practical about it if she was firm with herself, but somehow she did not think John would be fooled—possibly because his own involved emotions made him able to judge hers more accurately.

'Please—' She swallowed hard, trying to rid her voice of its betraying huskiness. 'Please don't apologise, John, you're—you're quite likely to be right about me—I'll probably find it quite easy to just move out of Ben Ross. I'm certainly not going to spend the rest of my life ' She caught her lip between her teeth suddenly, realising how close she was to crying, and dazedly unsure how she came to be in such a state.

'Oh, Melodie, sweetheart!' She was drawn into his arms again and held close with her head resting on his chest while he buried his face in the softness of her hair until it muffled his voice. 'I didn't mean to make you cry, honestly, sweetheart—I'm sorry ! '

Melodie had her eyes closed, but she felt a tear squeeze between her lashes and raised a hasty hand to brush it away. 'I'm *not* crying!' She eased herself away, but her eyes were bright and glistening when she looked up at him. She had not felt this weepy and unhappy when she came out, and she wished she could do something about it now. 'I need to be alone for a bit and clear my head—maybe I should go for a long walk before I make a fool of myself!'

'No, John, please!'

She was gathering up her things, heedless of how she did it, her hands unsteady and anxious only to have some time alone to think things out. So much seemed to be crowding in on her that she could not think clearly. Until now she had not seen her situation as in

any way urgent, but now suddenly it seemed imperative that she made a move away from Ben Ross and from Neil and she had to think it all out carefully and alone.

'When do you go home, John?'

She realised the impression her question had given and saw the look that came into his eyes as she straightened up with her stool tucked under her arm and the rest of her stuff thrust untidily into a bundle.

'I go the day after tomorrow. I'll be busy packing tomorrow, but I thought

'Then I'll say goodbye! '

He looked stunned, as if he found it hard to believe that it had finally come to an end, and she felt more touched by his reaction than she expected. 'You won't see me tomorrow?'

She shook her head, her eyes dark and shadowed by thick lashes, hiding the turmoil that churned away inside her. 'I'd much rather not, John.' Her voice too was betrayingly unsteady again and she knew that he wanted to reach out for her. 'I—I hate saying goodbye.'

'I hate saying goodbye to you!'

He had a hand on her arm and his fingers were curled tightly into her flesh. She tried hard to concentrate on his needs and his feelings while all the time her own emotions were hopelessly tangled and made it almost impossible to think of anything else.

'You won't refuse me a goodbye kiss, will you, Melodie?'

She thought how long ago it seemed since she had first seen those brown eyes, gleaming with warmth and friendliness in that pleasantly rugged face. Since he had offered to drive her up to Ben Ross and issued a lighthearted warning about the dourness of Neil

McDowell. It was hard to say goodbye, for she was really fond of John, but not fond enough. She was not in love with him as she was with Neil.

'Of course I won't refuse to kiss you goodbye!'

She said it hastily and a little breathlessly, for it was the first time she had made the admission, even to herself, that she actually loved Neil and it made her feel curiously vulnerable suddenly. She was smiling, a slightly dazed and unsteady smile, as she put down the paraphernalia of paints and canvas once more.

'Goodbye, John, and—thank you for—everything.'

He scanned her face swiftly, searchingly, his hands on her arms ready to draw her close. 'You won't change your mind and come with me?'

It was a curiously twisted smile she gave him and it did not reach her eyes, then she turned her head and looked down into the glen where the tiny loch lay smooth as a mirror in its setting of hills and mountains. When she laughed suddenly, it had little to do with amusement, and John's arm tightened for a second about her.

'I know it's silly,' she said, 'but I've the oddest feeling of belonging here.'

She raised her face to him and his mouth touched hers lightly. It was a gentle gesture of regret and farewell and it added to her already unhappy mood so that she slid her arms up around his neck and clung to him for a moment, needing his support.

'Maybe you do belong, sweetheart,' John said. 'I only wish you felt you belonged with me.'

It seemed to Melodie that a quiet ride on the moors was the ideal thing to help her clear her mind. The ever ready Rusty was available and nothing loth to

take an unexpected trip, and it was a lovely day. An initial gallop had rid the gelding of his surplus energy and from then on their pace had been no faster than an easy walk for the most part, but far from its being conducive to thought she found herself relaxing as she so often did when she rode among the now familiar surroundings.

Without intentionally choosing any particular direction she had made for the big loch on the western boundary of the estate, and from there veered north towards the towering slopes of Ben Midden. It was a much greater distance than she had done before, but she was unaware of how quickly time was passing and utterly content to let Rusty amble along at his present easy pace for as long as he liked.

The air was warm, but still fresh enough to cool her cheeks and her forehead, and it was only when she caught sight of a spring, bubbling crystal clear from a rocky outcrop at the foot of Ben Midden, that she realised how thirsty she was. The water sparkled, clear and pure, from a cleft in the rocks some five or six feet up, and ran away over a stony bed to disappear somewhere among the bristling heather, and she felt Rusty's head come up in pleasure at the sight and smell of it as they approached.

Sliding down from the saddle, she climbed over the lower rocks and cupped her hands under the bubbling fount, flinching briefly from its icy coldness over her fingers. The gelding could help himself from the stream lower down, and take a well earned rest at the same time, while she looked around her.

It was so quiet except for the occasional cry of a bird or the odd mysterious small noises that characterised the moorland and she felt at ease as she always did

out there. The lower slopes of Ben Midden towered over her, looking much less soft and pretty close to than when seen through a haze of distance and the ever present suggestion of mist. It looked far more rugged and harsh but no less intriguing.

Neil had said something about there being a family of wild cats in the area, and this rocky slope with its multitude of crevices and rock ledges was an ideal environment for them. The temptation to go searching was almost irresistible, but a glance at her wristwatch brought her up short, a silent whistle of surprise pursing her lips.

She scrambled down hastily from the ledge where she stood, all thoughts of wild cats banished in her anxiety to get back without further delay. She was already nearly an hour late for lunch and, though Jessie McKay was remarkably tolerant of her somewhat erratic timekeeping, there was a limit to her tolerance.

It was unbelievable that time should have passed so quickly, and yet when she looked at how far she had come it should not have surprised her. Arriving in the middle of the afternoon for lunch was likely to earn Jessie's disapproval, and Melodie pulled a face when she anticipated the explanations she was going to have to make.

Rusty was still drinking from the stream, dipping his head every so often and enjoying the cool water, and Melodie was never quite sure what happened next. Whether her own movements startled the animal into angry flight, or whether it simply objected to any kind of intrusion into its territory, she would never know, but a spittingly furious cat leapt suddenly from somewhere among the rocks and went hurtling down to the

ground in a wild flurry of fur and claws.

Legs stiff and straight, the cat landed close to where Rusty stood waiting, and the sight of it, back arched and every hair of its striped fur bristling in fury, was too much for even the patient gelding. Suddenly confronted by a shrieking creature with venomous yellow eyes, he panicked—he gave a shrill whinny of fear, tossed his head, then took to his heels across the moor before Melodie could make a move to stop him.

Too stunned to move for a second or two, she stared after her mount as he galloped off, tail and mane flying and heading for home as fast as he could go, then she let out a long breath and shrugged in helpless resignation. It would take her at least another hour to walk back to Ben Ross and she was already very late—Jessie was not going to forgive her so easily this time.

She looked around for the wildcat, but it had disappeared. In direct contrast to its noisy appearance, it had vanished as silently as a ghost among the rocks, and she had not even the consolation of seeing it for a moment or two. Ben Ross seemed an incredibly long way off but, since there was no chance of returning any other way, she had no option but to walk.

Trying to keep track of distance by an occasional glance at her wristwatch, Melodie thought she had walked roughly a mile when she caught sight of someone in the distance and blinked for a moment, not daring to believe it was possible assistance on the way.

Her heart was pounding heavily as she stood for a moment shading her eyes against the sun and watched the figures coming closer, although still some distance off. It had to be Neil, she thought, and half smiled to

herself at the thought. He would have seen Rusty come home without her and come looking to see what had happened.

The indeterminate figures evolved after a surprisingly few minutes into recognisable shapes and she could make out Neil's familiar fair head even at a distance. He was riding Tarquin and leading the runaway Rusty, and as soon as she was sure who it was she stood on tiptoe and waved a hand to let him know she had seen him.

She thought he urged the horses along faster, and certainly he was with her in a very short time and both horses were breathing hard as he pulled them to a halt and slid from the saddle without pause. He came straight to her, his hands reaching out for hers before even he uttered a word.

'You're all right?' The grey eyes scanned her face with a rapid scrutiny that was so intense she felt her cheeks colour furiously. 'You're not hurt?'

'I'm perfectly all right, Neil.'

She had not realised how soft her voice would sound, how much it would tell him, and she saw the response in the grey eyes at once. His fingers were tight and hard and he pulled her closer, pressing her hands to his chest so that she could feel the thudding beat of his heart which was much too fast for it to be normal.

'When Rusty came back without you, I thought____' He shook his head as if to rid himself of the thoughts that had gone through his mind. 'What happened, Melodie?'

'I stopped for a drink at the spring, and——'

'The spring?' His gaze went unhesitatingly to the towering height of Ben Midden. He knew every inch

of Ben Ross land—he did not need to question which spring she referred to. 'You've been *that* far?'

'I—I didn't realise the time until I looked at my watch while I was drinking from the spring, and then the wildcat ' She looked up at him anxiously, as if she feared he would not believe her story. 'I saw a wildcat, I think I must have startled it, and It jumped down from the rocks right beside where Rusty was standing.'

It did not really surprise her to see laughter gleaming in the ever-changing grey eyes, and her heart warmed to the glow it gave to his stern face, even though he found her predicament amusing. 'So he took off without you and left you stranded,' he guessed, and her bottom lip pouted reproachfully.

Even so there was a smile in her eyes when she looked up at him and Neil squeezed her hands, pressing her palms to the warmth of tanned skin beneath his shirt. 'You find that funny?' she asked, and he shook his head.

'Not really—I'm just so relieved that you're not hurt I can laugh at any alternative.' Again the grey eyes searched her flushed face and settled once more on her mouth. 'Does that surprise you, Melodie? That I was worried sick about what I'd find when I came out here to look for you?'

It was *a* moment before she shook her head. Her senses were reacting to Neil the way they always did, and she felt quite suddenly so lightheaded that she could have laughed for no reason at all—except that she felt so happy.

'I seem to remember that you appointed yourself my guardian, didn't you?'

He said nothing for a moment, but the hands that held her close tightened their hold, and he looked in to

her eyes with that steady and infinitely disturbing gaze that she always found so hard to bear. Only at the moment she did not find it hard at all and she met it head on, finding something there that shivered through her like ice and fire.

Then she bent her head suddenly and touched her brow to the spot where his shirt opened. A small pulse at the base of his brown throat throbbed urgently and she raised her head just a little more to press her lips to it with a touch as light as thistledown.

'Melodie !'

His voice, softer and deeper than she had ever heard it before, sounded close to her ear, and his hands moved to slide around her, drawing her into his arms. Her head rested just below his chin and he held her for a second without moving. It was like a dream to Melodie, something not quite real, and she pressed closer to him, unwilling to break the spell now or ever.

'I came out here because I had—things to think about.'

Her voice was muffled, and the words much too prosaic for the present situation, and she closed her eyes in pleasure when his mouth sought a soft spot beside her ear and kissed her lightly, almost teasingly.

'Do you have so much to think about?'

It was a moment before she answered, and she wondered just how much it would take to shatter this dreamlike moment beyond repair. But she loved Neil, she had no doubts at all about that now, and she wanted there to be no secrets between them. Even so she ventured the truth with a wildly beating heart.

'John's going back to Canada, did you know?'

He eased her away from him and looked down into her eyes for a moment before he answered. 'Aye, I knew,'

he said quietly. 'Is that what you had to think about so deeply, Melodie?'

His arms were still about her and she thanked heaven that at least that was unchanged. 'He asked me to marry him. I said no, of course,' she added hastily when she sensed the sudden tautness in the enfolding arms.

Neil slid a hand beneath her chin, lifting her face to him and scanning it closely, as if he searched for something he was not quite sure of. 'Of course?' he prompted, and Melodie nodded.

'How could I?' she whispered. 'I don't love him, Neil.'

'Did he have reason to suppose you did?'

The question was unexpected and she frowned at him curiously for a second before she answered. 'No, I've told him each time he asked me that I couldn't marry him.'

The grey eyes were deep, unfathomable and they sent a sudden shivering thrill through her whole body as she looked up at him. 'And could you marry me?' Neil asked.

'Oh, Neil!'

His arms were tighter, more urgent around her, and the lean hard body had a tautness that bowed her to its unyielding length like a willow to the wind. The grey eyes were closer, dark as grey steel in his tanned face, and his mouth only a breath away from hers so that his breath warmed her lips as he spoke.

'Will you?' His eyes swept swiftly over her face and came to rest once more on her mouth, soft and tremulous with anticipation. 'I love you, Melodie, and I've near gone out of my head the past few weeks thinking you were taking John Stirling seriously!'

'Oh, Neil, of course I'll marry you! I was only afraid that you still——'

His mouth, hard and firm on hers, silenced her for a long time a silence that was broken only by the shifting of the restless horses and the calls of birds among the heather. From her mouth to the softness of her throat and neck, until her head spun with the sheer excitement of him, and she hugged herself close to him, content if they never moved from that spot.

They were riding back to Ben Ross before she thought about how much of a rival the huge acres of the estate were going to prove. John had suggested that any woman who married Neil would have to take second place to his beloved Ben Ross, and she pondered on the possibility of how true it was as they rode into the stable yard.

Neil lifted her down, holding her for a moment and smiling down at her, as if he found it all a little hard to believe, and Melodie stood for a moment in his arms. 'I love you.' His deep, softly accented voice was like a shiver of sensation through her whole being, and she lifted her face to be kissed.

Her mouth warm and tingling when he released her at last, she looked up at him through the thickness of black lashes, her eyes on his mouth, usually so straight and firm, now half smiling. 'As much as you love Ben Ross?' she asked impulsively, and saw the swift frown that drew his brows together for a second only.

The grey eyes were steady, studying her in the way she always found so disturbing. 'That's an odd question,' he said. 'What on earth prompts you to ask such a thing, my love?'

He did not wait for an answer but led the horses into the stable while Melodie followed him, already wishing

she had not let her impulsive tongue run away with her yet again. He did not press her to explain but turned and smiled at her in a warm, satisfied way over his shoulder while he unsaddled her horse.

'I'm sorry, Neil.'

He paused for a second, looking at her curiously, then draped the saddle over the partition between the stalls and shook his head. 'I don't begin to understand you, my darling,' he confessed. 'I'd best spend the next few months learning what makes you tick.' He leaned across suddenly and planted a kiss on her mouth. 'It'll not be a hard chore,' he whispered.

Walking back across the cobbled yard to the house, he put an arm around her shoulders and tucked her close against him, looking down at her with that same warm, satisfied look as before, and this time it was Melodie who tiptoed and kissed him.

'I love you so much I'm half afraid I'll wake up at any minute and find this never really happened at all.'

Neil laughed, his eyes so darkly grey that they were almost black as he looked down at her. 'I feel a wee bit like that myself,' he confessed.

Recalling something else suddenly, Melodie pulled a face. 'I've yet to face Jessie and explain why I'm so late for lunch,' she reminded him. 'Is she very angry about it, Neil?'

It seemed to Melodie that his booted feet had the sound of authority as he strode across the echoing cobbles, and he did not smile, but his arm tightened almost imperceptibly. He brought them to a halt just outside the back door of the house, and pulled her into his arms, holding her close while he kissed her with such fierceness that she was breathless when he let her go at last.

'Apologise to Jessie by all means, but I'll not have you afraid of my housekeeper! You'll be mistress of Ben Ross very soon now, my darling, and you don't have to be afraid of anybody!'

Melodie looked up at him, her small face serious when she thought of the responsibility her new position would entail. It was far more than anything she had undertaken before and she had her first qualms of doubt. Not that she loved Neil any less, but running that great house would be her responsibility for the most part and she was horribly unsure if she was up to it.

'I only hope I won't prove too much of a disappointment,' she ventured, and laughed a little unsteadily. 'I'm hopeless as an organiser, as you have reason to know, and when I think of being in charge of somewhere as big as Ben Ross ! ' She drew a deep long breath and shook her head. 'I hope you won't have second thoughts about marrying me!'

He shook his head slowly, kissing her mouth with a lingering gentleness that set her senses reeling with its promise of passion. 'I'll not have second thoughts about that,' he promised. 'No matter how bad an organiser you are, my darling.'

He opened the door and as they passed the kitchen on their way through to the main part of the house he put his head round the edge of the kitchen door. 'It's all right, Jessie, she's back and quite unhurt!'

'Thank God ' Jessie McKay, straight and solemn as ever, noted the possessive arm about Melodie's shoulders with her shrewd brown eyes, and it seemed to Melodie that the small nod she gave might have expressed satisfaction. 'You'll be hungry after all that

time on the moor, Miss Came. Away with you into the dining-room and I'll get you something to eat.'

There was nothing to do but do as she said, and Melodic was aware that Neil was laughing as he drew her across the hall with him. Looking up at him, she wrinkled her nose in reproach, and he drew her into his arms suddenly, kissing her lightly just beside her ear.

'What makes you so sure that you'll not be able to manage this house and its staff?' he asked, and Melodic glanced instinctively across at the huge portrait that hung on the wall above the stairway.

Duncan Ross looked down at them with his sharp dark eyes, and she felt as if he could actually see them. Herself standing in the circle of Neil's arms, his fair head bent over her, kissing her neck and the soft skin of her throat. There was something about that portrait that always disturbed her, and yet she could not decide just what it was.

She put her hands either side of Neil's face and gave a moment to studying the strong tanned features that were suddenly almost unbearably dear to her. Then she kissed his mouth and glanced once more at the portrait.

'Maybe because I feel the critical eye of the old master on me,' she suggested, only half joking, and Neil followed the direction of her gaze and frowned suddenly.

'Does he bother you, darling?'

Something in his voice, she was not sure exactly what, made her look at him curiously for a moment, then she laughed and shook her head. 'Not really,' she denied. 'It's just that he always seems to be watching me. I suppose—' She hesitated, venturing in to new territory with some misgiving. 'I suppose you became quite

fond of him, didn't you? Was it he that gave you your—your passion for Ben Ross?

'In a way,' he agreed, and the quiet matter-of-factness of his voice gave her no warning of what was to come. 'He was my father.'

Melodie stared, first at Neil and then at the man in the portrait, and she remembered suddenly one evening when she had noticed something vaguely odd about the portrait with the light casting a patch of yellow across the head of the subject. The impression had been fleeting, but just for a moment it had looked a little like Neil with his strong dark face and fair hair, only she had not realised it then.

'Your—father? Duncan Ross?'

Neil was not looking at her, but up at the old man in the picture, arrogant and autocratic—qualities that he had passed on to his son in some degree. 'He wasn't a man for a home life and a wife and family,' he told her, in the same cool voice. 'He was a rover, all his life until the last years when he got too old to wander around all over the world, then he sent for me to come and run the estate for him. I was twenty at the time and had no idea I was other than Ramsey McDowell's son—my mother left the old man before I was born.'

'Oh, Neill' Her blue eyes were dark with the depth of emotion she felt for the wrong that had been done him. 'And then he left the estate to Catriona—how you must have hated him!'

The grey eyes fixed themselves on her mouth again and a hint of smile showed in their depths. 'I think I did at one time,' he confessed. 'I felt it was mine by right, but now—' He bent his head and his mouth was so infinitely gentle that she hung to it for as long as she could. 'Since I met you, my darling, I realised just

how much a man can love. I believe he felt about Catriona's mother the way I feel about you, I'm sure of it—he never loved another woman the way he loved her, because it wasn't possible.'

'More than he loved your mother?'

Neil took her in his arms again and his mouth was close to hers, warming her lips when he spoke. 'He could no more love another woman like he loved that first one than I could love anyone else as I do you, my darling.'

Melodie lifted her face to him, her eyes like blue gems in her small face and she kissed him softly with a mouth that was trembling and anxious. 'Then I have only Ben Ross as a rival,' she ventured and Neil's grey eyes looked deep into hers, dark and challenging.

'I have all I ever wanted from life now,' he said. 'My father's land and a woman I love even more than the land.' He kissed her, a long hard kiss that should have been conviction enough, then looked down at her with his grey eyes warm and gentle. 'Does that make you happy, my love?' he asked, and Melodie smiled.

'That's all I wanted to know.'