



MOTHER OF THE BRIDE

CAROLINE ANDERSON

Cherish



Caroline Anderson
Mother of the Bride

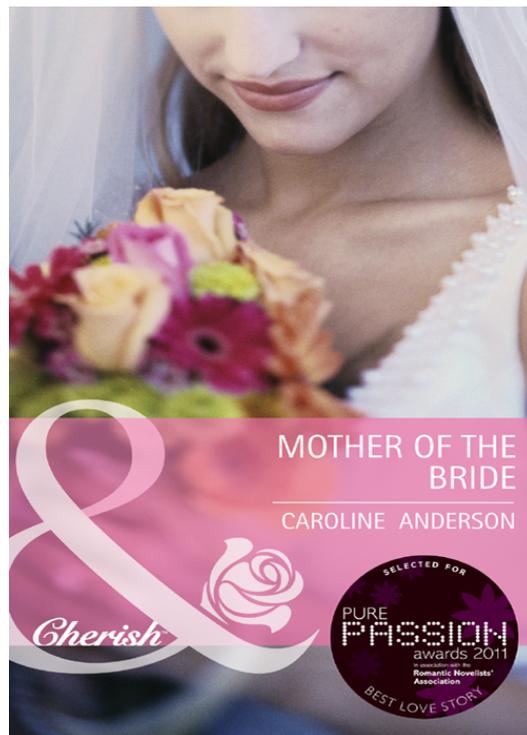
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CHAPTER ONE

‘MAISIE.’

Just the one word, but it curled around her, invading every part of her, swamping her with its gruff warmth. Her heart went into overdrive, her breath stalling at the unaccustomed and yet, oh, so familiar sound of his voice. And then fear kicked in.

‘Rob, what is it? What’s happened?’

‘Nothing’s happened—yet,’ he said quietly. ‘I just wanted to warn you, Alec’s going to ask Jenni to marry him this evening, and he wanted my blessing. I thought you should know.’

So the time had come. Maisie’s heart sank. For the last three years, ever since her baby had started dating the gentle, humorous Alec Cooper with his smouldering eyes and teasing sense of fun, she’d been waiting for this moment, and now it was here. Her legs felt like jelly, her heart was pounding, her mouth was dry, and she wanted to scream, *‘No! She’s too young! Don’t let her, she’s not ready ...’*

‘Maisie?’

‘I’m OK,’ she said, sitting down abruptly on the edge of the bed. The bed in which she’d given Rob her virginity over twenty-one years ago.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sort of. Thank you for warning me, although it would have been nice if Alec had done it,’ she said.

‘I know,’ he said, his voice sympathetic. ‘I suggested he should, but he was afraid you’d try and warn Jenni off.’

‘Rob, I’m her *mother!*’

‘Exactly. And you have ... ‘

‘Issues?’ she offered into the silence, and he gave a quiet huff of laughter that clawed at her insides.

‘You could put it that way. I told him you’d be upset, but he was very reluctant in case you tried to speak to Jenni, to talk her out of it, because he’s been planning it for ages, apparently, and he was desperate for it to be a surprise.’

‘Rob, he should have spoken to me, too. I’m the one who’s brought her up. Or doesn’t my blessing count?’

His sigh was soft. ‘Maisie, don’t be like that. I asked him to talk to you, he said he’d think about it, but obviously he didn’t feel he could, or he hasn’t been able to get you. He asked me not to tell you until he had time to ask Jenni, and he’s doing that now, as we speak, so I couldn’t tell you any sooner. I gave him my word. You have to respect that.’

Of course she did. She just felt out of the loop, as usual, at the bottom of the heap when it came to knowing anything, and it hurt. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she lied, but he cut in gently.

‘It does—and I’m really sorry. If it helps, he only asked me about four hours ago. And my mother doesn’t know.’

A small crumb of comfort, but surprisingly perceptive of him to know she’d needed it.

She closed her eyes and gave a tiny, shaky little laugh. ‘Rob, they’re so young.’

‘They’ll be fine. I’m sure Jenni’ll ring you the moment they’re back. It might be nice if you act surprised.’

She swallowed. ‘Sure—and, Rob ... Thank you for warning me.’

‘It’s a pleasure,’ he said, his voice low and gruff, and she felt the familiar shiver down her spine.

How could he still do that to her, after all these years? She should have got over him by now. She said goodbye and replaced the phone in the cradle, and sat staring at the wall blankly. It really was

going to happen. Jenni and Alec were getting married, and even though she'd known it was coming, she was still reeling with shock.

'You're being ridiculous,' she told herself, and, getting up, she went back over to her wardrobe and carried on the weeding process she'd been engaged in when Rob had called.

She pulled out a hanger and stared at it blankly. Good grief, how ever long had she had these trousers? Far too long, she hadn't worn them for years. She dumped them on the growing pile, found a few other things and then realised she'd put her favourite dress on the pile by accident.

She wasn't with it at all, she was miles away, in Scotland, with Jenni, praying that common sense would prevail and she'd tell Alec they should wait. Hoping it would work for them. Worried that it wouldn't, that like their marriage, Jenni's would prove too frail to stand the test of time.

They'll be fine.

Would they? She didn't know, but Rob's deep, warm voice echoed in her ears, and if she let herself, she could almost believe it. But not quite, because he'd said the same thing to her over twenty-one years ago, when he'd asked her to marry him.

'We'll be fine, Maisie. You'll see. It'll be all right.'

But it hadn't been. It hadn't been all right at all, in the end, even though the beginning had been blissful. Stormy, sometimes, but they'd always, always made up after a row, and sometimes she wondered if they'd had fights just for the hell of it, so they could make up afterwards. She laughed at the memory, but her smile faded and she felt her eyes fill.

She'd married him not only because she loved him, but also because she'd been eighteen, scared, pregnant, and her family wanted nothing to do with her. Her options had been severely restricted, and she'd thought he loved her as much as she'd loved him, but she'd been wrong. She must have been. If he'd loved her, he'd have come after her, but he hadn't, so she'd concluded sadly that he'd only married her out of duty, when they'd hardly known each other— certainly not well enough to weather the birth of Jenni while he was away at sea and she was alone in Scotland with his less-than-enthralled parents.

It wasn't really surprising that it hadn't worked, under the circumstances. They'd been children, out of their depth in the welter of emotions they'd encountered, coping with a situation that would have challenged anyone. And when she couldn't bear it any more up there without him, when she'd left Scotland and come back down here to Cambridge, he'd done nothing about it, to her horror and distress. There had just been a terrible, deafening silence.

He hadn't come to her when he'd had his next shore leave, as she'd expected, hadn't tried to find out what was wrong, but had said nothing, done nothing for six whole months except send money to her account. She'd taken it because she'd had no choice, and she'd written to him begging him to come to her, to talk to her—anything, but there'd been no reply, and then at last there had been a letter asking for access to Jenni in their divorce settlement—a divorce that hadn't even been on her agenda until he'd broached the subject. Shocked, devastated, she'd agreed to everything he'd asked, and the only contact they'd had since then had been over Jenni.

She'd hardly seen him in all this time— scarcely at all since Jenni had grown old enough to spend time with him alone without needing her, and certainly not at all in the last five years. They hardly even spoke on the phone any more. There was no need. If there was anything relating to Jenni, it was discussed with her directly, which was why his call today out of the blue had been so shocking.

She couldn't remember the last conversation they'd had that had lasted more than a very few seconds, but she guessed they'd be having to talk to each other now, and the thought brought all her confused and tumbled emotions about him racing to the surface. Emotions she'd never dealt with, just closed off behind a wall of ice in her heart before they destroyed her.

She still loved him, she realised. She'd die loving him, but it was a one-sided, unrequited love that had never stood a chance. And she was far too old to be so foolish.

The phone rang again, and for a moment she stared at it, her heart pounding, knowing who it was, knowing what she was about to hear, but stalling anyway because until she heard it, it might not be true ...

‘Mummy?’

‘Hello, darling. How are you?’

‘Amazing! You’ll never guess what—are you sitting down?’

She wasn’t, but she did. Rapidly. ‘OK. Fire away, what’s happened?’ she said, trying to sound fascinated and intrigued and enthusiastic instead of just filled with a sense of doom. She’d seen the look in Jenni’s eyes, and Alec reminded her so much of Rob as he had been—young, eager, in love—

‘Alec’s asked me to marry him!’

She squeezed her eyes shut briefly and sucked in a breath. Hard. Her lungs were jammed up tight, her heart was in the way and she wanted to cry.

She didn’t. She opened her eyes, forced a smile and said, ‘Oh, my goodness—so what did you say?’ As if she didn’t know what the answer would have been.

Jenni laughed, her happiness radiating unmis- takeably down the phone line. *My baby. My precious, precious baby.*

‘Yes, of course! What on earth did you expect me to say? Mummy, I *love* him! You’re supposed to be pleased for me! You *are* pleased for me, aren’t you?’

There was a note of uncertainty, of pleading, and Maisie sat up straighter and forced some life into her voice. ‘Oh, darling, of *course* I am—if it’s what you really want.’

‘You know it’s what I want. I love him, and I want to be with him forever.’

‘Then congratulations,’ she said softly. And then, pretending she didn’t already know, she added, ‘I wonder what your father will say?’

‘Oh, he’s really happy for us.’

‘That’s good.’ Her voice sounded hollow, echoing in her ears, but Jenni laughed again, unaware of Maisie’s inner turmoil.

‘Alec asked him first, apparently. They’re really close, and he wanted his blessing—it’s so like him. He really wanted to do it right, and I had absolutely no idea. It was amazing. He took me up to the ruin and got down on one knee—and I just burst into tears. I think he was a bit shocked.’

‘I’m sure he wasn’t, he knows you better than that. So, when are you talking about? Next year? The year after?’

‘As soon as I graduate—we thought maybe the third Saturday in June, if the church is free?’

‘But, Jenni, that’s only a few weeks!’ she said, her mind whirling. Surely not—please, no, that would be too ironic if Jenni, too.

‘Ten and a half—but that’s fine. We want to get it over before the really busy summer season, and the weather will be best then. If we wait until autumn the weather up here could be cold and wet and awful.’

‘Up there?’ she said, the timescale forgotten, blanked out by this last bombshell.

‘Well—yes, of course up here, Mum! It’s where I live now, where everyone is, except you. We’re all here.’

Jenni was right, of course, and she should have seen it coming. They all did live up there, light years away in the wild and rugged West Highlands. Everyone except her. Jenni’s fiancé Alec, his family, Jenni’s uni friends in Glasgow, Alec’s friends—and Jenni’s father.

Robert Mackenzie, Laird of Ardnashiel, king of his castle—literally. And she’d been nothing, a nobody; in the words of the taunting kindergarten rhyme, the dirty rascal, the girl who’d got herself knocked up with the heir’s baby and then, little more than a year after their wedding, had walked away. Why had he let her go without a murmur, without coming after her, without trying to fix what was surely not that broken? She didn’t know. She might never know.

And now her darling daughter—their daughter—was getting married, in the very church where she and Rob had made their vows over twenty years ago. Vows that had proved as insubstantial as cobwebs ...

She shuddered and sucked in a breath, the silence on the phone hanging in the air like the blade on a guillotine.

‘Mum?’

‘Yes, darling. Sorry. Of course you’re having it there,’ she agreed, squashing the regret that she wouldn’t be married here, in Cambridge, from the home where she’d grown up. But that was unrealistic, and she was sensible enough to recognise that now. ‘Where else, when you’ve got such a lovely setting? But—only ten and a half weeks?’ she said, her voice perilously close to a squeak of dismay as she thought of the reasons that might exist for their haste. ‘Don’t you need longer to plan it?’ she hedged.

The lovely ripple of her daughter’s laughter made Maisie want to cry again. ‘Oh, it’s all planned! We’re having the wedding here in the church, of course, and the hotel in the village can do the catering. They’ve got a brilliant restaurant, so the food will be great. And we’ll have a marquee on the lawn and if it rains there’s plenty of room inside, and we can have a ceilidh in the ballroom—it’ll be wonderful! But you have to come now, because I need a dress and I’ve only got a week and a bit before I have to go back to uni, and you *have* to help me choose it. And we have to look for something for you, too—you’ll need something really lovely, and I want to be there when you choose it. I need you, Mum. Say you’ll come.’

Her voice had dropped, sounding suddenly hesitant, and Maisie knew she had no choice. *Wanted* no choice. This was her baby, her only child, and she was getting married, whether Maisie liked it or not.

‘Of course I’ll come,’ she said, squashing down her apprehension and concentrating on being positive. ‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘Great. I can’t wait, it’s going to be such fun! Look, I have to go, we’ve got to tell Alec’s parents before they go to bed, but I’ll hand you over to Dad. He wants to talk to you.’

Oh, lord. Not now. Please, not now, not again. She needed to crawl under the covers and have a really good howl, and the last thing she needed to do was make small talk with the man who still held her heart in the palm of his hand.

‘She wants me to come up,’ she told him, sticking firmly to business.

‘Yes. It needs to be soon, so I hope you aren’t too busy. When are you free?’

Never. Not to go there, to the chilly, forbidding castle, with his mother still there despising her and him indifferent to her feelings, doing what was right instead of what mattered and riding roughshod over her heart. Except apparently he wasn’t indifferent to her feelings any more. Maybe he’d grown up. Twenty years could do that to you.

‘It’s not too bad for the next couple of weeks. I interviewed someone today for a feature that I have to write up, and I’m doing a wedding tomorrow—’

‘Can’t you hand it over to someone?’

She shook her head. ‘No. Not this one.’

‘Why not? Surely some other photographer.’

She sucked in a breath, stunned that he could dismiss her so easily, implying that any photographer could do the job as well, as if it was just a case of pressing the right button at the right time. So much for him not being indifferent to her feelings!

‘I don’t think you quite understand the process,’ she said drily, hanging onto her temper. ‘Quite apart from the fact that they want me, not *some other* photographer,’ she told him, ‘you have to understand that brides are very emotional and there’s no way I’d let her down at this point. I gave them my word—to quote you. And you have to respect that.’

There was a heartbeat of silence, then a quiet sigh. ‘All right. So you have to do the wedding. What time will you be through?’

‘Five? Maybe six, at the latest. It’s in Cambridge, so it’s local.’

‘So—if you get the seven-fifteen from Cambridge to King’s Cross tomorrow night, you can pick up the Deerstalker from Euston that gets to Fort William at ten the next morning. Will that be OK?’

The overnight sleeper? It would cost an arm and a leg—but she’d do it, for Jenni. ‘Yes, I’ll book it.’

‘I’ve done it. I’m doing it on line now. I’ll have the tickets waiting for you at the station to collect, and I’ll pick you up in Fort William the day after tomorrow. And, Maisie?’ he added, his voice dropping.

‘Yes?’

‘I know this is going to be difficult for you. It’ll be difficult for me, too, but we have to do this for Jenni.’

‘Of course we do,’ she said wearily. ‘And it’ll be fine. I just wish I felt they were doing the right thing.’

‘It is the right thing. It’ll be all right, Maisie. You’ll see.’

Those words again, echoing back at her over the years, reminding her of just how frail a thing love could be under pressure. She hoped he was right—heavens, how she hoped it, but she wouldn’t bank on it. They were so young, so eager, so unaware of all the pain.

‘I’ll see you at ten on Thursday,’ she said, and switched the phone off.

Thursday morning. Only—she glanced at her watch—thirty-six hours away. No time at all to shore up her defences and get her armour plating up and running.

She’d need days—

Ridiculous. She hadn’t done it in twenty years, what made her think a few more days could make any difference?

She got off the bed—the very bed where he’d loved her so tenderly, so sweetly, so patiently. So skilfully. She stroked the quilt smooth, her mind back in the long-ago days when love had been sweet and laughter had been the order of the day.

She’d been about to start her degree here at the local college—not as prestigious as one of the Cambridge University colleges, of course, but it offered a good degree in journalism—and she had needed accommodation. Cheap accommodation. And Rob, who had just graduated with flying colours from one of the Cambridge colleges, had been looking for someone to share his house. He was off to serve in the Royal Navy, a six-year commission, and he needed a care taker, all running expenses paid in return for maintaining the house in good condition in his absence.

Only one proviso—she had to live in it alone and share it with him occasionally when he was on shore leave, but that suited her fine, because it was the only way she could afford it and it meant she could get away from home, from a repressive father who didn’t think she needed to go away to college.

So she’d arranged to view it, and they’d gone out for a drink to discuss the fine detail. Well, that had been the excuse. In fact, they’d just wanted to spend time together, and over the next few days they’d fallen headlong in love. Just a week after they’d met, she’d ended up here in this room, in this bed, giving him her heart.

He still had it. He always would.

She sighed and turned her back on the bed. She wanted nothing more than to crawl under the quilt and cry her eyes out, but she had a feature to write up before tomorrow, clothes to pack for her trip, a wedding to prepare for—and besides, she was all done crying over Robert Mackenzie. She’d worn that particular T-shirt out long ago, and she wasn’t going there again.

‘How do you think she took it?’

Badly. Especially when he’d implied that another photographer could step into her shoes at a moment’s notice. He’d have to do better than that, Rob thought ruefully.

He smiled at his daughter—his beautiful, clever, radiantly happy daughter—and lied. ‘She’s fine,’ he told her. ‘I’ve booked her train ticket, and I’ll pick her up—’

‘Let me—please? Give me time with her, so I can talk her down a little. She’ll be nervous.’

Nervous? Would she? Quite possibly, he conceded. ‘She might not be very thrilled about it, but she’s got nothing to be nervous about,’ he said, trying to reassure their daughter.

But Jenni looked at him, wise beyond her years, and shook her head. ‘Of course she has. She hated it here. She hasn’t been here for twenty years and she’ll be unsure of her welcome.’

‘But—that’s silly! She’s your mother! Of course she’s welcome,’ he said, but then he thought about it, about the defensive tone of her voice, about how much she’d seemed to hate it here, and he sighed softly.

‘I’ll still pick her up. Even more reason. I can talk to her.’

Jenni chewed her lip. ‘Dad—she won’t want to talk to you. She goes out of her way to be out if you’re coming to the house, she won’t even look at you—what if she refuses to get in the car?’

‘She won’t refuse,’ he said, wishing he was as certain as he sounded. ‘She’s not that fond of walking.’

Jenni gave a splutter of laughter and came over and hugged him, slapping him on the chest simultaneously. ‘That was mean. You be kind to her or she’ll end up in the hotel in the village, I know she will.’

‘I’ll be kind to her, Jenni,’ he promised, serious now. ‘I was always kind to her.’

‘Were you? She’s never really said anything very much about you, just that it didn’t work out.’

‘That’s about the size of it,’ he said, carefully keeping his voice neutral. ‘But don’t worry. We can do this. It’ll be fine, Jenni.’

‘Are you sure? You’ll probably fight like hell. I don’t think you know her. She seems like a pussy-cat, but she can be pretty feisty, you know.’

He laughed, but her words echoed in his head. Feisty? Oh, yes, she’d been feisty, but that wasn’t how he remembered her. He remembered her *after* their fights—sweet, tender, passionate—until the end. Then she’d just been withdrawn and uncommunicative, as if all the spark had gone out of her, and he hadn’t known how to get through to her. Jenni was right. He really didn’t know her, the woman who’d been his wife, who’d taken his heart and broken it into little pieces.

‘I’m sure we can be adult about it,’ he said, not at all convinced but hoping it was true.

Jenni tipped her head on one side. ‘Why did neither of you ever get married again? I mean, I know why you didn’t stay married to each other, it’s not rocket science, but why didn’t you marry anyone else? It’s not as if you’re hideous, either of you, and you’re both so nice.’

He shrugged, not intending to drag his wounds out into the open for his daughter to pick the scabs off. ‘Never got round to it, I suppose,’ he said casually. ‘First I was in the navy, and then I was juggling establishing my business in London and being a father to you, and then my own father died and I had to move up here and take over the estate. And it’s hard to meet anyone when you’re up here in the backwaters, especially if you work in an almost exclusively male environment. Bear in mind that the majority of women who come to the estate are partners of men who come for the sport. They aren’t looking for a husband.’

‘Are you sure? Maybe they want to switch husbands? And anyway, that’s rubbish. It’s never hard to meet people when you’re rich, it’s just hard to meet the right people,’ she said drily, and he could tell from her tone that there was a wealth of hurt there. She’d encountered some gold-diggers at uni, men who’d only been interested in her for her inheritance, she’d told him, but Alec, fiercely protective, had been there for her through thick and thin, and he knew the young man loved his daughter from the bottom of his kind and generous heart.

If only they’d been so lucky, him and Maisie. If only they’d found a love like that. It might not be rocket science, but it was a mystery to him why they hadn’t got on. It had been so good at first, so special. Nothing had ever felt like it since, and that, of course, was why he’d never married

again. Because to be married to anyone other than his Maisie would have been a travesty, a betrayal of everything he stood for.

He swallowed and stepped back, gently disentangling himself from Jenni's embrace, and headed for the door. 'Sorry, sweetheart, I've got a million things to do. I'll see you for dinner.'

He went out, whistling the dogs, and headed down to the water. He needed a walk, a good, long stretch along the beach and then up over the headland, the point that gave Ardnashiel its prefix. There had been a hut there once, evidently, a shiel, which long ago had given way to the original castle, and he climbed the hill towards the ruins, needing the peace, the solitude that he would find there.

It was his retreat, the place he went to soothe his soul, the harsh wind and savage sea the only things wild enough to match the turmoil in his heart, but today they could do nothing to wipe out the memories of his love, here in this place, where he'd brought her so many times. And now, for the first time, she was coming back, not to him, but to the castle.

It was a step he hadn't been sure she'd ever take, but now she was, and in two days she'd be here. His beloved, beautiful Maisie was coming home ...

The train was on the platform as she collected her ticket, and she only just made it before the doors closed.

The wedding had gone on longer than she'd expected, and it had been harder than she'd imagined. She didn't know why—maybe because now she had become the mother of a bride, and could put herself in Annette's shoes, with the agony of her uncertain future. She'd had a health scare, and was facing a gruelling treatment regime over the next months and maybe years, but today had not been a day for dwelling on that. Today was her daughter's day, and Annette had been radiant.

'I'm so proud of her. Doesn't she look beautiful?' she'd said to Maisie in a quiet, private moment, a little oasis in the midst of the revelry, and Maisie's eyes had filled.

'Yes—yes, she does, she looks absolutely gorgeous, and so do you.'

Annette had met her eyes, her own distressed. 'Take plenty of photos,' she begged, and then added softly, 'Just in case.'

Maisie had swallowed. 'I will. I have. I've got some wonderful ones of you together, and I'll get them to you very soon.'

'Thank you,' Annette had said almost silently, and Maisie had held her gently and shared that quiet moment of knowledge that there might not be very much time left to her, and every second mattered.

So now, on the train to London, she was downloading the photos from her camera onto her laptop, then burning them onto several disks and labelling them. Thank God for mobile technology, she thought as she put the disks in the post on her way from King's Cross to Euston.

She was pleased with the photos. She'd go through them, of course, editing out the dross and cropping and tidying up the images so they could look at them on her website, and she'd produce an album with the family once they'd chosen the ones they wanted, but for now, at least, they'd get them in the raw form almost immediately to look through with Annette.

And hopefully, in the years to come, she'd be showing them to her grandchildren, but if not, at least they'd have a wonderful record of that beautiful day.

She blinked away the tears and stared out of the window of the sleeper at the passing lights. The cabin was claustrophobic—first class, the best it could be, but she was too full of emotion, from the wedding and from the task facing her, to sit still.

She locked up her cabin securely and went to the lounge to order food. She hadn't eaten at the wedding, and she'd had her hands full on the platform at Euston, and her blood sugar was through the floor.

Even so, she didn't touch her supper. Her stomach felt as if someone had tied a knot in it and she gave up and went back to her cabin, lying down on the narrow berth and staring at the window,

watching the lights flash past as they moved through stations, but mostly it was dark, the velvety blackness of the countryside all- engulfing as the train carried her north towards Rob.

And Jenni. It was about Jenni, she reminded herself—Jenni and Alec. She had to keep focus, remind herself what she was doing this for, or she'd go crazy.

Actually, what she needed was sleep, not the constant rumble of the rails, the clatter of the points, the slowing and shunting and pausing while goods trains went past, until she thought she'd scream. It wasn't the train's fault. It was comfortable, private—as good as it could be. It was just that she didn't want to be on it, didn't want to be doing this, and the memories were crashing over her like a tidal wave.

She'd done it for the first time when she was pregnant, when she'd just finished her first year's exams at Cambridge and was heading up to Scotland to wait for the birth. She'd wanted to stay in Cambridge, in their little house, but Rob had insisted she should move up to the castle. 'You can be looked after there, and my parents will want to spend time with the baby,' he'd said and so, because he wasn't there to drive her this time, as he had every other time they'd been, because he was already away at sea, she'd got on the train, exhausted, aching, and by the time she'd reached Glasgow, she'd realised she was in labour.

She'd been taken straight to the hospital in Fort William, and the next few hours were still a blur in her mind, but as the train rolled on, she kept reliving it, snatches of the pain and fear, knowing Rob was at sea and wanting him, needing him with her. And when he'd come at last, weeks later, he'd been different—distant, almost as if he couldn't bring himself to touch her. She'd known then that there was something wrong, but they hadn't talked about it, just tiptoed carefully around the cracks in their relationship as if they weren't there. And then he'd gone away again, back to sea, and left her behind to face the cold, dark winter there without him.

She hadn't been able to do it. Leaving the castle, going back south to Cambridge—it had seemed such a sensible move, the only thing she could do to stay sane. It had never occurred to her that Rob wouldn't follow.

She turned over, thumped the pillow, squeezed her eyes shut and pulled the quilt over her head, but the images were still there, crowding into her head, keeping her awake.

She gave up in the end, sitting perched on the lid of the washbasin in the corner and staring out of the window as the dawn broke. The countryside was getting wilder, the hills higher, the gentle ripples in the landscape giving way to crumples and then sharp, jagged pleats as they went further north. It was stark, bleak, with a wild majesty that made something in her ache at the beauty of it, but it terrified her, too, because of all the memories it held for her.

She was washed and dressed before the attendant knocked on the door with her breakfast—a hot bacon roll, tea and some fruit salad—and she sat on the bunk staring out over the wild, untamed landscape as the train slowly wended its way around the hills to Fort William, stopping at every station on the way, tiny outposts of civilisation in the midst of barren wilderness.

Not long now, she thought, and her stomach rejected all thought of the bacon roll after the first bite. She was fraught with nerves, too tense to eat, so she sipped her tea as they climbed up onto the flat and desolate plateau of Rannoch Moor, picked at the fruit because it was ridiculous to have nothing, and then gathered her things together as they pulled into the station in Fort William.

And then, when it was too late to do anything about it, she glanced at the mirror and winced. She looked awful. Dark circles under her tired, strained eyes, her hair in wild red corkscrews, needing attention—she hated travelling, hated the rush and pressure and hanging about. And Ardnashiel was waiting.

I'm not ready for it! she wanted to wail, but she didn't, she just picked up her camera bag, slung it over her shoulder, picked up her laptop and her suitcase and got off the train.

It should be like *Brief Encounter*, she thought, all swirling steam and whistles, but it wasn't, it was loud and noisy, unintelligible and horribly familiar. She took a deep breath and looked up,

and he was there, walking slowly towards her in jeans and a sweater, with his rangy, muscular limbs and broad, solid shoulders. His hair was touched with grey now, she noticed in surprise, crow's feet at the corners of his wary, slate-blue eyes, and when he smiled, the crow's feet crinkled and turned her legs to mush.

'Maisie,' he said, and his voice curled round her again, seeping into her heart and unravelling all her resolve.

'Hello, Rob. Here, you can make yourself useful,' she said, and handed over her luggage before he could do anything stupid like kiss her cheek and pretend they were friends.

'Is this all?'

'Three bags? Isn't that enough? I can tell what sort of women you've been mixing with, Mackenzie.'

His smile was wry. 'Yeah, your daughter. I've conveyed her and her clutter back and forth to uni for the last three years, remember. I know how you women travel.'

'I'm only here for a week—two weeks, max.'

'We'll see. Come on, then, let's head back.'

To Ardnashiel. Her heart thumped, and she bit her lip as he led her into the car park and plipped the remote control in his hand. Lights flashed on a car—low, sleek and expensive. She might have known. He'd always liked expensive cars. He stashed her belongings in the boot, then opened the door for her. 'Can I put the lid down, or do you want it up?' he asked as he slid in behind the wheel and turned to her.

She shrugged, unsurprised that the car was a convertible, a folding hard-top. He'd never been able to get enough fresh air. 'Whatever you like. My hair's a mess anyway. I need a shower.'

'You look fine, Maisie,' he said softly. More than fine. She looked—lovely. Wary, hesitant, out of her comfort zone, but lovely. And he wanted her to himself, just for a little bit longer.

He pressed the button to fold the roof and held her eyes. 'Do you fancy a coffee on the way?'

She frowned then gave a slight smile, the first one since she'd got off the train. 'Actually, that would be really nice. I didn't eat much yesterday—too busy. And I didn't really fancy breakfast. I'm starving.'

'OK. We'll do coffee. There's a lovely place opened since you were here last.'

'Rob, there's been time for dozens of places to open and shut since I was here last,' she pointed out, and he gave a quiet laugh.

'I know. It's been a long time.' Too long.

He started the engine then they purred softly out of the car park and headed out on the road to Mallaig. The air was cool, but it was a beautiful day and the sun was shining, and she put her head back against the butter-soft leather of the seat and closed her eyes, but even so, she couldn't cut him out of her thoughts.

She was aware of every movement he made, every breath he took, every flex of his muscles. Not because she could hear, or see, but because she just *knew*. After all this time, she still knew, her body so aware of him that her nerves were screaming.

How on earth had she imagined she could do this?

CHAPTER TWO

SHE looked wonderful. Tired, with deep smudges under her eyes, but wonderful.

She wasn't asleep, just resting her eyes, but it meant he could look at her out of the corner of his eye without being seen. And he wanted to look at her. Ridiculously badly.

She looked just the same, he thought with a twist to his heart. Well, no, not *just* the same, because she was thirty-nine now and she'd been eighteen when they'd first met, but the years had been kind to her and if anything she was more beautiful than she'd been twenty years ago.

Her skin was like rich cream, smooth and silky, dusted with freckles, and he wondered if it would still smell the way it had, warm and fragrant and uncomplicated. Her hair, wild and untamed, was still that wonderful rich red, a dark copper that she'd passed on to Jenni but which in their daughter was mellowed by his dark-haired gene to a glorious auburn.

She had the temper to go with it, too, the feistiness Jenni had reminded him of. It was something that fortunately neither of them had handed on to their daughter, but although at first they'd had stand-up fights that had ended inevitably in bed with tearful and passionate reconciliation, by the end there'd been no sign of it. And he'd missed it. Missed the fights, missed the making up. Missed his Maisie.

He sighed and turned into the car park of the café overlooking the top of Loch Linnhe, and by the time he'd cut the engine she had her seat-belt undone and was reaching for the door handle.

She straightened up and looked around, giving him a perfect back view, her jeans gently hugging that curved, shapely bottom that had fitted so well in his hands ...

'This looks nice.'

He swallowed hard and hauled in a breath. 'It is nice. It's owned by the people who run the hotel in the village. They've got a local produce shop here as well, selling salmon and venison and cheese and the like.'

'And insect repellent?'

He chuckled, remembering her constant battle with the midges. 'Probably.' He held the door, and she went in and sniffed the air, making him smile.

'Oh, the coffee smells good.'

'It is good. What are you having?'

'Cappuccino, and—they look tasty.'

'They are. Do me a favour and don't even ask about the calories.'

'Don't worry, I won't,' she vowed, making him laugh. 'I'm starving.'

He ordered the coffees and two of the trademark gooey pastries, and they headed for a table by the window. He set the tray down and eased into the seat opposite her, handing her her cup.

'So, how did the wedding go yesterday?'

A flicker of distress appeared in her moss-green eyes before she looked down at her coffee. She poked the froth for a moment. 'OK. Lovely. Very beautiful. Very moving. The bride's mother's not well—that's why I couldn't hand it over.'

He frowned. 'Why didn't they postpone it?'

'Because she's about to start chemo,' Maisie said softly. 'They had to rush the wedding forward, and the last thing I could do to them was upset them at this stage. They wanted me, they trusted me, and I'd promised.'

'Of course. I'm sorry, I didn't appreciate that at the time. I can quite see that you had to stay, and I'm sorry if I implied that anyone else could take over from you. Of course that isn't true, especially under those circumstances. You had no choice.'

She blinked. He'd really taken her comments on board, if that was anything to go by, but she wasn't surprised. He'd always been one for doing the right thing—even when it was wrong.

'You'll be wanting to send them the images.'

‘I’ve done it. I downloaded them on the train and posted them at Euston. Just in case.’ She sighed softly as she broke off, biting her lip and thinking of Annette.

‘Poor woman,’ he murmured. ‘It must have been hard for the family, dealing with all those emotions.’

She nodded, but then she went quiet, sipping her coffee, absently tearing up the pastry and nibbling at it. ‘Rob, this wedding—are you sure it’s right for them? They’re so young.’

‘Not that young.’

‘They are! Just like we were. We were far too young.’

‘You can’t compare them to us. They’re three years older than we were—’

‘No. I was eighteen, she’s twenty. That’s only two years.’

‘She’s almost twenty-one. She’ll be twenty-one by the wedding, and Alec will be twenty-four. And those years make a lot of difference. You were only just eighteen and pregnant, and I was twenty-one and committed to the navy for six years, and we didn’t know each other nearly well enough.’

‘We still don’t.’

‘No. Jenni said that on Tuesday, and I think she was right. But they’re different, Maisie. They know each other through and through. They’ve been friends ever since they were children, and this has been growing for years. They’re genuinely deeply in love, and it’s great to see them together. We didn’t stand a chance, but they do. I think they’ll be very happy together.’

‘You don’t think they should wait?’

‘What for?’

Good question. She stared out of the window over the gently rippling waters of the loch and sighed. ‘I don’t know,’ she murmured. ‘To be more settled?’

‘They are settled. Alec’s got a good job—’

‘One you’ve given him. Rob, you are sure about him, aren’t you?’ she asked, her anxiety surfacing. ‘You don’t think he’s using her?’

Rob frowned. ‘Using her? Of course he’s not. They’ve known each other for years!’

‘That wouldn’t stop some people.’

‘Maisie, Alec’s not like that.’

‘So what is he like? Tell me—I’m worried, Rob.’

‘You don’t need to be. They’ve known each other since they were children—he taught her to ride a bike, for heaven’s sake. They used to play together when she came up in the holidays, and they’ve always got on. He was born in the cottage his parents still live in, and his father was my estate manager until he retired five years ago. He worked for my father, and my uncle before him, and his father before him, so he’s the third generation to look after Ardnashiel. It’s in his blood, even more than it is in mine, and I can’t think of a safer pair of hands either for the estate or for Jenni. He’s kind and decent, honest as the day is long, and he really loves her. You honestly don’t need to worry.’

She nodded slowly, reassured by his measured assessment of his future son-in-law. ‘And your mother? How does she feel about him?’

‘She likes him. She’s very fond of him, actually.’

‘Really? Even though he’s one of the estate employees? I’m surprised she thinks he’s good enough for her.’

His brows scrunched together in a frown. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘Well, they made it clear I wasn’t good enough for you—or was that just my lack of morals?’

He gave a harsh sigh. ‘You don’t change, do you?’ he said. ‘You always were a little too quick to judge.’

‘I wasn’t judging her, she was judging me! That’s unfair!’

‘Is it?’ he said softly, his eyes searching hers. ‘You didn’t give my father the benefit of the doubt, you rebuffed all my mother’s offers of friendship and you walked off and left me. *That* was unfair.’

She opened her mouth to argue, thought better of it, here in this public place, and shut it again. She'd tell him another time—maybe—just what his mother's offers of friendship had consisted of. And as for his father, there was no doubt to give him the benefit of. He'd hated her, despised her, and he'd made sure she and everybody else had known it. And she hadn't left him, she'd left the castle, and he'd let her go, made no attempt to follow her, to find out what was wrong.

'This is neither the time nor place to go over all of this,' she said, equally quietly. 'And anyway, it's time we got on. I'd like to see Jenni now, she'll be wondering where we are.'

And without waiting to see what he did, she got to her feet and walked out of the café, leaving her coffee half-drunk and her pastry in shreds all over the table.

Stifling a sigh, Rob threw down a few coins for the tip and followed her out, wondering how on earth they were going to get through all the inevitable meetings and discussions and tantrums that would eventually culminate in the wedding.

Ten and a half weeks, he told himself as he unlocked the car and held the door for her, and it would all be over and she'd be gone, and everything would get back to normal.

For some reason, that didn't feel comforting.

The road to Ardnashiel was painfully familiar to Maisie, and they travelled it in a tense and brittle silence.

The first time she'd driven it with Rob all those years ago, it had felt very different. They'd been laughing and holding hands as he drove, their fingers linked on his thigh, and he'd been telling her all about it, about the huge, sprawling estate his father had inherited ten years before from an uncle.

He loved it, he'd told her. He'd loved it as a child, coming up with his parents to visit his widowed uncle, not realising at first that one day it would be his, and he was looking forward to showing it to her. 'Since it's going to be mine. Not for years and years, though,' he'd added, laughing. 'I'm not ready to bury myself up here in the wilderness yet, by a long way, but one day, I suppose, the time will come.'

That day had come sooner than he'd imagined, when his father had died in a shooting accident eight years ago and he'd left London and moved up here for good. She'd never been back, though, not since the day she'd left and vowed never to return.

The road hadn't changed at all since then, she thought, taking it in as her heart knotted ever tighter in her chest. A quiet, winding road that ran between lush green fields with fat cattle grazing contentedly. It was calm, bucolic, and it should have been beautiful, but it was coloured by association. The last time she'd travelled it, she'd been in a taxi, leaving it behind, and part of her was still the lonely, desperate young woman that she had been then.

He reached a junction and turned onto a narrow switchback of a road that clung in the gap between the edge of a loch and the wall of rock where the land met the water. It was an appalling road, and yet the fact that it existed at all in such a tight space was a miracle of engineering in itself.

The loch turned into a river, then the road widened as the land levelled out into a flat bowl around the harbour mouth, houses clustered along its walls, fringing the sea and running up towards the hills, and then beyond the small community, set up on its own on a rocky outcrop above the beach, was Ardnashiel Castle.

Built of stone, grey and forbidding, even with the sun shining on it there was a look of menace about it that chilled Maisie to the bone.

Just as it was meant to, really, since it had been built as a fort, but an ancestor had extended it two hundred years ago, creating a more civilised living area and carving gardens out of the woodland that had encroached on it. He'd added little turrets with tops like witches' hats, and made the windows bigger, and the first time she'd seen it she'd thought it was straight out of a fairy-tale, but then things had changed. It had ceased to be a safe haven and begun to feel like a prison, and looking at it now brought the feelings of suffocation crashing back.

And maybe Rob realised it because, as they crossed the stone bridge and drew up in the stable-yard by the coach-house, he glanced across at her for the first time since they'd left the café and sighed.

'I'm sorry,' he said quietly. 'I realise it's not your fault you don't know Alec, but give him a chance. Please. And my mother. I know you didn't always see eye to eye, but she's worried about seeing you again, worried you'll still dislike her.'

'I didn't dislike her, Rob,' she corrected him quietly. 'She disliked me. And I'm sorry if you felt I was being unfair to Alec. I will give him a chance, of course I will. I've always liked what I've seen of him, but—I'm just worried for Jenni, Rob. She's my little girl, and I'd hate to see her make a mistake.'

'It's not a mistake—and she's my little girl too, remember,' he said with a twisted smile that cut her to the heart. 'Just because she lived with you doesn't mean I didn't love her every bit as much as you did. And I know you feel I've stolen her from you, but she feels at home here.'

She opened her mouth to argue, to say of course she didn't feel that, she knew he hadn't stolen her, but then shut it again, because she did feel like that, did feel that he'd stolen not only her daughter but also her wedding, all the planning and girly excitement she'd seen so often in other young brides and their mothers, the tears and the tantrums and the laughter.

Which was ridiculous, because she was here now, for exactly that, and she would be here for as long as her daughter needed her.

'Rob, it's fine. Let's just move on, can we?' she said, and then the car door was snatched from her hand and Jenni was hurling herself into the car and hugging her, sitting on the sill and cupping her face, staring at her searchingly.

'Are you all right? I know you didn't want to come, but—'

'I'm fine,' she said softly, and gathering Jenni into her arms she hugged her hard. 'It's fine. And it's going to be loads of fun. Come on, let's go inside and we can start planning!'

'Brilliant, I can't wait. Here, look, my ring!'

She held her hand out, eyes sparkling, face alight with love and happiness, and Maisie looked at the ring, a simple diamond in a white gold band, nothing flashy but perfectly suited to her uncomplicated and slender daughter, and she smiled.

'It's lovely. Did he choose it?'

She giggled mischievously. 'I might have hinted a little,' she confessed, and Rob snorted.

'Only slightly,' he said. He was out of the car, taking her bags out of the boot by the time she'd disentangled herself from their daughter and climbed out, and she scraped her windswept hair back out of her eyes and reached for her camera.

Rob was there first. 'I've got it. You go on in with Jenni, I'll put this lot in your room.'

And she was led inside, Jenni's arm round her waist, and it was only as they went in that she realised things had changed.

The house was warm, for a start. Warm and bright and welcoming. It had never felt like that, not even in the summer, the year she'd had Jenni. And Jenni had taken her in through the front door, instead of round the side and in through the kitchen, the way Rob had always taken her in.

Through the tradesmen's entrance?

She was being ridiculous. He'd treated her as a member of the family instead of a visitor, but Jenni—Jenni was treating her as if she was special, a treasured and valued guest, ushering her in, smiling and laughing and hugging her, and as she led her into the drawing room, so familiar and yet so different, Helen Mackenzie got to her feet and came towards them. Older, stiffer, but still beautiful, still the elegant, dignified and aloof woman she'd always been.

'Maisie—welcome back,' she said softly, and held out her hand.

Maisie shook it, glad she hadn't kissed her or embraced her. It would have felt wrong after all the bitterness of the past, and the formal, impersonal contact was enough for now. More than enough. She found a smile and wished she wasn't wearing jeans and had had time to drag a brush through her hair.

‘Thank you, Mrs Mackenzie,’ she said politely, and then foundered, but it didn’t matter.

Rob’s mother simply smiled, said, ‘Please, call me Helen,’ and took up where she’d left off and asked if she’d had a good journey, and if she’d like a drink.

‘Tea? Coffee? Or something cold, perhaps?’

‘Actually, I’d love a glass of water.’

‘Of course. I always get very dehydrated when I’m travelling. There just don’t seem to be the opportunities to drink anything civilised. Jenni, my dear, would you ask Mrs McCrae if she could find us a bottle of spring water? Still or sparkling?’

‘Sparkling would be lovely. Thank you.’

How stilted. How formal and civilised and polite, when all Maisie wanted to do was head off with Jenni and hug her and hear all about Alec’s proposal.

‘Maisie, do sit down. You must be exhausted. I don’t suppose you slept a wink on that wretched train. I know I never do.’

‘It was very comfortable.’

‘But not restful. It’s not the same as a decent bed.’ She looked down at her hands, flexing her fingers slightly, then met Maisie’s eyes again, her own, so like Rob’s and Jenni’s, troubled. ‘I’m glad you’ve come,’ she said frankly. ‘I did wonder if you would, but for Jenni’s sake, if not for anyone else’s, I think we should try and put the past behind us and move on—let bygones be bygones.’

She opened her mouth to speak, found no words that she was prepared to say out loud, and then was saved from answering by Jenni coming back into the room with Alec.

She got up to greet him and found herself wrapped in a warm, firm hug. ‘Hi. I’m sorry I wasn’t here to greet you when you arrived, I was just welcoming a group of guests, but I saw you drive by and gave them some flannel about checking on the nesting golden eagles and left them to settle in.’

His eyes sparkled mischievously, and Helen gave a rusty chuckle. ‘You’re a terror, Alec Cooper. Will you stay and join us for a drink, or do you have to be somewhere?’

‘Checking the nesting eagles, for instance?’ Maisie teased, and he laughed.

‘No, I don’t have to be anywhere. The guests have all been before, so they know their way around. They’re all heading off to the pub for lunch, and I’m free for a while.’ He took her hand in both of his, his eyes serious. ‘So, will you forgive me? I’m sorry I didn’t manage to talk to you, too. I did try, but your mobile must have been off, and I didn’t leave a message. It didn’t seem to be the sort of thing I could say to a machine, but— well, I know you’ve had reservations about me, and I really wanted your blessing, too.’

‘Oh, Alec, of course I forgive you,’ she said, guilt washing over her. He *had* tried to ring—the missed call from a number she hadn’t recognised. ‘And it’s not that I have reservations, Alec. I don’t really know you, and I just want you both to be sure, but Jenni knows you much better than I do, and you probably know *her* better than I do, come to that, so I have to trust your judgement. I just want my daughter to be happy, and she does seem to be, so of course you have my blessing. But look after her, Alec, treat her right. That’s all I ask.’

‘Of course I will. I love her, Maisie. I love her more than anything or anyone in the world. I’ll do nothing to hurt her.’

Maisie’s eyes filled, and she hugged her soon- to-be son-in-law hard, then reached out for Jenni, drawing her into the hug as well. Please let it be all right, she prayed, and then let them go, just as Mrs McCrae came in, set down the tray and engulfed her in yet another hug.

‘Good heavens, lass, let me look at you. You don’t look a day older! Oh, it’s good to see you again.’

She laughed, delighted to see the kindly housekeeper who had been her saviour and only friend in the dark days after Jenni’s birth. ‘Oh, Mrs McCrae, how lovely to see you again, too! You haven’t changed, either. I would have known you anywhere!’

‘A few pounds heavier, mind, but my grandchildren keep me fit now when I’m not here running up and down stairs after this lot!’

She heard a door open and close, then Rob came in. ‘Sorry to be so long. I was held up by a guest—something about nesting golden eagles?’

Alec chuckled. ‘Ah—a little poetic licence. I wanted to greet my future mother-in-law, but it’s not a problem. I’ll tell them they can’t be disturbed, and, anyway, we have got nesting eagles.’

‘Have we?’

‘Aye. I saw them this morning when I was out on the hills checking the deer. We’ve a stag needs culling, by the way. He’s been injured—can’t put one hind leg to the ground. It’s the big old stag with the broken antler and the scar on his rump.’

Rob nodded. ‘I wondered about him. He was lame yesterday, I was going to check on him. Can I leave him to you?’

‘Sure.’

That dealt with, Rob turned to Maisie, scanning her face for any clue as to her mood, but she was smiling and talking to Mrs McCrae about her grandchildren and giving his mother a wide berth.

Oh, hell, it was all so complicated, he thought, feeling twenty-two again. If only she’d stayed, if only he’d tried to convince her to come back instead of letting her go without a fight. Or gone with her. They hadn’t needed to live up here, they could have lived in London or Cambridge—anywhere, really, that she chose, but she’d chosen to leave him, to take his daughter away, and deny his parents the chance to see their beloved little granddaughter grow up. She’d even done it behind his back, while he’d been at sea, and asked his parents to tell him and give him her letter—a letter that had told him what he’d already known, that she didn’t want to stay. She hadn’t even had the guts to do it to his face. That, more than anything, had hurt.

He checked the thought and turned to his mother, concentrating on the practicalities. ‘So—what time are we aiming to have lunch?’

‘Whenever we’re ready. Mrs McCrae, how long will lunch take to prepare?’

‘It’s all ready, Mrs Mackenzie, you just tell me when you want to eat. The bread’s fresh out of the oven and I just need a few moments to heat the soup.’

‘Ten minutes, then?’ Helen said, and Rob wasn’t sure if he’d imagined it, or if it was desperation that flickered briefly on her face before Maisie masked it.

‘I think,’ he cut in smoothly before anyone could argue, ‘that Maisie could probably do with a few minutes to freshen up. She’s been travelling all night. An hour, maybe?’

He hadn’t imagined it. Her eyes met his with relief, and she gave him a grateful smile.

‘Thank you. That would be wonderful—if you don’t mind, Mrs McCrae? I don’t want to put you to any trouble.’

‘Och, of course I don’t mind! I made cock-a-leekie for you, hen,’ she said, beaming at Maisie. ‘I know it’s your favourite soup, and there’s homemade oat bread, and some wonderful Mull Cheddar to follow. You always liked the Mull Cheddar.’

Maisie’s face softened, and she smiled warmly at the elderly housekeeper. ‘Thank you. That sounds lovely. Fancy you remembering I like cock-a-leekie.’

‘I’ve never forgotten you, pet. I’m making roast beef for you tonight, for Alec’s parents coming up. Just to welcome you home.’

She bustled off, and for a moment there was silence while the word ‘home’ seemed to reverberate around the room, but Rob cut it off swiftly.

‘I’ll show you to your room,’ he said, and opening the door he ushered her out and closed it softly behind them.

‘Thank you,’ she said. That was all, but it spoke volumes, and he dredged up a smile.

‘My pleasure,’ he told her, wishing that it wasn’t a lie, that every interaction between them, no matter how brief or businesslike, didn’t seem to be flaying him alive. ‘I’ve put you in the room you had before. You always used to sit there in the window and look out at the sea. I thought you might like it.’

Maisie felt a chill run over her. She’d wept so many tears in that room, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask for another, any one, it didn’t matter which, just not *that* room, but then she stopped herself and nodded. She had to get over this silliness. They had a wedding to plan, and she couldn’t allow herself to keep harking back to the past.

‘Thank you,’ she said, and followed him up the magnificent old stone staircase to the landing above. He fell into step beside her, hanging back as they reached the room, and she wondered if he could hear her heart pounding with dread.

The door was standing open, and she went in and stopped in her tracks.

It was different. Lovely. The colours were soft and tranquil, muted blues and greens, pale cream, a touch of rose here and there to lift it. A great black iron bed was heaped with pillows and cushions and dressed with a pretty tartan throw so soft she wanted to bury her face in it and sigh with delight.

When had it been changed? And why? Not for her, of course. It would be a favourite guest room, with that gorgeous view out over the sea to the islands, and she realised in surprise it now had its own bathroom off it, in the little room that had been Jenni’s nursery.

Progress, she thought in astonishment.

‘It looks ...’

‘Different?’ he murmured, and she turned and met his eyes.

‘Yes.’ Very different from the room she’d been installed in after Jenni had been born. That had been cold and forbidding, but this ...

She ran her hand over the throw, fingering its softness. ‘This is lovely.’

‘It’s a pastel version of the Mackenzie tartan,’ he told her. ‘Jenni’s idea. There’s one in every room—mohair, to keep out the cold.’

‘It’s warm in here, though.’

‘Well, it is April. The heating works better now, but the wind still sneaks in in January.’

His smile was fleeting, and made her heart ache. She’d loved him so much ...

‘And an en suite bathroom. That’s a bit luxurious,’ she said, turning away as if to study it, just to get away from those piercing eyes.

‘It *was* twenty years ago, Maisie,’ he reminded her gently, as if she needed reminding. ‘Things have changed. All sorts of things.’

Him? She said nothing, and after a moment she heard a quiet sigh. ‘I’ll see you downstairs. Come and find me when you’re done—I’ll be in my study.’

‘Where is it?’

‘Bottom of the stairs, turn left, follow the corridor round and it’s at the back, by the gun court. Just yell, I’ll find you.’

He went out, leaving her alone, and she closed her eyes and thought longingly of the bed. It looked so inviting. So soft and warm and welcoming. And she was shattered.

Later, she told herself. Shower first, then lunch, then talk to Jenni—and maybe later, before dinner, she’d snatch five minutes.

Anyway, her luggage was on the bed, waiting, and she’d have to deal with it before she could lie down.

‘Shower,’ she told herself sternly, and unzipping her case she pulled out her wash bag and headed for the bathroom.

She didn’t dawdle. Lunch was calling her, and she was more than ready for it by the time she’d tamed her hair, pulled on some clean clothes and tracked Rob down in his study overlooking the sea.

He was deep in thought, staring out of the window, feet propped up on his desk and his brow furrowed when she went in. He dropped his feet to the floor and swung round, greeting her with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. 'Everything all right?'

'Lovely, thank you. Much better,' she said with real gratitude, and he got to his feet and ushered her through to the drawing room where his mother, Jenni and Alec were waiting.

He'd gone into the study deliberately, she realised then, to wait for her so she didn't have to come in here alone and face them all. She could have laughed at that. If only he'd realised that he, of all of them, was the biggest stumbling block.

'I'll tell Mrs McCrae we're all ready,' he said, and left her with Jenni, striding down the corridor away from the scent of soap and shampoo and something else he recognised from long ago. Something that dragged him right back to the beginning, to the times when she would come to him smelling like that and he'd take her in his arms and hold her close and breathe in the scent of her.

He went down to the kitchen, wishing he could escape, go out onto the hills where the fresh air could drive the scent from his nostrils and bring him peace. But he couldn't, because he had things to do, things that only he could do. His daughter was getting married, and he had to hold it together until then. And dragging Maisie into his arms and breathing her in wasn't an option, either.

'We're all here now,' he said to Mrs McCrae. 'Can I give you a hand?'

'Aye, that would be kind, Robert. You can stir this while I put the bread out.' And having trapped him so easily, in a trap he'd walked into with his eyes wide open, she then started on him in her oh, so unsubtle way.

'She's looking tired.'

'She is tired. She's been travelling all night. She looks better now she's had a shower and changed into fresh clothes.'

'She'd look better still if she'd come home and let me feed her up a bit,' she said, wielding the bread knife like a weapon. 'Poor wee thing.'

'I'm sure Maisie's perfectly capable of feeding herself,' he said firmly, drawing the pot off the heat and closing the lid of the range. 'And she has a home in Cambridge,' he added, reminding himself as much as Mrs McCrae as he glanced at the bare table. He frowned. 'Where are we eating?'

'In the dining room,' she said, her eyes flashing with indignation. 'Robbie, she's come back, wherever you say her home might be! She can't be eating in the kitchen—not today.'

He opened his mouth to argue, shut it again and sighed softly in resignation. 'I'll carry this,' he said, and followed her up the stairs.

'Here we are, hen,' she said, setting the bread down on the table as Maisie sat down. 'And mind you eat plenty!'

She did. She was still starving, the half-eaten pastry just a memory now, and she had two bowls of the delicious hearty soup, a good chunk of cheese and two slices of the soft, warm oat bread that was Mrs McCrae's forte. And while she ate, Jenni took the opportunity to fill her in on the wedding plans to date.

'OK. I've had a few ideas,' she said, making Alec splutter into his soup, which earned him a loving swat from his fiancée. 'You're not here for long, Mum, so I thought we should spend today planning and having a brainstorming session, and then tomorrow we're going to Glasgow to look at dresses. I've made some appointments, and I've made sure they know that there's only two months, but the places we're going all have samples which they can sell us, so we won't have to go through the business of ordering them, which takes ages. Now, they'll probably need altering, so ...'

Rob watched her in wry amusement. She'd been planning this for ages, he knew, and Alec's proposal had been like a breath on a hair trigger. He just hoped that Maisie was ready for it.

CHAPTER THREE

‘SHE’S amazing. Is there anything she hasn’t thought of? She’s so organised—it’s like a military operation!’

Rob leant back against the ancient stone wall of the gun court, propped his elbows on it and chuckled, to her surprise. ‘Did you really expect anything else?’

Maisie shrugged, turning to stare out over the sea below. ‘I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it, but it never occurred to me she’d have it all down pat. What if it doesn’t work out? What if something can’t fit into her carefully orchestrated plan?’

‘Then she’ll have a little fit and learn the meaning of the word compromise,’ he said drily.

Maisie shook her head. ‘She’s got all these ideas so firmly fixed. How long’s she been planning it?’

His broad shoulders lifted in a casual shrug. ‘Months? Years, probably. Come on, ever since she knew the meaning of the word bride she’s been looking forward to this day. She just wants to be a princess. That’s why Alec didn’t ask her ages ago, he told me. He knew the second he said anything, she’d be off like a rat out of a trap, and so he had to wait until the time was right.’

‘But—two months?’ She winced just thinking about it, about all the plans that had to be put into action before the big day, but Rob seemed unperturbed.

‘She doesn’t need more than that, and he realised that if she had longer, she’d drive herself and everyone else round the bend. You know what she’s like. Single-minded, determined, knows what she wants and gets it. Now, who does that remind you of?’ he added drily, one brow arched in a mocking salute.

What? He thought she was like that? She nearly laughed out loud, because the one thing—the *only* thing—she’d ever really wanted was standing right there with her now, and she’d failed, lost the only thing she’d really, truly needed in her life.

The love of the man she adored, the man who had given her his child and then turned his back on her when she’d needed him the most.

‘I think you overestimate my powers,’ she murmured wryly.

‘Well, let’s hope not, because this wedding is all down to you now. I’ll do what I can, but I’m up to my eyes with the estate and the summer’s a nightmare with all the guests, so I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’re here to do it all.’

‘But—Rob, I have a life, six hundred miles away! I can’t just be here and sort it! I have things to do!’

‘Can’t you work round them? You can go back for the weddings—heaven knows there can’t be that many, and your features you can write from here. You could do one on being a wedding planner.’

‘What, and get tax relief on the wedding as a research tool, I suppose?’

‘Well, it’s a thought,’ he said, his lips quirking. It drew her attention to them, to the clean, sculpted line of the top lip, the firm fullness of the lower. He’d kissed her with those lips, trailed them over her skin, driven her crazy with need with just the lightest touch—

Don’t go there! Keep focused on the wedding.

She stroked her fingers over the barrel of an ancient cannon, testing the rough surface with her fingertips, searching for compromise. ‘I have commitments, Rob. I can’t just walk away from my life at a moment’s notice.’

‘So you’ll need to commute. Go back for your weddings, if you’ve got commitments, and be here when you can. It’s not for long.’

‘It’ll cost a fortune!’ she said, horrified, but he just shrugged.

‘So? She’s your daughter. I’ll pay your train fares. Talking of which, you’ll need money for tomorrow. I’ll give you a card and my pin number so you’ve got plenty of cash.’

‘That won’t be necessary. I’m buying her dress.’

‘Ah. I wasn’t thinking of the dress, I was talking about the train fare and incidentals, but ... um ... there might be a problem with the dress.’

She tilted her head, searching his eyes. ‘A problem?’ she echoed, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

‘My mother wants to buy it for her.’

She felt herself recoil. ‘No! I’m sorry, Rob. You can do everything else your way, but this is for me to do. She’s my daughter. I’m buying her wedding dress. Tell your mother to give her something else.’

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