

A painting of a woman in a red dress, seen from the back, holding a fan. Her reflection is visible in a mirror in the background. The scene is set in a room with a wooden vanity and a floral patterned wall.

NICOLA
CORNICK
Kidnapped

Nicola Cornick
Kidnapped: His Innocent Mistress

Аннотация

If I accept his offer to be his mistress, I could have the finest silks, the best carriage and be transformed from ugly duckling to a pampered, pretty swan! And although I would feel a virtuous pride in turning down the wicked rake, I also have an unmaidenly interest in exactly what the role would entail. . . . Catriona is doing her best to resist the skillful seduction of the scandalous heir to the Earl of Strathconan. But kidnapped and shipwrecked with only this rake as company, her adventure has just begun. . . .

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The moment in which I set out upon my journey to the house of Glen Clair and Mr. Sinclair behaves as no gentleman should.

I drew a deep breath. My heart was hammering. “Are you, by any chance, asking me to be your mistress, Mr. Sinclair?”

A disturbingly sensuous smile curled Neil Sinclair’s lips. “Would that be so very bad, Miss Balfour? I am offering you a comfortable home instead of a ruin in the back of beyond with relatives who do not want you.”

“You are not offering it for nothing!”

His smile deepened. He put out a hand and touched my cheek gently. I was so shocked at the physical contact that I jumped.

“All I ask in return,” he said, “is something that should be intensely pleasurable for both of us.”

Once again I felt that jolt deep inside me. I swallowed hard and pushed away the heated images of lust and loving.

“I thought,” I said, “that you did not even like me very much.”

I saw something primitive and strong flare in his eyes, scorching me.

“Then you know little of men, Miss Balfour,” he said. His tone had roughened. “I wanted you from the first moment I saw you.”

Kidnapped: His Innocent Mistress

Harlequin® Historical

**To Elspeth and Sheila, the original Miss Bennies and
so much nicer than their fictional counterparts!**

Author Note

A few years ago my mother-in-law gave me an ancient copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic novel *Kidnapped* as a birthday present. I had read and enjoyed the book many years before and now I picked it up again and was plunged into a world of romance and intrigue and adventure. When I finished it I thought how exciting it would be to write my own version, inspired by the original, and so the idea of *Kidnapped: His Innocent Mistress* was born. My husband's family are Scots and we visit the Scottish Highlands every year, so I used all the places I know and love as the setting for my book. Writing a book set in Scotland was such a thrill that I definitely plan to write a sequel!

I hope that you enjoy *Kidnapped: His Innocent Mistress*, which is a homage to both Robert Louis Stevenson's wonderful story and to Scotland, one of the most beautiful countries on earth.

NICOLA CORNICK

KIDNAPPED: His Innocent Mistress



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Chapter One

In which I meet the hero, as all good heroines should.

My name is Catriona Balfour and this is the story of my adventures. I will begin on a certain afternoon early in the month of July in the year 1802, when I buried my father in the graveyard at Applecross, beside the sea. I was eighteen years old.

A melancholy beginning, perhaps. Truth is, it had been a melancholy year. My mother had been taken a bare two months before, carried off by a fever brought to the village by a travelling peddler who came selling ribbons and buckles, gloves and scarves. My mother had bought a length of muslin for a new summer gown. When she died the pattern was only half made.

I stood by my father's fresh-turned grave and thought that at the least he had a fine view. The curve of the bay was before us, in all its harebell-blue beauty. Beyond it, across the shining water, were the jagged tops of the mountains of Skye. The air was soft that summer morning, and smelled of salt and seaweed. The sun was warm on my back and my best black bombazine dress—dreadfully disfiguring—crackled when I moved, the material so stiff that the gown would have stood up on its own. I admit it—even as I stood there, hazy with grief, I was aware of the ugliness of that dress and I was ashamed of myself. Ashamed that on the day of my father's funeral I could be thinking of fashion and wishing for a silver gauze scarf from Edinburgh, perhaps, or a

pair of soft kid slippers.

‘The child is vain, madam,’ Mrs Mansell, the housekeeper, had said to my mother all those years ago, when I was eight and she had found me standing before the mirror trying my mother’s Sunday best bonnet. ‘Take the rod to her before it is too late.’

But my mother liked pretty things herself and instead of beating me she wrapped me in a scented hug and whispered that I looked very fine. I remember smiling triumphantly at Mrs Mansell over my mother’s shoulder. Her thin mouth turned down at the corners and she muttered that I would come to a bad end. But perhaps she was only envious because she had a face like a prune and no one to love her since Mr Mansell had passed away, and possibly he had not loved her anyway.

My mother was warm and loving, and my father too, doting on her and on me, their only child. He was the schoolmaster at Applecross and had taught me my lessons from the age of three. As a result I was the only young lady in the Highlands who could plot a mathematical course by the stars, or who knew the botanical names of all the plants that grew thick by the burn. The squire’s daughters, Miss Bennie and Miss Henrietta Bennie, giggled and said that such knowledge would not help me catch a husband. They spent their days playing the spinet or painting in water-colours, whilst I grew sunburnt red helping Old Davie set his crab pots, or walking by the sea without my parasol.

The Miss Bennies were present at the funeral that morning, standing with the squire and his wife a little apart from the

rest of us. Of the other mourners present, we were split into a group of villagers and a separate small enclave of my father's academic colleagues, who had travelled from Edinburgh to pay their respects. I was touched that they had held Papa in such high esteem as to make the journey. Sir Compton Bennie's face was grave as he looked down at the coffin. He and my father had shared the occasional glass of malt whisky and game of cards. That had been to the disapproval of his wife. Lady Bennie was a woman very conscious of rank and consequence, and she had not considered the poor schoolmaster worth cultivating. I once heard her refer to me as 'that fey, ill-favoured child' when I was about six years of age, and it was true that I had been thin as a rake then, with tangled red-golden hair and a challenging expression in my blue eyes that my father had always commented was fierce enough to scare the wolves away.

There had not been wolves at Applecross for more than a half century now, and I hoped that time had also filled out my figure a little, smoothed the wayward curl of my hair and softened the fierceness in my expression. I was no longer as ill favoured as I had been as a child, although there was nothing I could do about the firm, determined lines of my cheek and chin, the fairness of my eyelashes or the unfashionable freckles that were not only scattered across my face but also sprinkled over the rest of my body. My hair was as thick and springy as the heather, and grief had turned me gaunt. I knew I was no beauty. I did not need the pink and gold prettiness of the Miss Bennies to point it out to me.

I noticed that today Lady Bennie was wearing her second best black gown, thereby conferring on the event precisely the right degree of importance; as first lady of the district it was her duty to attend, but despite the fact that she dabbed her eyes most prettily with her black-edged kerchief I knew it was all for display. The Miss Bennies had not the skill of their mother. Their boredom was plain to see as they fretted and fidgeted and even whispered under cover of the minister's words.

'Ashes to ashes...'

I threw a handful of earth onto the coffin and it rattled on the top. Tears made my throat ache.

'Dust to dust...'

Poor Papa. There had been so many things that he had still wanted to do. I felt so angry that he had been denied the chance. Someone, somewhere in the congregation, stifled a sob. Applecross folk were not the sort to cry, but my father, David Balfour, had been well loved. I had not needed to pay way mourners to attend his funeral, as Sir Compton Bennie was rumoured to have done when his father had passed away. But then Sir Compton's father had sided with the English in the harrying of the Highlands fifty years before, and people here had long memories...

'Come, Catriona...' The service was over and Mr Campbell, the minister, took my arm to guide me down the path to the lych gate. I paused for a moment, gazing at the raw scar of the grave. Douglas, the gravedigger, was leaning on his spade, impatient to

be finished there. I looked down on my father's coffin and for a moment felt a desolation so vast, so terrifying, that I had to push it away, because I was afraid my mind would disintegrate under the pain of it.

I was an orphan.

I had no money.

I had no home.

Mr and Mrs Campbell had broken this news to me the previous night, gently, over a beaker of milk laced with whisky to help me sleep. Since my father's death I had been staying at the manse because it had not been seemly for me, a young woman, to continue to live alone in the schoolmaster's house. What I had not realised, though, was that I was never to return there. The house belonged to the Charity of St Barnabas, which had employed my father. The trustees had already arranged for a new schoolmaster to come from Inverness to fill the vacancy. He and his wife and young family were expected any day soon. It seemed like unseemly haste to me, but then the charity were efficient, and did not wish the children of Applecross to have an unofficial holiday for longer than need be.

The trustees of St Barnabas had not been ungenerous. They had paid the funeral expenses, and had also sent Mr Campbell the sum of five pounds 'to provide for the daughter of the late schoolmaster.' I was bitter; I thought how fortunate it was for the trustees that my mother had died a few months before, thereby sparing them the necessity of paying a further ten pounds for

his widow. Mr Campbell had reproved me when I had said this, but he had done it kindly, because he knew I was miserable. But to me it seemed that my father was a footnote: recorded in the charity's ledgers, then swept aside, dismissed, forgotten. Deceased. I could imagine them drawing a thick line in black ink under his name.

We were to go to the schoolmaster's house for the last time now, to attend the wake.

The old path down from the churchyard was uneven, the stone cobbles grown thick with moss. Out in the bay the seabirds wheeled and soared, calling their wild cry. The sun was hot and it made my head ache. I wanted to seek the cool darkness of the shadows and hide away, to think about my parents on my own. I did not want to have to share my memories of them, or stand in the stone-flagged parlour of my old home feeling that I was a stranger there now as I made polite conversation with the mourners.

We reached the garden gate. Mr Campbell and I were at the head of an untidy straggle. Immediately behind us were the Bennies. Lady Bennie was accustomed to going first into all the drawing rooms in the county. I reflected that it had taken the death of my father to get her to concede precedence to me. It was never likely to happen again.

A little muted conversation had broken out behind us as we walked, but suddenly it hushed so quickly that I was pulled out of my self-absorption. I felt Mr Campbell stiffen with surprise,

and for a moment his step faltered. Then a man came forward from the shadow of the garden gate and stopped before us. He was in the uniform of the King's Royal Navy, and the austerity of the costume suited his tall figure well.

He knew it, too. He carried himself with an unhurried self-assurance, and there was an arrogant tilt to his head and a gleam in his eyes—eyes that were so dark that their expression was inscrutable.

I sensed rather than saw the Misses Bennie shift and bob behind me, like the tall poppies that grew by the roadside in high summer. They were positively begging for his notice. I raised my chin and met the dark gaze of the stranger very directly.

The air was suddenly still between us. Somewhere far away, in the furthest recesses of my body, my heart skipped a beat, and then carried on as though nothing had happened.

'Mr Sinclair,' Mr Campbell said, and I heard a tiny shade of uncertainty in his voice. 'We did not expect—'

The stranger had not taken his eyes from me, and now he removed his hat and bowed. He was young—perhaps five or six and twenty. The sunlight fell on his thick, dark hair and burnished it the blue black of a magpie's wing.

'Magpies are dangerous thieves,' my father had once said when we were discussing the ornithology of the British Isles. 'They are clever and reckless and untrustworthy.'

It was strange to remember that now.

The man had taken my hand. I had definitely not offered it,

and I wondered how on earth he had possessed himself of it. He wore no gloves, and I was conscious that the inexperienced darning on mine would be all too evident to his touch. I tried to pull away.

He held me fast.

This was most improper. There was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes now that made me feel as though the sun beating down on my bonnet was far too hot.

‘Miss Balfour,’ he said, ‘please permit me to introduce myself and to offer my deepest sympathy on your loss. My name is Neil Sinclair.’

His voice was very smooth and mellow, like a caress.

There was a gasp behind me. The Miss Bennies were not good at dissembling their feelings. I sensed that in that moment they would almost have been happy to be attending their own father’s funeral if it had entailed an introduction to this man. But he was not looking at them. He was looking at me.

And that was how I met Neil Sinclair, Master of Ross and heir to the Earl of Strathconan.

Chapter Two

In which I hear of my long-lost family.

It was late. The funeral supper was eaten, the casks of ale had run dry and the schoolmaster's house was scoured clean, locked and barred once more against the arrival of its new owner. I had worked my fingers to the bone to tidy up after our guests; anything to block out the cold sense of loss that threatened to break me.

Now there was no more to do, and I stood in the gardens for the last time and breathed in the heady scent of the roses my mother had coaxed to grow against the sheltered southern wall. Across the village green the lamps were lit in the manse, and the moths were bumping against the windows, trying to get to the light. The sea was calm and its sighing was a muted hush on the sand. The evening was sapphire-blue, with a half moon rising, and very peaceful, though cooler now that the sun had gone.

I crossed the green and let myself into the manse by the back door. The house was very quiet, but from Mr Campbell's study came the sound of voices. I had no taste for company that night, and I was about to go past and seek the comfort of my room when Mrs Campbell came around the curve of the passageway. Her face warmed into a smile of relief to see me.

'There you are, Catriona! Mr Campbell was asking for you.'

I sighed inwardly. I knew that Neil Sinclair was with Mr

Campbell, and I had no wish to seek his further acquaintance. After he had greeted me he had spent the rest of my father's wake talking with Sir Compton Bennie and with Mr Campbell, and I still had no notion as to what he was doing here. Occasionally I had felt him watching me across the room, and had glanced up to meet the same speculative interest in his dark eyes that I had seen when we first met. I had no experience with men but I sensed that his interest had little or nothing to do with me as a woman. Instead I suspected that he knew something about me and was measuring me in some way, assessing my character. For some reason this annoyed me.

I knocked on the study door and went in, Mrs Campbell following me. The minister was seated at his desk, with Mr Sinclair in a chair beside the fire with a glass of the finest malt whisky on the table beside him. He looked up when I came in. He had a thin, watchful face, tanned a dark brown from sea and sun—a face with character and resolution in the line of his jaw. I gave him a cool nod, which seemed to amuse him, and addressed myself to Mr Campbell.

‘You wished to see me, sir?’

I spoke very politely but I saw the flash in Mr Sinclair's eyes that suggested he thought this obedience out of character. A faint smile curled the corner of his firm mouth. I turned a shoulder to him.

‘Catriona... Yes...’ Mr Campbell seemed flustered, which was unusual to see. He gestured me to the long sofa. This piece

of furniture was the most uncomfortable in the house, and necessitated me to sit upright as though I were a bird perched on a twig. This did nothing to improve my temper, especially as Mr Sinclair seemed deliberately to lounge back indolently in his chair with a sigh of contentment as he sipped his whisky and watched me over the brim of the glass.

Mrs Campbell had followed me in, and now hastened to see to her visitor's comfort. 'You have had sufficient to eat and drink, Mr Sinclair? May I fetch you anything else?'

I watched the gentleman smile his thanks and put Mrs Campbell at her ease. He had a very easy charm. I could not deny it. When Mrs Campbell went out again her face was flushed peony-pink, like a young girl's.

'Well, now,' Mr Campbell said, shuffling the papers on his desk, 'there are matters to be settled, Catriona. Matters to do with your future. You know that Mrs Campbell and I love you as though you were our own daughter, but I have been thinking that now your parents have passed on the natural place for you is with your remaining relatives.'

I assumed that he meant my mother's family, who lived far, far away on the south coast of England. My mother had made a scandalous match twenty years before when, as a young debutante, she had visited Edinburgh, fallen in love with my father, a poor schoolmaster, and eloped with him. Her family had cast her out after that, and I had absolutely no intention of going to them cap in hand now, when they had ignored my existence

for eighteen years.

‘Can I not stay here, sir?’ I asked. ‘Here in Applecross, I mean,’ I added, in case poor Mr Campbell had thought I was suggesting I should live on his charity indefinitely. I knew it must be a wrench for him to speak of my going, for it was true that not only was he my godfather but he and Mrs Campbell had cherished me like their own.

‘I could work for a living,’ I added. ‘Perhaps I could help the new schoolmaster, or act as companion to old Miss Blois...’

Mr Sinclair smothered what sounded suspiciously like a snort. I looked at him.

‘I beg your pardon, sir?’ I said frigidly.

There was laughter in his eyes. ‘Forgive me, Miss Balfour,’ he said, ‘but I cannot see you as companion to an elderly lady. Nor as a schoolmistress, for that matter.’

I set my lips in a thin line. I did not see what business it was of his. ‘You do not know me very well, Mr Sinclair,’ I said. ‘My father taught me himself, having no prejudice against the education of females. I can teach reading, and I write a very fair hand, and I am learned in mathematics and astronomy and philosophy and...’ I ran out of breath in my indignation.

‘I do not quarrel with your father’s abilities as a tutor,’ Mr Sinclair said lazily, ‘nor indeed with yours as a scholar, Miss Balfour. I am sure you are most accomplished. It is simply that I have seen no evidence that you have the temperament required to do the job of schoolteacher yourself. Would it not require

patience and tolerance and composure, amongst other things?’

I was so angry at his presumption that I almost burst there and then. ‘Well, I do not see it is any concern of yours—’ I began crossly, but Mr Campbell made a slight movement and I subsided, holding fast to the fraying shreds of my temper.

‘It would not serve, Catriona,’ he said. ‘Applecross is a small place and it is time for you to go out into the world—the sooner the better. I have already had three requests from gentlemen for your hand in marriage, and have no desire to be turning more away from my door.’

I was astonished. Not one single gentleman had approached me with a view to marriage, and I could not imagine who could have asked Mr Campbell for permission to pay their addresses to me. I stared at him in puzzlement.

‘Who on earth...?’

Mr Campbell ticked them off on his fingers. ‘McGough, who farms up beyond Loch Ailen, young Angus the shepherd and Mr Lefroy of Callanish.’

This time there was no doubt that Neil Sinclair was laughing. His shoulders were positively shaking. I tried to ignore him whilst inside me the anger seethed at his discourtesy.

‘McGough has buried three wives already,’ I said, ‘young Angus is kind, but a mere lad, and Mr Lefroy wants a housekeeper he does not have to pay for.’

‘A wife is more expensive than a housekeeper in the long run,’ Mr Sinclair observed casually.

I swung around and glared at him. ‘Do you know that for a fact, sir?’

His dark eyebrows went up. ‘Not from personal experience, madam,’ he drawled, ‘but I do know on the strength of a few hours’ acquaintance that you would no more make a biddable wife than you would a suitable lady’s companion.’

We looked at one another for what seemed like a very long time, whilst the air fizzed between us and all the discourteous, unladylike and plain rude things that I wanted to say to Mr Sinclair jostled for space in my head. I could see a distinct spark of challenge in his eyes as though he was saying, Do you wish to quarrel further, Miss Balfour? You need only say the word...

Then Mr Campbell cleared his throat.

‘Which is nothing to the purpose, Catriona, since your papa, when he knew he was dying, wrote to his relatives at Glen Clair to ask that they offer you a home.’

Mr Sinclair shifted in his chair. ‘It is all arranged. I am here to escort you to Sheildaig on the morrow, Miss Balfour. Your uncle will send a carriage to collect you from the inn there.’

For the second time in the space of as many minutes I was silent with shock. How could Papa have arranged such a thing without telling me? Who was this uncle and his family of whom I had heard nothing until this moment, and why should they, who were strangers to me, wish to give me a home? Most importantly, how could it all be arranged when this was the first that I had heard of it?

I took a deep breath and, ignoring Mr Sinclair completely, addressed myself to the minister.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ I said carefully, ‘but you find me completely amazed. I did not know my father had any relatives in the world, let alone that they would be prepared to give me a home.’

Mr Campbell was now looking even more uncomfortable, and Mr Sinclair positively bored. He sighed, toying with the whisky in his glass, swirling it around and around. One lock of dark hair had fallen across his brow, giving him an even more rakish air. No doubt my amazement at the discovery of my long-lost family was of little consequence to him, and any attempt at explanation would be terribly tedious for him to endure. He had graciously offered to escort me—for what reason I was still unsure—and his attitude implied that it was my duty to be grateful for his condescension. I reflected that I was fast coming to find Mr Sinclair one of the most objectionable men of my limited acquaintance.

Mr Campbell rubbed his head, setting the sparse strands of hair awry. ‘Truth to tell, Catriona,’ he confided, ‘I scarcely know more myself. When your father was sick he gave me a certain letter and asked me to send it to Glen Clair. He said that it was to do with your inheritance. He asked that as soon as he was gone, the furniture disposed of and the house taken back by the charity trustees, I should send you to the Old House at Glen Clair and to your uncle, Ebenezer Balfour.’ Here Mr Campbell looked

hopefully at Mr Sinclair. ‘Perhaps you have something to add here, sir?’

Mr Sinclair shrugged his broad shoulders—carelessly, I thought. ‘I fear I cannot help you, sir,’ he said. ‘I am come to escort Miss Balfour as a favour to her uncle. That is all I know.’

I looked from one to the other. ‘My father never mentioned that he had a brother,’ I said. ‘All these years I never knew he had any family other than my mother and myself. I do not like to find such matters settled when I have had no say in them.’

Mr Sinclair looked at me. ‘You are familiar with the expression that beggars cannot be choosers, Miss Balfour?’

I glared at him. ‘Mr Sinclair, I do not believe you are contributing anything useful to this situation at all.’

‘Only a means of transport,’ Neil Sinclair agreed affably.

Mr Campbell settled his spectacles more firmly on his nose. ‘Family is always to be cherished,’ he murmured. ‘I know of the Balfours of Glen Clair, of course, but had no notion that your father was related. The Balfours were a great family once. Before the forty-five rebellion.’

‘You mean they were Jacobites?’ I asked, and for a moment it seemed that the very word caused the lamplight to grow dim and the shadows to flicker with secrets.

‘Aye.’ Mr Campbell looked grave. ‘They suffered reprisals for their loyalty.’

Mr Sinclair shifted, and I remembered that he was a Navy man in the service of King George III. The enemy was Napoleon

and the French now, not the English, and the old days were long gone. Nevertheless, something in my Highland blood stirred at the old loyalties.

‘These days,’ Mr Sinclair said, ‘the Balfours are as poor as church mice, mistress. There will be no inheritance waiting for you at Glen Clair.’

I smarted that he might think me so shallow that all I cared for was a fortune—although if I were being completely honest a few hundred pounds would not have gone amiss. But I sat up a little straighter and said, ‘If I have found a family I did not know existed then that will be more than enough for me, Mr Sinclair.’

I thought the sentiment rather fine, and was annoyed that he smothered a grin in his whisky glass, as though to say that I was a foolish chit who knew nothing of what I was talking about.

‘We shall see,’ he said cryptically.

I stood up. I had had about enough of Mr Sinclair’s company for one evening. ‘If you will excuse me, sir?’ I said to Mr Campbell.

‘Of course,’ he murmured. His tired blue eyes sought mine and I realised then what an unlooked for responsibility I was to him. He had taken me in out of Christian kindness, love for me and friendship to my late father, but he and Mrs Campbell were getting old, and though they would never say it, they could not want the burden of a eighteen-year-old hoyden.

‘I will go and pack my bags,’ I said. ‘And I do thank you, sir, for I know that you always have my well-being at heart.’

It would take me little enough time to pack, in all conscience. I had barely a change of clothes and the few books that my father had left me.

Mr Campbell looked relieved. ‘Of course, child. I’ll bid you goodnight. I think,’ he added, and I wished there had not been such uncertainty in his tone, ‘that you are doing the right thing, Catriona. Mrs Campbell will accompany you as far as the inn at Sheildaig, under Mr Sinclair’s escort.’

Mr Sinclair said nothing at all, but there was a sardonic gleam in his dark eyes that I disliked intensely. He stood up politely as I left the room, and I felt his gaze on me, but I refused to look at him.

I went up the curving stair of the manse to the little room Mrs Campbell had given me on the first floor. My belongings, scattered untidily about the place, looked suddenly meagre and a little pathetic. This was all I had in the world, and soon I was to turn away from all things familiar and go to a family I did not know I had at a tumbledown house in Glen Clair. For a moment I felt a mixture of terror and loneliness, and then my common sense reasserted itself. Glen Clair was only two days away—which was fortunate, since I had no wish to be in company with Neil Sinclair any longer than I must—and I could always return to Applecross if matters did not work out for me. It was not the end of the world.

Nevertheless it felt close to the end of everything as I packed away my spare petticoat and my embroidered shawl, a few books

and some sheet music, and the blue and white striped tooth mug that had been my father's. I sat down rather abruptly on the narrow bed and had to take several deep breaths to calm myself when once again grief grabbed my throat and squeezed like a vice.

I slept badly that night, which was no great surprise, and in the morning awoke to find the house abuzz. A quick breakfast of milk and wheat cakes awaited me in the kitchen, and Mr Sinclair's carriage was already at the door. I had barely time to snatch a mouthful of food and to hug Mr Campbell in thanks and farewell before it was time to go out to where Mr Sinclair awaited to escort me to my new life.

Chapter Three

In which I set out upon my journey to the house of Glen Clair, and Mr Sinclair behaves as no gentleman should.

It was uncomfortable being in an enclosed carriage with Mr Sinclair. The carriage itself was not uncomfortable, of course, being from the stables of the Earl of Strathconan himself. It had dark blue velvet seats with fat cushions, and was well sprung to protect us from the jolts and ruts of the road. No, it was only Mr Sinclair's company that felt so unwelcome on that bright summer day.

I was acutely aware of his physical presence within the enclosed space. It felt as though he was too close to me in some mysterious way I had not experienced with anyone before. Strange, because he was sitting at a perfectly respectable distance from me, and Mrs Campbell was there as well, as the most irreproachable chaperon. Occasionally, when the coach would lurch over a particularly bad hole in the road, his leg would brush against mine and I would move the skirts of my second best gown away, much to his apparent amusement. On one occasion the carriage pitched so hard that I was almost unseated, and Mr Sinclair reached out to grab me before I tumbled onto the floor. His hands were hard on my upper arms as he caught me, and for a dizzy moment he was so close to me that I could smell the scent of his skin and the lime cologne he wore. My head spun

in a very peculiar way. I know I turned very pink and I know that he observed it. He placed me back on the seat with absolute propriety, and then ruined it by giving me a look that was not remotely proper and made my blood burn. I knew that he was only doing it to disconcert me, and not because he had the least admiration for me, and this annoyed me all the more.

Mrs Campbell certainly did not seem to share my dislike of Mr Sinclair. Indeed, as the journey progressed it seemed to me that Mr Sinclair's company was the only thing that made the whole thing tolerable from her point of view, for she hated to travel and had never been further than Inverness in her life. The two of them chatted away easily, about the weather and the state of the roads and the journey time between Applecross and Glen Clair, whilst I sat in my corner and wondered how a man like Mr Sinclair could get away with charming the chaperons into thinking he was not remotely dangerous.

It was another beautiful day. As the carriage climbed the track out of the village I watched the turquoise sea tumbling on the rocks far below and the black silhouette of the Cuillins of Skye against the sun. The air was full of the scent of gorse and hot summer grass. Presently I realised that Neil Sinclair was addressing me and withdrew my attention from the scenery with reluctance.

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'I was asking, Miss Balfour, whether you had travelled much in the past?'

‘I have been to Edinburgh with my father on several occasions, sir,’ I said, ‘and I have sailed to Skye and the other islands more times than I can recall.’

‘And are you a good sailor?’

I saw Mrs Campbell nod a chaperon’s encouragement at this blameless conversation.

‘No, sir,’ I said. ‘I was sick in a bucket on all but one occasion, when the sea was as flat as a mirror.’

Mrs Campbell frowned.

‘Are you a good sailor, Mr Sinclair?’ I enquired. ‘One would hope so, since you are in the Royal Navy.’

Neil Sinclair smiled without mockery for the first time—a real smile that reached his eyes and made my heart jump, and almost made me forget that I disliked him.

‘No, Miss Balfour, I am not,’ he said. ‘I, too, was sick as a dog on my first few voyages, but unfortunately there was no bucket to hand.’

I smiled, too. ‘You said that you know my uncle, sir,’ I said, on impulse. ‘What manner of man is he?’

Mr Sinclair was silent for so long that I started to feel nervous. ‘Your uncle is a dour man,’ he said at last. ‘You’ll have little conversation out of him, mistress.’

That was not encouraging. ‘And my aunt?’ I asked, wondering if I wanted to know the answer.

‘Mrs Balfour suffers from her nerves,’ Mr Sinclair said.

I did not really understand such a complaint, having not a

sensitive nerve in my body, or so I had been told. Lady Bennie, who suffered from nerves herself, mostly when Sir Compton spent time with his mistress in Inverness, had commented sourly on my lack of sensibility on more than one occasion.

‘Oh dear,’ I said. ‘And my cousin Ellen?’

Mr Sinclair smiled. ‘Miss Balfour is delightful,’ he said.

I felt an unexpected rush of jealousy and wished I had not asked.

The conversation waned. Mr Sinclair seemed disinclined to speak any further of my relatives, and I was sufficiently discouraged to think of my dour uncle and delicate aunt that I did not persist in my questioning. It did not sound as though a very warm welcome awaited me at Glen Clair, and I wondered once again why they had offered to take me in.

That night we stopped at the inn in Sheildaig, a building of whitewashed stone on the harbour. The bedchambers were clean and the linen fresh, if threadbare. I wanted to open the window, because the room felt stuffy and unaired, but when I pushed the creaking casement open the smell of gutted fish blew in and overwhelmed me. It takes a great deal to put me off my food—grief had certainly increased rather than diminished my appetite—but the rotten fish smell almost robbed me of any. I washed and went down to the parlour, where I took a little bread and cheese for supper and then retired for the evening. Mrs Campbell seemed relieved to see me go, for I think she was exhausted from a day’s travel on poor roads. Mr Sinclair got politely to his feet

and came to the bottom of the stairs with me to light my candle, then wished me a goodnight.

A thunderstorm was brewing as I prepared for bed, the wind rising from the west battering the eaves and whistling through the cracks in the windowframe. When I was undressed to my shift and petticoats I did not immediately get into the bed, but sat on the window seat with my elbows on the sill. The stinking harbour was in darkness now, and the view was a deal more appealing than the smell had been. Half the sky was clouded over with the gathering storm, and the rain was sweeping in over the islands out to sea, but to the north the moon rode high on ragged clouds, attended by a scattering of stars and laying its silver path across the black waters. I stared, enchanted.

The noise from the taproom downstairs was growing now as the fishermen came in. I was tired from the jolting of the coach and my head ached. I took my tincture of lavender from my bag and rubbed my temples, breathing in the sweet, strong scent. Tomorrow a carriage would come to meet me and take me to Glen Clair and my father's family. Mrs Campbell would return to Applecross on the drover's cart. And Mr Sinclair... Well, from the conversation I had overheard between him and Mrs Campbell earlier, I understood that he was posted to a naval station some way up the coast at Lochinver, but since the signing of the Treaty of Amiens the previous month he had been granted some leave.

I wondered idly where he would be spending it, and with whom. Perhaps he would choose to spend the time with his

family at Strathconan? Or perhaps he might go to Edinburgh to enjoy the entertainments of the city? Inexperienced as I was, I did not for a minute doubt that Neil Sinclair lacked for female companionship when he had the opportunity.

There was the scrape of a step in the inn doorway beneath my window. The lantern swung in the rising wind. A movement caught my eye and I looked down. Neil Sinclair himself was in the street directly below my window. He was looking up at me. And in that moment I realised what I must look like, with the candlelight from my chamber window no doubt turning the thin linen of my shift quite transparent and my unruly red hair loose about my face.

Neil Sinclair did not look away. He held my gaze for what seemed for ever, as the hot colour flamed to my face and my traitorous limbs turned to water. I could not move. Then he smiled, his teeth showing very white in his dark face, and raised a hand in deliberate greeting.

Suddenly freed from the captivity of his gaze, I stumbled back from the window and closed the shutters with such a sharp snap that I almost pulled them from their hinges. I realised I was shaking. Of all the foolish, immodest and downright dangerous things to do—leaning from my window like a wanton Juliet! I should have realised that someone might see me. I should have thought how abandoned I would look. But the trouble with me, as I already knew, was that I almost always acted first and thought later.

There was a knock at the door. Assuming that it was Mrs Campbell, come to help me with my laces, I went across and opened it.

Neil Sinclair stood there. I realised that he had come directly up to my chamber. Though I had been thinking of him only a moment before, I could not have been more shocked had it been Mrs Campbell herself running down the inn corridor in her shift.

Before I could prevent it, he stepped inside the room and closed the door.

I found my voice—and grabbed my gown to my chest to cover my near nakedness.

‘What do you think you are doing, sir? Leave this room at once!’

He smiled again, that lazy, intimate smile that had such a distressing effect on my equilibrium. I felt my legs tremble a little.

‘Do not be afraid, Miss Balfour,’ he said. ‘I merely wish to speak to you.’

‘This,’ I said, ‘is not the time nor the place to talk, sir. You are no gentleman to stand there staring at a lady in a state of undress!’

He gave me a comprehensively assessing glance that started on my heated face and ended with my bare feet, and he made no attempt whatsoever to disguise the fact that he was enjoying looking.

‘No gentleman, perhaps,’ he murmured, ‘but a man nonetheless.’

My hands clenched on my gown. I would have slapped his face to emphasise my point except that that would have necessitated dropping the garment and revealing even more of myself to his gaze. I was not exactly over-endowed with a bosom, but there was enough of it that I did not wish to expose it to him. Whilst I hesitated with this ridiculous dilemma of to slap or not to slap, he spoke again.

‘And I am beginning to think that you are no true lady, Miss Balfour.’

I froze, astounded. ‘I beg your pardon, Sir?’

‘No lady would see fit to undress and then lean from the window of a tavern in her shift, like the veriest wanton.’

I blushed hotly, the pink colour flooding not only my face but prickling the skin of my chest and shoulders as well. Having so pale a complexion can be such a curse.

‘That was a mistake!’ I said furiously. ‘I did not realise—’

His dark brows rose in quizzical amusement. ‘Indeed. You are wild, Miss Balfour, whether you realise it or not.’

We stared at one another, whilst the air between us seemed to sing and hum with something I did not understand. I was woefully inexperienced in the ways of men, but I could see desire darkening his eyes and I could feel an answering warmth in the pit of my stomach. I was shivering as though I had an ague, the goose pimples rising on my bare skin, but at the same time I felt hotter than I had ever felt before in my life. The fire hissed in the grate and the wind battered at the window, and I seemed sensitive

to every sound and every sensation and most particularly to the turbulent heat in Neil Sinclair's eyes.

'You need not travel on to Glen Clair tomorrow,' Neil said softly. 'There is nothing for you there. Come with me to Edinburgh instead. You will have a house, with servants to attend you and fine clothes and jewellery. I would come to you often.'

I drew a deep breath. My heart was hammering. 'Are you by any chance asking me to be your mistress, Mr Sinclair?'

No doubt the Miss Bennies would have collapsed with the vapours by now to be so treated, but even though I had no practical experience I was not a sheltered lady who did not know what went on between a man and a woman. Living in a small village one became aware of such matters. Besides, I was as blunt spoken as any man.

A disturbingly sensuous smile curled Neil Sinclair's lips. 'Would that be so very bad, Miss Balfour? I am offering you a comfortable home, instead of a ruin in the back of beyond with relatives who do not want you.'

'You are not offering it for nothing!' I snapped.

His smile deepened. He put out a hand and touched my cheek gently. I was so shocked at the physical contact that I jumped.

'All I ask in return,' he said, 'is something that should be intensely pleasurable for both of us.'

Once again I felt that jolt deep inside me—the tug of desire that had me thinking all kinds of wanton thoughts. I swallowed hard and pushed away the heated images of lust and loving.

‘I thought,’ I said, ‘that you did not even like me very much.’

I saw something primitive and strong flare in his eyes, scorching me.

‘Then you know little of men, Miss Balfour,’ he said. His tone had roughened. ‘I wanted you from the first moment I saw you.’

‘Which was only yesterday,’ I said.

‘Sometimes it does not take very long to know.’

I spoke slowly. ‘You think me wild?’

His eyes were very dark. His hand fell to my bare shoulder, his touch light as feathers brushing the skin, and I shivered all the harder. He traced a line down my arm from the hollow of my collarbone to the sensitive skin of my wrist where the pulse hammered hard.

‘You are as fierce as a Highland cat, and with me you could always be as wild as your nature leads you to be.’

His words, so softly spoken and so intimate—so perilously tempting—made my stomach clench tight. But even so I knew that I had to stop this. Already, in my naivety and accursed curiosity, I had let it go on far too long. I should have thrown him out of my chamber within a minute, instead of allowing myself to be drawn in. The difficulty, the danger, was that Neil Sinclair was right. I was wild. I always had been. He had had my measure from the start.

My wayward mind whispered that it would be exciting, deliciously enjoyable, to be Neil’s mistress. My knees threatened to give way completely at the mere thought of him seducing me. I

realised with a shock that I wanted him as much as he wanted me.

But I was not stupid. I would not trade my good name to be a rich man's mistress, with my body entirely at his disposal. I would not do it even for those mysterious and seductive pleasures he promised. Yes, I concede I was tempted. Very well, I was greatly tempted—to within an inch of accepting. But...

'So,' I said, 'you know I am alone and unprotected. You know I am penniless and dependent on the charity of relatives you say have none. So you make your dishonourable offer. You are a scoundrel, Mr Sinclair.'

He took a step back. He looked rueful now, and a little chagrined. I knew that he had sensed the struggle in me and realised that this time my honour had won out.

'I am sorry that you see it that way, madam,' he said.

'How else is there to see it?' I demanded.

He shrugged. 'If you put it like that—'

'I do!'

He raised his hands in a gesture of reconciliation. 'Very well. I apologise. I made a mistake.' His gaze went to my whitened knuckles, still clasped tight about the gown at my breast. 'Have no fear, Miss Balfour. I am not a man who would force a woman against her will.' He laughed. 'It has never been necessary.'

Well! The arrogance of the man!

'Good,' I said. 'Because I am not a woman to shout for help and bring the whole inn down about our ears—but I will if I have to.'

He smiled, and for a moment I felt my all too precarious

determination falter. 'But you were tempted by my offer,' he said. 'Admit it, Catriona.'

'I was not.' I turned my face away to hide my betraying blush and he laughed.

'Liar,' he said softly.

My chin came up. 'I like Edinburgh,' I said. 'I like the shops and the galleries and the exhibitions and the lectures. I would like to visit again. But not at the price you offer, Mr Sinclair. I am not for sale.'

'You have more resolution than I gave you credit for,' Neil said. The smile was in his eyes again, admiration mixed with regret. 'I should have remembered that you are a Balfour of Glen Clair. They can be damnably obstinate.' He sighed. 'I do not suppose,' he added, 'that you trust me now.' There was an odd tone in his voice, as though he sincerely regretted it.

'If I do not it is your own fault,' I said. I smiled a little, being unable to help myself. 'I never did trust you, Mr Sinclair. Not really. I always suspected you were a dangerous scoundrel.'

That made him laugh. 'Just as I always knew you were wild—even when you pretended otherwise.'

'The door is behind you,' I said. 'Goodnight.'

When Mrs Campbell came in a bare two minutes later, to help me with my laces, she found me sitting on the edge of the hard little bed with my gown still clutched to my breast, and she was forced to point out that it would be quite ruined to wear in the morning.

Chapter Four

In which I meet with strange travellers on the road and see Mr Sinclair again sooner than I expect.

The rainstorm blew itself out in the night. The clouds scattered on a fresh wind from the sea. Dawn crept in at about five-thirty in the morning, the light spilling over the mountains to the east.

I had been awake on and off all the night, my dreams, when I had them, broken with memories of my parents and fears about the new day, as well as with strange desires and longings that seemed to feature Neil Sinclair rather more than was wise. I heard the first of the fishermen drag his nets across the cobbles, and the splash of the boat putting to sea before it was properly light. I was ready, with my bags packed, by seven thirty.

Mr Sinclair greeted me at the bottom of the stair when Mrs Campbell and I went down together. I had wondered how I would feel to see him in the daylight, but his manner was so impersonal that I had the strangest feeling that the scene between us had been just another of my broken dreams. We took bread and honey and ale for breakfast, and then I went out onto the quay for a walk.

The carriage from Glen Clair did not come. The clock crept around to nine, then nine-thirty, and then ten. I walked the length of the quay in one direction and then back again, and then around for a second time. As I passed the inn I could see Mrs Campbell sitting in the parlour, her face starting to tighten into

nervous lines. The drover's cart was due to leave for Applecross immediately after midday and I knew she did not want to be left behind.

I sat on a bench, looking out to sea, and thought of my new relatives—who did not appear to have sent their carriage for me and had not sent a messenger to explain why. It scarcely argued an eagerness to see me. Even though the sun was warm again I drew my shawl a little closer about me. The seabirds were soaring and calling out in the bay. From here my road turned eastwards, away from the coast and into the mountains to Torridon and Kinlochewe and on to Glen Clair. I had lived by the sea all my life. It was in my blood. And though Glen Clair was only a day's drive inland, it felt as though I would be leaving a part of me behind.

I stood up, stiff and a little cold from the sea breeze, and made my way back towards the inn parlour. I could hear the chink of harness where the drover's cart stood waiting in the yard. Mrs Campbell would be starting to fuss.

She was. The maidservant had brought in plates of crab soup and crusty rolls for our luncheon, and just the smell was making me hungry, but Mrs Campbell was too nervous to eat. She sat fidgeting with her soup spoon.

'There is not another cart back to Applecross for nigh on a week,' she was saying, 'and my cook and maid cannot manage a Sunday dinner alone. What am I to do?'

I laid a hand over hers. 'Dear ma'am, please do not concern

yourself. I can await the carriage here on my own. I am sure the landlady will stand chaperon for a short while.'

Mrs Campbell's anxious face eased a little. 'Well, if you think that would serve—'

'There is no landlady,' Mr Sinclair said helpfully. 'The landlord is a widower.' He had come in from the stable yard with his dark hair ruffled by the breeze, and he smelled of fresh air and horses and leather. It was not unpleasant. In fact it was rather attractive, and I was annoyed with myself for thinking so.

I frowned at him to compensate. 'I am sure there must be someone who could help me?'

'I could help,' Mr Sinclair said. 'I could escort you on to Glen Clair.'

I looked at him. 'That would not be appropriate,' I said. 'Given that...' I paused. Given that you are a scoundrel who tried to seduce me last night. I did not say the words aloud, but I could see from the bright light in his eyes that he was reading my mind. He waited, head tilted enquiringly.

'Given that we would not be chaperoned,' I said.

He smiled. 'But we are cousins of a kind,' he said, 'so it would be entirely proper.'

Mr Sinclair had a habit of silencing me.

'So we are cousins now, are we?' I said, when I had recovered my breath. 'How very convenient.'

His smile deepened. 'I swear it is true,' he said. 'I am third cousin twice removed to Mrs Ebenezer Balfour on my mother's

side. You may check the family bible if you do not believe me.'

'Oh, well,' I said sarcastically, 'that is quite acceptable, then.'

Mrs Campbell frowned. 'I am sorry, Catriona,' she said, 'but I do not think that so distant a connection is entirely reliable.'

'No,' I said, trying not to look at Mr Sinclair, who looked the absolute antithesis of reliable. 'Perhaps you are correct, ma'am.'

We were saved from further dispute by the arrival of the carriage from Glen Clair. With a cry of relief, Mrs Campbell swept me up, carried me out into the yard and installed me in the coach without even permitting me to finish my crab soup.

'All will be quite well now, my love,' she said, ignoring the fact that the coachman was the most villainous-looking fellow that one could imagine. 'You will be safely in Glen Clair by nightfall, and I know your family will be delighted to see you.' She kissed me enthusiastically on both cheeks. 'Pray write to me often.'

Mr Sinclair was handing my bags up to the groom, and suddenly I felt very alone. Neither the coachman nor the groom seemed inclined to speak to me, and neither had vouchsafed anything beyond a surly greeting.

Mr Sinclair came alongside the window to bid me farewell, and for once the impudent light was gone from his eyes. He looked sombre and very serious.

'I wish you good fortune, Miss Balfour,' he said, quite as though we might never meet again.

'Do you ever go to Glen Clair to call upon your third cousin twice removed, Mr Sinclair?' I asked impulsively.

He smiled then. 'Very rarely, Miss Balfour,' he said. 'But you will see me in Glen Clair before the month is out.'

I felt relief and a strange sense of pleasure to hear it, but naturally I was also rather annoyed with myself for making it appear that I actually wanted to see him again. I tilted my chin haughtily and gave him my hand in what I hoped was a dignified manner. But he simply turned it over, kissed my palm, and gave it back to me with quizzically lifted brows. The colour flamed into my face and I wished Mr Sinclair at the bottom of the loch.

'Thank you,' I said frostily, 'for the service that you have rendered me, Mr Sinclair.'

'A pleasure, Miss Balfour,' he said. He smiled straight into my eyes. 'Should you reconsider my offer, you need only send to me.'

'A refusal so often offends, Mr Sinclair,' I said. 'You must be a brave man indeed to risk a second rebuff.'

He laughed. 'You have not seen Glen Clair yet,' he said cryptically.

'So you are the lesser of two evils?' I enquired. 'I shall bear that in mind.'

His laughter was still in my ears as the carriage lurched out of the inn yard and away along the cobbled street that fronted the quay. I craned my neck for a last view of the sea, until the road turned inland towards the high mountains and the last shimmer of sparkling blue was lost from my sight. And though I tried not to think of Mr Sinclair paying court to the ladies of Edinburgh, the thought of him stayed in my mind for most of the long journey

to my new home.

Now, it may appear to readers of my narrative that I am much concerned with modes of transport, but it could not escape my notice that the carriage sent from Glen Clair was much inferior to that of Lord Strathconan. As I sat down on the straw-stuffed seat a thick cloud of dust arose and settled on my skirts in a clinging grey film. I was sure that I saw a flea jump out of the cushions.

It seemed that with every rut in the track the coach threatened to shake to bits. I began to feel a little travel sore, so to take my mind from the journey I tried to concentrate on the view as we lurched along the road. Afternoon was well advanced by now, for our progress was slow, and the sun was dipping behind the high mountains. The heather on the slopes merged with the bracken into a purple and amber mist. Above the rocky peaks soared a single eagle, the sun bright on the gold of its head. The road wound its narrow way along the valley bottom beside a trickling burn fringed by pines. It was very beautiful, but to me, accustomed to the friendly scatter of the homesteads at Applecross, it seemed an empty landscape and a deserted one. I imagined that the jagged peaks and the bare hillsides might drive some men mad with loneliness.

The sun had long vanished behind the mountains, the purple shadows were fading to shades of grey and I was very hungry when we turned down an even narrower lane, rattled over a wooden bridge across the stream and drew alongside a broad loch that I realised must be Loch Clair at last. I sat forward, searching

the dusk for my first glimpse of the house, but there was nothing ahead—no lights, no sign of life but the last flickering silver of the light on the water.

I sat back again, feeling slightly disappointed. As I did so the carriage lurched to a stop and there was a silence. I waited a few moments for one of the servants to come and tell me the reason for the delay. No one appeared, so I tried to open the carriage window to see what was going on. But the frame was splintered and the window stubbornly refused to move. I opened the door and stuck my head out.

We had stopped halfway along the edge of the loch. To one side of the carriage there was the water, and on the other side the rocky wall of the hillside rose straight and sheer from the edge of the road. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I was able to open the door wide enough to jump down.

Gathering up my skirts, I hurried around to the front of the coach. The horse—a tired old beast with a white star on its head and manners far more pleasant than that of its driver—whickered in greeting and nuzzled my pockets for a treat. I patted his nose.

The road unrolled before me, stretching away to a small wood at the end of the loch. There was no sound but for the whisper of the wind in the reeds by the water. The same wind brought the scent of woodsmoke faintly on the air. It was cold air, and it breathed gooseflesh along my skin, for the coachman and groom had completely vanished.

A second later instinct made me aware that I was no longer

alone on the road. I spun around, but I was a moment too late. Strong arms had caught me from behind, pulling me backwards against a hard male body. A hand came down over my mouth. Through my struggles—for I wriggled and kicked and strained to be free, of course—I had a confused impression of movement about me, and I heard the scrape of steel on stone.

I never scream. I have never been able to. When I was a child and the village boys teased me and pulled my hair, my cries of anger always came out as frustrated squawks. It was most vexatious to lack this accomplishment at a moment when it would have been useful to scream loud enough to make the mountains ring. It would also have been useful to be built along more generous lines, for I was slight and thin, and no match for my captor's strength. In less than a moment he had both my hands held behind my back in just one of his. His grip was tight, and he held me hard against his own body so I had no chance to escape nor even to see his face.

'I never scream,' I said, when I had ceased my struggles and caught my breath. Since he still had his hand over my mouth, this came out something like, 'Mmmmmfffff.'

Surprisingly, he took his hand away.

'I never scream,' I repeated.

'No one would hear you if you did,' he said. He spoke with a remarkably strong Highland burr, so his words came out something like, 'Nae oon wuid hear ye an ye did.'

I have always liked the Highland brogue, and his voice was

low and melodious and oddly attractive. I had to remind myself that he was a felon and up to no good. His words were all too obviously true. There was not a soul in sight. No one would come to save me even if I had a scream like a banshee.

I sighed instead. 'What have you done with the coachman and the groom?'

'They ran away.' The laconic answer held a hint of amusement.

I made a sound of disgust. 'Cowards!'

He moved slightly, though his grip on me did not slacken. 'I cannot disagree with you there.'

'So what do you want?' I demanded. 'Are you a footpad? If so, I can tell you that I have no money.'

This was not precisely the case. I had the five pounds that the trustees of St Barnabas had sent, plus a further five pounds donated most generously by my father's scholarly colleagues, and yet another pound confided to me by Mr Campbell—who had probably taken it, most improperly, from the Sunday collection plate. This grand total of eleven Scottish pounds would be riches indeed for a thief on the road.

I thought that I felt my captor shake with silent laughter. 'I do not believe you,' he said. 'You are a lady. You must be rich.' He slid his free hand caressingly down the length of my body and I stiffened with outrage beneath his touch. 'Shall I search you,' he continued, 'to see if you tell the truth?'

'Do so and I shall see you hanging on the end of a rope for your pains,' I said, between my teeth. It was strange, but I had a

feeling that robbery was not his aim at all—nor the ravishment of innocent young ladies. Even as we spoke I sensed that his mind was working with some other urgent preoccupation.

‘So you think me a highwayman?’ he said.

Something clicked in my mind then—the smell of the smoke, the other men who had passed, the scrape of metal on the stone. I realised that they must have been moving a whisky still. The Highlands were rife with illicit whisky distilleries, tucked away in every mountain glen. It was the curse of the excise men, because all the local populace would be part of the conspiracy—even to the point of local ministers hiding bottles of malt in coffins in the church.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I don’t think you are a highwayman. I think you are a whisky smuggler.’

I felt the surprise go through him like a lightning strike, and in that moment his grip on me loosened and I pulled free and ran.

On reflection it was not a sensible thing to have done. The light was fading fast now, and I could barely see to put one foot before the other. I did not know where I was and I had nowhere to run to. Besides, my captor was a lot quicker and stronger than I was.

He caught me within six paces, as I dived into a copse of pine trees in a vain attempt to hide. If I had thought him rough before, it was nothing to how he treated me now. He grabbed my arm, knocking me to the ground and pinning me there with the weight of his body on mine. All the breath was crushed out of me.

The ground beneath me was dry and soft with last year’s pine

needles. I lay still, inhaling the sharp, fresh scent and trying to catch my breath. It was too dark to see his face, but I was aware of every tense line of his body against my own. My hands were trapped against his chest, and beneath the coarse material of his coat I could feel the hardness of muscle and his heart beating steadily. In that moment all my senses seemed acutely sharp, so much so that I could smell the scent of him: leather, horses, fresh air and an echo of citrus that mingled with the smell of pine. His cheek brushed mine, and I felt the warmth and roughness of his skin against my own. A shiver seemed to echo its way through my entire body. And in that moment, although I could see nothing of his face in the darkness beneath the trees, I recognised him and knew who he was.

‘Mr Sinclair!’

I heard him swear, and he clapped a hand over my mouth again. ‘Quiet!’

I ignored him, trying ineffectually to struggle free from beneath his weight.

‘When you said I would see you within the month,’ I said, ‘I had no notion you meant it to be so soon.’ I took a deep breath. ‘And what the devil,’ I added, ‘do you think you are doing, smuggling whisky and accosting young ladies on the road?’

His grip relaxed a little, though he still held me pinioned beneath him. It was, in truth, disturbingly pleasant to be held thus, so hard against him. My body, which seemed to have developed a will of its own from the first moment I had met Mr

Neil Sinclair, was busy telling me just how pleasurable the whole business was. I tried to ignore the stirring of desire deep inside me, but Neil would not let me up, trapping me with one leg across my skirts and thus keeping me trussed up beneath him.

‘Stop struggling,’ he said, and his voice sounded lazily amused. ‘I rather like you like this, Miss Balfour.’

I gave an angry sigh. ‘You have not answered my question,’ I said. I relaxed for a moment, staring at the spiky pattern of the pine needles against the dark blue of the night sky. ‘Why smuggle whisky?’

‘Why not?’ He sounded maddeningly reasonable. ‘The King’s taxes are criminally high.’

‘But you are an officer in the Navy and heir to an earldom!’
‘Which has nothing to do with the exorbitant state of the taxes.’ He moved slightly, his hand coming up gently to brush the tumbled hair away from my face in what was almost a lover’s touch.

‘I cannot have a conversation about tax with you in this situation,’ I said, resisting the urge to turn my cheek against the caress of his fingers. ‘It is ridiculous.’

‘As you say.’ His voice had dropped. ‘Taxes are not the matter uppermost in my mind, either.’ He leaned closer. And at that point, when every fibre of my being was aching for him to kiss me, we heard the sound of horses on the road.

We both froze absolutely still.

‘Excise men?’ I whispered.

‘Maybe.’ In the darkness his face was set in taut lines.

‘I could call out for help—’

His gaze came away from the road and focussed hard and fast on mine in the moonlight. ‘Then why do you not?’

For a long, long moment of silence I looked up into his face, and then I took a deep and deliberate breath.

Throw down the gauntlet...

His mouth came down on mine so swiftly that I never had a chance to call out, and after the first second I completely forgot that that was what I had been intending to do. The sensuality flared within me in a scalding tide, drowning out thought. He kissed me again, fiercely, hungrily, and I instinctively understood somewhere at the back of my mind that this was something that been going to happen between us from the very first moment that we had set eyes on one another.

No one had ever kissed me before. My being the schoolmaster’s daughter, the village lads had thought me above their touch, whilst the gentlemen who had visited the Manor had thought me beneath their notice. So, although I understood the theory of love from my reading and from observation, I was quite an innocent. But Neil Sinclair did not kiss like a gentleman, and he made no concessions to my inexperience, so I had no time to worry about what to do, or how to go about the whole business of kissing. In fact, I do not believe that I spared it one thought, but simply responded to the ruthless, insistent demand of his mouth on mine.

When he let me go, the pine needles and the stars pricking the skies above them were spinning like a top. I saw the flash of his smile in the darkness.

‘Thank you,’ he said. And then he was gone.

I lay still for another long moment, thinking of the arrogance of the man in thanking me for something he had not had the courtesy to request in the first place but had simply taken, like the thief he was. Then I struggled to sit up, and from there, by degrees, to stand on legs that felt all too unsteady. I could still feel the imprint of Neil Sinclair’s lips on mine, a sensation that threatened to rob me of any remaining strength. Then I told myself that I was acting like a silly little miss—and that Mr Sinclair had behaved like the scoundrel he undoubtedly was, and deserved everything that was coming to him. I took that long-delayed deep breath and found that I could scream after all.

‘Help! Smugglers!’

I stumbled out of the woods and onto the road—right in front of two English Army redcoats. Their horses shied and almost set the poor old coach horse off at a gallop—except that it was long past such excitement. One of the soldiers was so startled that he already had his musket raised and wavering in my direction.

‘What the hell—’

Indeed. What I can have looked like, tumbling out of the trees with pine needles in my hair and my clothing askew, can only be wondered at. He was a short, stocky man, and from what I could see of his expression in the rising moonlight I would have said

he looked of nervous disposition. Not the kind of temperament to suit hunting smugglers through the Scottish glens.

His companion was a very different matter. Tall, fair and languid, he put out a hand to soothe the other man and stop him shooting me in a fit of anxious overexcitement.

‘Put away your gun, Langley,’ he murmured. ‘Can you not see this is a lady? You will frighten her.’

He dismounted with one fluid movement and was bowing before me. ‘Madam,’ he said, ‘Lieutenant Arlo Graham, at your service. Smugglers, you say?’

‘Whisky smugglers in the woods,’ I said. ‘What are you waiting for?’ I looked from one to the other. ‘They are getting away.’

Lieutenant Graham sighed. He seemed utterly disinclined to plunge off up the wooded mountainside in hot pursuit. Perhaps it would have disarranged his uniform.

‘Too late,’ he said. ‘They will be well away by now.’ He turned to the carriage. ‘Is this your conveyance, madam?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I am Miss Balfour, niece to Mr Ebenezer Balfour of Glen Clair.’

‘But where is your coachman?’

‘I have no notion,’ I said truthfully. ‘I believe the wretch ran off when the smugglers stopped the coach.’

‘And why should they do that?’ Langley interposed. Rudely, I thought. ‘If they were smuggling whisky why draw attention to themselves by stopping the coach?’

‘I have no notion,’ I said again, rather less patiently this time.

'I am not in their confidence, sir.'

Lieutenant Graham smiled. 'Of course not, Miss Balfour.'

Langley frowned suspiciously. 'And what were you doing in the woods yourself?'

I looked at him. 'Hiding, of course. What else would I do with such ruffians about?'

'What else indeed?' Lieutenant Graham said. 'That blackguard of a coachman, running off and leaving a lady unprotected! I am sure your uncle will turn him off on the spot. Now, pray let me escort you to Glen Clair before you take a chill, Miss Balfour. Langley, you can drive the coach and lead your horse. I will take Miss Balfour up with me.'

Before I could protest, he had remounted the very showy chestnut and reached down to swing me up before him. His arm was strong for such a deceptively indolent fellow. The horse, clearly objecting to the excess weight, sidestepped and threatened to decant me on the verge. I grabbed its mane and reflected that it was only in stories that the heroine was so featherlight that the poor horse did not suffer.

'Unchivalrous fellow,' Graham said, bringing it ruthlessly under control. 'I beg your pardon, Miss Balfour.'

'When you are quite ready, Graham,' Langley said crossly. He had already mounted the box and efficiently tied his own horse's reins to those of the poor old nag.

Graham pulled an expressive face. 'I apologise for Langley,' he whispered in my ear. 'I fear the climate in the north suits him

ill. He is in a permanent bad mood.’

‘He is lucky it is not raining,’ I said. ‘This is fine weather for these parts.’

‘But cold,’ Graham drawled. ‘Always so cold, Miss Balfour. And on the rare occasions that it is warm the mosquitoes bite. Langley, poor fellow, is fatally attractive to the mosquito.’

It seemed to me that if Neil Sinclair was a handsome knave, then Arlo Graham was the smoothest gentleman this side of the Tweed. But both had one thing in common. They were well aware of their own attractions. Lieutenant Graham certainly did not require me to join the ranks of his followers, being his own greatest admirer.

We set off at a decorous trot. After we had covered but a few yards, Langley enquired irritably whether Lieutenant Graham could not hurry it up a little, for the coach was in danger of running us over. Arlo Graham sighed, but speeded up slightly. It also meant that he had to tighten his arms about me as I sat in front of him, to ensure that I did not lose my balance. This was by no means an unpleasant experience, but I found that rather than dwelling on Lieutenant Graham’s most respectful embrace, I was thinking of Neil Sinclair’s rather less deferential one. Not that I needed to worry that either of these two were likely to catch him, for the one would end up shooting at shadows and the other would do nothing so strenuous as chasing criminals. So it seemed it was left to me to have a few severe words with Mr Sinclair when I next saw him.

After about ten minutes we clattered across another wooden bridge, passed a dark and silent lodge house, and found ourselves on a wide sweep of drive before the Old House at Glen Clair. I was home.

Chapter Five

In which I meet my family and receive a less than warm welcome from my uncle.

Although it could only have been nine o'clock, there were no lights. The house crouched silent like a pouncing cat. I shivered.

Lieutenant Graham dismounted and helped me down. He strolled across to the door and tugged on the iron bell-pull. It came away in his hand, so he knocked. I heard the sound echo through the house like a distant roll of thunder.

'Are they not expecting you?' he enquired.

I was saved the complicated explanations as the door sighed open with a shuddering creak. A tiny pool of light fell on the step.

'Who is it?'

Lieutenant Graham checked at the sound of so sweet a female voice. Then the lady holding the candle stepped forward, and we all saw her for the first time.

Quite simply, she was beautiful. She was perhaps a year or two older than I, and she had corn-gold hair curling about her face, and deep blue eyes. I heard Arlo Graham catch his breath and saw him draw himself up very straight. Lieutenant Langley, who had presumably abandoned the poor old horse in the stables, came scrambling up the drive with my portmanteau in his hand, and practically pushed Graham out of the way in order to make a handsome leg.

No doubt my cousin Ellen always had such an effect on all men. I was seeing her for the first time too, of course, but I was not a man. My feelings were vastly different, consisting of envy and admiration in almost equal measure.

‘Madam! I...’ Graham cleared his throat. ‘I have escorted Miss Balfour to you. There has been an accident on the road...’ His voice trailed away. Had he been knocked on the head by one of the ceiling beams—a distinct possibility, given the dilapidation of the entrance hall—he could not have looked more stunned.

‘There were smugglers on the road,’ I said, seeing that Lieutenant Graham had lost the power of speech. ‘How do you do? You must be my cousin Ellen. I am Catriona Balfour.’

She smiled at me, the sweetest smile I had ever seen. I remembered Neil Sinclair saying that Ellen was delightful, and I felt a fierce rush of jealousy and an even fiercer one of shame a second later—for how could I hold such a sweet creature in dislike?

‘Catriona!’ She could not have seemed more pleased to see me had we already been the best of friends. To my surprise, she came forward and hugged me warmly. ‘I am so glad that you are safe here! We were afraid that you were lost.’

‘The carriage was late arriving at Sheildaig,’ I said. ‘And as I mentioned, there were smugglers on the road.’

I saw her glance quickly over her shoulder and draw the gauzy spencer more closely about her throat.

‘Smugglers! How terrifying!’

‘Nothing to fear, ma’am.’ Langley stepped forward. ‘They are considerably less terrifying with a musket ball through their throats.’

Ellen gave a little scream of horror.

‘Pray, stop frightening the ladies, Langley,’ Arlo Graham said. ‘Madam, there is nothing to fear. We will protect you to the death.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘let us hope it does not come to that.’ I waited for them both to take the hint and leave now that all was safe, but neither gentleman moved. Both were staring at Ellen, who was standing, head bent shyly, looking at nothing in particular. I realised that I would have to be plainer or we should be there all night.

‘You must excuse me, gentlemen,’ I said pointedly. ‘It is late, and I have some hunger after the journey. Thank you for your aid, and I will bid you goodnight.’

Lieutenant Graham woke up at that. ‘Of course, Miss Balfour.’ He looked at Ellen. ‘But which of you is Miss Balfour?’

‘My cousin,’ I said irritably, ‘is Miss Balfour of Glen Clair, being from the senior branch of the family, Lieutenant. I am Miss Catriona Balfour of Applecross.’

Graham bowed—first to Ellen, then to me—as precedence demanded. ‘Then I shall hope to call on you both tomorrow,’ he murmured, ‘to enquire after your health.’

‘Please do,’ Ellen said, smiling with luscious warmth.

‘I shall call, too,’ Langley piped up.

‘Oh, good,’ I said. I shut the door in their faces and turned to my cousin. ‘I am sorry to disturb you so late in the evening—’ I began, but she shook her head, smiling.

‘Oh, Catriona, pray do not apologise! We keep early hours here at Glen Clair, for Mama is an invalid and Papa...’ Her voice trailed away. ‘Well, you shall meet him presently. Now, you said that you were hungry.’ She slipped her hand through my arm and drew me along the stone-flagged corridor.

We passed two doorways, the oaken doors firmly closed. With each step the house seemed to get darker and more and more cold. I felt as though I was being sucked into the very depths, and shivered.

‘There is no money for candles nor fuel for a fire anywhere but in Mama’s bedroom,’ Ellen said apologetically.

She opened a door and I found myself in a cavernous kitchen with a scrubbed wooden table in the centre. Ellen put the candle down on this and scurried off into the pantry. She returned a moment later with half a loaf of bread, a slab of butter and a thin sliver of unappealing cheese. She looked as though she were about to cry.

‘I am sorry,’ she said, staring at the cheese as though she expected something to creep out of it—which it might well have done. ‘It is all we have. Mrs Grant, our housekeeper, brings food from Kinlochewe on a Tuesday, and she will be with us on the morrow, but until then...’

‘This will do me fine,’ I said heartily, reaching for the rusty

old knife I had seen on the dresser. I managed to hack a bit of stale bread off the loaf and smeared some butter on it. After a moment's hesitation I also decided to risk the cheese. It was strong, but surprisingly tasty, and not, as far as I could see, too rancid.

Ellen sat down on the bench opposite me. She looked the picture of misery. 'I am sorry!' she burst out again. 'I know this is a poor welcome to Glen Clair for you, Catriona. I have so looked forward to meeting you—my own cousin, and so close in age. It will be lovely to have a friend at last, for Papa allows so few people to call.'

She stopped. In the flickering light of the tallow candle she looked like a drooping flower. It was fortunate that Lieutenant Graham was not there to see it, for he would probably have carried her off on the spot, so desperate would he have been to make her smile again.

'I am very happy to have found you, too,' I said sincerely. 'I have no brothers or sisters, and did not even know of my uncle and his family until my father died. I had no home, so—' I swallowed the lump that had risen unbidden in my throat. 'It was splendid to hear of Glen Clair and to know that I had someone to take me in.'

Ellen smiled, her blue eyes luminous in the candlelight. 'Then we shall be the best of friends,' she said, clasping my hand, 'and it will be delightful.'

On such sweet sentiment there was an almighty crash at the

back door, and a moment later it swung inwards, bouncing off the lintel. Several scraps of plaster fell from the ceiling onto my bread and cheese.

Ellen went white before my eyes. ‘Papa!’

A man was standing in the doorway—or, more accurately, was leaning against the doorpost in the manner of one completely drunk. He had a blunderbuss in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other, and was drinking straight from the bottle, splashing a vast quantity of malt down his stained shirt. He was a big man, powerfully built but run to seed, with thinning grey hair and grey eyes narrowed against the candle flame. How he could possibly have fathered the adorable Ellen was a mystery that I could not fathom.

‘Papa,’ Ellen said again, ‘this is your niece Catriona, come from Applecross.’

Ebenezer Balfour stared at me from beneath lowered brows. ‘Davie’s girl,’ he slurred. ‘Your father’s dead, and that’s all that brings you to my door.’

I heard Ellen catch her breath at the harshness of his words. ‘Aye, sir,’ I said. ‘That would be right.’

I saw a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. ‘Proud,’ he said, ‘just like your sire.’ He leaned heavily against the wooden table for support and it creaked beneath his weight. ‘We quarrelled,’ he said, slumping down in the big carver chair at the table’s head. ‘Did he tell you that, girl?’

‘He told me nothing, sir,’ I said coldly. I could quite see how

that had happened. Uncle Ebenezer would, I was sure, pick a quarrel with a saint. 'But I am grateful to have family to take me in,' I added. 'Thank you, sir.'

The words seemed to stick in my throat, but I felt I had to force them out. Despite the coldness of Uncle Ebenezer's greeting, I did not want it ever said that I was ungrateful to be offered a home at Glen Clair.

'There's nothing for you here,' he said, his eyes hooded. He nodded towards Ellen. 'Did she tell you? I drink what profits this estate provides.' He raised the whisky bottle in drunken salute.

'The smugglers are out,' Ellen said quickly. 'Catriona met them on the road.'

Uncle Ebenezer lowered the bottle again, frowning. 'I know.'

Ellen started to shred breadcrumbs between her nervous fingers. 'There were two excise men on their tail. They said that they would call again tomorrow.'

Uncle Ebenezer gave her a look of contempt. 'Then you had better distract them, hadn't you, girl? We want no nose-poker-inners here.'

Unhappy colour flushed Ellen's cheeks. She did not reply, and a moment later Uncle Ebenezer took another long slurp of the drink.

'Ye'll have had hopes of us, I daresay, Catriona Balfour?'

I looked at Ellen, but she avoided my gaze. Her face looked pinched and cold. 'I confess, sir,' I said, 'that when I heard I had kinsfolk well-to-do I thought they might help me in my life.' My

tone hardened. 'But I am no beggar. I look for nothing that is not freely given. I can always return to Applecross and work for my living.'

Ellen looked up, a spark of amazement in her blue eyes. 'Work?'

'Aye,' Uncle Ebenezer said rudely, 'tis what you would have had to do, girl, had your mother not filled your head with foolish notions of gentility and seen that you were good for nothing.'

He reached across me for the bread, tore off a hunk and thrust it into his mouth. 'We shall see,' he said. 'We want no more mouths to feed here.'

I stood up. In that moment I was so angry that I would have walked all the way back to Applecross there and then had it been in the least possible. Then I caught Ellen's eye. She was looking at me beseechingly and I remembered what she had said about longing for a friend.

'I will show you to your chamber,' she said quickly, grabbing the candle. 'Excuse us, Papa.'

Uncle Ebenezer snorted. 'Chamber! A broom cupboard amongst the rats is the place for Davie's girl.'

We left him sitting in the dark, gnawing on the remains of the cheese.

'I am so sorry,' Ellen whispered, as she dragged me back along the corridor to the foot of the stairs. 'Papa is always like this when he is in his cups.'

'What is he like when he is sober?' I whispered back.

She smiled. ‘Not much better.’ Her face fell. ‘Oh Catriona, you will not leave, will you? Not when I have only just found you.’ She grabbed my hand. ‘Please?’

I felt terribly torn. Already I liked Ellen such a lot, and it was clear she was lonely here in the big, crumbling mansion whose future her father was drinking away.

‘I will have to see,’ I said. ‘I cannot stay here if Uncle Ebenezer does not wish it.’

She let go of my hand and started up the stairs. ‘I suppose not,’ she said. Her tone brightened a little. ‘You said that you could work?’

‘As a teacher or a companion, perhaps,’ I said, trying not to think about what Neil Sinclair had said about my potential. Suddenly I wanted to ask Ellen about Neil—but that was probably a bad idea. He had said she was delightful. Perhaps she thought the same of him.

‘A teacher?’ Ellen said, as though such an idea were somehow miraculous. ‘Only fancy.’

She threw the door open onto a small bedchamber on the first landing. It was clean and bare, empty of all furnishing but for a table with a jug of water and a bowl and a big tester bed that looked as though it were at least a hundred years old.

Ellen was looking anxious. ‘I cleaned it myself,’ she said. ‘The linen is fresh.’

‘It is lovely,’ I lied. I kissed her goodnight. ‘Forgive me,’ I said. ‘I am tired.’

Even so, it was a while before I slept. The linen was indeed fresh, but the mattress was damp, and as lumpy as poorly made porridge. Mice scratched in the wall and the old house creaked and groaned around me like a foundering galleon. There was no peace to be found at Glen Clair.

I wondered about my father and the quarrel he had had with Uncle Ebenezer. I wondered about my Aunt Madeline, whom Neil had said suffered from her nerves and Ellen had said was an invalid. And I wondered about Ellen herself, and the gentlemen who must surely be queuing up to take her away from all this squalor. Finally I thought about Neil Sinclair, and that I would have something to say to him when we next met. Smuggler or free trader, rogue or hero, he would have no more kisses from me. Or so I vowed.

Chapter Six

In which a great many visitors come to the Old House at Glen Clair.

When I awoke the sun was creeping across the bare boards of the floor and the old house was rattling with activity. I rolled over in bed and my back protested. After a night lying on the damp and lumpy mattress I felt stiff.

There were footsteps and voices outside my door, one raised above the others in querulous protest.

‘Where is Ellen? I told you to send her to me. No, I do not require any medicine. It is too cold in this room. Pull up the covers for me. No, not like that, woman. You are practically smothering me!’

A door closed, cutting off the voice abruptly.

I opened my eyes and stared at the frayed cover of the tester bed above me. That, I imagined, had been my Aunt Madeline, the invalid. There appeared to be nothing wrong with her lungs, at any rate.

I swung my bare feet to the floor and reached for my petticoat. Five minutes later I had dressed and was dragging a comb through my hair. Throwing open the curtains, I gazed out at the view and was immediately entranced.

The Old House stood on a promontory between Loch Clair and the smaller Loch Torran, and my room looked out at the

back of the house, across a rough meadow that had once been a lawn, where peacocks pecked and prowled. Beyond the little loch the valley opened up in a wide bowl with the mountains, clad in amber and purple, reaching to the sky. I stared—and fell in love with Glen Clair in that moment.

Opening my bedroom door, I could hear my aunt's voice rising and falling like the peal of bells, even through the thick oak door opposite. No doubt Ellen would bring me to meet her later. But for now I was sharp set, and looking forward to my breakfast.

I did not have high expectations of what might be on offer, but even those were dashed. When I reached the kitchen it was to find Ellen herself stirring a pan of porridge upon the hob. The kettle was whistling. Ellen's face lit up when she saw me.

'I did not like to wake you,' she confided, 'knowing that you had had so tiring a day yesterday. Here—' she scooped a ladle full of porridge from the pan '—pass a plate.'

The porridge was a stewed grey, and slopped down into the plate in one fat blob. I tried not to blench and picked up my spoon, digging in whilst she poured me a mug of tea.

The porridge was almost cold. My stomach rumbled. Ellen was watching me anxiously.

'Is it all right?'

'Delicious,' I mumbled, chewing on a big lump of oats. At least the tea washed it down.

She smiled. 'Mama is out of spirits today,' she said, sliding onto the kitchen bench beside me. 'She has taken a chill. Mrs

Grant is sitting with her. But she is anxious to meet you, Catriona. I promised to take you up directly after you had eaten.'

I had done my best with the porridge, and, remembering that Mrs Grant was supposed to have brought food with her that morning from Kinlochewe, looked around hopefully for something else to eat.

'Did you wish for oat cakes?' Ellen asked. 'There is some homemade marmalade.'

There was a smidgeon of butter to cover the cake, and some whisky marmalade which, once I had scraped the mould from the top of it, proved surprisingly tasty. I wondered how Mrs Grant had taken the whisky bottle away from my Uncle Ebenezer for long enough to put some into the marmalade.

'It's good, isn't it?' Ellen said, and I nodded, mouth full.

'We take luncheon at eleven and dinner at four,' she continued. 'As I said yesterday, we keep early hours.'

'Shall I wash the pots?' I asked, gesturing to the sink.

Ellen looked horrified. 'Gracious, no! Mrs Grant does the pots. No, no...Mama is waiting, and she becomes a little impatient.'

I left the pots for poor Mrs Grant, who it appeared had no maid to help her about the place, and we hurried upstairs. I had the impression that my aunt must be a tyrant, ruling the house from her bed. Ellen was certainly anxious that she should not be kept waiting any longer.

Aunt Madeline occupied the room opposite mine, and when

the door swung open it was like stepping into a fairy tale boudoir frozen in time. The bed, the delicate cherrywood wardrobe, the linen chest, the dressing table crowded with beautifying pots and potions...They were all tiny, fragile pieces of furniture. A collection of china dolls with pretty painted faces sat crowded together in a rocking chair. The drapes that kept out the sunlight were thin and fraying, their bright colours faded. And Aunt Madeline was faded, too—a golden beauty whose colour had drained to grey. At last I could see from where Ellen had inherited her glowing prettiness. Aunt Madeline must have been an accredited beauty in her day.

The room was stiflingly hot, for a fire burned in the grate even though it was high summer. All the windows were closed, sealed shut with cobwebs.

Aunt Madeline was sitting propped against lace-trimmed pillows, and when we knocked at the door she turned her plump, fallen face in our direction and bade us come close. She had been crooning softly to one of the china dolls, which she held in the crook of her arm. Everything about her drooped, from the lacy nightcap on her curls to her mouth, which had a discontented curve. She did not smile to see me.

‘So,’ she said, ‘you are Davie Balfour’s daughter. Come closer, child, so that I can look at you.’

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